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# FATHERS AND DELINQUENCY

*Nate Juda*


## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the relationship between delinquent activity in young adolescent male subjects living in three household structures: (1) traditional family with a biological mother and father in the home (2) a stepfamily with a biological mother and stepfather in the home, and (3) single mother households. Using data collected from Add Health's longitudinal survey W1 (n = 2,799, aged ages 11-17), findings suggests that the presence of a father figure during adolescence is likely to have protective effects for males in curbing delinquent behavior. Conversely, findings found single mother households to be significantly and positively associated with delinquent behavior in adolescent males. The presence of a stepfather was negatively associated with delinquent behavior, but not to a significant degree, suggesting an alternative to a biological father in the home may mitigate negative consequences associated with paternal absence.*


***Keywords**:* add health, adolescence, boys and men, family, fathers, single mothers

## INTRODUCTION

Dramatic shifts over the past several decades have considerably altered modern U.S. families' living arrangements. Incidents of divorce have more than tripled over the past three decades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020) resulting in more children than ever residing in household structures outside of traditional married families (Nicholson, 2018). Over 50% of children will, at some point in their lives, live in a single-parent family (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994) and mothers are awarded custody of children in nearly 90% of cases (Rachlinski & Wistrich, 2021).

The absence of fathers in children's lives has been a long-standing societal concern (Mintz, 1998) dating back to the Industrial Revolution in the late 19th Century where the new economic structure brought concerns over paternal absence when men moved in massive numbers from farm to factory labor and again with the societal changes of the Great Depression in the 1930s and World War II a decade later (Duncan, 2000.). However, empirical research over the last three decades has supported the importance of paternal involvement.

A considerable body of research has shown that children raised by both original parents are advantaged in several domains of well-being when compared to children born to single mothers or whose parents have divorced (Amato & Keith, 1991; Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1989; Demo & Acock, 1988; Emery, 1988; McLanahan & Booth, 1989). Specifically, prior research has shown that paternal absence is positively associated with adolescent delinquency—particularly in boys (Demuth & Brown, 2004; Kofler-Westergren et al., 2010; Vanassche et al., 2014). Depending on the source, between 40 and 90% of incarcerated male felons grew up in homes without fathers (BJS; Texas Dept. of Corrections, 1992) and young men who grow up in homes without fathers are twice as likely to be incarcerated than those from traditional two-parent families-- even when other factors such as race, income, parent education and urban residence were controlled for (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). Research shows that when fathers are involved, their children are twice as likely to go to college, and 80% less likely to spend time in jail. Conversely, children in father-absent homes account for 71% of all high school dropouts, 90% of homeless and runaway children, 63% of youth suicides.

Using data collected from Add Health's longitudinal survey W1, this study aims to examine the relationship between delinquent activity in young adolescent male subjects living in three household structures: (1) traditional family with a biological mother and father in the home (2) a stepfamily with a biological mother and stepfather in the home, and (3) single mother households.

## CURRENT FOCUS

### Purpose:

The purpose of this study (using Add Health data responses made on the Delinquency Check List) is to determine the relationship between delinquent activity in young adolescent male subjects living in three household structures: (1) traditional family with a biological mother and

father in the home (2) a stepfamily with a biological mother and stepfather in the home, and (3) single mother households.

**Research Question:**

What differences exist in delinquent behavior between sample groups: resident biological mother and father (i.e. intact traditional families), resident alternative to biological father (i.e. stepfather), and no resident male figure (i.e. single mother households)?

**Hypotheses:**

H1: Young males who have a biological father living in the home will be significantly less likely to engage in delinquent behavior than their peers without a biological father in the home.

H2: Young males who have alternatives to resident biological fathers (i.e. stepfathers in their home) will be less likely to engage in delinquent behavior than their peers without any father figure in the home.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Data Source

This study's data was obtained from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), administered by the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Add Health is the largest, most comprehensive longitudinal survey of adolescents ever undertaken collecting V waves of study data (Harris, 2019). Wave I (W1) of Add Health was administered between September 1994 and April 1995 to 20,745 nationally representative adolescents in grades 7 through 12 (ages 11-17). An in-school questionnaire was given to every student who attended one of the 132 sampled U.S. schools (N=132). A random sample of approximately 200 adolescents from each school was selected for in-home interviews (Harris, 2019). This study uses data collected from W1. The mean age of participants was 15.9 years (95% CI = 15.7 to 16.1) with a response rate of 79%.

The initial sampling frame consisted of 26,666 schools stratified by level of urbanization, school type, school size, ethnicity, and census region. Participating schools were requested to identify feeder schools that included a 7th grade to send a minimum of five students to that particular high school. The top feeder school for each high school was selected to participate in the study. Replacement schools were selected if a feeder school declined to participate in the study. Recruitment efforts yielded a total of 132 schools for the core study including 80 high schools and 52 middle schools.

The primary aims of this longitudinal study were to provide information about the health, family, social, and individual characteristics of U.S. adolescents, as well as to explore risk and protective factors for each outcome (Harris, 2019; Resnick et al., 1997). For a number of reasons, Add Health is ideal for this and future related studies. First, it was specifically designed to provide in-depth information on adolescents' health and risk behaviors. A detailed set of questions

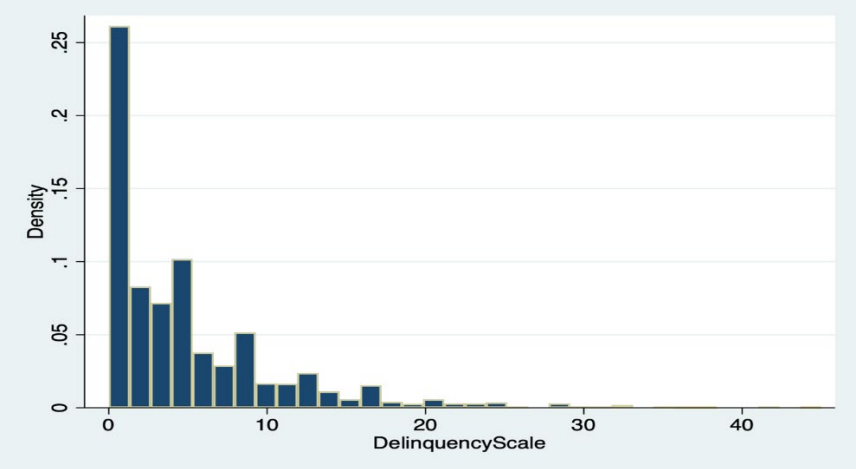
revealing information about involvement in delinquent behaviors was asked of the respondents in each wave. Second, it is considered to be the largest and most comprehensive survey of adolescents ever conducted. Third, the longitudinal nature of the Add Health allows researchers to examine the long-term relationship between family structure and delinquent behavior. Finally, since Add Health provides information on delinquent behavior in all waves, baseline differences in these behaviors can be accounted for in empirical analyses. After excluding cases of respondents who identified as female, and cases where there were missing data, the final sample size was 2,799 respondents.

**Dependent Variable**

This study's dependent variable, *delinquency*, was derived from W1 Add Health's Self-Report Delinquency (AHSRD). Based on previous research (Beaver, 2010; Pechorro et al., 2019; Pechorro et al., 2019), delinquency was measured using AHSRD's 15 item scale which evaluates aggressive and violent behavior with non-violent delinquency by combining the 11 items of the nonviolent factor and the 4 items of the violent factor on a 4-point ordinal scale. Higher scores indicate higher levels of delinquency. The questions are similar to those found in other surveys and comply with the official definitions of "crime" used by government sources such as the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS, n.d.). This study focuses on a representative set of five types of delinquent behaviors that occurred in the past 12 months in these categories: (1) property crime, (2) violent crime, (3) drug crime, (4) defiance of parental authority, (5) unruly public behavior. These comprise most of the delinquent behaviors undertaken by young people (Beaver, 2010).

Specifically, participants were asked in the past 12 months, how often have they engaged in the following activities: (1) "paint graffiti or signs on someone else's property or in a public place?"; (2) "deliberately damage property that didn't belong to you?"; (3) "lie to your parents or guardians about where you had been or whom you were with?"; (4) "take something from a store without paying for it?"; (5) "get into a serious physical fight?"; (6) "hurt someone badly enough to need bandages or care from a doctor or nurse?"; (7) "run away from home?"; (8) "drive a car without its owner's permission?"; (9) "steal something worth more than $50?"; (10) "enter a house or building to steal something?"; (11) "use or threaten to use a weapon to get something from someone?"; (12) "sell marijuana or other drugs?"; (13) "steal something worth less than $50?"; (14) "take part in a fight where a group of your friends was against another group?"; (15) "being loud, rowdy, or unruly in a public place?" Items were coded as 0 = never, 1 = one or two times, 2 = three or four times and, 3 = five or more times. The sum of these created the delinquency scale (mean = 4.875, SD = 5.790), which has a good level of internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$) and positively skewed data (see figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Delinquency Distribution

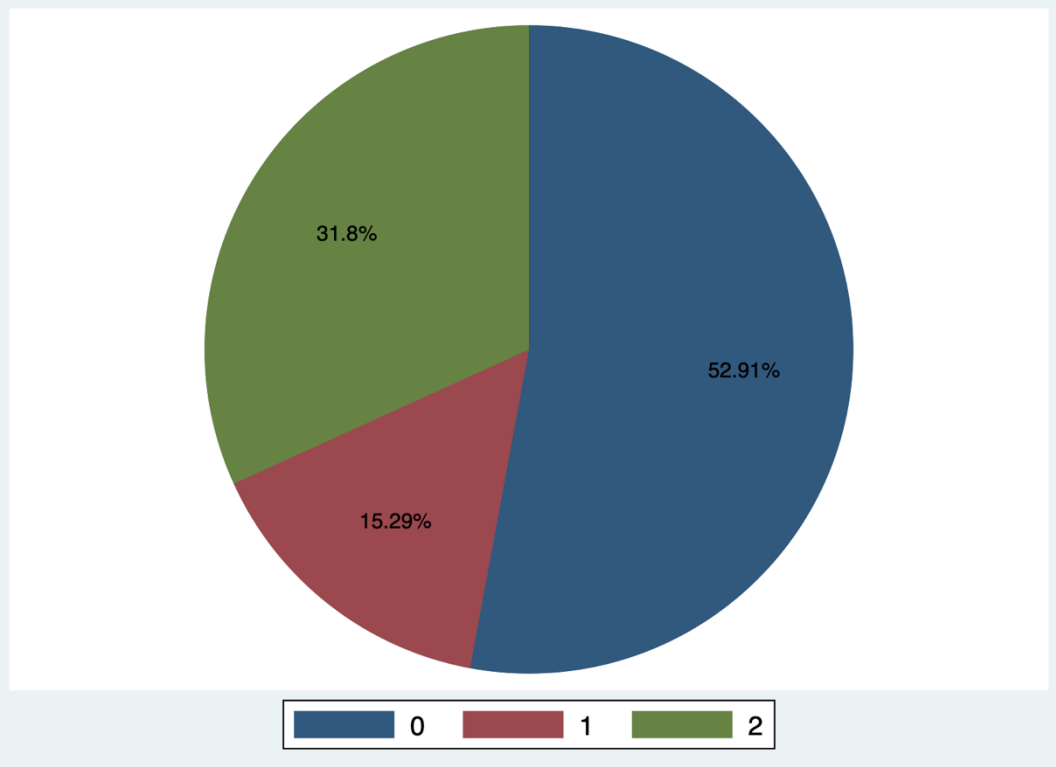



Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health

**Independent Variable**

This study's independent variables are three separate household structures: (1) *resident biological father*, (2) *resident stepfather*, and (3) *single mother household*. For the purposes of this study, non-resident father figures were not considered nor were resident males such as older male siblings, uncles, or grandfathers. This study only considered stepfather as an alternative to the biological father. This study restricts its estimation sample to male adolescents living with their biological mother in W1. The variation in family structure comes from the absence or presence of a resident biological father or resident stepfather residing in the home during W1. This study's three structure indicators: The analytic sample (n = 2,799) for this study was confined to adolescent males who reported that they were (1) living with their biological mother and biological father (n = 1,481)--(0,1), (2) a biological mother and resident alternative to biological father (e.g. stepfather) (n = 428)--(0,1), or (3) a single mother (n = 890)--(0,1). Information about the prevalence of specific family structures is presented in figure 2. Figure 2 shows over 50% of adolescents live in traditional families with both their biological mother and biological father. Consistent with previous literature and data (Dahl & Moretti, 2008; Pew, 2019; US Census Bureau, 2020), roughly 15% live in households with a mother and a stepfather, and roughly 30% of adolescents in our sample live with a single mother (see figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Family Structure




Traditional Family=0; Stepfamily=1; Single Mother=2

Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health

**Control Variables**

In an effort to ensure validity, this study controlled for variables that could potentially confound the study's results: (1) demographic variables such as age and race and (2) socio-economic status (household income). Previous research has indicated that *SES* is a prime mediator of the effect of family structure on behavior and outcomes of adolescents. Income and family structure have a high degree of association, and income have been shown to be negatively correlated with delinquent behavior in children (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Flewelling & Bauman, 1990). We also controlled for several demographic correlates. *Age* was measured in years at W1 (M = 15.59, SD = 1.78). A *race* variable was constructed based on responses to six questions that asked about the racial origin of the adolescent respondent (i.e. White, Black, Latino, American Indian, Asian, or other). This information was then used to create White (n = 1,635; M = .584) vs. non-white (n = 1,164; M = .416) as a dummy variable.

*Socioeconomic status* (SES) is among the most well-documented correlates of juvenile delinquency (Rekker et al., 2017). The literature is clear that adolescents from low-SES households are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior than adolescents from high-SES households (Archambault et al., 2017; Beyers et al., 2001; Rekker et al., 2017). Variations in SES result in disproportionate access to resources (Galobardes et al., 2007; Myers, 2009). In addition, issues related to privilege, power, and control are often measured as the sum of education, occupation (or job title), and income (Walder, 1995; Woehr, 2018). For the purposes of this study, SES will be measured solely by household income. Analysis suggests that income plays a significantly greater factor in obtaining resources, privilege, and power than education level or job title. Income (not job title or occupation) affects the type of neighborhood in which families can afford to live and in turn school systems and peer groups to a far greater extent than parents' education level or job title (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). The factors that define SES such as neighborhood, power, and resources are linked overwhelmingly to income.

All incomes were based on parental reports of 1994 total pre-tax family income at W1 (in $1000 increments, top-coded at $999,000) (n = 2,360). Income was defined as all sources of income, including public assistance, based on parent report and rounded to the nearest thousand dollars and then collapsed into a six-category variable to simplify analysis and reporting and more normalize the distribution. The six SES/income categories are: families earning less than $16,000 (coded 0)—which was roughly the federal poverty threshold in 1994–1995; income of $16,000-$45,000 (coded 1)—lower middle-class; $45,000-$100,000 (coded 2)—middle-class; $100,000-$250,000 (coded 3)—upper middle-class; $250,000-$500,000 (coded 4)— upper-class; and >$500,000 (coded 5)—wealthy. Of the respondents, mean income was $47.7k and median income was $40k and was positively skewed (SD = .821) (see table 1).

**Table 1.** Income Distribution

| SES | Freq. | Percent | Cum. |
|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | 405 | 17.16 | 17.16 |
| 1 | 1,003 | 42.50 | 59.66 |
| 2 | 858 | 36.36 | 96.02 |
| 3 | 73 | 3.09 | 99.11 |
| 4 | 16 | 0.68 | 99.79 |
| 5 | 5 | 0.21 | 100.00 |
| Total | 2,360 | 100.00 | |

## ANALYTIC STRATEGY

To address the massive quantities of data and the complex nature of the Add Health sample design, the analyses for this study were conducted using STATA. The STATA computer program allows researchers to use estimation commands to incorporate large amounts of complex survey data that account for characteristics of the sample design ensuring unbiased parameter estimates and standard errors (Kreuter & Valliant, 2007; West & McCabe, 2012). The software package STATA is used for all analyses. First, a frequency distribution was used to describe the distribution of the responses among the sample. T-tests and correlation matrices were conducted to assess the relationships at the bivariate level. Due to the nature of the study's dependent variable (i.e., positively skewed over-dispersion, with no negative values, a large number of zero values, and $\sigma^2 > \mu$) (see Figure 1), negative binomial regression was determined to be the best fit. Next, a series of negative binomial regression models were estimated to examine the relationship between delinquency and household structure, net of control variables. Specifically, each of the three family types (traditional family, stepfather, and biological mother, and single mother households) was entered into the model. The final model tests to see if age, race, or SES accounts for the differences between delinquency and household structure. Because this study focuses exclusively on adolescent males, *sex* was coded M=0 and F=1 and all data =1 was dropped. Listwise any cases with missing information were deleted.

## RESULTS

The aim of this study is to determine the scope and magnitude of the differences in delinquent behavior between three household structures: resident biological mother and father (i.e. intact traditional families), resident alternative to biological father (i.e. stepfather), and no resident male figure (i.e. single mother). H1: Young males who have a biological father living in their home will be significantly less likely to engage in delinquent behavior than their peers without a biological father in their home. H2: Young males who have alternatives to resident biological fathers (i.e. stepfathers in their home) will be less likely to engage in delinquent behavior than their peers without any father figure in their home. Table 2 summarizes descriptive statistics for study variables. The sample is comprised solely of male adolescents between the ages of 11 and 21. The average age is 15.59 years. Approximately 58% of the sample is white, and the remaining 42% are comprised of other races and ethnicities. Approximately 53% of the sample had a traditional family (residential biological father and mother), with roughly 15% living with a stepfamily (stepfather and biological mother), and 32% living in a single mother household.

**Table 2**. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

| Variables | Mean | SD | Min Value | Max Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Dependent Variable* | | | | |
| Delinquency | 4.875 | 5.790 | 0 | 45 |
| *Independent Variable* | | | | |
| Trad. Family | 0.529 | - | 0 | 1 |
| Alt Family | 0.153 | - | 0 | 1 |
| Single Mother | 0.318 | - | 0 | 1 |
| *Control Variables* | | | | |
| Age | 15.590 | 1.781 | 11 | 21 |
| Race (White) | 0.584 | - | 0 | 1 |
| SES | 1.282 | 0.821 | 0 | 5 |

Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health

Table 3 displays the results of a correlation matrix of the study variables. The correlation matrix shows that residing in a traditional family with a biological mother and father is statistically significant and negatively associated with an increase in delinquent behavior in adolescent males ($b = -0.727$, $p < .001$), residing in a family with a biological mother and stepfather has a negative but not statistically significant association with increased delinquent behavior in adolescent males ($b = -0.0152$), and residing in a single mother household is positive and significant ($b = 0.0639$, $p < 0.001$). Neither age, race, nor SES appeared to have a significant association with delinquent behavior in adolescent males.

**Table 3.** Bivariate Correlations for Study Variables (N = 2,799)

| | Delinquency | Traditional Family | Stepfamily | Single Mother | Race (White) | Age (W1) | SES |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Delinquency | 1.00 | | | | | | |
| TraditionalFamily | -0.07* | 1.00 | | | | | |
| Stepfamily | -0.02 | -0.31* | 1.00 | | | | |
| SingleMother | 0.06* | -0.72* | -0.20 | 1.00 | | | |
| Race (White) | -0.03 | 0.18* | 0.00 | -0.21* | 1.00 | | |
| Age (W1) | 0.01 | -0.05* | -0.02 | 0.04 | 0.01 | 1.00 | |
| SES | -0.03 | 0.33* | -0.01 | -0.33* | 0.21* | 0.02 | 1.00 |

*p<0.05. **p<0.01. ***p<0.001

Using traditional family as a baseline, the negative binomial regression model shows results that are consistent with those provided by the correlation matrix (see table 3). Age, race, income (SES) and resident stepfather household structure do not have a statistically significant impact on delinquent behavior. However, residing in a single mother household is shown to be significant and positively associated with increased delinquent behavior in adolescent males. Table 4 displays the results of negative binomial regression models investigating the relationship between delinquent behavior and household structure.

**Table 4**. Effect of Household Structure on Delinquency

| Variable | NBR Coefficient | Standard Error | Z | P> \|z\| |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Stepfamily | 0.002 | 0.0911 | 0.02 | 0.981 |
| Single mother | 0.204 | 0.058 | 3.52 | 0.000 |
| Race (White) | -0.504 | 0.052 | -0.97 | 0.330 |
| Age | 0.002 | 0.015 | 0.13 | 0.896 |
| SES (income) | 0.003 | 0.032 | 0.09 | 0.929 |

LR test of alpha=0: chibar2(01) = 7225.75 Prob >= chibar2 = 0.000

If H01 states there is no significant difference in delinquent behavior between adolescent males living in a home with a biological and adolescent male residing in a household with an alternative to a biological father (i.e. a stepfather), we must fail to reject the null hypothesis.
If H02 states there is no significant difference in delinquent behavior between adolescent males living in a home with an alternative to a biological father (i.e. a stepfather) and adolescent males living in single mother households, we must reject the null hypothesis.

## DISCUSSION

Traditional nuclear families with two married heterosexual parents are now the minority of U.S. households. Divorces have more than tripled over since 1990 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020)—more than any time in human history. Mothers are awarded custody of children in nearly 90% of cases (Rachlinski & Wistrich. 2021), with 64% of millennial mothers having a child outside of marriage (Johns Hopkins researchers). According to U.S. census data, 25% of U.S. families are headed by a single parent--80% moms, 20% of U.S. children born to a married couple and more than 50% of those born to a cohabiting couple will experience their parents' divorce, and 40% of babies born in the United States circa 2018were born to an unmarried mother.

Paternal absence has been a long-standing societal concern (Mintz, 1998). Research indicates that paternal absence is positively associated with adolescent delinquency—particularly in boys (Demuth & Brown, 2004; Kofler-Westergren et al., 2010; Vanassche et al., 2014). Depending on the source, between 40 and 90% of incarcerated male felons grew up in homes without fathers (BJS; Texas Dept. of Corrections, 1992) and young men who grow up in homes without fathers are twice as likely to be incarcerated than those from traditional two-parent families-- even when other factors such as race, income, parent education and urban residence were controlled for (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). A meta-analysis by Stevenson and Black

(1988) found that father absence is correlated with aggressive behavior in older boys and that disruptions in the father-son relationship may be particularly serious for adolescents, who may express their masculinity by externalizing behavior. Wallerstein (1989) emphasized the most drastic consequences of father deprivation, based on U.S. crime statistics: "more than 1/3 of children from divorced families suffer from severe psychological disorder. Almost 2/3 of all rapists, 3/4 of juveniles convicted of homicide and a similar high proportion of juvenile prisoners grew up without a father."

Data from the W1 Add Health survey (1994-1995) was used to compare delinquent behavior among the three groups of male adolescents in: traditional two-biological-parent married families, in mother-stepfather families, and in single mother families. These data compared a wide range of delinquent acts at varying levels of severity. The large sample size yields a sizable number of male adolescents in the three family types: 1,481 in traditional families, 428 in mother-stepfather families, and 890 in single mother families. The findings of this study suggest, all things being equal, adolescent males who live in traditional household structures (i.e. with their biological mothers and fathers) are much less likely to engage in delinquent behavior than their peers who reside in households headed by single mothers. In addition, the negative effects associated with paternal absence can be partially mitigated by the presence of an alternative to a biological father (i.e. stepfather) in the home. As suspected, a boy's race was statistically insignificant in contributing to delinquent behavior. However, surprisingly, SES (i.e. household income) was not shown to have a significant association with delinquent behavior in male adolescents (see similar results Demuth& Brown, 2004; Hoffman & Johnson, 1998).

According to the 2020 U.S. Census, roughly 25% of children are raised in single parent households. Of those, 80% reside solely with their mothers. Because the purpose of this study is to measure the effect of paternal absence on delinquency, households without biological mothers such as boys living with their father and a stepmother, grandparents, extended families, or in foster care would likely distort the results. For example, delinquent behavior exhibited by a young person solely living exclusively with his grandmother or in a foster situation may be influenced by an absent mother rather than or in addition to an absent father. Therefore, to ensure methodological rigor, resident biological mothers were controlled and only households with a resident biological mother were included in this study.

Based on the results of this study and consistent with previous research (see Gormon-Smith et al., 1996; Herrenkohl et al., 2003; Price, 2000; Wallen & Rubin, 1997) paternal presence is a critical element in the healthy development of male youth. Because of this, decades old systems that encourage procreation outside of wedlock, divorce, and paternal alienation through archaic and misguided alimony, child support, and welfare (Allen & Brinig, 2012; Carbone, 1990) should be reconsidered. These findings are particularly important in the face of the growing societal trend to glorify single mothers as heroes. The label single mother is used almost synonymously with strong and worn as a badge of honor. For example, British Vogue (2023) published an article titled, *Single Mothers Are Heroes. It's Time We Started Treating Them As Such* and Jezebel's (2015) article *Single Mom By Choice: A Great Option for 'Strong-Ass Bitches'*—both pushing the

feminist narrative that "women need men like a fish needs a bicycle". And while this narrative, that men are useless, may be true for some feminists, empirical literature finds that for children, particularly boys, a man in their life—specifically a father—is invaluable.

## LIMITATIONS

Although the results suggested delinquent behavior in adolescent males is influenced by household structure, this study contained several important limitations that must be addressed. Notably, the study is cross-sectional and fails to account for possible confounders, omitted variables, and reverse-causality. Also, levels of supervision/monitoring, and parental involvement were not accounted for and have been shown to be greater in two-biological-married parent families on average than in single parent families (Demuth & Brown, 2004; Mosier, 2022). Factors such as insufficient supervision/monitoring are more likely to manifest in single mother households than in two-parent-married families or stepfamilies. In addition, stepfathers were the only alternative to a biological father accounted for in this study. Other alternative to biological fathers such as grandfathers, uncles, and coaches and other mentors could have been considered. Another notable factor that was not accounted for in this study was the possible influence the stress of divorce may play in delinquent behavior. This study's sole measure of SES was income. While income is the predominant measure of SES, other elements such as neighborhood--which play a role were neglected. It is entirely feasible that, for a variety of reasons (e.g. remaining in a family home) that families with high incomes could live in bad neighborhoods.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research is needed to address many of the limitations listed. To help better understand the association between fathers and delinquency in adolescent males, paternal involvement in addition to paternal household presence, must be considered. Future research should also consider other alternate male figures such as athletic coaches and academic mentors' effect on delinquent behavior on young males living in single mother households. In addition, types and severity of delinquent behavior (e.g. violence, property crime, substance abuse and the seriousness of these offenses) associated with paternal absence should be delineated and further studied. Lastly, because of the growing number of single father families (Demuth & Brown, 2004), a comparison in the effects between single father and single mother households on adolescent male delinquency would be interesting and would help control for the role divorce plays in delinquency (as opposed to paternal absence).

## CONCLUSION

Using data collected from Add Health's longitudinal survey W1, findings suggests that when SES, race, and age are accounted for, the presence of a father figure during adolescence is likely to have protective effects for males in curbing delinquent behavior. The presence of a biological father in the home is statistically significant and negatively associated with an increase in delinquent behavior. Conversely, single mother households are significantly and positively

associated with delinquent behavior in adolescent males. The presence of a stepfather was negatively associated with delinquent behavior, but not to a significant degree, suggesting an alternative to a biological father in the home may mitigate negative consequences associated with paternal absence. It must be noted that the study did not account for alternative to biological fathers other than stepfathers or the possibility that stress induced by divorce influences delinquent behavior as opposed to, or in addition to, paternal absence.

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