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Adolescent delinquency and family processes among single parent families

By

Sunmi Seo

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of  
Mississippi State University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Science  
in Human Development and Family Studies  
in the School of Human Sciences

Mississippi State, Mississippi

August 2016

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2016

Adolescent delinquency and family processes among single parent families

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This study used secondary data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) to examine the relationship between adolescent delinquency and family processes (i.e., relationship to residential parents and autonomy), among single-mother and single-father families. The findings indicate that adolescents in single-mother families reported a higher quality relationship to residential parents than those living with single-fathers. Additionally, the relationship to residential parents variable was modestly predictive of adolescent delinquency. However, the results indicate there is no statistically significant difference between rates of adolescent delinquency among single-mother and single-father families. Research and practical implications of this study are discussed.

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction**

In 2013, more than 26 million children who were under the age of 18 had lived in single-parent families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Among them, 5 million children were in the father's custody, while 19 million were in the mother's custody. Kids Count Data Center (2014) indicated that between 2000 and 2013, the rate of children who lived in single-parent families had risen from 30% to 34.5%. Research indicates that adolescents in single-parent families associate with delinquent behaviors more than those living in other family structures. The Institute for Marriage and Public Policy (IMAPP) (2005) found evidence that youths in single-parent homes were more prone to commit crimes than those living with parents who were married. In fact, more than 50% of youth who had criminal records lived with single-parent families (Simons, 2010). A more recent trend report stated that children in single-parent families were less likely to access economic support and positive family processes than children in two-parent families (Kids Count Data Center, 2015). According to the Pew Research Center (2013), 43% of single-mother families were in poverty and 24% of single-father families lived in poverty.

## Statement of the Problem

A large amount of research has revealed that adolescents in single-parent families are more prone to engage in delinquency (Jablonska, 2007; Mack, Peck, & Leiber, 2015) when compared to adolescents who reside in a two-parent household. Although only a few researchers have examined whether the family processes associated with adolescent delinquency vary across family structure, findings from those studies have been inconsistent. For example, Mack, Leiber, Featherstone, and Monserud (2007) found that attachment and supervision were more important factors than economic hardship and family structure in contributing to adolescent delinquency. However, Rodriguez, Nichols, Javdani, Emerson, and Donenberg (2015) indicated that a negative parent-adolescent relationship, which was influenced by poverty, resulted in adolescent externalizing problems (e.g., rule-breaking, lying, and aggression).

Moreover, existing studies have not focused solely on adolescents in single-parent families. Although many studies have found differences between single-parent families and married parent families, there is a lack of studies examining the difference between single-mother and single-father households (Breivik, Olweus, & Endresen, 2009; Eitle, 2006). One notable exception is a study conducted by Eitle (2006) who tested the level of adolescent risk behavior including delinquency and delinquent behaviors in different single-mother and single-father families.

Because of these discrepancies in research, more research must be done to investigate adolescent delinquency as related to single-parent families. Furthermore, research is also necessary to understand how family processes affect adolescent delinquent behaviors in single-parent families. Understanding the role of family

processes for adolescent delinquent behaviors will contribute to positive outcomes for youth in single-parent families. Moreover, such research may identify intervention strategies that could enhance family processes among parents and adolescents in single-parent families.

### **General Background of the Problem**

During the past several decades, a large number of studies have sought to examine the relationship between parent-adolescent relationships and adolescent problem behaviors among various family structures. Findings of these studies seem to diverge along two distinct paths: those that indicate that (1) family structure has a direct impact on adolescent delinquent behaviors, and those that emphasize (2) the effects of family processes on adolescent delinquency.

Recently, a few researchers have narrowed their investigation to focus on delinquent behaviors in adolescents living with single-mothers compared to single-fathers. The results suggested that single-mother families are likely to have less income and show higher quality of family processes than single-father families (Crawford & Novak, 2008). Adolescents from single-father families are more apt to participate in delinquent behaviors, delinquency, and substance use than those from single-mother families (Jablonska, 2007).

Delinquent behaviors may put adolescents at risk for failing to make a successful transition into adulthood. Cook, Pflieger, Connell, and Connell (2015) revealed a relationship between specific transitional patterns of delinquent behaviors (e.g., aggression, theft, low severity, and high severity) in early adolescence and negative outcomes (e.g., high school dropout, depression, alcohol and drug problems, and criminal

involvement) in early adulthood. The results of this study showed that adolescents who escalated to more serious patterns of delinquent behaviors were at greater risk of negative outcomes in young adulthood compared to adolescents in a stable non-delinquent behavior group (Cook et al., 2015).

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how family processes relate to adolescent delinquency in single-mother families and single-father families. Specifically, this study will explore the relationship between the aforementioned family processes and adolescents' delinquency among youth in grades 7 through 12 who live in single-parent families. This research will also examine whether the family processes that influence adolescent delinquent behaviors differ among single-mother families and single-father families.

### **Definitions**

Generally, family processes refers to the relationship between family members such as communication and satisfaction with family life (Child Trends, 2013). In this study, family processes are operationalized as the relationship between parents and adolescents such as the quality of relationship and autonomy. Within this work, delinquency is regarded as the behaviors that violate laws or lead to arrest or adjudication (Day, Wanklyn, & Yessine, 2014).

### **Research Questions**

1. Do family processes (e.g., relationship to residential parents and autonomy) influence adolescent delinquency in single-parent families?
2. Do adolescent-parent relationship and autonomy and adolescent delinquent behaviors vary between single-mother families and single-father families?

### **Hypotheses**

1. Adolescents living in single-father families will report higher delinquency scores than adolescents living in single-mother families.
2. Adolescents residing with single-mothers will report a higher quality relationship to residential parent and greater autonomy than those in single-father families.
3. Higher quality of relationship to residential parents and greater autonomy will be associated with lower delinquency scores.

### **Significance of Study**

Research has compared the relationship between family processes and adolescent delinquent behaviors among single-parent families and married parent families. However, most research solely focuses on single-mother families rather than focusing on both single-mother families and single-father families.

Furthermore, insufficient research has been done to explain the relationship between family processes and adolescent delinquent behaviors among single-parent families. Recent research has revealed that adolescents residing with single-fathers are more inclined to engage in delinquency than those living in single-mother families. However, more research needs to be done in this area for a sample of U.S. families because several research comparing single-mother families and single-father families was conducted in other countries such as Norway (Breivik et al., 2009) and Sweden (Jablonska, 2007).



This study will examine the relationship between family processes (e.g., adolescent-parent relationship and autonomy) and adolescent delinquent behaviors among single-parent families. This research will expect that there is a significant association between family processes and adolescent delinquent behaviors in single-parent families. Furthermore, it is envisaged that single-mothers are more likely to show a higher quality of adolescent-parent relationship and autonomy than single-fathers. These different levels of family processes among single-parent families will be anticipated to indicate that adolescents in single-father families associate with delinquent behaviors more than those living with single-mothers.

These findings will be influential in creating intervention strategies for enhancing family processes among parents and adolescents in single-parent families. The findings may also influence changes in parenting education that will help improve family processes, which in turn has the potential to decrease adolescent delinquent behaviors.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This study intends to find the effect of family processes on adolescent delinquency and see if family structure have an impact on family processes. Abundant research has indicated the relationships between family processes and family structure. In this chapter, three specific topics will be covered: adolescence, theoretical base of social control theory, and family context (family structure and family processes).

#### **Perspectives on Adolescence**

Historically, a large number of researchers have investigated adolescent development. G. Stanley Hall (1904) first identified adolescence as a distinct developmental period associated with “storm and stress” (Arnett, 1999). In his view, this turmoil in adolescence is biologically determined, so storm and stress are an inevitable and unchangeable part of adolescent development, without regard to the social and cultural environment (Steinberg, 2010). From this perspective, the notion of healthy adolescent development is the avoidance of problems rather than the growth of competencies (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Thus, adolescent problem behaviors, such as conflicts with parents, mood disruptions, and risky behaviors are expected from this perspective (Arnett, 1999).

Contrary to Hall’s belief, contemporary scholars no longer believe that adolescence is an inherently period of difficulty (Petersen, 1993). Research has

demonstrated that adolescents typically traverse this period without any significant emotional, behavioral, or social problems (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Although the researchers admitted that engagement of problem behaviors are more likely to occur in adolescence than other developmental stages (Steinberg, 2001), having positive opportunities and experiences could reduce the likelihood of problem behaviors (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

The concept of Positive Youth Development (PYD) has emerged against Hall's deficit model (Reininger et al. 2003). Instead of "storm and stress" which views adolescence from a deficit perspective rooted in risk factors, PYD regards all youth as a resource with the potential and capacity for positive development (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). In this view, negative outcomes or risky behaviors will be reduced or prevented by accomplishing positive potential. Based on PYD, the Search Institute suggested the concept of 40 developmental assets for fostering PYD and reducing adolescent risky behaviors (Vimont, 2012). Two primary components of these assets include positive adult-adolescent relationships (e.g., family support, caring school climate, caring neighborhood, etc.) and opportunities that promote the achievement of values, skills, and competencies (e.g., youth programs, time at home, self-esteem, cultural competence, etc.) (Tableman, 2002).

### **Adolescence**

Generally, adolescence is understood as a bridge between the end of childhood and beginning of adulthood (Phillips, 2008); usually the age ranges from 10 to late teens or early 20s (Porter, Kaplan, Homeier, & Albert, 2009). In this period, adolescents experience changes in several developmental domains, including physical, cognitive,

social, and emotional changes. Puberty is a process of physical changes through which a child's body matures into an adult body capable of sexual reproduction (Porter et al, 2009). This often includes a growth spurt and the development of secondary sex characteristics (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

In addition to physical changes, adolescence is also a period of emotional development. According to Porter et al. (2009), "this phase is characterized by seemingly spontaneous outbursts that can be challenging for parents and teachers who often receive the brunt" (p. 1752). Since the regions of the brain that control emotions develop and mature in this period, adolescents are gradually capable of establishing an identity and managing their emotions and stress (e.g., family, society, peer, and school) (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

In terms of cognitive development, adolescents develop the ability to engage in increasingly complex thought and reasoning processes. Adolescence is the beginning of abstract thinking; adolescents are able to have better abstract and hypothetical thoughts, use symbols, and analyze cause and effect logically than in childhood, and use symbols, such as metaphors (Porter et al., 2009). However, adolescents are more likely to make poor decisions (Fischhoff et. al., 1999) and engage in risky behaviors (e.g., violence, aggression, and alcohol use) than adults due to immature brain development (Steinberg, 2005).

Along with physical, emotional, and cognitive development, adolescents also experience changes in the social domain related to the relative influences of family relations and peer groups. As the time to seek more autonomy and identity, adolescents begin to cast doubt on family rules, which often results in conflict with their parents

(Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Porter et al., 2009). In light of this, peer groups become the center of social life unlike in childhood (Steinberg, 2010). Peer groups play a key role in the source of information and social comparison of the world outside of family (Bush & Peterson, 2013). Moreover, adolescents tend to conform and comply to peer influence in that they are often eager to belong in peer groups (Adams, 2005). There are several developmental theories that describe changes in these domains at different ages and stages of development.

### **Developmental theories**

Catalyst for human development categorized in three different views: nature, nurture, and interaction. In the view of nature, human behaviors are products of biological factors or genetic endowment (Newman & Newman, 2009). This view regards a human being is developed like plants or animals. In contrast, the stance of nurture perceives human development (e.g., thoughts and behaviors) as it is influenced by the environment by which they are surrounded. According to Newman and Newman (2009), environmental factors include health care, cognitive stimuli, interpersonal relationships, financial status, stressors, work settings, etc. In order to combine these two different kinds of views, the view of interaction emphasizes relations between biological and environmental factors. The psychologists who advocate this view believe that the actions, thought, knowledge, or behaviors in humans are affected by both innate factors and environment (Miller, 2010). There are several theories based on these three views: (1) nature (e.g., Evolutionary Theory, Psychosexual Theory, and Cognitive Developmental Theory), (2) nurture (e.g., Learning Theory, Social Role Theory, and Life Course

Theory), and (3) interaction (e.g., Psychosocial Theory, Cognitive Social Historical Theory, and Dynamic Systems Theory) (Newman & Newman, 2009).

### ***Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development***

Erik Erikson (1959) proposed a psychosocial theory of lifespan development, which expanded Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Freud believed individual personality is driven from three psychological structures: id (i.e., innate desire and main source of psychic energy), ego (i.e., the role of mediation between id and reality), and super ego (i.e., morality) (Miller, 2011). However, Erikson highlighted that culture and society (e.g., family, parents, and community) and the conflicts that can occur within the individual (i.e., ego) contribute to establishing one's personality (Crain, 2011).

Additionally, Erikson disagreed with Freud that personality is fully developed by middle childhood and therefore included eight stages which represented the entire lifespan (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). His theory represents an interactional theory of development where "nature determines the sequence of the stages and sets the limits within which nurture operates" (Miller, 2011, p.157). In his view, each individual develops one's personality by resolving a crisis in each stage (see Figure 1). Each crisis is characterized by interaction between biological forces and social demands.

Stage (Age)	Psycho Social Crisis	Expected Resolution
Infancy	Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust	Hope
Early Childhood	Autonomy vs. Shame, Doubt	Will
Play Age	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose
School Age	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competence
Adolescence	Identity vs. Confusion	Fidelity
Adulthood	Generativity vs. Self-Absorption	Care
Old Age	Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom

Figure 1 Eight stages of Erikson's theory (Erikson, 1959)

According to Erikson's theory, the social crisis associated with the stage of adolescence is identity vs. role confusion. In his theory, adolescence is the time to resolve identity crisis. In this period, identity crisis is characterized by puberty and the changing demands of society (e.g., peer group and family) as adolescents mature (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Identity development within the context of the changing nature of family relations and peer influences forces adolescents to try on "new roles," especially of their peers. Peer groups play a crucial role in providing opportunities to try out new roles. As growth of autonomy and independence, youths seek their identity through peer groups more than through parents (Miller, 2010). Peer groups provide modeling and feedback for identity achievement during experiments with different roles and identities (Steinberg, 2010). Peer pressure is triggered by a desire to "belong" in the peer group, often lead to social deviance (Adams, 2005). Despite weakened parent-adolescent relationships, parental guidance, monitoring, supervision, and support are helpful for a successful transition into a positive peer context (Fosco, Stormshak, Dishion, & Winter, 2012) and identity formation such as self-esteem and self-concept (Steinberg, 2010).

If adolescents successfully integrate their identifications in this stage, they will establish their own identity and their self-conception in the society or culture where they live (Miller, 2011). In contrast, if they fail, they will feel role confusion (i.e., the individual feeling of uncertainty about oneself or the feeling of not belonging in one's society) (Miller, 2011). According to Erikson, role confusion leads to maladaptive behaviors and a negative personality (e.g., antisocial behaviors and delinquency) (Steinberg, 2010). Adolescents with role confusion have problems making decisions, having relationships with others, and having excessive sexual concerns. Moreover, failure to build identity is influential to adolescent delinquent behaviors (Barbot & Hunter, 2012).

### ***Theory of Cognitive Development***

This theory was first developed by Jean Piaget. As a trained biologist, “he thought of the cognitive system as a biological system whose purpose, like other biological systems such as locomotion, respiration, or digestion, was to permit the organism to adapt and survive” (Newman & Newman, 2009, p. 82). Piaget presented an inherently active organism that children continually explore, hypothesize and evaluate schemas to achieve equilibrium (Miller, 2011). Scheme refers to the structure or organization which is changed, integrated with the environment by people (Newman & Neman, 2009). According to Piaget, people (i.e., all organisms) inherently tend to adapt to the environment; thus, they constantly modify the schemas, which is named adaption. Adaption consists of two complementary processes: assimilation (i.e., interpretation of new experience within existing experience) and accommodation (i.e., reframing existing schemes for explaining new experience).



Piaget introduced four major stages to explain children’s cognitive development (Erneling, 2012; Geert, 1998) (Figure 2). Piaget suggested that each stage is constructed from the previous stage and followed by specific order for the advanced stage (Geert, 1998). During this construction process, children find logical structure and build new cognitive structure so that they move to the new stage from the previous stage.

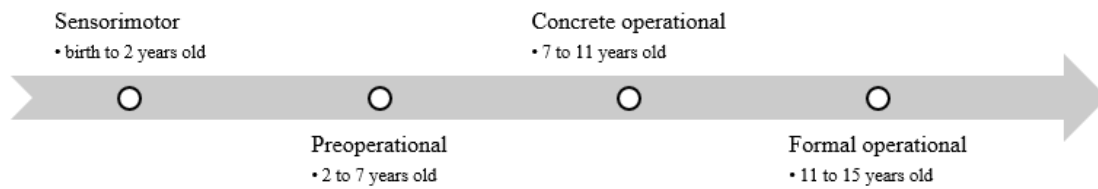


Figure 2 Piaget’s stage of cognitive development (Piaget, 1970)

According to Piaget, the formal operational period is adolescence. In this period, adolescents have capacities to think abstractly, hypothetically, and deductively. They are also able to have combination thinking so that they solve the problems through logical thinking. Moreover, they conceive themselves in the future, and distinguish between reality and possibility. Nevertheless, as stated in the above chapter, adolescents are easily engaged in poor decision making and delinquent behaviors during the processes in which adolescents develop cognitive ability.

Most recently, cognitive neuroscience introduced in adolescent cognitive development in a large sense (Miller, 2010). By using neuroimaging techniques (e.g., fMRI), this research explains human cognitive development within brain activities. The researchers also revealed the changes in the brain before and after puberty (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). Additionally, this view also explained the reason of adolescents’ poor

decision making and increased problem behaviors (Steinberg, 2005). Due to dramatic changes of the prefrontal cortex, adolescents are more likely to make poor decisions than adults (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006).

### **Adolescent delinquent behaviors**

Delinquency is defined as “a wide range of behaviors that may lead to criminal charges, arrest, or adjudication” (Day et al., 2014, p.99). Delinquency also refers to the juvenile criminal behaviors which were handled in the juvenile justice system (Steinberg, 2010).

Based on Erikson’s theory, adolescence is a crucial time of identity development. Many researchers show that identity confusion is likely to link to adolescent delinquent behaviors. According to Barbot and Hunter (2012), adolescent delinquent behaviors are tied to building identity. Furthermore, Ferrer-Wreder, Palchuk, Poyrazli, Small, and Domitrovich (2008) stated that failure to resolve identity crisis has an impact on antisocial behaviors, which refer to actions that violate social norms, rules, and laws (Fosco et al., 2012). Fosco et al. (2012) measured antisocial behaviors including delinquency (e.g., in past 12months, have you been arrested?) and revealed that adolescents who have a lower level of antisocial behaviors show more positive identity development than those who have a higher level of antisocial behaviors (Ferrer-Wreder et al., 2008).

Moreover, recent studies have shown that cognitive changes in brain development play a key role in explaining the reason that adolescence is associated with increased problem behaviors (e.g., violence, aggression, delinquency, and substance abuse) (Steinberg, 2005). During puberty, the prefrontal cortex (i.e., the front of the brain) goes

through dramatic changes. Owing to immaturity of the prefrontal cortex, adolescents tend to have poor cognitive control over their behaviors, self-regulation, and decision making; also, they are likely to engage in emotional impulsivity and risky behaviors (Phillips, 2008).

Along with development of the prefrontal cortex, adolescent cognitive systems are also changed (Steinberg, 2005). These cognitive changes often lead to adolescent poor decision making (e.g., risk taking) which can precede risky behaviors (e.g., delinquency and sexual behaviors) (Eccles, Wigfield, & Byrnes, 2003). According to Steinberg (2007), imbalanced development of a cognitive-control network which helps executive functions (e.g., planning and self-regulation) and socioemotional network which is sensitive to social and emotional stimuli is influential to adolescents' poor decision making and risky behaviors during puberty. For these reasons, delinquency is more likely to occur and prevail in adolescence than during other developmental stages (Perren & Hornung, 2005).

### **Adolescent-parent relationship**

In adolescence, parent-adolescent relationships tend to weaken, as they are characterized by a decrease in closeness and communication as well as less parental monitoring and supervision (Fosco et al., 2012). Erikson expressed while adolescent autonomy (i.e., independence) and identity develop in adolescence, the adolescent and parent relationships grow weaker (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Adolescents are eager to belong to a society (e.g., peer group) and become more independent. At the same time, they tend to rely on adults (e.g., parents). Adams (2005) stated that “family closeness and attachment remains a major factor in predicting adolescents' adjustment and serves as a

buffer against engaging in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, drinking, using drugs, and leaving school” (p. 12).

Furthermore, in the perspective of Positive Youth Development, the role of family (e.g., family support) is important to adolescent positive development. According to Benson, Scales, Leffert, and Roehlkepartain (1999), researchers have found the 40 developmental assets to promote adolescent healthy development and showed that adolescents who have more assets (30 or more) engaged in fewer risky behaviors (e.g., violence, depression, sexual behaviors). Among these assets, adolescents most commonly experienced family support (providing high levels of love and support) (Benson et al., 1999). For these reasons, parental support plays a vital role in adolescent development as a protective factor.

### **Theoretical Base**

Travis Hirschi (1969) proposed social control theory to explain the engagement in adolescent delinquency. Social control theory originated from criminological theories trying to find the reason that people commit crimes (Petrocelli & Petrocelli, 2005). In this perspective, individuals will become involved in delinquency when their bond to society has failed or weakened. Hirschi developed the concepts of the four elements of social bond (i.e., attachment, commitment, involvement, and beliefs). Attachment refers to the relationship between the individual and society (e.g., parents, caregivers, and friends). Commitment denotes the investment in conventional norms. Involvement refers to the actual amount of time spent participating in conventional activities. Beliefs are acceptance of moral validity such as conventional norms. Thus, individuals involved in

delinquency are likely to have weak attachment, low commitment, low involvement, and negative beliefs.

Among these four factors, Hirschi initially stated that the degree of attachment between parent and child is crucial to determine adolescent deviant behaviors (Crawford & Novak, 2008; Fosco et al., 2012). Hirschi indicated that individuals who have weak attachment encourage high levels of delinquency while healthy attachment is less likely to result in delinquent behaviors. He believed that when adolescents in single-parent families show a high quality adolescent-parent relationship, they expect to report a lower level of delinquency than those in two-parent families who have weak attachments (Mack et al., 2007).

Empirical research has used this theoretical perspective to examine the correlation between family and adolescent delinquent behaviors (Wiatrowski, Griswold, & Roberts, 1981). Hirschi (1969) revealed the link with parental attachment (e.g., mothers versus fathers) and delinquency among male teens beyond the family structure. He concluded that parental attachment is a significant factor to prevent adolescent delinquency. Additionally, the finding in this research revealed that a higher quality of parent attachment in the types of single-parent families tends to be sufficient to prevent delinquent behaviors. However, the link between single-parent families and delinquency is still unclear (Rebellion, 2002). In addition to Hirschi (1969), Wiatrowski, Griswold, and Roberts (1981) studied the relationship between adolescent delinquency and the four elements of social control (i.e., attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief). Their findings supported social control theory by demonstrating that parental attachment (e.g.,

closeness) and school attachment (e.g., attitude toward school, academic achievement, etc.) were negatively related to adolescent delinquency.

However, Hirschi modified the perspective in later years and stated that parenting within single-parent families have difficulty maintaining the high quality of child and parent relationships (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Mack et al., 2007). It is supposed that two-parent families show better parental attachment, monitoring, and guidance than single-parent families. Numerous research studies have supported this perspective (Demuth & Brown, 2004; Rankin & Kern, 1994; Rebellon, 2002). Rankin and Kern (1994) conducted the correlation with adolescent delinquency and attachment (e.g., communication, supervision, and family activities) to mother and father using national surveys. They revealed that adolescents in two-parent families were less likely to show delinquency than those who live in single-parent families. Similarly, Demuth and Brown (2004) found that the absence of one parent is correlated with adolescent delinquency based on social control theory even though they found that family processes mediate engagement of adolescent delinquency across family structure.

For the current research study, this perspective is useful to explain whether the quality of family processes and adolescent delinquency score differ among the types of single-parent families. Moreover, this research will identify the relationship between adolescent delinquency and parental attachment factors regardless of the types of single-parent families. Empirical research has commonly used parent-adolescent closeness variables to reveal parental attachment. Extending this research, this present study will use parental attachment components such as the relationship to residential parents,

including closeness, and test how parental attachment is related to adolescent delinquency in single-parent families.

### **Family Context**

The meaning of family varies widely (Pruitt, 1999). In the past, family was defined as a social group that has common residence, economic support, and reproduction; traditionally, family consisted of two adults and one or more children (Georgas, 2003). However, as a result of demographic changes in the U.S., the composition of family, such as divorce, unmarried parents, and homosexual families, has changed. In view of these changes, Popenoe (1988) defined a minimum family constitution as one adult and one dependent person.

A number of researchers have debated whether family process or family structure more strongly influences adolescent development, child-parent relationships, parenting, and marital life (Bush & Peterson, 2013; Peterson, 2005). Structural family variations denote “differences across families in the composition (i.e., the number of family members, types of relationships and statuses), resources available (e.g., income and education level), and structural organization (e.g., intact two-parent, bi-nuclear families)” (Bush & Peterson, 2013, p. 278). Despite continued debates, researchers have found the effect of family processes is affected by structural family variations on adolescent development, child-parent relationships, parenting, and marital life (Peterson, 2005).

### **Family structure**

Family structure is defined as either the size of the family or familial positions (e.g., mother, father, daughter, etc.) (Georgas, 2003). In family composition, at a

minimum, one adult and one more dependent person (e.g., child or romantic partner) are included (Popenoe, 1988). The types of family structures are single-parent families, non-divorced parent families, step-parent families, homosexual families, etc. (Falci, 2006). Throughout the last several decades, researchers have investigated the relationship between family structure and adolescent problem behaviors. In the past, most studies suggested that youth from “broken homes” (i.e., parental absence) were involved in higher rates of delinquency than youth from intact homes (Shaw & McKay, 1932). As recent research has continually revealed, adolescents from single-parent families were more likely to be involved in antisocial or delinquent behaviors (Breivik, Olweus, & Endresen, 2009; Jablonska, 2007). On the other hand, other research has revealed that family processes mediate the effect of family structure on adolescent problem behaviors (Breivik et al., 2009; Demuth & Brown, 2004).

### ***Single-parent families as compared to two-parent families***

Likewise, a number of researchers have examined whether adolescents in single-parent families engage more in delinquent behaviors than adolescents who live with two biological parents (Breivik et al., 2009; Hoffman, 2006; Jablonska, 2007; Mack et al., 2007). A large amount of research has revealed that adolescents in single-parent families tend to live in poverty more often (Jablonska, 2007) and engage in delinquency involving aggression and substance use (Breivik et al., 2009; Mack et al., 2015) when compared to adolescents who reside in a two-parent household. For example, Hoffman (2006) investigated the link of family structure and adolescent problem behaviors (e.g., antisocial behaviors, delinquency, and substance use) within the community context. The results of this data showed that adolescents with single-parents and stepfathers are more



likely to participate in problem behaviors than those living with biological mothers and biological fathers.

On the other hand, Demuth and Brown (2004) indicated that family processes (e.g., parental involvement, supervision, monitoring, and closeness) are more important in determining adolescent delinquent behaviors than family structure. Among diverse family structure, adolescents living with two married parents have the lowest level of delinquency, and those who residing with single-father families reported the highest level of delinquency. They also found that parental absence, a major issue in single-parent families, is related to a decrease in parental involvement, supervision, monitoring and closeness. However, they highlighted that adolescent delinquency is more likely to appear in different family processes or parent-child relationships than the types of family structure (Demuth & Brown, 2004).

Although there are different results regarding the relationship between family structure and adolescent delinquent behaviors, family structure seems to have an indirect influence on adolescent delinquency. Characteristics of family structure have an impact on family interaction and processes (Peterson, 2005). For example, compared to married parent families, single-parents work longer hours and have more economic hardship or pressure (Anderson, 2012). As a result, single-parents are less likely to monitor children's whereabouts and use effective disciplinary strategies than intact families (Laird, Criss, Pettit, Dodge, & Bates, 2008). Those deficient parental behaviors by single-parents affect adolescent deviant behaviors, such as substance use and delinquency. In turn, family structure has indirect consequences for adolescent delinquency.

### *Single-mother families as compared to single-father families*

Although prior researchers have pointed out that adolescents from single-parent households report more adolescent delinquent behaviors than two parent households, there is a lack of research dealing with the difference in the level of delinquency specifically between single-mother and single-father households (Eitle, 2006). Prior research, by and large, has focused on single-parent families characterized by divorced single-mother families, never-married single-mother families, and widowed single-mother families (Demo & Acock, 1996). This demonstrates that research conducted on single-parent families tends to focus more on single-mother families rather than on single-father families. Because single-mother families are in greater quantity than single-father families, most research has homed in on the “father absent” household (Macklin, 1987).

However, there have been far fewer studies that have compared single-mother and single-father families in terms of adolescent delinquency. The research that has been conducted has found that adolescents in single-mother families are less prone to engage in delinquent behaviors than adolescents in single-father families. Jablonska (2007) investigated the impact of family structure (i.e., two-married parent families, single-mother families, single-father families, and shared physical custody) on adolescent risk behaviors (i.e., alcohol, illicit drugs, drunkenness and smoking), victimization, and mental distress problems (i.e., aggressive behavior, anxiety, and depression) in Stockholm, Sweden. After controlling for possible confounders, adolescent risk behaviors, including alcohol use, drug use, and aggression, were significantly associated with single-father families while risk behaviors in single-mother families were no longer

statistically significant. This study's results clearly show that adolescents who live with single-fathers engaged in higher illicit drug use, alcohol use, drunkenness, and aggressive behaviors than those residing with single-mothers. Crawford and Novak (2008) demonstrated that parenting styles—involvement and monitoring—are influenced by family structure. Interestingly, in this study, both mother-only and father-only families are characterized by less parental monitoring and involvement than two-parent families.

On the contrary, single-mothers tend to communicate more with their children and acquire more information about their children than single-fathers. In addition, Breivik et al. (2009) found that adolescents from single-father households show higher substance use and antisocial behaviors than adolescents in single-mother families in Bergen, Norway. Those results may indicate that single-fathers monitor and supervise their adolescents less than single-mothers (Breivik et al., 2009; Crawford & Novak, 2008). According to these studies, adolescents in single-father families are at greater risk for involvement in delinquency than those in single-mother families. Although research has been conducted in other countries, these findings may not be representative of the U.S. For this reason, more research needs to be performed in the U.S.

### **Family processes**

Generally speaking, family processes are defined as “the interactions between members of a family, including their relationships, communication patterns, time spent together, and satisfaction with family life” (Child Trends, 2013, p. 34). A number of researchers have identified core factors related to family processes. Baumrind (1978) conceptualized parenting styles as authoritative, permissive, and indifferent parenting. Patterson, DeBaryshe, and Ramsey (1989) divided family processes into coercive

parenting (i.e., harsh and non-compliment) and parental monitoring. Furthermore, research has found that family processes indicate positive parenting (e.g., warmth, involvement, monitoring, warmth, responsiveness, and closeness) as protective factors and negative parenting (e.g., harsh, non-compliment, and inconsistent) as risk factors (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010).

These family processes are influenced by the types of family structure (Peterson, 2005). The quality of the parent-adolescent relationship, level of communication, and family satisfaction have been long regarded as important factors that affect adolescent problem behaviors (e.g., delinquency and sexual behavior) (Adams, 2005).

### ***The effect of family process on adolescent delinquency***

Family processes play a key role in determining the level of adolescent delinquent behaviors. As a protective factor, supportive and close parent-adolescent relationships lead to reduced problem behaviors such as delinquency (Crawford & Novak, 2008; Criss et al., 2015; Fosco et al., 2012). Those family processes play a key role in predicting or moderating adolescent delinquent behaviors (Laird et al., 2008; Williams & Steinberg 2011). Previous research has highlighted how negative family processes (e.g., coercive, non-compliment, and harsh parenting) serve as risk factors rather than focusing on supportive parent-adolescent relationships as a protective factor. These risk factors have been associated with adolescents' delinquency and family structures (e.g., single-parent families and two-parent families) (Gutman & Eccles, 1999). Several studies have indicated that negative parental behaviors are a significant predictor of adolescents' delinquency. When parents engage in negative parental behaviors, the risk for adolescent delinquency increases (Williams & Steinberg, 2011).

## ***Parenting***

An important part of family processes is parenting, which refers to the processes or behaviors used by which parents to raise their children (Brooks, 2011). Williams and Steinberg (2011) used longitudinal research to find the link between parenting and adolescent adjustment (i.e., delinquency, internalized distress, and academic orientation) among juvenile offenders. Data were collected for delinquency as aggressive offending (e.g., attack someone physically), related offending (e.g., attacked by someone without weapon), and substance abuse-related social problems (e.g., getting complaints from family because of substance use). This study displayed that warm parenting and hostile parenting were predictive of adolescent problem behaviors. Warm parenting decreased adolescent delinquency unlike hostile parenting. Fosco et al. (2012) found that supportive parent-adolescent relationships (i.e., closeness) were beneficial for reducing the risk of youth substance use and problem behaviors. Mack et al. (2007) focused on how family structure (i.e., intact, divorce, death, or never-married) was associated with adolescent delinquency; also, they examined the influence of economic factors and family processes such as closeness, supervision, and parental control on this association. They found that family closeness has more impact on determining the level of delinquency among adolescents than other factors such as family structure and socio-economic level. This research demonstrates that parenting is an important variable in determining adolescent delinquent behaviors. While hostile and coercive parenting are important risk factors for adolescents' delinquency, supportive and warm parenting may be protective factors for adolescents' delinquency (Hoeve et al., 2009).

### ***Parental monitoring***

Fosco et al. (2012) described parental monitoring as “parents who stay informed about their child’s activities, attend to their child’s behavior, and structure their child’s environment” (p.203). Parental monitoring has been associated with better outcomes for children and is a significant factor that results in a decline in delinquency. For example, Laird et al. (2008) employed a longitudinal design based on adolescent and parent reports to determine whether parental monitoring moderated the link of antisocial friends and adolescent delinquent behaviors. They found that poor parental monitoring was associated with higher delinquent behaviors and having friends who engaged in delinquent behaviors. Moreover, this research suggested that lower parental monitoring is more likely to increase future adolescent delinquent behaviors. Breivik et al. (2009) investigated how family relationships – mother-child conflict, father-child conflict, parental monitoring, mother closeness, and father closeness – mediate adolescent risk behaviors (i.e., antisocial behaviors and substance use) among single-mother and single-father families. The results suggested that only parental monitoring was associated negatively with adolescent risk behaviors across both types of single-parent families. Consistent with those researchers, Williams and Steinberg (2011) suggested that parental monitoring was connected to the level of delinquency. Fosco et al. (2012) conducted a study to examine the effects of parental monitoring and family relationships as a predictor for adolescent problem behaviors (e.g., antisocial behavior and delinquency). The findings of this study showed that parental monitoring and connectedness accounted for predicting the level of adolescent problem behaviors. The authors indicated that when parents used effective parenting and monitoring skills in sixth grade, adolescents

decreased the pattern of problem behaviors in eighth grade. Criss et al. (2015) also identified the relationship between monitoring behavior (i.e., parental solicitation, child disclosure, and parental involvement) and adolescent adjustment (i.e., antisocial behavior, substance use, and school grades). The results clearly showed when parents and their children spend time together (i.e., parental involvement), adolescents show lower substance use than those who spend less time together (Criss et al., 2015).

### ***Autonomy***

Autonomy has been defined in a variety of ways (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003). Some researchers have defined autonomy as independence or volition (Van Petegem, Vansteenkiste, & Beyers, 2013). Independence refers to an individual's behaviors, decisions, and thoughts without relying on others (Steinberg, 2010). According to Van Petegem, Vansteenkiste, and Beyers (2013), volition refers to the behaviors by individuals' interests, values and goals. Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) suggested the term of emotional autonomy which was operationalized about adolescents' detachment from parents. As previously stated in the previous section, adolescents experience social changes are expected to become independent from parents.

Much research has revealed that autonomy is correlated with the quality of adolescent-parent relationship and adolescent adjustment (e.g., delinquency, alcohol use, mental distress, school achievement, and substance use) (Beyers & Goossens, 1999; Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Steinberg, 1996; Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993; Van Petegem, Vansteenkiste, & Beyers, 2013). Lamborn and Steinberg (1993) conducted an ANOVA and *t* test to analyze the association between emotional autonomy (i.e., individuation, de-idealization of parents, non-dependence on parents, and perceptions of parents as

individuals beyond the parental role), relationship support and outcome variables including adolescent delinquency and drug and alcohol use. According to this study, emotional autonomy correlated to both negative and positive adolescent delinquency. Although adolescents with greater autonomy reported higher rates of behavioral problems than adolescents who were well connected to their parents, the authors also found that adolescents who have not only higher emotional autonomy but also higher relationship support from parents reported better healthful adjustment. Likewise, recent research that assessed adolescents' volitional autonomy showed higher quality of well-being and lower levels of problem behaviors than adolescents who feel pressure by external demands (Van Petegem, Vansteenkiste, & Beyers, 2012). They also revealed how adolescent well-being and problem behaviors differ from proximity and distance in the parent-child relationship. They found that adolescents who felt distance in the relationship with parents show higher levels of problem behaviors.

In sum, adolescents' autonomy may significantly relate to the quality of relationship with their parents. When supportive/close parenting is coupled with adolescent autonomy or independence, adolescents show lower delinquency as compared to adolescents who have higher levels of autonomy without parent support. There is insufficient research in regard to family structure. Thus, further research comparing the types of single-parent families may need to be done in this area.

### **Conclusion**

Single-parent families may influence delinquency via family processes. Social control theory explained that family processes, such as attachment, are more important than family structure in understanding adolescent delinquency. However, family structure



seems to play a key role in negative family processes in that the absence of one parent presents a challenge to sustained high quality adolescent-parent relationships. The family context of single-parent families may contribute to or inadvertently lead adolescents to engage in delinquent behaviors. The research literature is rich with studies examining family structure; however, there is a lack of research comparing the effect of family processes in single-mother and single-father households on adolescent delinquent behaviors. The few studies that have been conducted indicate that, adolescents who live with single-fathers are more likely to participate in delinquent behaviors than those living with single-mothers.

Adolescents' delinquency may be mediated by family processes across single-parent families; however, family processes are affected by family structure. Furthermore, adolescents are less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors if they have higher autonomy and higher quality of adolescent-parent relationships. Although positive family processes seem to be a significant protective factor to prevent adolescent delinquent behaviors, little research deals with the different effects of parenting among single-parent families. Building upon past research, this study seeks to examine the effect of family processes on adolescent delinquent behaviors in single-mother and single-father families.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

Existing literature has shown that little research has been done to examine the impact of family processes on adolescent delinquent behavior in single-mother versus single-father families. How this gap in literature will be addressed will be clearly identified in this methodology chapter. To accomplish this, the research design, sample, variables, instruments and analysis procedure for this thesis study will be described.

The purpose of this study is to explore whether positive family processes relate to delinquent behaviors of adolescents living in single-parent families. Additionally, this research aims to document whether adolescent delinquency differs among single-mother and single-father families. Two research questions have guided this study: 1) Do family processes (e.g., relationship to residential parents and autonomy) influence adolescent delinquency in single-parent families? and 2) Do adolescent-parent relationship and autonomy and adolescent delinquent behaviors vary between single-mother families and single-father families? These questions are examined using secondary data from a nationally representative research study.

#### **Research Design**

This quantitative study was a secondary analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) which is recognized as “the largest, most comprehensive longitudinal study of adolescents ever undertaken”

(Harris et al., 2009, para. 1). Thus far, this longitudinal study has conducted four waves of data collection and is currently collecting additional follow-up data in a fifth wave (2016-2018). The data from Add Health were collected from a nationally representative sample of adolescents who were enrolled in grades 7-12 between 1994 and 1995. It was stratified by urbanicity, size, type, and ethnicity (Harris et al., 2009). The research for Wave I was conducted through in-home interviews, in-school questionnaires, and parent questionnaires. The in-home interview for Wave I were conducted in students' home in 1995. For respondents' confidentiality, the researchers logged all data on their computer instead of using paper surveys. Moreover, the parent questionnaires were also conducted in the respondents' homes. The follow-up study was conducted in the form of an in-home interview in 1996 (Wave II), 2001-2002 (Wave III), and 2008 (Wave IV).

In the present study, the data collected through the in-home interview and parent questionnaire in Wave I of the public-use data (1994-1995) were selected because adolescents in 7th-12th grade were the target population of this project. Moreover, the specific focus of the present analysis was the relationship between family processes (e.g., the quality of family relationships and autonomy) and adolescent delinquency in single-mother families versus single-father families. Wave I focused on the “forces that may influence adolescents' health and risk behaviors including personal traits, families, friendships, romantic relationships, peer groups, schools, neighborhoods, and communities” (Harris et al., 2009, para. 2). Wave I included the data measuring adolescent delinquency, relationship with parents, and family type. Therefore, it was decided that the first wave of Add Health would be used for the current study.

## Population and Sample

Adolescents were selected using a multistage, stratified, school-based cluster sampling procedure (Harris et al., 2009). The sample was randomly selected from each of the 132 schools in the core study (80 high schools and 52 feeder schools). Participants for Wave I of the Add Health study included more than 90,000 adolescents and their parents in grades 7 through 12. Data collected in Wave I included the in-school questionnaire, the in-home interview, and the parent questionnaire. In the in-school interview, 90,118 adolescents participated. All students who completed the in-school questionnaire plus those who did not complete the questionnaire but were listed on the school roster were eligible for selection in the core sample. In the in-home interview, 12,105 respondents of a core in-home sample were included. The total sample, 20,745, includes the oversampled groups of the in-home interview along with the core in-home sample. Oversampled groups include ethnic groups, saturation, disabled, and genetic groups. Furthermore, 17,670 parents of adolescents completed the in-home interview contained within the parent interview. Wave II data were collected from 14,738 students who were 12th grade and were not part of the genetic sample at Wave I in 1996. In Wave III, 15,197 respondents were interviewed when they were between 18 and 26 years old. In Wave IV, 15,701 adults aged 14-32 who completed Wave I were included in 2008.

Because the target in this study was adolescents who were in 7th through 12th grades residing with single-parents, the analysis sample for this study included 216 adolescents in single-parent families and their parents who were selected for in-home surveys in Wave I. Originally, the data set was comprised of 108 adolescents in single-father families and 1,421 residing with single-mothers. However, to ensure equal

representation of single-mother and single-father families, 108 adolescents in single-mother families were randomly selected from the original group of 1,421 using statistical program, 22.0 version of Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Out of 1,529 respondents that had assigned numbers in the original dataset, this study selected the cases corresponding to single-mother households. Then, a selected case was run to randomly select 108 participants using SPSS. Specifically, stratified random sampling was opted for in this study so that a population was more likely to have an equal chance of being selected within homogenous groups; also, this sampling method has the advantage to ensure representative samples (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2014). Furthermore, independent-sample *t* test is minimally affected by violation of normality and homogeneity of variance by the sample size and magnitude of the violation. If sample sizes are equal, “the *t* test for independent groups may be used without appreciable error despite moderate violations of the normality and/or the homogeneity of variance assumptions” (Pagano, 2013, p. 376). For this reason, it was decided to compare equal sample sizes rather than comparing the 108 adolescents residing in single-father families with the 1,421 adolescents residing in single-mother families.

## **Measures**

### **Variables**

In order to find the relationship between family processes and adolescent delinquency among single-parent families, this research identified family processes as independent variables that consist of the relationship to residential parents and the autonomy. Delinquency, which was a dependent variable in this study, was determined by the degree of family processes and the type of single-parent families. Single-parent

families in this study comprised of single-mother families and single-father families. The gender of residential parents were regarded as independent variables when it comes to revealing the difference of adolescent delinquency scores compared to single-mother families and single-father families.

### **Instruments**

Adolescents and parents completed a questionnaire consisting of measures of delinquency, the relationship to residential parents and autonomy, as well as a variety of demographic questions. Delinquency and family processes (i.e., the relationship to residential parents and autonomy) were taken from in-home interviews for the first wave. The types of single-parent families was collected from parent questionnaires. In the original data, in-home interviews and parent questionnaires were given to 20,745 adolescents and more than 10,000 parents. These interviews and questionnaires were conducted in the home of each participant.

*Delinquency* was taken from the in-home interviews in the first wave. Add Health utilized the Denver Youth Survey (Huizinga, Esbensen, Weiher, & Elliott, 1990) to measure adolescent delinquency. The instrument used in the Add Health study was a 15-item self-report scale that adopted, adapted, and dropped items from the original 33-item scale (Huizinga, Esbensen, & Weiher, 1991) and was designed to measure involvement in delinquent activities in the past 12 months. Responses were ranked on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 to 3. The response options included “never,” “1 or 2 times,” “3 or 4 times,” and “5 or more times.” As can be seen in Appendix A, one sample item from the delinquency scale was, “In the past 12 months, how often did you deliberately damage property that didn’t belong to you?” Another sample item was, “How often did

you use or threaten to use a weapon to get something from someone?” Responses to each statement were summed; potential scores range from 0 to 45, with higher scores indicating greater participation in delinquent behaviors. This measure exhibited strong reliability ( $\alpha = .91$ ). The sample mean score from the present study was 5.09 (SD = 6.16).

*The relationship to residential parents* was assessed with two items. Using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much), adolescents responded to the following questions: (1) “How close do you feel to your mom/dad/parent?” and (2) “How much does he/she care?” In the sample of this project, the mean score of 9.44 was presented for current sample (SD = 1.28). This instrument was created by selecting items from the in-home interviews of the first wave in Add Health. This study selected two items to measure closeness and parental care from the relationships with parents section in the in-home interviews and then named the relationship to residential parents.

*Autonomy* was measured using 7-items from the decision-making section of the in-home interviews. The scale used in this study investigated adolescents’ abilities to make their own decisions, not relying on their parents. A sample item used to assess autonomy reads, “Do your parents let you make your own decisions about what time you go to bed on week nights?” (See Appendix A). The adolescents’ answers were coded as 1 if parents allow them to make a decision and 0 if not. Total autonomy scores could range from 0 to 14, with the mean autonomy score for the current sample being 5.42 (SD = 1.57). Reliability for the present sample was a modest ( $\alpha = .67$ ).

*Demographics*, including race/ethnicity and the type of family structure, were collected from parent interviews of the first wave. Moreover, adolescents answered the questions about their gender and their grades in the in-home interview. Adolescents were

asked their biological gender with two categories: male or female. They were also asked to select a grade between 7th through 12th with an additional category available for not attending school. Based on parental response, race/ethnicity was assessed using dummy variables. In the original dataset, race/ethnicity was assessed by dummy variables and parents could choose multiple answers. Then, parents selected what race/ethnicity best described them in the next question. Thus, in this study, the race/ethnicity simply recreated the categories (See Appendix A). Parents described their relationship with their children in the original dataset. Among parents who are biological parents, this study selected single-parents based on marital status. Then, the present study reconstructed the categories to measure single-parent families. Appendix A also provides the instruments about all scales in this study.

### **Analysis Procedure**

Data were analyzed using SPSS 22.0 for Windows. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate frequencies, means, and standard deviations for demographic data. Correlational analysis was conducted to assess the relationship between family processes and adolescent delinquency. Independent-sample *t* test was conducted to determine whether delinquency and autonomy scores varied by family structure (i.e., single-mother families vs. single-father families). Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to measure whether parental education, race/ethnicity, and family income had any bearing on delinquency scores. Finally, simple linear regression was used to determine whether the relationship to residential parent was predictive of delinquency scores.



## Summary

By using secondary data which was taken from a nationally representative longitudinal study (Add Health), the present study, based on social control theory, sought to explore the relationship between adolescents in single-parent families and engagement in delinquency utilizing correlation. It also sought to compare two types of single-parent families by applying an independent-sample *t* test. Additionally, this work assessed whether family processes were predictive of adolescent delinquency. The results of these analyses are presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The aim of this thesis study was to explore whether and how family processes relate to adolescent delinquency in single-mother families and single-father families, as well as to assess whether and how adolescent delinquency differs between single-mother families and single-father families. This study tested three hypotheses. The first hypothesis was that adolescents living in single-father families would report higher delinquency scores than adolescents living in single-mother families. The second was that it is anticipated that adolescents residing with single-fathers would report a lower quality of relationship to their residential parent and less autonomy than those in single-mother families. Lastly, it was expected that a higher quality of family processes (i.e., relationship to residential parents and autonomy) would be associated with a lower delinquency score. In this chapter, the findings of the analyses used to test these three hypotheses are presented.

#### **Demographics**

Participants for this analysis included 216 middle school and high school students (57.9% male, 42.1% female) who were selected for the in-home interview surveys and their parents who completed parent interview. The sample's mean age was 14.58 years (SD = 1.6). By grade, adolescents in grade 7<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> represented pretty equal frequencies. As previously discussed, 50% of participants reported living in single-

mother families, and 50% reported living in single-father families. Demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of demographic characteristics

	Characteristics	N	%
Gender	Male	125	59.7
	Female	91	42.1
Grade	7 <sup>th</sup>	33	15.3
	8 <sup>th</sup>	37	17.1
	9 <sup>th</sup>	37	17.1
	10 <sup>th</sup>	45	20.8
	11 <sup>th</sup>	34	15.7
	12 <sup>th</sup>	21	9.7
	School doesn't have grade levels	3	1.4
	Not being in school	6	2.8
Ethnicity/Race	Non-Hispanic White	140	65.1
	African American	57	26.4
	American Indian or Native American	9	4.2
	Asian or Pacific Islander	2	<1
	Other	7	3.2
	Missing	1	<1

### **Delinquency, Autonomy, and Quality of Parent-Child Relationship by Gender of single-parent families**

Independent-samples  $t$  tests were conducted to evaluate potential differences in delinquency, autonomy, and parent-child relationship by family structure (single-mother vs. single-father families). Means and standard deviations for the dependent variables by family structure are shown in Table 2.

As expected, there was statistically significant difference in self-reported quality of relationship to residential parents, with youth being raised by single-mothers having a higher score on this variable than youth being raised by single-fathers, ( $t(214) = 2.037, p = .043$ ). As can be seen in Table 2, although the difference was statistically significant, it might not be meaningful as the difference was extremely modest. Results indicated no statistically significant difference in autonomy between youth in single-mother families and single-father families,  $t(214) = -.173, p = .863$ . At the same time, there was no statistically significant difference in mean delinquency score between youth in single-mother families and single-father families ( $t(213) = -.963, p = .337$ ). Although there was a difference in the mean delinquency scores for the two groups, with youth in single-father families having a higher mean delinquency score, the difference failed to achieve statistical significance. Table 2 shows Independent-sample  $t$  test results.

Table 2 Independent-sample *t* test

	Single-mother families		Single-father families		<i>t</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	
1. Delinquency	4.69	5.41	5.50	6.85	-.963
2. Autonomy	5.40	1.49	5.44	1.65	-1.73
3. Relationship to residential parents	9.62	1.33	9.30	1.20	2.037*

\*  $p < .05$

### Covariates

A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to evaluate the difference between independent variables (i.e., the types of single-parent families) on adolescent delinquency controlling for several potential covariates (i.e., parental education, ethnicity/race, and household income). Analysis revealed no main effects for ethnicity/race,  $F(1, 201) = .289, n.s.$ , parental education,  $F(1, 201) = .006, n.s.$ , or household income,  $F(1, 201) = .760, n.s.$  Concurrently, no significant interactions were detected.

### Family Processes and Delinquency

Correlation coefficients were computed among three variables: delinquency, autonomy, and relationship to residential parent. The results of the correlational analyses presented in Table 3 show that 1 out of the 3 correlations were statistically significant. Relationship to residential parent and delinquency were significantly and negatively related ( $r = -.135, p < .05$ ). Basically, a better relationship with residential parent relates to a lower adolescent delinquency score. There was a nonsignificant correlation of .001

( $p = .989$ ) between autonomy and delinquency. Furthermore, the association between relationship with parents and autonomy was not significant ( $r = .030, p = .66$ ).

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the extent to which reported quality of relationship to residential parents was predictive of delinquency. Relationship to residential parent is very modestly predictive of delinquency score [ $F(1, 213) = 3.956, p < .048$ ], accounting for 1.8% of the variance in delinquency score.

Table 3 Bivariate correlations between delinquency, autonomy, and the relationship to residential parents

	1	2	3
1. Delinquency	-		
2. Autonomy	.001	-	
3. The relationship to residential parents	-.135*	.030	-

\*  $p < .05$

Table 4 Summary of linear regression analysis

	B	SE(B)	$\beta$	$t$	Sig. ( $p$ )
Relationship to residential parents	-.652	.328	-.135	-1.989	.048

\*  $R^2 = .018$

### Conclusion

This study aimed to find relationships between types of single-parent families, adolescent delinquency, and family processes. In contrast to the first hypothesis, that adolescents residing with single-fathers show higher delinquency score than those living with single-mothers, the analysis of independent-sample  $t$  test found there was no

significant difference in adolescent delinquency scores between adolescents residing in single-mother families and those in single-father families. In terms of the second hypothesis, that adolescents in single-mother families tend to show a higher quality of family processes (i.e., relationship to residential parent and autonomy) than those residing in single-father families, the expected result was verified. However, this study failed to find the evidence with regard to the link between the type of single-parent families and autonomy, which is one of the variables assessing family processes in this study. The third hypothesis, that high quality of relationship to residential parent and more autonomy are related to a low delinquency score, was partially confirmed by two different results. Autonomy was not correlated with adolescent delinquency. However, the relationship to residential parent was negatively correlated with adolescent delinquency. Moreover, the results of the linear regression clearly showed that higher quality of relationship with their residential parents predicts a lower adolescent delinquency score. These findings will be further discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This study intended to find relationships between the gender of residential parents in single-parent families, adolescent delinquency, and family processes. Prior research has considered how adolescent delinquency may be influenced by the link between family structure and family processes (Mack et al., 2015). Specifically, a majority of research has revealed that there are significant differences between single-mother families and single-father families on adolescent delinquency and family processes. On the other hand, family processes are correlated with adolescent delinquency regardless of the types of family structure including single-parent families. The current study extends prior research to compare adolescents residing with single-fathers with those living in single-mother families. This chapter identifies whether each hypothesis was supported or not supported by the findings. Additionally, implications and limitations in this study are also suggested.

#### **Hypothesis 1: Adolescents living in single-father families will report higher delinquency score than adolescents living in single-mother families**

As indicated in chapter 1, there was a lack of research about the link with adolescent delinquency and the gender of residential parents for the sample of U.S. families. Research comparing single-mother and single-father households in Norway (Breivik et al., 2009) and Sweden (Jablonska, 2007) has indicated that adolescents living



with single-mothers tend to be less involved in delinquency than those living with single-fathers.

The findings of this study present a striking contrast to the research in regard to the relationship between gender of the residential parents and adolescent delinquency. The findings in this study disconfirmed the first hypothesis by indicating that there was no difference in delinquency scores between adolescents in single-mother families and those in single-father families. In other words, this indicates that the gender of the residential parent did not influence levels of adolescent delinquency. This could be because the adolescents in this sample were not very delinquent ( $M = 5.09$ ) making it difficult to detect differences between single-mother and single-father families. It is also possible that no difference exists in adolescent delinquency in single-parent families, so this study could not detect any difference.

Nevertheless, the results of this study support the findings of others that family processes play a more meaningful role in influencing adolescent delinquent behaviors than family structure (Phillips, 2012). For example, Phillips (2012) revealed that whereas satisfaction with the family and negative affect in the family predicted adolescent delinquent attitude score, there were no significant differences in adolescent delinquency on the basis of family type (i.e., married-biological parent families, step-parent families, and single-parent families).

Since this study did not find any significant difference between the types of single-parent families and adolescent delinquency, an ANCOVA was conducted to control for socioeconomic status (i.e., parental education and household income) and race. Previous research has found that socioeconomic status and ethnicity/race are

influential to adolescent delinquency and family processes (Demuth & Brown, 2004; Sobolewski & Amato, 2005). For instance, financial poverty in family background during adolescence is a significant predictor of psychological problems in adulthood (Sobolewski & Amato, 2005). Moreover, single-parent family context had a significant association with adolescent problem behaviors and increased health and educational problems (Spencer, 2005). Additionally, white adolescents were less likely to show delinquency than other adolescents such as Hispanic, black, and others (Demuth & Brown, 2004). By extending prior research, this study also sought to examine the effect of covariates as socioeconomic status and race on adolescent delinquency among single-parent families. However, this study did not find any effects of socioeconomic status and race on the relationship between adolescent delinquency and type of single-parent families.

**Hypothesis 2: Adolescents residing with single-mothers will report a higher quality relationship to residential parent and greater autonomy than those in single-father families**

The present research has revealed that the higher quality of family processes such as closeness and parental control including autonomy are not present as often in single-mother families as they are in single-father families (Breivik et al., 2009; Crawford & Novak, 2008). The second hypothesis based on previous research was partially supported by this study. The results which confirm the second hypothesis, showing that adolescents whose residential parent was their mother reported a slightly better relationship with their parent than adolescents whose residential parent was their father. However, autonomy was not associated with the gender of the residential parent. Because autonomy between single-mother families ( $M = 5.40$ ) and single-father families ( $M = 5.44$ ) showed very

similar mean, this study did not find an association between the gender of the residential parent and autonomy. Because the hypothesis for this study was based on limited existing literature and the results did not support the relationship between autonomy and the types of single-parent families, further research may need to be done in this area.

**Hypothesis 3: Higher quality of relationship to residential parents and greater autonomy will be associated with lower delinquency scores**

Within existing literature, autonomy has been associated with adolescent delinquency (Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993; Smetana, Compione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004). However, this study did not show any relationship between autonomy and adolescent delinquency ( $r = .001, p = .989$ ). A potential reason that the third hypothesis was partially disconfirmed is that the instruments for autonomy in this study only investigated whether adolescents made their own decisions. However, other research has used diverse domains of autonomy (e.g., family decision-making, non-dependence on parents, and individuation).

Prior research has shown that the higher quality of relationship with parents predicts lower adolescent delinquent behaviors (Fosco et al., 2002). As discussed previously, Phillips (2012) found that family processes are a predictor of adolescent delinquency. Consistent with this research, in this study, higher quality of relationship to residential parent was correlated with low adolescent delinquency. The findings suggest that the quality of adolescent-parent relationships (e.g., feeling close to residential parents and parents' care) is negatively correlated with adolescent delinquency. This means that a higher quality of adolescent-parent relationships is related to lower adolescent delinquency. In sum, the quality of relationship to residential parent predicted adolescent

delinquency although it only accounted for a very small percentage (1.8%) of variance in the delinquency score. In other words, the quality of adolescents' relationship with their residential parents may be considered a protective factor to prevent adolescent delinquency.

According to social control theory, family processes are related to adolescent delinquency irrespective of the gender of residential parents in single-parent families. In this study, the measurement of the quality of adolescent-parent relationship similarly constructed with parental attachment in social control theory. The results in this study partially support social control theory as higher quality of parental relationship, which relates to parental attachment, was related to the lower adolescent delinquency scores. This study also hypothesized, based on modified social control theory, that adolescents would show different delinquency and family process scores according to the types of single-parent families. Interestingly, adolescent delinquency did not differ among the types of single-parent families, but the quality of the relationship between adolescent and parent, which is connected to parental attachment, did differ based on the gender of the residential parent.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study can be used to inform research and practice. As the findings in this thesis study did not find a negative effect of family processes and covariates on adolescent delinquent behaviors, it might be meaningful for future research to focus on the effects of non-family factors (e.g., peers, neighborhood factors) on adolescent delinquency. Recent studies have examined how the important non-family factors (e.g., peers, neighborhood factors) play a larger role in delinquency than family

factors (Huang, Ryan, & Rhoden, 2016). Several studies have found that the neighborhood context influences adolescent delinquency. Vazsonyi, Cleveland, and Wiebe (2006) found that adolescents in more disadvantaged neighborhoods had an increased risk for delinquency and aggression than those in less disadvantaged neighborhoods. Likewise, youth moving into stable neighborhoods are less involved in delinquent behaviors than those moving into unstable neighborhoods (Huang, Ryan, & Rhodena, 2016). Ferguson and Meehan (2011) revealed that there is a strong correlation of peer delinquency and youth substance use after controlling family, neighborhood, and media use. Similarly, several studies identified that peer groups have been associated with higher levels of aggression, delinquency, and substance use (Cotter & Smokowski, 2016; Flannery, Williams, & Vazsonyi, 1999).

These findings have potentially practical implications about intervention strategies that could enhance family processes among parents and adolescents in single-parent families to reduce adolescent delinquency. Because the relationship to residential parent only accounted for a small percentage of the variance in adolescent delinquency, it may be meaningful to include several other family process factors that research has shown influences adolescent delinquency, such as parental monitoring or supervision, in their intervention strategies. Policymakers or organizers who work with youth and families may incorporate these other family processes into their policies and programs in order to reduce adolescent delinquency. On the other hand, because adolescent relationship to their residential parent only explained a small percentage of the variance in adolescent delinquency, another practical implication may be to consider factors outside the family such as peer groups and neighborhood factors when designing

prevention programs to reduce adolescent delinquency. Such community-based programs might seek to enhance positive relationships to non-delinquent peers or provide youth with opportunities to contribute to improving their neighborhood.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations in this study. The first is that the sample showed a sheer lack of variation in delinquency scores, meaning that the students in this sample were not a delinquent group as evidenced by their very low mean delinquency score ( $M = 5.09$ ). One possible explanation for this is that the adolescents might not have honestly responded to the delinquency questions because their parents were in close proximity to them even though they were given earphone to listen to the sensitive questionnaires with. For this reason, adolescents in this study might lead to under reporting participation in delinquent activities. Another potential reason is that the delinquency scale used was unable to assess mild or moderate forms of delinquency because this instrument measured adolescents' vandalism, aggression, and usage of weapons (see Appendix A).

Secondly, this study did not consider a variety of single-parent types such as never-married, widowed, and divorced. Through different experience (e.g., death of parent or divorce of parent), adolescents who are in widowed and divorced parent families may show different relationships with their parents as well as delinquency scores as compared to those who are in never married parent families. Therefore, further research should be done on these types of single-parent families.

Third, there are also limitations associated with conducting secondary data analysis. This secondary data from Add Health is an older dataset from the mid-nineties. Because the population of single-parent families has gradually increased, and social and

environmental circumstance have changed during past decades, recent data may show different results.

Finally, although the relationship with residential parents has a significant correlation with adolescent delinquency, the instruments used only two items to assess relationship to residential parents. Given the two items, we could not say that the instrument fully measure diverse context of adolescent-parent relationship because a minimum of three items is typically used in research.

### **Conclusion**

Several researchers have investigated adolescents residing in single-parent families and have found that they were more likely to be involved in delinquent behaviors than adolescents in other family structures. However, few studies have focused solely on adolescents in single-parent families. Of the studies that have examined adolescents in single-parent families, a majority only addressed adolescents in single-mother families. The purpose of this research study was to solely focus on single-parent families, by examining how family processes and adolescent delinquency differ between single-mother families and single-father families. Although this study did not find a difference in adolescent delinquency between single-mother and single-father families, it found the role of the quality of relationship to residential parents was a protective factor on adolescent delinquency. This research study provides a contribution to our understanding of adolescent delinquency in single-parent families since this research focused on both mother-headed and father-headed single-parent families rather than focusing on only single-mother families or other family structures (e.g., two-parent families, step-parent families).

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APPENDIX A  
INSTRUMENT

## **In-home interview**

### **Demographics**

#### ***Gender***

Interviewer, please confirm that respondent's sex is (male) female

Response categories: 1=male, 2=female

#### ***Grade***

What grade {ARE/WERE} you in?

Response categories: 7=seventh grade, 8=eighth grade, 9=ninth grade, 10=tenth grade, 11=eleventh grade, 12=twelfth grade, 97=not in school, 99=school doesn't have grade levels of this kind or not applicable

#### ***Family income***

About how much total income, before taxes did your family receive in 1994?

Include your own income, the income of everyone else in your household, and income from welfare benefits, dividends, and all other sources.

Responses: indicate the range from \$0 to \$999 thousand

### **Delinquency scale**

Delinquency includes few questions about vandalism, violence and weapons.

Response Categories is a 4-points scale: 0 = Never, 1 = 1 or 2 times, 2 = 3 or 4 times, and 3 = 5 or more times

1. In the past 12 months, how often did you paint graffiti or signs on someone else's property or in a public place

2. In the past 12 months, how often did you deliberately damage property that didn't belong to you?
3. In the past 12 months, how often did you lie to your parents or guardians about where you had been or whom you were with?
4. How often did you take something from a store without paying for it?
5. How often did you get into a serious physical fight?
6. How often did you hurt someone badly enough to need bandages or care from a doctor or nurse?
7. How often did you run away from home?
8. How often did you drive a car without its owner's permission?
9. In the past 12 months, how often did you steal something worth more than \$50?
10. How often did you go into a house or building to steal something?
11. How often did you use or threaten to use a weapon to get something from someone?
12. How often did you sell marijuana or other drugs?
13. How often did you steal something worth less than \$50?
14. In the past 12 months, how often did you take part in a fight where a group of your friends was against another group?
15. How often were you loud, rowdy, or unruly in a public place?

## Family processes

### *The relationship to residential parent*

Response categories: 1=not at all, 2=very little, 3=somewhat, 4=quite a bit, and 5=very much

If Mom,

1. How close do you feel to your {MOTHER/ADOPTIVE MOTHER/ STEPMOTHER/ FOSTER MOTHER/etc.}?
2. How much do you think she cares about you?

If Dad,

1. How close do you feel to your {FATHER/ADOPTIVE FATHER/STEPFATHER/FOSTER FATHER/etc.}?
2. How much do you think he cares about you?

### *Autonomy*

Response categories: 0=no, 1=yes

This section is administered if MOM and/or DAD:

1. Do your parents let you make your own decisions about the time you must be home on weekend nights?
2. Do your parents let you make your own decisions about the people you hang around with?
3. Do your parents let you make your own decisions about what you wear?
4. Do your parents let you make your own decisions about what you wear?
5. Do your parents let you make your own decisions about which television programs you watch?

6. Do your parents let you make your own decisions about what time you go to bed on week nights?
7. Do your parents let you make your own decisions about what you eat?
8. On how many of the past 7 days was at least one of your parents in the room with you while you ate your evening meal?

### **Parent interview**

#### **Demographics**

##### ***Race/Ethnicity***

Which ONE category best describes your racial background?

Response categories: 1=white, 2=black/African American, 3=American Indian/Native American, 4=Asian or Pacific Islander, 5=other

##### ***The types of single-parent families***

Response categories which was recreated by this study: 1=single-mother families and 2=single-father families

##### ***Parental education***

How far did you go in school?

Response categories: 1= 8th grade or less, 2= more than 8th grade, but did not graduate from high school, 3= went to a business, trade, or vocational school instead of high school, 4= high school graduate, 5= completed a GED, 6= went to a business, trade or vocational school after high school, 7= went to college, but did not graduate, 8= graduated from a college or university, 9= professional training beyond a 4-year college or university, 10= never went to school