An Examination of Differential Association and Social Control Theory: Family Systems and Delinquency
Wesley T. Church, II, Tracy Wharton and Julie K. Taylor
Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice 2009; 7; 3 originally published online Nov 20, 2008;
DOI: 10.1177/1541204008324910

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://yvj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/7/1/3

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
ACJS
Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences

Additional services and information for Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://yvj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://yvj.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations http://yvj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/7/1/3
An Examination of Differential Association and Social Control Theory

Family Systems and Delinquency

Wesley T. Church II
Tracy Wharton
Julie K. Taylor
School of Social Work, University of Alabama

This study applies differential association and social control theories to juvenile delinquency. Using a path analysis model, relationships between family, self-image, and behavior are explored. Analyses suggest that positive self-image leads to decreased delinquency, and association with delinquent peers is the greatest predictor of delinquent behavior, regardless of race.

Keywords: juvenile delinquency; family cohesion; family dynamics; differential association theory; social control theory

The juvenile delinquency literature has identified a number of variables causally linked to delinquent behavior. The nature of a youth’s peer relationships, social and family environments, and self-image have been cited as factors associated with deviant behavior in juveniles although few models have been developed to explore the strength of these associations. Previous studies provide evidence that deviant behavior in adolescence, particularly early adolescence, leads to increased likelihood of adult criminal offenses (Haynie, 2001; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). A close examination of factors affecting juvenile delinquency may provide some insight into potential points for successful intervention. In this study, we used differential association and social control theories to guide our examination of potential associations between family stressors, family cohesion, family relationships, self-image, behavior, and delinquent behavior.

Patterson and colleagues (1989) suggest that family strain in early life prepares juveniles to enter deviant peer groups, and these peer groups are the “major training ground” (p. 331) for antisocial behaviors and substance use. Their research indicates that strong family cohesion could protect children from the influence of deviant peers, particularly as children transition through school grades and begin to form their self-image in relation to their peers. Gove and Crutchfield (1982) suggest that there is strong evidence “that the family plays a critical role in juvenile delinquency” (p. 302) and state that this is the single most replicated finding in the

Author’s Note: Please correspondence to Wesley T. Church II, School of Social Work, The University of Alabama, Box 870314, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487; e-mail: wchurch@sw.ua.edu.
juvenile deviance literature. Snyder, Edwards, McGraw, Kilgore, and Holton (1994) discuss how familial relations affect early childhood development and how the establishment of parent–child relations may affect the development of conduct problems.

Family stressors and family cohesion include a range of factors such as the frequency of positive and negative family interaction, and the ability of family groups to cope with various life stressors. There is some evidence that ineffective parenting skills or parenting by adults who themselves have poor social skills may increase the likelihood that children in the home will learn maladaptive behaviors and inappropriate social skills. This can later lead to deviant behaviors and delinquency. The nature of parental discipline can directly affect childhood conduct problems not only in the home but in school as well (Snyder et al., 1994; Snyder & Patterson, 1995). Research has found that family stressors common in families of lower socioeconomic status (SES), such as unemployment or income instability and higher rates of family violence, may increase the likelihood of poor parenting practices. Middle-SES parents may be “more likely to use reasoning and psychological methods of discipline, allow their children more freedom of choice and self-direction, show egalitarian parenting styles, express positive affect toward their children, verbalize, and support cognitive and academic growth” (Patterson et al., 1989, p. 329). Conversely, parents of lower SES are more likely to be controlling of children’s behavior, use physical discipline, or exhibit authoritarian parenting styles (Patterson et al., 1989).

Previous studies have found a high correlation between the use of physical punishment, particularly in single-parent homes, and delinquent behavior in adolescence. However, Barnes and Farrel (1992) caution that “being in a single-parent versus a traditional two-parent family may not be as critical a factor for adolescent outcomes as are parenting practices per se, particularly support and monitoring” (p. 773). Where support and monitoring of children was provided, rates of delinquency were lower over time (Barnes and Farrel, 1992; Patterson et al., 1989) compared with ineffective discipline, which has been associated with the risk of developing antisocial traits in childhood.

Children who have poor relationships with their parents or who reside in homes where adults are poor role models for problem solving and prosocial behaviors are more likely to turn to deviant peer groups and are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior (Patterson et al., 1989). Patterson and colleagues argue that “disrupted parent practices are causally related to child antisocial behavior” (p. 330), suggesting that disruption to parent practices is the variable of consequence, not family structure per se.

The Pittsburgh Youth Study, a three-wave longitudinal study of 500 men, offers some explanation of generational offending as well as familial criminality and the prediction of future offending in young men (Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, Stouthammer-Loeber, & Kalb, 2001). The authors conclude that if relatives had been arrested, one could predict a young man’s predisposition to delinquency as well, acknowledging environmental factors, including law enforcement and court bias toward criminal families as well as genetic mechanisms (Farrington et al., 2001). Similarly, Loeber and Farrington (2000) conclude that the severity of offenses may vary but that all offenses carry the same underlying factors of deviancy. They assert that children progress at different rates regarding severity of offenses, which constitutes a developmental pathway of offending. Loeber (1991) defines a pathway as a
“pattern of development shared by a group of individuals which is distinct from the behavioral development experienced by other groups of individuals” (p. 98).

Direct causal relationships between family variables and delinquency have been difficult to establish, given that most available studies have been cross-sectional. Few longitudinal studies have been conducted to test models explaining these relationships. Patterson et al. (1989) highlight this issue with regard to social training, pointing out that “there are only a small number of studies designed to investigate the hypothesized training process” (p. 331). They also note that method covariance in studies of this topic is often very difficult to untangle (p. 330), along with challenging or poor specification of variables (Haynie, 2001). However, social cognitive development research offers some explanation regarding how children develop an understanding and knowledge of social events (Caprara, Dodge, Pastorelli, & Zelli, 2006; Dodge & Rabiner, 2004; Raine et al., 2006).

Theoretical Linkages of Social Control and Differential Association

Differential association theory asserts that deviant behavior is learned through interaction with others. Motives, drives, rationalization, and attitudes are formed through social and cultural transmission. As a child ages, these factors become more developed, and law-breaking behavior becomes less socially taxing. According to this theory, an individual may develop, over time, greater associations with law-breaking behavior than with law-abiding behavior. Hirschi’s (2002) theory of social control states that the delinquent individual has the freedom to commit delinquent acts as the individual’s ties to “conventional order” within society have been broken (p. 3). The theory operates on the presumption that delinquency occurs when group norms have been violated (Colvin & Pauly, 1983; Hagan, 1989; Hoffmann, 2002).

Both differential association theory and social control theory point to the importance of family cohesion, family stressors, and nonfamilial relationships in the development or prohibition of deviant behavior. Hirschi (2002) using a cultural deviance perspective, states that youths who are unattached to their parents or who do not have significant relationships with other adults have a higher rate of exposure to “criminogenic influences” (p. 85), such as delinquent peers or opportunities for delinquent behavior. The concept of family cohesiveness is closely related to the notion of social support and also to theories relating to the effects of parental support on adolescent outcomes (Barnes, 1990; Barnes, Farrell, Cairns, 1986; Cohen & Willis, 1985; Farrell & Barnes, 1993; Peterson & Rollins, 1987; Rollins & Thomas, 1979). The more cohesive the family, the greater the likelihood that communication, individual functioning as a member of the family, and ability to maintain a positive self-image will increase, leading to better behavioral outcomes for adolescent children (Farrell & Barnes, 1993). In contrast, troubled families or families with a high level of family stress exemplify low cohesion or exhibit “cross-generational coalitions” (Feldman & Gehring, 1988, p. 1035), where parents demonstrate greater closeness to their children than to the other parent (Bying-Hall & Campbell, 1981; Gehring, 1985; Haley, 1973; Perlmutter & Hatfield, 1980). Such families appear to provide additional strain on individual functioning and the ability to maintain positive self-image.
As differential association theory frames the development of individual choices, social control theory frames the system in which those choices are made. Together, these theories can be used to create conceptual linkages between risk factors and juvenile delinquent behavior. By exploring these linkages, relationships may be explored between family cohesion, family stressors, nonfamilial relationships, association with delinquent peers, self-image, and delinquent behavior.

**Methods**

**Design and Sample**

The data for the present study were generated from Delbert Elliott’s longitudinal National Youths Study (NYS) of 1,725 youths in the United States and were retrieved via the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). The NYS employed a national probability sample of individuals in the continental United States who were 11 to 17 years old in 1976. From 1976 to 1980, the NYS conducted five annual “waves” of interviews. The data set also includes additional interview data collected in 1983 and 1987. This study considers data from Wave 5. The current study used six subscales and three demographic variables of interest from the larger NYS data set. No judgments were made for this study concerning the inclusion or exclusion of variables within the subsets because such decisions had already been made by the original investigator(s) of the NYS (Elliott, Ageton, Huizinga, Knowles, & Canter, 1983; Tolan & Thomas, 1995).

**Demographic Variables**

Three sociodemographic variables—gender, race, and age—were included in the data analyses, an acknowledgement of their theoretical or empirical relation to delinquency, which has been established by prior studies (Haynie, 2001; Patterson et al., 1989). Gender constituted a dummy variable, with “1” indicating male and “0” female, and race, also a dummy variable, was described with a “1” indicating White or a “0” indicating non-White. Age was a continuous-level variable based on the age response given by the respondent in the study.

**Family Stressors**

Reported family stressors were measured using a subscale of the NYS containing eight self-reported items. The items focused on whether or not the respondent reported the specific stressful event had occurred in his/her life up to the time of Wave 5 of the NYS. Events included items such as divorce, loss of jobs, serious illness, or death in the family. The events were dichotomized into “yes/no” responses. A dummy variable was created to measure each type, with “1” indicating a report of occurrence, “yes,” and “0” indicating a report of no occurrence, “no.” An index was developed for measuring the respondent’s family stressors by summing the scores for all eight items. The family stressors index had a Cronbach alpha of .80.
Family Cohesion

Family cohesion was measured using a subscale of the NYS containing 10 self-reported items. The items were based on the relationship that the respondent had with his/her family as well as how important the family relationship was to the respondent. Five of the items focused specifically on how the respondent viewed the importance of the family relationship. This was measured by asking respondents questions such as “How important is this to you?” Response categories (on a scale of 1 to 5) ranged from 1 = not important at all to 5 = very important. Five of the items focused specifically on how well the respondent felt these relationships were going at the time of each NYS wave. This was measured by asking respondents questions such as “How well is this relationship going for you?” Response categories (on a scale of 1 to 5) ranged from 1 = not well at all to 5 = very well. An index was developed for measuring the respondent’s family cohesion by summing the scores for all 10 items. The family cohesion index had a Cronbach alpha of .70.

Importance of Nonfamilial Relationships

The importance of nonfamilial relationships was measured using a subscale of the NYS containing seven self-reported items. The items were indicative of the importance that the youths placed on outside relationships and activities that were not within the purview of their family. Items included the importance of activities with friends, dating relationships, and the positive expression of opinions toward respondents by teachers. The importance of these relationships was measured by asking respondents “How important is this to you?” Five response categories ranged from 1 = not important at all to 5 = very important. From these responses, an index was developed for measuring the importance of the respondent’s personal relationships outside of his/her immediate family by summing the scores for all seven items. The importance of nonfamilial relationships index had a Cronbach alpha of .70.

Perceived Self-Image

Perceived self-image was measured using a subscale of the NYS containing 23 self-reported items. The items were based on responses to questions regarding how the respondent felt their parents and friends perceived them. Examples of items included are as follows: Parent’s thinking the respondent breaks rules, is a good citizen, is well-liked, is a bad kid; friends think the respondent is well liked, often upset, gets along well with others, breaks rules, has personal problems, and is likely to succeed. Self-image was measured by asking respondents how they think they are perceived. Response categories ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. An index was developed for measuring perceived self-image by first reverse coding the indexes to make the direction of the response total equivalent to a positive self-image, then by summing the scores for all 23 items. The perceived self-image index had a Cronbach alpha of .81.

Peer’s Delinquent Activity

Respondents’ association with delinquent peers was measured using a subscale of the NYS containing 13 self-reported items. The items were based on the respondent’s knowledge about
his/her friend’s delinquent activity. Examples of items included are as follows: Friends cheating on tests, destroying property, stealing, hitting someone, or using drugs or alcohol. Friends’ delinquency was measured by asking respondents “How many of your friends have done the activity stated?” Response categories ranged from 1 = none of them to 5 = all of them. An index was developed for measuring the respondent’s association with delinquent peers by summing the scores for all 13 items. The peer’s delinquent activity index had a Cronbach alpha of .86.

Delinquency

Respondents’ delinquent activity was measured using a 52-item self-reported delinquency subscale of the NYS. Respondents were asked about the frequency of delinquent behaviors in the past year. Items on the scale were scored such that a higher score represented a greater frequency of behavior. Examples of items included are as follows: frequency of damage to property, theft, alcohol or drug involvement, setting fires, running away, engaging in sexual or gang activity, or disruptive behaviors. Delinquent activity was measured by asking the respondent “How many times have you done this?” An index was developed for measuring respondent’s delinquency by summing the scores for all 52 items. The delinquency index had a Cronbach alpha of .77.

Results

A path analysis was used by the researchers to explore the hypothesized causal relationships. To test the proposed model, a technique recommended by Alwin and Hauser (1975) for estimating effects in recursive causal models was used. This technique allows for the decomposition of effects into direct and indirect components through the successive computation of equations using ordinary least squares regression. At the outset, equations with only exogenous variables were used. An exogenous variable in this study was a variable entering from and determined from outside the system being studied. Consequently, equations using the intervening variables were used in sequence from cause to effect. The full path model can be seen in Figure 1.

Prior to the preliminary path analysis, multicollinearity was investigated through the examination of the correlations among the variables. An examination of the correlations did not indicate the presence of multicollinearity among the examined variables (Bohrnstedt & Knoke, 1988; Hair, Anderson, Tatum, & Black, 1998). This information is presented in Table 1. The regression coefficients from the equations to estimate the total, direct, and indirect effects in the model are presented in standardized and unstandardized forms in Table 2.

An examination of the exogenous variables on delinquency points toward having an association with delinquent peers as the strongest indicator ($\beta = .373, p < .001$). Therefore, as one would surmise, multiple associations with delinquents was associated with the perceived label of delinquency. Self-image is also a significant predictor of delinquency ($\beta = -.176, p < .001$), indicating that higher self-image is a key indicator in the decision not to commit a delinquent act. Conversely, the lower the perceived self-image, the more
likely the youth is to commit a delinquent act. It is also important to note that higher perceived self-image meant that she or he was less likely to associate with delinquent peers ($\beta = -0.427, p < .001$). This relationship is very strong and would suggest that even with poor family cohesion and some family stressors, if a youth can maintain a positive self-image, she or he will be less likely to commit delinquent acts. Clearly, there is evidence that

---

**Figure 1**

Total Population Path Model

---

Note: The error is given by $\varepsilon$.

**Table 1**

Correlations Among Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>-0.046</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td>0.100**</td>
<td>-0.052*</td>
<td>0.130*</td>
<td>-0.136**</td>
<td>-0.143**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Age</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
<td>-0.070**</td>
<td>-0.201</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.128**</td>
<td>0.186**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Race</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>-0.009</td>
<td>-0.065*</td>
<td>-0.090**</td>
<td>-0.054*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Family stressors</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>-0.075**</td>
<td>-0.044</td>
<td>-0.101**</td>
<td>0.100**</td>
<td>0.117**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Family cohesion</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.328**</td>
<td>0.351**</td>
<td>-0.283**</td>
<td>-0.161</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Importance of nonfamilial relationships</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.106**</td>
<td>-0.057*</td>
<td>-0.050</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Self-image</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>-0.473**</td>
<td>-0.355**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Delinquent peers</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.487**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Delinquency</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.
Table 2

Coefficients From Path Model in Standardized Form for Total Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predetermined Variable</th>
<th>Equation and Dependent Variable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient (Unstandardized)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family stressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of nonfamilial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delinquent peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| N                      | 1494                           | 1494                           | 1494                           | 1494                           | 1485                           | 1494                           |
| R²                     | .005                           | .021                           | .151                           | .144                           | .278                           | .286                           |

*aUnstandardized coefficients in parentheses.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
certain attributes are associated with differential association, after the effects of attitudes and family are controlled for. This notion is also consonant with the social control theory of delinquency: If people do not see themselves as responsible and if they perceive that society views them as deviant, they will act on that perception.

When examining self-image, family cohesion is the best predictor of a positive self-image ($\beta = -0.337, p < 0.001$), and importance of nonfamilial relationships has no bearing on the youth’s perceived self-image. This might lead one to argue for the importance of family cohesion within the psyche of adolescents. If there is strong family cohesion, the youth is more likely to have a positive self-image, in turn being less likely to commit delinquent acts.

Family cohesion is the best predictor of the importance of nonfamilial relationships ($\beta = 0.322, p < 0.001$). However, importance of nonfamilial relationships has no direct effect on any of the variables of interest. Although it has been demonstrated that family cohesion is related to self-image and delinquent peers, there is no direct effect of family cohesion on delinquency. Therefore, it cannot be argued that family cohesion has a direct effect on delinquency, although it can be argued that family stressors does. When looking at family stressors, there is a small direct effect on delinquency ($\beta = 0.07, p < 0.01$). This finding suggests that it is not so much the family cohesion that has the greatest effect on the youths but the stressors that the youth encounters within the family that lead to decisions about delinquency. High family stressors have a negative effect on family cohesion ($\beta = -0.082, p < 0.001$) and on a positive self-image ($\beta = -0.076, p < 0.001$) as well as a positive association with delinquent peers ($\beta = 0.062, p < 0.01$). Although differential association theory explains how association with delinquency leads to one’s own delinquency, it does not explain why some individuals are associated with delinquent peers and others are not. The model presented makes the argument that an individual’s family stressors could be a leading precursor to that event.

The model tested three basic demographic descriptors that are present in the literature and have been determined to have an impact on delinquency. Looking at the effects on the measure of delinquency, the results indicate that being male is the strongest predictor of delinquency ($\beta = -0.068, p < 0.01$). Young men are also more likely to have relationships with delinquent peers ($\beta = -0.063, p < 0.01$). One could surmise that men may have greater freedom to associate with delinquent peers. This effect could be a result of different societal norms that are placed on different genders or a result of the kind of parental control of the youths.

There could be other factors involved, however. When one looks at self-image, young women have a higher self-perception than do men ($\beta = 0.101, p < 0.001$), and the importance of nonfamilial relationships is more important to women than to men ($\beta = -0.093, p < 0.001$). This could indicate that positive relationships are more relevant in the lives of women than in the lives of men, who might be more subject to having negative associations to facilitate social acceptance.

Finally, race does not appear to be a significant predictor of delinquent activity. This is contrary to the literature, which places this variable as a central factor in both differential association and social control theories. Previous literature has reported that race is one of the demographic variables that correlates highly with delinquent activity (Haynie, 2001), an assertion not supported by findings here. However, there is a significant relationship
between race and importance of nonfamilial relationships ($\beta = -0.051$, $p < 0.05$). This study demonstrates that the African American youth in this sample find relationships outside of the familial setting more important in their personal lives than do youth who are not African American. It is possible that this finding may be an indication of the makeup and family dynamics within those homes.

**Discussion**

The causes of delinquency are many and complex, and there have been numerous theories and ideas proposed that may assist us when looking at this phenomenon. The literature highlights the importance of the family, the family environment, and the social environment of youths involved in delinquent activity. The present study uses an integration of social control theory and differential association theory to examine how family cohesion, family stressors, youth’s perceived importance of nonfamilial relationships, youth’s perceived self-image, and their association with delinquent peers affect delinquency. Of the three primary variables of interest (family stressors, family cohesion, and importance of nonfamilial relationships), family stressors is the only variable that had a direct effect on delinquency.

It is the belief of the researchers that the integration of differential association theory and social control theory allows for a more cogent explanation of the phenomenon as opposed to examining the phenomenon using the theories independently. Differential association theory states that delinquent behavior is learned via social interaction with others (Hoffman, 2002; Sutherland, 1939). This theory focuses on how individuals learn to become delinquents (motives, drives, rationalization, and attitudes) but does not concern itself with the reasons for why they make delinquent choices. Differential association theory predicts that an individual will choose a criminal path when the balance of definitions for “law-breaking” exceeds those definitions for “law-abiding.”

In contrast, social control theory (also known as social bonding theory) proposes that people’s relationships, commitments, values, norms, and beliefs encourage them not to break the law. Thus, if moral codes are internalized, and individuals are tied into and have a stake in their wider community, they will voluntarily limit their propensity to commit deviant acts. The theory seeks to understand the ways in which it is possible to reduce the likelihood of delinquency developing in individuals. However, it does not consider motivational issues, simply stating that human beings may choose to engage in a wide range of activities, unless the range is limited by the processes of socialization and social learning.

Thus, morality is created in the construction of social order, assigning costs and consequences to certain choices and defining some as evil, immoral, and/or illegal. Together, differential association theory and social control theory address both the formation and ongoing behavior of social deviance. In this framework, cultural transmission of the importance of the perceived deviant values exceeds the importance of law-abiding values, and the environment does not provide incentive for any change in this internalization.

Our data suggest that there are a number of factors, in addition to family stressors, that have an impact on the likelihood of engaging in delinquent acts. Being male was the strongest predictor of delinquency and carried a strong connection to having associations
with delinquent peers. Differences in the expectations of socialization between genders may help explain this finding because the strength of positive self-image was also found to be a factor in delinquency. Girls tended to have higher self-image and more positive relationships—variables that seem to correlate with a lower incidence of delinquency. Conversely, boys tended to have lower self-image and greater association with delinquent peers, along with fewer positive relationships (family or otherwise) and much higher rates of delinquent behavior. Family cohesion and family stressors were observed to predict perceived low self-image, and both variables were found to predict association with delinquent peers. However, even with poor family cohesion and some family stressors, if a youth can maintain a positive self-image, it appears that she or he will be less likely to commit delinquent acts.

Within this study, race was not found to be an important predictor of delinquency. This finding contradicts previous suppositions found in the literature. It is possible, however, that historical associations between race and poverty may help account for previous findings, whereas shifts in the distribution of races across populations demonstrating delinquent behavior may help explain the null race finding here because there was no direct association between race and family stressors or family cohesion.

Data from this study suggest several potential points of intervention. Although both genders certainly are at risk, interventions that are gender specific might be appropriate because male adolescents are more likely to demonstrate delinquent behavior than are female adolescents. It is not only critical to recognize that there are distinct differences between male and female adolescents, but we must also know what those differences are, what they mean, and their importance in the treatment process. Working with parents to facilitate good role modeling in decision making might be one point of intervention when looking at young men who are at risk for delinquency. Positive roles models are vital in the development of adolescents, and having a positive male role model has been shown to be a key indicator of success for at-risk male youths in this country.

Furthermore, attention to building a positive self-image in young males, building positive relationships (both inside and outside the family), and determining how to make positive choices would directly affect the progression of delinquent behavior. Finally, it is important to have a greater understanding of the “inner workings” of the families of youths at risk for delinquency. We cannot just assume that having cursory information is adequate. Appropriate and thorough assessments of not only the adolescents but also the family can only improve services and outcomes for delinquent youths and their families.

**Notes**

1. The standard error for the slopes in all the equations was examined, and the findings indicated that some were slightly inflated; equations were rerun using square-root transformation in the dependent variable. By performing this step, we were able to stabilize the standard errors. On further analysis, no changes in the substantive interpretations of the coefficients were found for the dependent variable. Therefore, it was determined that use of the original parameter estimates was sufficient.
References


Wesley T Church II, PhD, is an assistant professor with the University of Alabama, School of Social Work. His current research interests are in the areas of juvenile justice, child welfare, and family systems.

Tracy Wharton, MEd, is a PhD student with the University of Alabama, School of Social Work. Her research interests are in the areas of compassion fatigue, training of practitioners, and intervention research.

Julie K. Taylor, MSW, is a PhD student with the University of Alabama, School of Social Work. Her research interests are in the area of juvenile justice.