

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Single-parent families, economic disadvantage, and youth crime

By Kevin Wong, Ph.D.



Why this research is important

At the community level, the concentration of single-mother families is one of the most powerful predictors of youth crime. An understanding of this relationship is important in devising crime control policies as well as community support for single-mother families.

How the research was conducted

The research is based on data from the Canadian Census and crime rates from over 400 Canadian municipalities. The analyses are based on data collected between 1996 and 2011. The effects of the concentrations of single-mother families (SMFs), single-father families (SFFs), couple families (CFs), and other sociodemographic variables on youth crime were estimated using statistical analysis.

What the researcher found

As social control agents for youth, are single-parent families as effective as two-parent families? Based on

What you need to know

Using a social disorganization perspective, my current research is in the study of the concentration of single-parent families and youth crime.

municipal-level data, my research found that the concentration of single-mother families (SMFs) caused youth crime to increase. On the other hand, the concentration of single-father families (SFFs) had a neutral effect (i.e., near zero effect) on youth crime, similar to the effect of two-parent families.

Do the economic conditions of the SMF explain the effect of its concentration on youth crime? The results revealed that the economic conditions of the SMF did not have much effect on youth crime, but the unfavorable economic conditions of the SFF had significant and moderate crime-causing effects.

Does the crime-causing effect of the SMF on youth crime reduce as the prevalence of the SMF increases (i.e., when it becomes more common or normalized)? The results from my analysis did not support the ‘normalization hypothesis.’ On quite the contrary, the effect of the concentration of SMFs on youth crime increased with its prevalence, thus supporting the ‘minority threat hypothesis’ instead.

How this research can be used

From the above questions and findings, one can ask and perhaps answer a number of practical questions. Here is an

example: ‘Will throwing money at the problem solve the problem?’ ‘Can alleviating the economic conditions of the SMF help to reduce youth crime?’ Unfortunately, based on the research findings, there is no evidence supporting an affirmative answer. Instead, the findings lead to the rather unsettling suggestion that alleviating the economic conditions of the SFF might produce a moderate crime-reduction effect. Of course, one can dismiss the findings as a fluke—or—further research is needed as we may not yet have the final and definitive answer.

Discriminatory policing: In my next project, I will examine the relationship between the concentration of SMFs and the crime clearance rate. This explores the other side of the equation. That is, is it possible that the police may target the SMF and its youth, thus causing the rate of youth crime to increase (i.e., the mobilization of law effect)? In other words, targeted policing may manufacture crime, and targeted policing against the SMF and its youth may manufacture youth crime.

About the researcher

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Keywords

Social disorganization; single-mother family; single-father family; youth crime

Publications based on this research

Wong, S. K. (2018). Economic disadvantage and the prevalence of single-mother and single-father families: The intricate links of youth crime. In Thomas K. Babalis, Yota Xanthacou and Maria Kaila (Eds.), *Single-parenting in the 21st century: Perceptions, issues and implications* (pp. 105–142). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Publishers.

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