

Effect of Parents in the Home on Juvenile Delinquency

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THE NUMBER OF PARENTS in a juvenile's home is not apparent to a policeman at the time he decides to apprehend a juvenile. The policeman may ascertain the number before he decides on the disposition of the juvenile, but routinely the living arrangements of the juvenile are not determined until he reaches the juvenile court. Other factors in recorded delinquency, such as race, age, and sex, which can be determined by superficial observation, may influence delinquency rates by their effect either on the actions of the juvenile or on the policeman's decision to cite the juvenile to court. The number of parents with whom a juvenile lives appears to affect delinquency rates because of its influence on the juvenile's behavior, rather than because of its possible influence on the policeman's decision. Thus, among the demographic characteristics which have been shown (1) to be associated with recorded juvenile delinquency rates, the number of parents in the home is of unique interest.

Recorded delinquency rates have been shown by Eaton and Polk (2), Hathaway and Monachesi (3), and by us (1) to be lower for children living with two parents than for those living with one parent or not living with either

parent. Family composition, however, interacts with other demographic factors. In general, delinquency rates and the probability that a child will not live with two parents both increase as the child grows older (table 1). The percentage of children living with two parents also varies with race, income, and area of the city (4, 5). Previous studies have not controlled these variables. To determine whether the number of parents in a child's home is an independent correlate of delinquency rates, data which have been controlled for interacting factors will be examined.

Material

We have previously described the juvenile delinquents who are the subjects of this study (1). They include all persons under the age of 18 living in San Francisco in 1960 who during that year had a recorded contact with the police or juvenile court of the city for a non-traffic offense. (Cases of neglect and dependency cases are not included.)

Because data on family composition were not available for persons "warned but not cited" by the police department, only juveniles cited one or more times to juvenile court are included in this paper.

Population estimates were derived from 1960 U.S. Census data (4, 5).

Methods

Control for race and sex. Data for white and nonwhite juveniles were tabulated separately. Tabulations by specific race were not available because the census data (4) classified persons under 18 living with two parents only by color. The white group includes the cate-

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gory white with Spanish surname. We have shown that these two groups have similar delinquency rates (1). In this study these groups are not analyzed separately because of the limitations of our data; our previous results also support this approach. Nevertheless, cultural differences between these groups suggest that combining them may be inappropriate. The nonwhite group includes the high-delinquency Negro population and the low-delinquency Chinese population, as well as Filipinos, Japanese, American Indians, and others.

To separate the nonwhite group by race, we chose two areas of the city where at least 80 percent of the nonwhite population of each census tract consisted of one race. One was a Chinese area, consisting of 12 census tracts, each having a population of at least 1,000 Chinese. The other was a Negro area of 15 census tracts, each with a Negro population of at least 1,000. The Chinese area consisted of contiguous census tracts; the Negro area did not. Nonwhite delinquency in these two areas was assumed to reflect mainly Chinese and Negro delinquency.

Four study populations resulted from these divisions: the entire city's white population, the entire city's nonwhite population, the Chinese area's nonwhite population, and the Negro area's nonwhite population. Each of these populations was tabulated separately by sex.

Control for income and geographic area. The census tracts in which each study population lived were divided into quartiles by median income in each tract. Each study population was thus divided into four quartiles, which presumably represented both economic and geographic divisions. We used this form of control for income and neighborhood because data were not available on the income distribution of one-parent and two-parent families.

In general, low income characterizes Negro areas. Therefore, division by income quartiles placed census tracts that are in the first income quartile for the entire city into the first, second, and third quartiles for the Negro areas.

Control for age. The total white or nonwhite juvenile population in each study area was used as a standard population to compute age-adjusted delinquency rates for each income quartile. All rates are expressed in per 1,000 persons at risk.

Table 1. Distribution of children not living with both parents, by age group, western urban areas of the United States

Age group (years)	Percent in each age group		Percent of each age group not living with both parents	
	White	Non-white	White	Non-white
0-7-----	33.8	44.9	8.4	26.7
8-10-----	21.5	15.9	16.1	25.6
11-13-----	12.3	13.0	9.8	23.1
14-16-----	13.9	17.4	12.3	48.0
17-----	18.5	8.7	41.3	46.2
0-17-----	100.0	100.0	12.2	29.2

SOURCE: Based on reference 5.

Population estimates. The number of juveniles in each 3-year age group within each economic quartile was estimated from census 5-year groupings by color and from single-year groupings for the total population. The number of children in each quartile not living with two parents was obtained directly from census data. The age distribution of these children was estimated from the 1 to 1,000 sample census for the western region of the United States (5). This estimate was derived from a tabulation of all children in the census sample who lived in urban areas of 500,000 or more population by the number of parents in the child's home and by his age and color. The San Francisco population of children not living with two parents was then assigned to age groups in proportion to the age distribution in the sample tabulation (table 1). Estimates were made separately for the white and nonwhite populations.

Significance tests. Significance of the difference between age-adjusted rates was determined by summing the variance ($V=pq N^2/n$) for each cell and computing a standard error for each adjusted rate ($S^2=\Sigma V/[\Sigma N]^2$). Results are expressed as significant at the 1 percent or 5 percent level (P is less than 0.01 or 0.05 respectively).

Results

For convenience, we shall use the term "expected pattern" to designate age-adjusted delinquency rates that are lower for juveniles liv-

ing with two parents than for juveniles living with one parent or none.

For white juveniles of all income quartiles, the difference in rates when there were two parents in the home compared with rates when there was one or no parent was significant at the 1 percent level except for boys in the first, or lowest, income quartile (table 2). By type of offense, all significant differences were in the expected direction except for "other offenses" of juveniles in the first income quartile. "Other offenses" consists of a large number of offenses, none dependent on the age of the offender and all considered offenses when committed by adults.

Nonwhite juveniles showed a different pattern than white juveniles in respect to the effects

of parents in the home on delinquency rates (table 3). For nonwhite boys of the first income quartile, the expected pattern was reversed significantly. The reversal for nonwhite juveniles of the first income quartile was seen for each specific offense, although it was significant only for auto theft.

To study juvenile delinquency rates further in respect to parents in the home and income quartile of the place of residence, Chinese and Negro areas of San Francisco were used. We found the expected pattern for Chinese boys of all income quartiles, but the difference was significant only in the fourth quartile (table 4). Fewer than five female Chinese delinquents were in each category—a number too low for statistical analysis.

Table 2. Juvenile court age-adjusted delinquency rates for white juveniles per 1,000 at risk, by offense, income quartile of census tract of residence, and number of parents in home, all San Francisco, 1960

Offense and income quartile ¹	Male rates (N=1,641)			Female rates (N=353)		
	Parents in home		Significance of difference (percent) ²	Parents in home		Significance of difference (percent) ²
	2	1 or 0		2	1 or 0	
All offenses:						
1.....	113	124	-----	16	31	1
2.....	69	133	1	12	40	1
3.....	48	104	1	10	22	1
4.....	43	83	1	3	16	1
Delinquent tendencies and curfew violations:						
1.....	19	38	1	8	21	1
2.....	14	37	1	7	25	1
3.....	11	29	1	6	16	1
4.....	10	24	1	2	13	1
Assault, robbery:						
1.....	4	8	-----	4	8	-----
2.....	3	8	-----	0	0	-----
3.....	3	4	-----	0	0	-----
4.....	2	2	-----	0	0	-----
Burglary, theft:						
1.....	34	42	-----	2	2	-----
2.....	18	35	5	2	11	1
3.....	11	25	1	1	2	-----
4.....	11	24	1	0	1	-----
Auto theft:						
1.....	19	16	-----	0	0	-----
2.....	8	16	-----	0	0	-----
3.....	9	10	-----	0	0	-----
4.....	8	11	-----	0	1	-----
Other offenses:						
1.....	33	20	5	5	7	-----
2.....	23	36	-----	2	3	-----
3.....	13	34	1	2	3	-----
4.....	12	22	5	1	1	-----

¹ Quartile 1 comprises census tracts with lowest median incomes; quartile 4, tracts with highest median income.

² (-----)—no significant difference.

Table 3. Juvenile court age-adjusted delinquency rates for nonwhite juveniles per 1,000 at risk, by offense, income quartile of census tract of residence, and number of parents in home, all San Francisco, 1960

Offense and income quartile ¹	Male rates (N=979)			Female rates (N=270)		
	Parents in home		Significance of difference (percent) ²	Parents in home		Significance of difference (percent) ²
	2	1 or 0		2	1 or 0	
All offenses:						
1-----	147	108	1	37	36	-----
2-----	82	114	5	21	24	-----
3-----	48	107	1	10	34	1
4-----	65	45	-----	12	26	-----
Delinquent tendencies and curfew:						
1-----	21	19	-----	14	15	-----
2-----	10	18	-----	12	14	-----
3-----	6	20	5	3	20	5
4-----	11	4	-----	9	5	-----
Assault, robbery:						
1-----	19	15	-----	2	1	-----
2-----	13	19	-----	0	0	-----
3-----	7	18	-----	2	4	-----
4-----	4	4	-----	0	0	-----
Burglary, theft:						
1-----	61	47	-----	10	14	-----
2-----	26	33	-----	4	5	-----
3-----	19	40	5	2	7	-----
4-----	16	28	-----	3	21	-----
Auto theft:						
1-----	18	7	5	0	1	-----
2-----	8	13	-----	0	1	-----
3-----	5	9	-----	0	1	-----
4-----	2	4	-----	0	0	-----
Other offenses:						
1-----	26	19	-----	9	5	-----
2-----	21	30	-----	5	4	-----
3-----	9	17	-----	2	1	-----
4-----	28	4	5	0	0	-----

¹ Quartile 1 comprises census tracts with lowest median incomes; quartile 4, tracts with highest median income.
² (-----)—no significant difference.

In the Negro areas the expected pattern was reversed in the first, second, and fourth quartiles (table 5). The difference was significant at the 1 percent level in the second quartile. The expected pattern was found in the third quartile. The reversal of the expected pattern of delinquency rates for low-income nonwhite boys was associated with Negroes rather than with Chinese.

Discussion

An ideal method to control the effects of income in this study would have been to cross-tabulate for income and number of parents in the home. This method was not available to us because of limitations of data. Instead, we

chose to assume that the division of the city into income quartiles by census tract divided the population into groups of differing economic status. This assumption is generally true, on a statistical basis, but is obviously incorrect on an individual basis. The method also has the effect of combining the effects of poverty and a delinquency-producing environment. Despite these objections, we consider the method a useful means of determining whether an observed effect is generally found in high-income or low-income neighborhoods.

The economic position of Negroes in the community calls for special attention in this connection. The disadvantaged economic position of Negroes results in most areas with a high concentration of Negroes being in the lowest

Table 4. Juvenile court age-adjusted delinquency rates for all offenses per 1,000 at risk for nonwhite male juveniles in Chinese areas by income quartile of census tract of residence and number of parents in home, San Francisco, 1960

Income quartile ¹	Parents in home	
	2	1 or 0
1-----	16	34
2-----	24	59
3-----	16	29
4 ² -----	16	175

¹Quartile 1 comprises census tracts with lowest median incomes; quartile 4, tracts with highest median income.

² The difference was significant at the 5 percent level.

NOTE: The number of nonwhite male juvenile delinquents in Chinese areas was 44. The number of nonwhite female juvenile delinquents in Chinese areas was too low for statistical analysis.

income quartile for the city as a whole. Differences do occur, however, between the census tracts with large Negro populations, and these differences can be brought out by dividing these census tracts into quartiles according to median incomes of the nonwhite inhabitants. The resulting economic quartiles for the nonwhite population are not comparable to similarly ranked quartiles for the white population.

A possible source of error in this study may be associated with inaccurate reporting of the number of parents in a home, both in the 1960 census and in the juvenile court statistics. The 1960 requirement that a family receiving support from the Aid to Needy Children program contain no adult male provided a strong economic motive for over-reporting of one-parent families. The effect of such a bias would depend, however, on whether the over-reporting, if present, was greater in the census statistics or the juvenile court statistics. We have no information indicating whether this over-reporting did, in fact, occur. For these reasons, the results must be considered as tentative until they are confirmed by other studies.

The results confirm previous studies which have shown that the presence of two parents in the home is associated with low delinquency rates in the white population. This effect is in-

dependent of sex. Since this effect of parents in the home is found after adjustment of the rates for age, it is not due to the higher probability that younger children (with low delinquency rates) live with both parents. It is consistent in all income groupings, although not for all offense categories in the lowest grouping.

Results for the nonwhite population are different than for the white. We found the expected effect for nonwhite juveniles only in upper income quartiles. We observed a reversed pattern in census tracts of lowest income. Data from the Negro and Chinese areas show that explanations for the reversed pattern among nonwhites should be sought in the low-income Negro population.

Our data do not permit conclusions as to why the number of parents in the home has a different effect on juvenile delinquency rates of whites than it does on the rates of nonwhites. Among several tenable hypotheses is the explanation that this result is due to over-reporting of one-parent families. Another hypothesis, however, which appears to be both tenable and worth further investigation has to do with norms of family structure in the white and Negro communities. Many a lower class Negro family lacks a father in the home without being "broken" in the conventional sense. Such homes represent a female-based family structure (6) which probably (7) can be traced to the disruption of Negro families when slaves were being

Table 5. Juvenile court age-adjusted delinquency rates per 1,000 at risk for nonwhite juveniles in Negro areas by income quartile of census tract of residence and number of parents in home, San Francisco, 1960

Income quartile	Male rates (N=587)		Female rates (N=145)	
	2 parents	1 or 0 parent	2 parents	1 or 0 parent
1-----	123	111	39	58
2 ¹ -----	246	111	35	29
3 ² -----	60	105	21	28
4-----	132	117	32	36

¹ The difference in rates according to living arrangement was significant for males at the 1 percent level.

² The difference in rates according to living arrangement was significant for males at the 5 percent level.

imported from Africa. Female-based families have not been studied adequately. Long (8) points out the "missing or fragmentary" nature of investigations of the psychological effects of this type of family structure on Negro children.

These effects differ from effects of broken families on white children. For example, in the 10-year trial of the Glueck delinquency prediction scale (9), the original criteria of "family cohesiveness" had to be modified in order to make the scale apply to Negro female-based families. A parallel to our results was found by Stetler (10) in a study of high school dropouts in Connecticut. He reported that "Significantly, the type of family situation did not differ markedly between Negro boys who dropped out of school and those who remained;" in contrast, the percentage of boys from one-parent families was significantly higher for white dropouts than white nondropouts.

Among white juveniles (and probably among Chinese), the presence of two parents in the home is associated with low delinquency rates. Among Negro boys from low-income areas this is not the case. Our previous observation (1) that delinquency rates are lower for Negro boys living with two parents than for those living with one or no parent was reversed when adjustments were made for age and economic level. These adjusted results and the female-based structure of many low-income Negro families suggest the hypothesis that the absence of a parent is an independent factor associated with juvenile delinquency only in a culture in which the norm is a nuclear family.

Conclusions and Summary

Juvenile court delinquency records for San Francisco in 1960 were studied to determine the effect of the number of parents in a juvenile's home on delinquency rates. Population estimates derived from census data were used to compute age-adjusted delinquency rates for juveniles with two parents in the home and for juveniles living with one or no parent.

White juveniles who lived with two parents had lower delinquency rates than those with

other living arrangements. These results are independent of age, sex, area of the city, and probably of economic level. Nonwhite males in the lowest economic quartile of the city showed the opposite pattern. Negro (but not Chinese) juveniles showed higher rates when two parents were in the home than when one or both were absent.

These observations suggest the hypothesis that absence of a parent is independently associated with high juvenile delinquency only in a subculture where the norm is a nuclear family. Further investigation is needed in subcultures with other norms of family structure.

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