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# Exploring Potential Connections Between Parental Divorce, Deviance and Negative Child Outcomes: A Literature Review

Haley Robertson  
*Arkansas Tech University*

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EXPLORING POTENTIAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PARENTAL DIVORCE,  
DEVIANCE AND NEGATIVE CHILD OUTCOMES: A LITERATURE REVIEW

By

HALEY ROBERTSON

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## Abstract

Today, divorce is at an all-time high in the United States. Divorce not only impacts adults, but it greatly impacts children. The number of children affected by divorce has increased dramatically since the 1950s. Many studies over the years have linked juvenile delinquency, deviancy, and antisocial behavior to children who have experienced a parental divorce. I believe there is a connection between juvenile delinquency and parental divorce. In this paper, I will explore how existing research has proven that parental divorce and juvenile delinquency are connected. This article focuses on the impact of divorce on children through various characteristics such as socioeconomic status, family structure, social support, mental health, and academic performance. It will explain how these certain characteristics each impact the role of delinquency.

Keywords: divorce; parental separation; delinquency

## Table of Contents

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
I. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	1
The Hardships of Socioeconomic Disadvantages.....	2
Family Dysfunction and the Roles of Parenting.....	4
The Impact of Divorce on Mental Health.....	5
Academic Performance.....	7
II. DELINQUENCY .....	9
The Effects of Socioeconomic Status on Delinquency.....	9
Family Dysfunction can Lead to Delinquency .....	10
Parental Divorce Impacts Mental Health which Can Lead to Delinquency .....	12
Academic Performance and Deviant Behavior.....	12
III. CONCLUSION.....	14
IV. REFERENCES .....	17

## **Literature Review**

Marriage and divorce are both common experiences. Marriage is associated with a variety of positive outcomes, and the dissolution of marriage is associated with negative outcomes for men, women, and their children (Loveless & Holman, 2006). Divorce was once viewed as morally wrong, but now it has changed drastically in law as well as in the attitudes of the general population across the country. Today, divorce is at an all-time high in the United States (U.S.). High divorce rates in the U.S. over the past 20 years have resulted in numerous changes in the American family life, with perhaps the most important consequences bearing on children whose families were disrupted (Demo & Acock, 1988). About 25% of children in the U.S. live with only one parent (Bernet, 2015). The U.S. Census Bureau (2011) estimated 14.4 million parents lived with 23.4 million children less than 21 years of age while the other parent(s) lived somewhere else.

Divorce not only impacts adults, but it greatly impacts children. The stigma of divorce may be gone, but the divorce itself still plays a major role in a child's upbringing and other societal problems. Sigle-Rushton, Lyngstad, Andersen, and Kravdal (2014) discuss in their research that children who spend time in a single-parent family following the dissolution of their parents' relationship fare worse, on average, than children who grow up with both biological parents. Many children in divorced families encounter more negative life changes than positive changes because of their parents' separation. Demo and Acock (1988) explained that there are significant changes in family composition, parent-child interaction, discipline, and socioeconomic circumstances, as well as the emotional reactions that parents and children have to divorce. Social and psychological well-being includes aspects of personal adjustment, self-concept,

interpersonal relationships, antisocial behavior, and cognitive functioning. Some of the socioeconomic circumstances that could alter a family's day-to-day life are restrictions to activities, changes in residences or schools, and increasing levels of daily stress that the family experiences. Their research suggests that family disruption alters daily routines and work schedules, and imposes additional demands on adults and children living in single-parent families.

Many studies over the years have linked juvenile delinquency, deviancy, and antisocial behavior to children dealing with the implications of parental divorce (Demo & Acock, 1988). I believe there is a connection between juvenile delinquency and parental divorce. In this paper, I will explore how existing research has demonstrated that parental divorce and negative child outcomes are connected, and based on these processes, I will suggest intervention points to try and disrupt this pattern. One intervention which may help this is the process of mediation, in which a neutral third person helps two parties resolve disputes between them. This tactic has been practiced for thousands of years and is universal among many societies. This article focuses on the impact of divorce on children through various characteristics such as socioeconomic status, family structure, social support, mental health, and academic performance. I will explain how these certain characteristics each impact the role of delinquency.

### **The Hardships of Socioeconomic Disadvantages**

Many of today's families face significant financial problems as a result of the current status of the economy. A family's socioeconomic position is very important because it affects the life course development and interrelationships of family members. Socioeconomic disadvantage has negative consequences for adults and children.

Financial hardship often causes psychological distress and disrupted parenting practices. Conger, Conger, and Martin (2010) confirmed in their research that families often suffer when faced with economic hardship or low socioeconomic status. For families who are already poor, divorce will often intensify their economic situation. This can result in more stressed-out parents who are less available, resulting in higher stress levels through the family system (Conger et al., 2010).

Strohschein (2005) discusses that the association between socioeconomic status and child mental health is also well documented. Children with corresponding higher levels of household income and parental education and in households that are owned rather than rented have fewer emotional and behavioral problems. The economic hardship during and following a divorce can make it hard for the family to adjust in ways that benefit the child (Strohschein, 2005).

Divorce often precipitates a downward slide in standard of living, and may result in changes in residence, school, and friends (Thomas & Gibbons, 2005). Adolescents are often no longer able to participate in the sports and organizations they had prior to the separation due to the changing of residence and schools. In addition, the economic hardship during and following a divorce can make it difficult for parents to provide resources such as books, computers, travel, and assistance with college tuition to facilitate their children's educational stressors. When children or adolescents are faced with the challenge of having to change residences or experience restrictions of certain activities, their level of daily stress increases significantly. This level of daily stress can intensify the role of parenting which can make it very challenging at times. The impact of reduced family income on the adjustment of children of divorce may be expressed

indirectly through its negative effect on the quality of parenting of the custodial parent (Simons, Lin, Gordon, Conger, & Lorenz, 1999).

### **Family Dysfunction and the Roles of Parenting**

Family dysfunction can be defined as the absence of mutually supportive, trusting, and respectful family relationships (Ebling, Pruett, & Pruett, 2009). Treating family dysfunction as an indicator of parental investment is justified because parents bear responsibility for providing a positive family environment for their children, a task that requires parenting and interpersonal skills. As parents proceed along the path to divorce, the ability and motivation of one or both parents to invest time, effort, and resources into the lives of their children may become increasingly compromised (Ebling et al., 2009).

Parental separation removes one parent from the home, which can result in changes in the child's relationship with both parents. Divorce may impact children's internal representation of the family. Ebling et al. (2009) discuss how children with separated or divorced parents are more likely to exclude family members socially. Factors such as separation from parents, permanent or temporary changes of residence, and visitation arrangements disrupt children's sense of security with custodial and noncustodial parents. Parental conflict negatively affects children's attachment to parents and subsequent feelings of security in relationships. Children and adults experiencing parental divorce and growing up in a high-conflict family are associated with long-term decrements in well-being (Ebling et al., 2009). Some research on children suggests that divorced custodial parents are less communicative and affectionate, more punitive, and more inconsistent in the use of discipline than married parents (Riggio & Valenzuela,

2004). Children exposed to high-conflict parental relationships may acquire the negative or dysfunctional behavioral strategies used by parents during conflict.

Parental separation may lead to a reduction in social support which is also related to poorer health (Maier & Lachman, 2000). In addition to the reduction of social time due to socioeconomic constraints, divorce removes one parent from the home which limits the amount of parental support the child receives. Some studies have found that children whose parents divorced had higher levels of interpersonal dependence which had a detrimental effect on their social interactions (Maier & Lachman, 2000). This type of loss is associated with interpersonal difficulties which may reduce the amount of support the child later receives from friends or family. Strohschein (2005) implies in her research that psychosocial resources such as marital satisfaction, parental depression, and family dysfunction reflect parents' interpersonal skills and psychological capabilities in maintaining family well-being, and each are linked to parental divorce and child mental health. Although parental separation does not necessarily lead to psychopathology in the child, it may initiate a chain of negative events which causes its effect to persist over time (Maier & Lachman, 2000).

### **The Impact of Divorce on Mental Health**

Divorce is likely to be a stressful experience for children. Amato and Keith (1991) discovered that experiencing a parental divorce before age 16 was associated with poorer mental health. Parental divorce may cause an initial depressive episode in children and adolescents, and depression may reoccur in adulthood. Some negative outcomes associated with parental divorce include negatively impacted psychological well-being (e.g., depression, low life satisfaction), family well-being (e.g., low marital

quality, divorce), socioeconomic well-being, and physical health. Amato and Keith (1991) conclude in their research that individuals who experienced parental divorce as children, compared with those parents who were continuously married, have lower quality of life as adults. Similarly, children of divorced parents have been shown to exhibit more emotional (e.g., depression and anxiety) problems than children of married parents (Neher & Short, 1998). These results also suggest that children of divorce may continue to have poorer adjustment than their peers into adulthood.

Studies have confirmed that children from divorced families, on average, experienced more behavioral problems and had a lower level of well-being than did children from continuously intact two-parent families (Nair & Murray, 2005). Loss or separation from parents in childhood does have a negative impact on health problems and psychological adjustment in midlife and that the effects are more pronounced for divorce (Maier & Lachman, 2000). The divorce experience during infancy and early childhood has more adverse effects on children than it does during the elementary, middle childhood, and adolescent years (Nair & Murray, 2005). Rapid developmental changes in the cognitive, emotional, and social domains take place in early childhood. Family disruptions in this period can have lasting consequences on the child's well-being and adjustment in later years.

Children who experience parental divorce handle the situation in different ways. Some children are able to adjust and deal with the separation, while others struggle to handle the disruption in the family. Studies have shown mixed results with respect to how the timing of divorce affects children's adjustment (Lansford, 2009). Young children may be less capable of realistically assessing the causes and consequences of divorce,

may feel more anxious about abandonment, may be more likely to blame themselves, and may be less able to take advantage of resources outside the family to cope with the divorce than do children who are older when the divorce occurs. In addition to potential mental health consequences, depending on how some children cope with their parents' divorce, there may be an academic performance decline.

### **Academic Performance**

Family conflict and disruption are associated with inhibited cognitive functioning such as poor performances on standardized intelligence and academic achievement tests (Demo & Acock, 1988). Family disruption alters daily routines, work schedules, and imposes additional demands on adults and children living in single-parent families. Some adolescents must assume extra domestic and child care responsibilities, and financial conditions require some to work part-time. These burdens result in more absences of school, more tardiness, and can cause severe stress in terms of academics. Likewise, some work schedules are demanding and this can take away the necessary time available to work on school work.

As a group, adolescents from divorced families display lower levels of academic and vocational attainment. Adolescents demonstrate lower academic performance and achievement test scores and are two to three times more likely to drop out of school (Thomas & Gibbons, 2009). Many studies conclude that young people in single-parent households are not as academically successful as those living with both biological parents (Frisco, Muller, & Frank, 2007). Divorce can affect high school students' academic performance by increasing academic stratification. Some students simply want to graduate and would rather not take demanding college preparatory classes. Instead,

students will most likely take general classes and not even consider filling out a college application form. Financial instability, marital quality, negative spousal behavior, and parental fighting can also influence adolescents' school performance. Additional stressors associated with divorce also impede adolescents' efforts to learn and succeed in school.

Children also suffer emotional problems which can lead to interference with study patterns. Children who live with single parents or stepparents during adolescence receive less encouragement and less help with school work than children who live with both natural parents. Ineffective or inadequate parental assistance may lead a child to feel overwhelmed and consequently withdraw themselves from school (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). In numerous studies, children who grow in single-parent families have found to be less likely to complete high school or to attend college than children who grow up with both parents.

Evidence has been obtained across different country contexts and using a variety of measures of educational success has demonstrated fairly conclusively that children who grew up with both parents have the best educational outcomes (Sigle-Rushton et al., 2014). It is likewise well established that some children who spend time in a single-parent family following the dissolution of their parents' relationship fare worse than children who grow up with both biological parents. Children of divorce will often have difficulty with school, suffer depression, and commit delinquent acts. Although divorce does not affect all children uniformly, research confirms that divorce negatively influences academic performance and behavioral adjustment.

## **Delinquency**

Juvenile delinquency has been a concern for decades. Delinquency is more prevalent today than in the past. Delinquency can be defined as a minor crime, especially those committed by young people. In 2009, juvenile courts in the United States handled an estimated 1.5 million delinquency cases that involved juveniles charged with criminal law violations (Parks, 2013).

### **The Effects of Socioeconomic Status on Delinquency**

Socioeconomic status is one of the most documented correlates of juvenile delinquency. Many studies have shown that youths from low socioeconomic families are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior than youths from high socioeconomic families (Rekker et al., 2015). Research shows that, while the child poverty rate in America is 20%, more than half of American youths spend at least one year in poverty before age 18. The disadvantages of low socioeconomic status on families are most often negative. However, although low economic status alone does not encourage delinquent behavior, poor families tend to have a lower quality of life (Webber, 1997). For example, poverty consistently accompanies poor health, and an unstable living environment. Low socioeconomic status can also impact parental stress, and stress induced by economic disadvantage can lead to harsher disciplinary practices. Mothers of low income families will exhibit a high rate of harsh disciplinary practices to prevent their children from involvement in antisocial activity and this can promote child aggressive behavior. An overwhelming sense of stress due to economic hardships can lead to less attention to the child's needs.

### **Family Dysfunction Can Lead to Delinquency**

Even though divorce tends to contribute to delinquent behavior, conflict among family members is a better predictor (Parks, 2013). Two of the main factors influencing juvenile delinquency are the family structure that a child is exposed and the relationships adolescents have with parents (Parks, 2013). Youth of all ages are living in many various types of homes, such as with single, married, and cohabiting parents. Children that live in non-traditional households are at greater risk for a wide variety of negative outcomes including involvement in delinquency (Parks, 2013). Children in different family structures also experience many forms of monitoring, supervision, involvement, and attachment they receive from their parents. Children experiencing parental divorce are already at risk for a variety of negative developmental outcomes so it would be more beneficial to the child if the environment inside the family structure was civil.

Youth who have weak attachments to their parents such as a sense of closeness or security, are more likely to participate in delinquent behavior. The attachment between parent and child is paramount and the strength of this relationship is one of the most important factor in determining delinquent behavior. It is the quality, and not the quantity, of bonds that determine delinquency (Parks, 2013). Many children who experience a divorce or are in otherwise non-traditional families may not be as close to their parents as children in two-biological-parent families. They may experience weakened bonds with their parents and others, which can increase the likelihood that they will engage in crime and delinquency (Parks, 2013).

Adolescents who lack a feeling of closeness with their parents or who feel a lack of family cohesion are more likely to get into trouble. Children exposed to high-conflict

parental relationships may acquire the negative or dysfunctional behavioral strategies used by parents during conflict. Parents who are overwhelmed, who provide little acts of discipline, who use coercive techniques to force submission, who have negative attitudes toward school, and who engage in multiple negative-aggressive behaviors themselves tend to produce children who are at risk for antisocial behavior (Webber, 1977).

Increased social bonds decrease the likelihood of engaging in crime and deviance. Having adequate support from friends, family, and teachers can allow a child to believe in a second chance. Social bonds with parents have also been measured with terms such as parental monitoring, supervision, and involvement. Behavioral control, such as parental monitoring is negatively linked to delinquency. Similarly, some studies show that more time spent with parents lead to less participation in crime and delinquency (Parks, 2013). The more frequently adolescents are supervised, the less likely they are to engage in crime and delinquency. Practicing good parenting and closely supervising an adolescent can influence the adolescent not to participate in crime throughout adulthood. Children who are brought up in families where they are closely supervised and have interactions with their parents are less likely to turn into criminals as adults (Parks, 2013).

A child looks for support from family, friends, and professional helpers who the child views as caring and would hold them accountable for their actions. Parental separation removes one parent from the home which may reduce the amount of support the child later receives from family. Having social support is universally cited as the most important factor leading to a child overcoming the impact of divorce (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004). When the child's coercive and aggressive behavior results in social

rejection by peers and teachers, because of peer isolation, the child has few opportunities to develop appropriate social skills (Webber, 1997).

### **Parental Divorce Impacts Mental Health, Which Can Lead to Delinquency**

Young children who may not display early aggressive behavior but who are depressed, feel hopeless, or have other psychological disorders may also be at higher risk for later delinquent behavior. In addition, one third of depressed young people display antisocial behavior or conduct disorders (Webber, 1997). Poverty, health, and family integrity appear to interact with children's emotional well-being. Children who live in poverty, deprived of basic necessities, often feel hopeless and either learn to be victims or may resort to aggression to obtain what they need (Webber, 1997) Maltreatment victimization, school/education problems, and mental health disorders (including substance abuse) are associated with profound difficulties for many children and adolescents.

### **Academic Performance and Deviant Behavior**

The addictive effects of parental conflict and divorce disrupt the intellectual environment in the home, the supervision of homework, and communication with the school, causing a child's academic success to decline (Mulholland, Watt, Philpott, & Sarlin, 1991). School performance may also suffer following parental divorce because of ineffective parenting skills. Parents may be overwhelmed with stress and finances so they do not take the time to sit down with their child and go over their school work. Children's performance in school, academically and behaviorally, is a main ingredient in building self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment (Mulholland et al., 1991).

Young children with academic and behavior problems often display aggressive and violent behavior and may drop out of school (Webber, 1997). Children who are raised in at-risk family situations and who display aggressive behavior early in life have a higher probability of attending schools in poor school districts (Webber, 1997). Also, these schools are often overcrowded, impersonal, have high concentrations of children with aggressive behavior, and have inexperienced teachers (Webber, 1997). Schools might resemble the dysfunctional family. Adolescents from disadvantaged and troubled families are more likely to have unsuccessful school experiences, form weak bonds to normative social institutions (i.e., school and community organizations) due to poor social skills, and curtail or abandon conventional aspirations (Wickrama, Simons, & Baltimore, 2012). A majority of adolescents involved in juvenile court have at least one, if not more than one, significant emotional or learning impairment, or maltreatment experience (Mallett, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

I explored existing literature on potential connections between parental divorce and delinquency, and how it might affect child negative outcomes. First, I considered the impact of divorce on children through various characteristics such as socioeconomic status, family structure, social support, mental health, and academic performance. Previous research suggests that children whose parents divorce have worse adjustment on average than do children whose parents do not divorce. Ultimately, there are significant changes in family composition, parent-child interaction, discipline, and socioeconomic circumstances, as well as the emotional reactions that parents and children have to divorce (Demo & Acock, 1988). Many studies over the years have linked juvenile delinquency, deviancy, and antisocial behavior to children living in “broken homes” (Demo & Acock, 1988). Juvenile delinquency is more prevalent today than in the past. Many children who experience a divorce or who live in otherwise nontraditional families may not be as close to their parents as children in two biological-parent families. Children who lack a feeling of closeness with their parents or who feel that they lack family cohesion are more likely to get into trouble. Some children may start stealing or lying because they are not receiving the attention that they want or need. Poverty, health, and family integrity appear to interact with children's emotional wellbeing. Children who live in poverty, deprived of basic necessities often feel hopeless and either learn to be victims or may resort to aggression to obtain what they need (Webber, 1997).

The ultimate goal for society should be to prevent juvenile delinquency altogether. In order to accomplish this, society as a whole should refocus its efforts on building healthy families and adolescents to curtail juvenile delinquency. One

intervention which may help this is the process of mediation, in which a neutral third person helps two parties resolve disputes between them. The major goal of mediation in family disputes is to help the disputing couple become rational and responsible enough to cooperate toward making compromises acceptable to both (Coogler, Weber, & McKenry, 1979). Divorce mediation, as developed by the Family Mediation Association, provides a new alternative for the resolution of the conflict specifically surrounding marital dissolution (Coogler et al., 1979). There are also programs designed to specifically target children and adolescents who have behavioral problems.

In the last three decades, there has been ample research to demonstrate that instituting Multisystem Therapy (MST) for serious juvenile offenders, keeping them in the community with intensive intervention, can significantly reduce recidivism. MST provides 24-hour available parental guidance, family therapy, individual therapy, group therapy, educational support and a change of peer group. MST focuses on prosocial activity and less on association with deviant peers. MST is an intensive therapy program which focuses on numerous aspects of the adolescent's life, family, school and any other unique factors which may relate to the individual's delinquent behaviors. Insights from participants included appreciation that the family finally had time to talk with each other. Delinquent individuals also stated they were more clearly able to see and recognize how their behaviors were affecting their family (May, Osmond, & Billick, 2014).

Studies such as the Perry Preschool Program suggest that early intervention programs produce positive effects on reducing future delinquency and are highly cost effective for society (May et al., 2014). By combining early education programs with support programs, the Perry Preschool Program is able to target multiple risk factors,

including antisocial, for future delinquency. The Perry Preschool Program model has become one of the most commonly used curriculums in the Head Start Program offered to low-income families.

Parental divorce impacts children and adolescents in a variety of ways. Research has proven that children and adolescents of divorce are at risk for an assortment of adjustment problems. It is our job as a society to help children and adolescents cope with family disruptions such as parental divorce. Implementing more programs and preventive measures can help reduce a child or adolescent from partaking in deviant acts.

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