



The differential influence of absent and harsh fathers on juvenile delinquency

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have identified father absence as a contributor to juvenile delinquency. Consequently, politicians and community leaders are making efforts to re-engage fathers. However, it is possible that the presence of fathers is not, in itself, a substantial protective factor and, in some cases, can even be more detrimental than father absence. Employing a diverse sample of male juvenile offenders in the U.S. (ages 13–17), the present study examined the differential effects of absent fathers and harsh fathers on delinquency. Results indicated that youth in the harsh-father group engaged in more offending behaviors and used more substances than youth in the absent-father group. This difference remained even after controlling for the mother-child relationship. Implications of these findings for future research and delinquency prevention programs are discussed.

The role of fathers in promoting their children's delinquent behaviors has been primarily examined in respect to two issues: the quality of the father-child relationship and father absence. Researchers have found that high quality father-child relationships are associated with lower rates of offending and substance use in adolescence (Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, & Carrano, 2006; Hoeve et al., 2009; Simantov, Schoen, & Klein, 2000). The inverse is also true: in father-child relationships where the amount of hostility is high and warmth is low, offending behavior (Hoeve et al., 2009) and illicit drug use (Parker & Benson, 2004) are more prevalent. In regards to father absence, previous research suggests that youth living in single-mother homes engage in higher levels of serious delinquency and are at greater risk for incarceration than youth in dual-parent households (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). Thus, both having an absent father and having a harsh father creates a greater risk for juvenile delinquency but very little research has compared the level of risk associated with these family environments. Therefore, the goal of the present study was to examine the differential influence of absent and harsh fathers on the delinquent behavior of male juvenile offenders.

1. Differential influences of absent and harsh fathers

Criminological and family-divorce theories suggest ways in which both harsh fathering and paternal absence, respectively, may be associated with adolescent delinquency. According to criminology-based social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), children are less likely to be delinquent if they are bonded to a conventional figure, such as a parent. A parent-child relationship high in negative affect

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results in a weak bond, therefore this relationship would not be protective against delinquency. Adolescents who are bonded to their parents are more likely to care about their parents' expectations'. When faced with the decision to engage in delinquent acts, thinking about the response of a parent with whom they share a strong bond may prevent an adolescent from engaging in that act. The parental absence perspective from the family-divorce literature posits that father absence presents problems that are not fully resolved by a significant bond to one's mother (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 1987). All else being equal, two parents are better equipped to monitor, supervise, and respond to the behaviors of their children than single parents. Due in part to work demands, single parents have less time to partake in positive child rearing activities, such as providing affection and monitoring, which affords adolescents the time to engage in delinquent behaviors (Rebellon, 2002). Thus, both social control theory and the parental absence perspective suggest ways in which harsh and absent fathers could lead to delinquent behavior in youth but they do not clearly specify if one might be more predictive than the other.

2. Parent-child relationship quality and delinquency

The quality of the parent-child relationship is consistently associated with adolescent delinquency. Relationship quality is typically evaluated on two dimensions: control and support (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Support refers to parental behaviors toward the child that make the child feel comfortable and safe (Rollins & Thomas, 1979), and can include both positive and negative aspects, such as warmth, intimacy, hostility and neglect (Rohner, 2004; Rollins & Thomas, 1979). High levels of parental support are associated with lower rates of delinquency (see meta-analysis by Hoeve et al., 2009) and a decreased risk of cigarette use and alcohol consumption (Simantov et al., 2000). Research also suggests that hostility in the parent-child relationship is related to higher rates of delinquency (Hoeve et al., 2009), while low levels of support are associated with increased adolescent use of alcohol, cocaine and marijuana (Parker & Benson, 2004).

The majority of studies on parent-child relationship quality and adolescent delinquency focuses on either the mother or the parenting unit as a whole (Williams & Kelly, 2005). However, the quality of the father-child relationship may be most influential for male youth. Considering that children have a tendency to identify with the same-gender parent (Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004), the connection between relationship quality and adolescent problem behaviors may be strongest within same-gender dyads. In support of this possibility, a meta-analysis of 161 published and unpublished manuscripts revealed that the father-child relationship is a stronger predictor of delinquency among male adolescents than the mother-child relationship (Hoeve et al., 2009). Further, research has also documented that the quality of the father-child relationship is predictive of offending behavior and substance use above and beyond maternal involvement (Gony & van Dulmen, 2010; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Zimmerman, Salem, & Maton, 1995). For example, Bronte-Tinkew et al. (2006) investigated the relation between the father-child relationship and the risk of first delinquent activity and substance use among adolescents living in intact families. The researchers found the risk of first delinquent behavior is lower for adolescents with more positive father-child relationships, controlling for the mother-child relationship. Moreover, the influence of the father-child relationship was strongest for male adolescents.

3. Paternal absence and delinquency

When studying father absence, it is important to consider that there may be a continuum of father involvement. Paternal absence is often considered synonymous with living in a single-parent, non-intact, non-nuclear, or mother-headed family. Nonresident fathers, or biological fathers living outside of the home, are often classified as absent fathers irrespective of their level of contact with their children (Demuth & Brown, 2004; Harper & McLanahan, 2004; Mack, Leiber, Featherstone, & Monserud, 2007). Because prior research typically considers nonresident fathers as synonymous with absent fathers, we know little about youth who report no relationship *at all* with their fathers. The findings of the limited research conducted with samples that include absolute paternal absence are mixed. For example, White and Gilbreth (2001) investigated the level of paternal contact and reported that youth with good relationships with their non-custodial fathers scored significantly lower on externalizing problems than those who reported having no father-child relationship. Similarly, King and Sobolewski (2006) reported that degree of father contact (i.e., measured continuously from no contact to contact several times a week) had an association with externalizing problem and this was through responsive fathering.

An extensive amount of research has been conducted on the association between nonresident fathers and delinquency. Youth living in single-mother homes are at greater risk for incarceration and engage in more serious delinquency than youth in intact families (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). Nonresident fathers likely influence adolescent behavior by exposing youth to various risk factors. Children in single-parent households have lower family income and a greater likelihood of being poor than those in married-parent families (Sawhill & Thomas, 2005). Indeed, disparities between family income levels of single-mother households and two-parent households may largely explain the association between father absence and incarceration (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). An additional issue is the single parent's ability to provide the same level of affective support that could be given in the presence of an additional parent in the household (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). This additional parent would relieve some amount of child-rearing duties and provide the original parent with the emotional and psychological support necessary to raise a child in a positive manner. Indeed, research suggests that in households in which there is only one parent, parents are more likely to exhibit indifference or hostility toward their children (Laub & Sampson, 1988).

Relatively few studies have simultaneously examined the effects of living in a single-mother household and the qualities of the father on youth behavior. Analyzing cross-sectional data from the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study, Jaffee, Moffitt, Caspi, and Taylor (2003) examined the association between father involvement, father's antisocial behavior, and behavioral

problems at age 5. The researchers utilized two indicators of father involvement: presence, measured by the percentage of time the biological father resided in the home, and caretaking, measured as how often the father spent time taking care of the children. Their results indicated that at low levels of father antisocial behavior, children who did not reside with or were not cared for by their father exhibited the most conduct problems. Contrarily, at high levels of father antisocial behavior, children who resided with or were cared for daily by an antisocial father exhibited the most conduct problems. These findings suggest that the effects of father absence and presence on child antisocial behavior are conditional on the characteristics of the father.

It is possible that youth in single-parent households could develop in a positive manner just as youth living in dual-parent households. In his initial test of the absent-father/delinquency connection, [Hirschi \(1969\)](#) found only weak evidence that suggested the presence of an additional parent was meaningful. Several studies support the possibility that a secure attachment to one parent, typically the primary caregiver or mother, can mitigate any effects of father absence. [Demuth and Brown \(2004\)](#) examined the relation between delinquency and being raised in a single-parent (father or mother) versus a two-parent family. After accounting for indirect and direct parental controls, the researchers found no evidence that parental absence was a significant predictor of adolescent delinquency. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, [Mack et al. \(2007\)](#) tested various theories that explain the association between family structure and delinquency among community adolescents. The results suggest that there is no association between father absence and juvenile delinquency after controlling for maternal attachment. These results support the view that maternal attachment, not the nonresident father, is the most important predictor of delinquency.

4. The current study

The current study addressed two primary aims. First, we compared the influence of absent fathers and harsh fathers on their adolescent sons' delinquent behavior. Second, we examined whether having an absent or harsh father had an effect on the adolescent's behavior after accounting for the quality of the mother-child relationship. A secondary aim of the study was to further differentiate the effects of father absence and presence from those of the quality of the father-child relationship by examining differences between the harsh and absent youth versus youth with high quality fathers.

We contribute to the body of literature exploring the association between father involvement and juvenile delinquency in a number of important ways. First, we extend the work of [Jaffee et al. \(2003\)](#) into adolescence by examining whether the association between delinquency and father presence may be contingent on the quality of the father-child relationship. Second, we accounted for the possible continuum of father involvement by combining both youth identification and household composition to define father absence. That is, youth who do not identify a father figure comprised the father absent group. Lastly, we examined the influence of harsh and absent fathers on the delinquent behavior among a diverse sample of first-time male juvenile offenders. First-time offenders are a particularly important group to examine considering that they are at high risk for persistent delinquency and future justice system contact ([Huizinga, Schumann, Ehret, & Elliott, 2003](#), pp. 1–145; [Lieberman, Kirk, & Kim, 2014](#)). Further, despite research indicating minority youth are more likely to experience paternal absence ([Blackwell, 2010](#)) and to have juvenile justice system contact ([Huizinga et al., 2007](#)), the samples previously examined are often racially and ethnically unrepresentative of absent-father or justice-system-involved youth. The present study employs a diverse sample to obtain perhaps a more accurate picture of the father's role in juvenile delinquency.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

The sample derives from the Crossroads Study, a longitudinal study that prospectively examines the effects of juvenile system contact on the development of 1216 male first-time offenders. Youth were ages 13–17 at baseline and were interviewed at six months after their first official contact with the justice system. Youth had been arrested for a range of low-level (misdemeanor) offenses, with the most frequent charges including vandalism (17.5%) and theft (16.7%). Youth were sampled from three sites: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (N = 533); Jefferson Parish, Louisiana (N = 151); and Orange County, California (N = 532). The sample is ethnically diverse: Latino (46%), Black (37%), White (15%), and other race (2%). Descriptive statistics for the full sample and subsamples are presented in [Table 1](#).

For the purpose of this study, a subsample of youth who identified their father as absent (N = 291) or harsh (high in hostility and low in warmth; N = 58) was included in these analyses. Overall, the subsample was reflective of the larger sample with an average age of 15.3 years and ethnic composition of Black (48.4%), Latino (37.3%), White (12.6%), and other race (1.7%) (see [Table 1](#)).

5.2. Procedures

Signed parental consent and youth assent were obtained for all participants before interviews were conducted. Participants were informed of the nature of the study and were told that there was no penalty for not participating. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at all three institutions approved the study procedures. Upon obtaining consent, participants completed an interview a maximum of six weeks after their first arrest, as well as a follow-up interview approximately six months after their initial interview. Face-to-face interviews with the youth ranged from 2 to 3 h and were conducted using a secure computer-administered program. A Certificate of Confidentiality issued by the Department of Justice protects participants' privacy by exempting their responses and identity from subpoenas, court orders, or other types of involuntary disclosures. Participants were given a detailed explanation of the

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

	Full Sample (N = 1216)	Father Subsamples			Group Effect	High-Quality Fathers (N = 36)	Group Effect
		Absent Fathers (N = 291)	Harsh Fathers (N = 58)				
Demographics							
Race				$\chi^2 = 24.99^{**}$ Cramer's V = 0.27		$\chi^2 = 28.09^{***}$ Cramer's V = 0.19	
Latino	45.8%	34.71%	50%		36.11%		
Black	36.9%	53.95%	20.69%		58.33%		
White	14.8%	9.97%	25.86%		5.56%		
Other	2.5%	1.37%	3.45%		0%		
Age M (SD)	15.29(1.29)	15.19 (1.35)	15.64 (1.22)	$t(347) = -2.32^*$ $d = -0.33$	15 (1.29)	$F(2, 382) = 3.37^*$ $\eta_p^2 = 0.017$	
Parent Education				$\chi^2 = 7.51^*$ Cramer's V = 0.15		$\chi^2 = 8.05$	
Had not completed high school	29.2%	34.6%	27.6%		24.2%		
Completed high school	32.5%	37.5%	27.6%		36.4%		
More than a high school diploma	38.3%	27.9%	44.8%		39.4%		
Mother-Child Relationship Quality							
Hostility M(SD)	1.59 (0.43)	1.56 (0.46)	1.84 (0.49)	$t(344) = -4.08^{***}$ $d = -0.57$	1.24 (0.23)	$F(2, 378) = 19.78^{***}$ $\eta_p^2 = 0.095$	
Warmth M(SD)	3.17 (0.66)	3.25 (0.64)	2.72 (0.76)	$t(344) = 5.6^{***}$, $d = 0.81$	3.7 (0.27)	$F(2, 378) = 32.19^{***}$ $\eta_p^2 = 0.146$	
Father Residence							
Out of Home	50.8%	100%	36.2%		44.4%		
Father-Child Relationship Quality							
Hostility M(SD)	1.46 (0.43)		2.38 (0.53)		1 (0)	$F(1, 87) = 238.98^{***}$ $\eta_p^2 = 0.733$	
Warmth M(SD)	2.77 (0.86)		1.46 (0.33)		3.88 (0.14)	$F(1, 92) = 1800.25^{***}$ $\eta_p^2 = 0.95$	
Delinquency							
Self-Reported Offending (Baseline)							
M(SD)	1.49 (2.12)	1.5 (2.1)	2.85 (3.28)	$t(347) = -4.01^{***}$ $d = -0.58$	0.67 (0.96)	$F(2, 382) = 12.3^{***}$ $\eta_p^2 = 0.061$	
Range	0–17	0–16	0–17		0–4		
Self-Reported Offending (Six Months)							
M(SD)	1.39 (2.26)	1.29 (2.19)	2.84 (3.26)	$t(330) = -4.38^{***}$ $d = -0.65$	0.31 (0.58)	$F(2, 365) = 15.3^{***}$ $\eta_p^2 = 0.077$	
Range	0–18	0–18	0–13		0–2		
Self-Reported Substance Use (Baseline)							
M(SD)	1.24 (1.54)	1.13 (1.55)	1.91(1.63)	$t(346) = -3.47^{***}$ $d = -0.50$	0.44 (0.7)	$F(2, 381) = 11.37^{***}$ $\eta_p^2 = 0.056$	
Range	0–11	0–9	0–7		0–3		
Self-reported Substance Use (Six Months)							
M(SD)	1.14 (1.67)	0.90 (1.37)	2.09 (2.52)	$t(330) = -5.01^{***}$ $d = -0.74$	0.19 (0.53)	$F(2, 365) = 19.22^{***}$ $\eta_p^2 = 0.095$	
Range	0–13	0–8	0–13		0–2		

⁺ p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

Certificate of Confidentiality prior to the interview and were reminded again before sensitive questions were asked.

5.3. Measures

5.3.1. Demographic information

Youth self-reported general demographic information, including age and race. Youth also reported on the highest level of education that his parent(s) had received. This was used as a proxy for socioeconomic status. Approximately 29.4% of the participants did not have a parent with a high school diploma, 34.5% had a parent with a high school diploma, and 36.1% had a parent with more than a high school diploma. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

5.3.2. Parent-child relationship quality

Participants were first asked to specify their exact relationship to the individual they considered to be their father. Options included biological father, stepfather, adoptive father, foster father and grandfather. Next, participants were asked if they had any contact with this individual during the recall period. If yes, participants completed the Quality of Parental Relationships Inventory (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994) to assess the affective tone of the parent-child relationship. Twelve items evaluated parent-child relationship hostility (e.g. “How often does your father/mother get angry at you?”) ($\alpha_{\text{paternal}} = 0.93$, $\alpha_{\text{maternal}} = 0.81$). Nine items assessed parent-child relationship warmth (e.g. “How often does your father/mother let you know he/she really cares about you?”) ($\alpha_{\text{paternal}} = 0.91$; $\alpha_{\text{maternal}} = 0.92$). The participants respond to each question on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “Always” to “Never”. For hostility, higher scores indicate a more negative and abusive relationship. For warmth, higher scores indicate a more supportive and nurturing relationship. Means and standard deviations for the full sample and subsamples are presented in Table 1.

5.3.3. Household occupants

Youth were asked to describe their current living situation and the people living in that household. Specifically, youth were asked an open response question about the number of people occupying their household. To determine exactly who they were living with, the participants were asked to specify their relationship to each individual included in the household occupant count.

5.3.4. Father type

To assess father type, we created a dichotomous variable (absent or harsh) using the contact level and father-identification data from the Parent-Child Relationship Quality scale and the Household Occupants information. Specifically, absent-father youth were those who did not identify a father figure, did not report being in contact with a father figure, did not report on the quality of the father-child relationship, and did not identify a father figure living in their household at the baseline interview ($N = 291$). Harsh fathers were identified using data from the Parent-Child Relationship Quality scale. First, four groups were created by identifying youth who reported combinations of high (+1 SD) and low (−1 SD) levels of relationship hostility and warmth: high hostility/low warmth ($N = 58$), high hostility/high warmth ($N = 22$), low hostility/high warmth ($N = 36$), and low hostility/low warmth ($N = 34$). For the purposes of this study, we focused primarily on those who reported having a father-child relationship high (+1 SD) in hostility and low (−1 SD) in warmth ($N = 58$). This group was referred to as the harsh-father group. To achieve the maximum number of father-son dyads and accommodate all family types, this harsh-father group was not limited to biological fathers. However, the majority of harsh-father youth reported on biological fathers (77.6%) and step-fathers (18.9%). Additional details and descriptive statistics for the absent and harsh father subsamples are presented in Table 1.

5.3.5. Self-reported offending behavior

Offending behavior was assessed using the Self-Report of Offending scale (SRO; Huizinga, Esbensen, & Weiher, 1991). This self-report scale assesses 24 various criminal acts ranging from selling drugs to homicide. The number of different types of offenses the person had endorsed since the previous assessment was summed to create an overall offending count score, which provides a consistent and valid estimate of involvement in illegal activity over a given recall period (Osgood, McMorris, & Potenza, 2002). These variety scores are the preferred method for summarizing individual criminality because they assess heterogeneity in crime types, giving more weight to more serious behaviors that may be discounted if they occur less frequently than less serious behaviors that occur more frequently (Sweeten, 2012). On average, youth engaged in 1.68 ($SD = 2.38$, range = 0–17) types of offenses prior to baseline, and 1.48 ($SD = 2.35$, range = 0–18) types during the six months after baseline. Descriptive statistics for the full sample and subsamples are presented in Table 1.

5.3.6. Self-reported substance use

Substance Use was assessed using the Substance Use/Abuse Inventory developed by Chassin, Rogosch, and Barrera (1991) for use in a study of children of alcoholics. Only the Substance Use subscale, which considers the youth's use of illegal drugs and alcohol within a six-month interval, was used. An overall substance count score was created by summing the number of different types of substances the youth recounted using since the previous assessment. On average, youth reported using 1.28 types of substances ($SD = 1.62$, range = 0, 10) types of substances at baseline, and 1.23 types of substances ($SD = 1.76$, range = 0–13) during the subsequent six months. Descriptive statistics for the full sample and subsamples are presented in Table 1.

5.4. Plan of analysis

Negative binomial regressions were used to examine whether youth delinquency differed by father type (absent vs. harsh). Because the dependent outcomes, self-reported offending and self-reported substance use, are count variables with skewed distributions (Table 1), ordinary least squares regression would not be an appropriate method to analyze the data (Long & Freese, 2003; Long, 1997). Additionally, because the distribution of both variables was over-dispersed by lower values, and the variance of each outcome exceeded the means (Offending, $M = 1.23$, variance = 5.51; Substance Use, $M = 1.13$, variance = 3.09), a negative binomial regression is preferable to a Poisson regression. Therefore, negative binomial regression models were used in order to avoid violating the assumptions of regression (Gardner, Mulvey, & Shaw, 1995).

To examine whether father type predicted offending behaviors, self-reported offending was regressed on father type. The same analysis was repeated with substance use as the outcome. Both models included age, race, and baseline counts of self-reported

offending or substance use as controls. Socioeconomic status, measured by parent education, was also included as a control due to its relation to both paternal absence (Amato & Keith, 1991; Harper & McLanahan, 2004) and delinquency (Agnew, Matthews, Bucher, Welcher, & Keyes, 2008). As previous research has found that the quality of the mother-child relationship may outweigh the effects of paternal absence and harshness (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2006; Hirschi, 1969; Mack et al., 2007), mothers' hostility and warmth were included in the regression models as controls.

6. Results

6.1. Sample characteristics

The absent-father and harsh-father groups differed on various demographic variables (Table 1). Youth with harsh fathers were older ($t(347) = -2.32, p = 0.02$). The two groups differed in racial composition ($\chi^2 = 24.99, p < 0.01$). Most harsh-father youth identified as Latino (50%), while the majority of absent-father youth identified as Black (53.95%). Parent education also varied by father type ($\chi^2 = 7.51, p = 0.02$). Harsh-father youth most frequently reported having at least one parent who obtained more than a high school degree (44.8%). Most absent-father youth reported having at least one parent who had obtained only a high school degree (37.5%).

6.2. Father type predicting self-reported offending and substance use

To examine whether youth with absent fathers show a higher rate of delinquent behavior than youth with harsh fathers, self-reported offending and substance use were regressed on father type, adjusting for youths' age, race/ethnicity, prior offending behavior, and mothers' hostility and warmth. The results of the negative binomial regressions indicate that youth with harsh fathers showed a higher rate of delinquency than youth with absent fathers, even after accounting for the mother-child relationship. Youth with harsh fathers reported engaging in more offending behaviors ($IRR = 1.49, SE = 0.30, p = 0.05$; Table 2) and using more substances ($IRR = 1.44, SE = 0.25, p = 0.03$; Table 2) than youth with absent fathers.¹

To further examine the effects of father absence and relationship quality, the regression analyses were repeated with an additional category of fathers: high-quality fathers. The high-quality father group was comprised of youth who reported having a father-child relationship low (-1 SD) in hostility and high ($+1$ SD) in warmth ($N = 36$). Descriptive statistics for this sample are found in Table 1. The results indicate that youth with absent fathers and youth with harsh fathers were indeed more delinquent than youth with high-quality fathers. Harsh-father youth reported engaging in more offending behaviors ($IRR = 4.69, SE = 1.97, p < 0.001$; Table 3) and used more substances than youth with high-quality fathers ($IRR = 3.72, SE = 1.64, p = 0.003$; Table 3). Absent-father youth also reported engaging in more offending behaviors ($IRR = 3.11, SE = 1.17, p = 0.002$; Table 3) and using more substances than youth with high-quality fathers ($IRR = 2.57, SE = 1.06, p = 0.023$; Table 3).

7. Discussion

Father absence is widely acknowledged as a key contributor to delinquency, leading to efforts to promote father involvement with youth to deter juvenile delinquency. However, not all involved fathers develop positive, high-quality relationships with their sons, and father presence in some cases can be more detrimental than father absence. Indeed, our findings indicate that youth with harsh fathers committed more offenses than those with absent fathers. Youth with harsh fathers also used a greater variety of substances than their absent-father counterparts. Moreover, the difference existed between absent- and harsh-father youth even after controlling for the mother-child relationship. This latter finding is important and consistent with past studies reporting that the father-child relationship predicted delinquency even after controlling for maternal behavior (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2006; Gony & van Dulmen, 2010; Hovee et al., 2009; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Zimmerman et al., 1995). By analyzing both father and mother relationships simultaneously, we were able to provide additional evidence that fathers do, in fact, have an effect on youth behavior after accounting for the quality of the mother-child relationship. Thus, this study adds to the growing literature that fathers have a unique influence on youth behavior that is separate from mothers.

Importantly, the present study abandons a common definition of paternal absence as living out of the youth's home in exchange for one of absolute absence. By characterizing absence in terms of residence, previous studies have been unable to provide a comprehensive picture of the paternal absence and delinquency association. Being out of one's home is not synonymous with being out of one's life. Indeed, previous research suggests that fathers are influential regardless of their presence in the home (Clark & Barber, 1994; Coley & Medeiros, 2007; King & Sobolewski, 2006). Further, our findings considered, as far as we could, the potential confounding effect of the difference in family income between father-present and father-absent homes (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). That is, we controlled for parent education, a proxy for socioeconomic status, and found that the differences in offending and substance use between absent, high-quality, and harsh fathers remained. Although parent education is not a precise measurement of family income, our findings suggest that economic factors that are associated with father absence may not fully explain the

¹ Maternal warmth was controlled for as a covariate, but it may be more appropriately used as a moderator. Self-reported offending and substance use were regressed on the interaction between maternal warmth and father type. The interaction was not significant for either outcome (Offending, $p = 0.97$; Substance Use, $p = 0.76$).

Table 2
Negative binomial regression results for delinquency by father type.

	Self-Reported Offending (Six Months)			Self-Reported Substance Use (Six Months)		
	IRR ^a	SE	95% CI	IRR	SE	95% CI
Latino ^b	1.07	0.26	0.67, 1.72	0.84	0.17	0.57, 1.25
Black ^b	0.82	0.20	0.51, 1.32	0.52	0.11	0.34, 0.79
Other ^b	0.50	0.31	0.15, 1.69	0.76	0.38	0.28, 2.03
Age	0.96	0.06	0.86, 1.08	1.19**	0.07	1.06, 1.34
Parent Education ^c	1.13	0.19	0.81, 1.58	1.01	0.16	0.74, 1.39
Maternal Hostility	1.51*	0.26	1.07, 2.12	1.33 ⁺	0.21	0.97, 1.83
Maternal Warmth	1.05	0.14	0.82, 1.36	0.89	0.10	0.72, 1.11
Self-Reported Offending (Baseline)	1.20***	0.04	1.12, 1.28			
Self-Reported Substance Use (Baseline)				1.28***	0.06	1.18, 1.40
Harsh Father ^d	1.49*	0.30	1.00, 2.22	1.44*	0.25	1.03, 2.01
LR χ^2	79.34***			123.90***		
Pseudo R ²	0.07			0.13		

⁺ p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

^a IRR: Incidence-rate Ratio.

^b Reference group is White.

^c Reference group is “Less than high school diploma”.

^d Reference group is “Absent Father”.

Table 3
Negative binomial regression results for delinquency by father type (absent, harsh, high-quality).

	Self-Reported Offending (Six Months)			Self-reported Substance Use (Six Months)		
	IRR ^a	SE	95% CI	IRR	SE	95% CI
Latino ^b	1.06	0.25	0.67, 1.69	0.84	0.17	0.57, 1.25
Black ^b	0.86	0.21	0.54, 1.38	0.55**	0.12	0.36, 0.83
Other ^b	0.51	0.31	0.15, 1.71	0.77	0.39	0.28, 2.08
Age	0.96	0.06	0.86, 1.07	1.18**	0.07	1.05, 1.32
Parent Education ^c	1.11	0.18	0.80, 1.54	1.00	0.16	0.73, 1.37
Maternal Hostility	1.51	0.26	1.08, 2.13	1.34 ⁺	0.22	0.98, 1.83
Maternal Warmth	1.04*	0.14	0.81, 1.34	0.88	0.10	0.71, 1.10
Self-Reported Offending (Baseline)	1.20***	0.04	1.13, 1.29			
Self-Reported Substance Use (Baseline)				1.29***	0.06	1.18, 1.41
Absent Father ^d	3.11**	1.7	1.50, 6.49	2.57*	1.06	1.14, 5.78
Harsh Father ^d	4.69***	1.97	2.06, 10.68	3.72**	1.64	1.57, 8.82
LR χ^2	100.57***			141.95***		
Pseudo R ²	0.09			0.14		

⁺ p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

^a IRR: Incidence-rate Ratio.

^b Reference group is White.

^c Reference group is “Less than high school diploma”.

^d Reference group is “High-Quality Father”.

differences in risk for delinquency.

Despite these strengths, the present study was limited in several ways. First, the sample was not restricted to youth who reported only on biological fathers. While it may be important to differentiate between biological and non-biological fathers, the quality of the relationship with both types of father figures has been found to be predictive of behavioral problems (Coley, 1998). Moreover, the current findings did not change substantially after constraining the sample to only youth reporting on biological fathers (not shown). Further, a previous study found that youth in single-mother households showed more delinquent behavior than youth in mother-stepfather households (Demuth & Brown, 2004), providing additional evidence that non-biological fathers are also influential on delinquent behavior. As such, our inclusion of all father figures provides a richer picture of the father-son dynamic. Second, we have little information on father delinquency or the causes of father absence. Previous research suggests that the level delinquent behavior exhibited by resident fathers is positively associated with the risk of childhood conduct problems (Jaffee et al., 2003) and persistent

adolescent delinquency (Mulvey et al., 2010). Additionally, it is possible that circumstances preceding father absence may in turn explain why their absence did not elevate youth's risk of offending relative to youth those with harsh fathers. Without knowing the fathers' history of antisocial behavior or why these fathers are absent, the current study's depiction of the father/juvenile delinquency association is incomplete. Thus, future research should explore the reasons behind a father's absence and their prior behavior. Third, most harsh-father youth identified as Latino. This finding is at odds with research that consistently finds that Latino parents tend to endorse warm parenting practices (Fuller, Holloway, & Liang, 1996; Hofferth, 2003). It is possible that this finding could be attributed to our measurement of relationship warmth and hostility, which was derived from parenting patterns within a sample of white, middle class parents (Conger et al., 1994). Definitions of normative parenting are largely based on research conducted with similar samples (García Coll & Pachter, 2002). Consequently, Latino youth may be overrepresented in the harsh-father category due to differences in culture or the contextual factors that demand this style of parenting. There is reason to expect that the effects of paternal absence and harsh parenting will vary between racial groups (Matsueda & Heimer, 1987; García Coll & Pachter, 2002). Unfortunately, our sample lacks the statistical power to explore racial differences due to the low number of harsh-father youth. Instead, race was only controlled for in our analyses. Lastly, despite having data on father residence, this study did not investigate whether the influence of harsh fathers was moderated by their presence in or out of the youth's home. This omission was due to the low number of harsh fathers in the sample and a lack of statistical power to test for differences. Previous research suggests fathers are influential regardless of their presence in the home (Carlson, 2006; Coley & Medeiros, 2007; Demuth & Brown, 2004), however, future studies should investigate if residency impacts whether or not hostile fathers have a more negative effect on adolescent behavior than absent fathers.

It is also important to comment on the strength of our sample and, in particular, the racial composition. Employing a sample of first-time offenders is advantageous considering a significant portion of the father-delinquency research employs samples of community adolescents or at-risk youth. A sample of offenders is more appropriate in which to test the differential effects of father absence and harshness on delinquency. Additionally, this aspect is especially relevant in light of the many of the father-focused initiatives aiming to prevent continued contact with the justice system. Further, previously examined samples are often racially and ethnically unrepresentative of absent-father youth. Within the current study, more than half of the absent-father youth are Black and over a third are Latino. This is similar to the racial distribution of single-mother households in the U.S.—single-mother families are more common among Blacks and Hispanics (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). There is reason to expect that the effects of paternal absence and harsh parenting will vary between racial groups (García Coll & Pachter, 2002, pp. 1–20; Matsueda & Heimer, 1987). Unfortunately, our sample lacks the statistical power to explore racial differences due to the low number of harsh-father youth. Instead, race was only controlled for in our analyses. We believe that it is important that future research pays attention to race/ethnicity when examining the differential effects of father absence and harshness on delinquency.

In summary, community leaders and policymakers recognize fathers' potential to decrease youth involvement with the justice system. Yet, our findings suggest that the quality of the father-child relationship varies greatly and needs to be considered in interventions and in policy decisions. It may be irresponsible to encourage fathers to be involved without acknowledging the importance of the quality of the father-child relationship. Based on our results, present fathers who are hostile and cold pose a greater risk for youth than absent fathers. Initiatives and programs whose primary goal is to re-engage absent fathers must consider the possibility that father presence alone is not enough to deter delinquent behavior. It is imperative that these initiatives not only re-engage absent fathers, but also equip them with the knowledge and parenting skills needed to positively raise their children.

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