

**EXAMINING FAMILY STRUCTURE AND PARENTING PROCESSES AS  
PREDICTORS OF DELINQUENCY IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ADOLESCENT  
FEMALES**

**By**

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**(ABSTRACT)**

This study employed a sample of African-American adolescent females from intact (n=279) and non-intact (n=219) families to examine the relationship between parenting processes (parental monitoring, parent-adolescent communication, parent-adolescent attachment, authoritative parenting) and delinquency. Results revealed no significant differences in parenting processes or delinquent participation for African-American adolescent females residing in either family structure. Parental monitoring predicted African-American adolescent female delinquency in both family structures; parent adolescent communication predicted delinquency among African-American adolescent females in non-intact families. Implications for family therapy are discussed.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

#### Problem Statement

In the history of our society, adolescent delinquency has been reported as a dilemma, and increasingly is a topic of concern and much needed attention. Daily, the media reports problematic and socially unacceptable behaviors demonstrated by adolescents. These behaviors include such things as substance abuse, drug distribution, prostitution, car thefts, gang activity, and murder. Schools find themselves forced to install metal detectors and to have police presence in order to ensure the safety and well-being of their attendants and faculty. The delinquency of adolescents, adolescent substance abuse and aggressive behavior continue to create problems in our society and are more of an issue with kids from the inner city living in poverty (Tolan, Gorman-Smith & Loeber, 1999). The purpose of this study will be to examine various family processes that could have an effect on delinquency as it occurs among African American adolescent females. These processes include family structure, parental monitoring, parent-adolescent communication, parenting style, and parent-adolescent attachment, will be reviewed to determine the relationship of these factors to delinquency.

#### *Prevalence*

In 2003 the estimated number of juvenile arrests was 2,220,300 (OJJDP, Statistical Briefing Book). Twenty- nine percent of the total arrests were female juveniles. Females accounted for three out of every five arrests for running away and 3 out every 10 arrests for curfew violations and loitering. According to the OJJDP, African American female juveniles accounted for 5,310 of children in residential placements.

This number was 541 more African American female juveniles than reported in the year 1997. The number of African American female juveniles in residential placements appears to be increasing over time. In 2001 the OJJDP reported 5,103 females were detained for delinquent behaviors. This number was up from the 4,878 reported in 1999 and the 4,746 reported in 1997. Although this information was not specific to African American adolescent females, the trend suggests an increase in females' involvement with delinquency.

### *Defining Delinquency*

In its simplest definition juvenile delinquency is legally defined as criminal behavior by a minor (Flannery, Hussey, Beibelhausen, & Wester, 2003). For the purpose of this study, delinquent behavior will be defined as criminal as well as at risk behaviors that could lead to more serious delinquency. These behaviors include but are not limited to, running away from home, driving a car without permission, property damage, theft, and police involvement. The arrest/statistics reported by the OJJDP include criminal behaviors that range from murder, manslaughter, and robbery to runaways, curfew violations and vandalism, with many other offenses in between. That range gives a much broader scope of delinquency than what is perceived as delinquent behavior in our society.

In an attempt to understand delinquency, many different and potential origins of delinquency have been examined. The various origins of delinquency impact both the male and female genders. The latest research continues to show the spread of delinquency across genders, and socioeconomic status independent of the delinquency origin examined. Due to the abundance of research on delinquency in the adolescent male

population and the relative lack of research on delinquency among adolescent females, this study focuses on African American adolescent females. Delinquency transcends gender, socioeconomic status, and cultures, much the same way it has transcended eras. Each era has had a different perception of the origin and development of delinquency in the community's children. Historically, the issue of delinquency has had its place in societal concerns. The emergence of delinquency did not happen overnight but instead this growing concern started as early as the Victorian Era. Even as early as Victorian society, the family was viewed as the problem and the solution to delinquency. In reviewing the research for this study, there appears to be no exact origin of juvenile delinquency; however all of the research references the family of origin as impacting delinquency (Klein, Forehand, Armistead, & Long, 1997).

McLaughlin and Muncie (1993) address the history of delinquency in their article on Juvenile Delinquency in the Journal of Social Problems and the Family. They identify some consistent and reoccurring basic factors in their review of delinquency history and origin. These basic factors are identified as social disorganization, family breakdown, inadequate parental control, and inadequate socialization. Although our focus in this study centers more on family breakdown than social disorganization and inadequate socialization, all of these other listed factors are mentioned throughout the research. A factor that remains consistent in the research is family breakdown. From Victorian society until the present, the responsibility for delinquency is taken off the child and placed with the family, highlighting the breakdown of the family.

McLaughlin and Muncie (1993) discuss the juvenile labor movement in the 1800s and the impact that it had on the way that society viewed children. It was the general

perception that with this movement, children were able to 'buy out' of their parents' control. Children were now afforded economic availability, meaning that children earned their own money, which created a sense of independence from the family. This perception was not consistent across genders; wives and daughters were still raised and taught to be domestic servants or were seen as sexually promiscuous and provocative when they became more independent from societal norms.

Due to the limited number of research studies on African American adolescent females throughout this review some of the information referenced will be gender biased, and focus primarily on Caucasian and African American males with little to no attention to that of the female gender and even less focus on African American adolescent females.

#### *Female Adolescent Delinquency*

In general there are many suggested reasons for youth, whether male or female engaging in delinquent behavior and becoming delinquent. The suggestions range from family environment, community, personality, to victims of violence/abuse, and premature birth (Raine, Brennan, & Mednick, 1994), socioeconomic conditions, and more (Flannery et al., 2003). The assumption by professionals in the field of adolescent development is that females engage in delinquent behavior for different reasons than males due to the uniqueness of behaviors specific to their gender such as sexual abuse (Chesney-Lind, 1999).

There has been little research in the area of delinquency and adolescent females. Most of the research available is in regards to male delinquency with some minor reference and comparison to females. In order to capture data on female delinquency, reporting agencies such as the Office of Juvenile Justice record delinquent behaviors for



females that would not be considered serious for males, partly because most female delinquents do not engage in some of the more intense behaviors of their male counterparts. These reports include delinquent behaviors such as truancy and running away that are not considered serious delinquent behaviors with males. Society's response to delinquency in adolescent females has been described in much of the literature as being 'heavy handed' for minor offenses (Chesney-Lind, 1974), suggesting that females who commit similar status offenses as males receive much stricter consequences. Researchers suggest that delinquent females are perceived by society as more delinquent than their male counterparts. This notion suggests that if a female engages in delinquent activity, the behavior is more serious than a male engaging in similar behaviors. This sort of society sexism, or male privilege could influence the way in which delinquent females are viewed (Chesney-Lind, 1974). Society could impose stricter and harsher consequences to females engaging in delinquent behaviors, out of a sense of perceived urgency to save the adolescent female population.

Chesney-Lind has done extensive research in the area of female delinquency and reports that in a study she conducted in the early seventies the percent of females who were referred to the Honolulu court system and charged with juvenile offenses was double that of males. She suggests in her research that society seems to have a need to save or protect females and therefore punishes them more severely. Chesney-Lind suggests that females are more likely to be arrested for non-criminal offenses such as runaway, and CHINS (child in need of supervision) than males. Most of the research included sample populations with a high percentage of Caucasian and other ethnicities, and a small percentage of African American adolescent females, thus the need for more

studies specific to that population. The research in the area of adolescent females and delinquency notes a glorification by the media of females' criminal activity, and inaccurate reporting of a dramatic increase in the delinquent behavior of females by stating that female delinquency has rapidly increased each year, which is not supported by the actual arrest records recorded by the FBI and Office of Juvenile Justice. The FBI and Office of Juvenile Justice arrest records appear to contradict findings by Chesney-Lind but a closer look reveals that overall national arrests for female adolescents are lower than male adolescents, but arrests of female adolescents on minor offenses are higher than that of male adolescents for similar offenses.

There are several explanations mentioned in the research for females engaging in delinquent activity ranging from acting out oppression (Artz, 1998), meaning that adolescent females are acting out of society's perceived role for females to be submissive and subservient to males, to a parent's ability or inability to monitor their children's whereabouts, social network, and school performance (Gorman-Smith & Loeber, 2005), to family stressors and family violence (Chesney-Lind et al., 1996). None of the aforementioned explanations appears to be the sole reason for explaining influences on delinquency in adolescent females, but instead a complex blend of many explanations/factors could influence females engaging in delinquent behavior. As mentioned in the earlier section on delinquency, historically society has viewed female delinquency as a direct reflection of family dysfunction and a direct challenge to parental authority.

The purpose of this study is to specifically examine the relationship among family structure, parenting processes and delinquent behavior among African American

adolescent females. The absence of research in the area of African American adolescent females highlights a need for more studies on the topic of this thesis. Studies reviewed by this writer primarily focus on delinquency in Caucasian adolescent males, African American males, Hispanic males, Hispanic females, with a large focus on African American and Caucasian males. African American females appear to have the least amount of focus in studies on delinquent behavior, possibly due to lower arrest records specific to this race and gender. In order to be effective, the interventions designed by society need to address issues specific to the targeted population and not broad interventions to treat all populations. Males and females are perceived differently in society, have gender specific growth development, and developmental processes therefore their gender needs and issues are different.

#### *Theoretical Framework*

Family systems theory (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981) provides the framework for examining the relationship between family structure, parenting processes and delinquent behavior among African American adolescent females. According to Family systems theory the family is not a constant entity. In relation to its social context the family unit is continuously changing and evolving. The family unit faces a constant need for change whether the need comes from within the family unit or external to the family unit. The family could experience loss, growth, financial instability, and structural transitions which could result in the shift of the family dynamics and functioning. In treating a family unit where there is a presence of delinquency symptoms, a clinician needs to assume that there are more issues in one or all of the following areas: hierarchal structure of the family, parental functioning, and the connectedness of family members. By addressing

those issues a clinician can systemically address and therapeutically reorganize the family's functioning and demands to change. This study will use Family systems theory as a lense to examine the effects of family structure and parenting processes on delinquency in African American adolescent females.

## Chapter II

### Literature Review

This review of literature will examine family structure, parenting processes, parent-adolescent attachment and delinquency to determine the relationship among them and their impact on delinquency.

#### *Family Structure and Delinquency*

For the sake of this study, family environment will be referred to as family structure. Family structure includes intact families, non-intact families, divorced families, and kinship families. Dual parent homes, referred to in this study as intact families, are increasingly becoming the minority and more and more single parent families are emerging (Bowser, 1991). This is especially true in the African American community because there is an overrepresentation in the African American community of father absence (Gibbs, Brunswick, Connor, Dembo, Larson, Reed & Solomon, 1998; Mincy, 1994). As early as 1990, almost two thirds of births of African American children were to single mothers (Bianchi, 1995).

Of all the large demographic groups in the United States, African American single parent families are most severely impacted by financial stressors (Bennett, 1995). In a study conducted by Gorman-Smith, Tolan, and Henry (1999), a population of African American and Latino males was sampled, with over 60% residing in single parent homes. They reported based on their findings that family poverty and single parenthood were not related to delinquency. They did note, however, that environmental stressors could impact family functioning, which affects the family's susceptibility to delinquency.

Paschall, Ringwalt, and Flewelling (2003) surveyed 175 mothers of 260 African American male adolescents ages 12-16. The survey measured areas such as parental monitoring, parental perceived control, communication, relationship, delinquent peers, father absence, and delinquent behavior. Approximately 90% of the mothers surveyed were the biological mothers; the remaining 10% were not (extended family, foster mother, etc.). The study did not identify father absence as a sole predictor of delinquent behavior in male adolescents. However, the study did reveal that mothers reported a lower socioeconomic status in those homes without a father present than in the homes in which a father was present. There was also a positive relationship between the effects of a lower socioeconomic status in father absent households and delinquent behavior. This finding implies that African American males raised in intact families are less at risk than those raised in non-intact families (Taylor, 1991). The difference between intact and non-intact families could suggest that African American females raised in intact families are also less at risk, given that some of the same systemic issues that involve African American males could affect African American females. Perceived paternal support has been related to positive outcomes of African American adolescent females (Caldwell, Antonucci, Wolford & Osofsky, 1997).

Research demonstrates that a large number of adolescent females who are delinquent come from single parent homes. For example, a study of 200 incarcerated female adolescents in the state of California (Acoca, 1999), revealed that 95% of those detainees lacked a stable home environment. The finding that over half of the interviewees reported that their mothers had been incarcerated at some point evidences this unstable home environment; the remainder reported that their fathers had been

incarcerated. Therefore, at any given point in the life of the adolescent, they resided with a single parent. About 15 % reported their fathers being incarcerated at the time of the interview.

In their study of 679 male and female African American adolescents' alcohol and drug use, Bryant and Zimmerman (2003) reported a relationship between the adolescents' role model and delinquent behavior. While the majority of the adolescents sampled reported their mothers and fathers as their role models, interesting relationships were revealed in the cases of female adolescents who did not report a mother or father as a role model. The female adolescents who viewed their brother as a role model reported more violent behavior and alcohol use. These reported behaviors may be due to males engaging in more aggressive and risky behaviors than females, and the females attempt to identify with them by mimicking those behaviors. Those females reporting a father or extended family member as a role model reported better school performance. Females in the study that did not view their mother as a role model tended to exhibit more psychological distress than those females that considered their mother to be their role model.

Family structure has also been examined in families that have experienced transitions. The family transitions examined by Freeman and Newland (2002) resulted from a marital separation or divorce. In their two-year longitudinal study of 5600 ethnically diverse 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> graders in California and Wisconsin, Freeman and Newland (2002) examined the impact of family transitions during adolescence. Self-report questionnaires were administered during the fall of each year of the study. Based on the responses about their living situation, adolescents were divided into three groups: (1) transitional mother custody (went from a two parent headed household to single parent

headed household); (2) stable never divorced; and (3) and stable mother custody. Their findings suggested more autonomy was given to children residing in single parent homes, which results from the fact that the single parents lack some of the same support found in intact families. Adolescents' perception of maternal support could be greater in an intact family due to accessibility of more support for the parent versus a single parent home and a strained and limited support network (Bean, Bush, McKenry & Wilson, 2003). Single parents have various financial stressors and may have to work hours that are not the traditional 9 to 5 business hours, usually evening, and overnight hours, thus requiring a certain amount of self-sufficiency in their children. In single parent families, financial pressures and poor to no social network may navigate parents towards premature autonomy granting in the cases of younger adolescents (Dornbusch et al., 1985). This autonomy could also differ from that created in intact families. It would seem that the type of autonomy created in single parent households requires the child to make decisions and become self sufficient with little to no buffer between making a decision on their own and resourcing his or her parent when choices are ambiguous. This autonomy could also create a sense of distance between the parent and child, and possibly even resentment by the child towards the parent.

As discovered in some of the studies, family structure, whether intact or single, can be perceived by adolescents in either environment differently based on gender and culture. In his study of 124 single families, Fry (1983) examined youths' perception of living in a single family and the differences reported by those living with mothers (n=70) and those living with fathers (n=54). The families were identified as divorced, separated and widowed. The mean age for females with their mothers was 10.6, and females with



their fathers was 9.7. The mean age for the females was slightly higher than that of the males. The mean age for males with mothers was 10.1, and males living with fathers was 9.4. Findings reveal that participants perceived mothers in mother-headed households as more rigid, structured, consistent with consequences, organized, more connected as well as more susceptible to financial stressors, depression, and feeling helpless than father-headed households. Fathers in father-headed households were perceived as less structured, inconsistent with parental expectations, flexible, disorganized, unavailable, and disconnected to the children than those participants who lived in mother-headed households. Less connected parents could be perceived by their children as having less parental behavioral control, which is a predictor of adolescents externalizing behaviors (Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994). Unfortunately, the study did not report the findings by gender. Although ethnicity was not mentioned in the above study, the perceptions reported of the mother-headed household are congruent with findings in other studies examining single families in the African American community (Bowser, 1991).

African American adolescents reared in single parent families in which more parental control is used reported lower self esteem than those in two parent families who tend to use less parental control. In single parent families the child's self esteem could be affected by the parent's need to protect, preventing the child from experimenting with his or her choices and the outcomes. This lower self-esteem reported in single parent households is also consistent with findings in previously mentioned studies that suggest a different level of autonomy in single parent homes (Bean et al., 2003). Lower self-esteem in children can create a sense of uncertainty in decision-making, interacting in social settings, and in importance to loved ones. Children with lower self-esteem are also

susceptible to joining gangs and engaging in promiscuous behavior in order to feel better about themselves.

This section of family structure highlighted some of the issues between intact and single family households, with consistent findings of an increased autonomy with those adolescents living in single parent homes. Increased autonomy in some cases creates a sense of detachment from parents and possibly a perception that the parents do not have behavioral control over the adolescent. The research in this section also suggested that the perceived family process by adolescents differed based on the gender of the parent in single-family homes, but did not specify the gender of the adolescents in relation to the perceptions. As this study examines family structure and delinquency in African American adolescent females it will specifically focus on data collected from African American adolescent females' self reports.

#### *Parenting Processes and Delinquency*

For the sake of this study, parenting process refer to the way in which the parent monitors the adolescent, the extent of communication between the parent and adolescent, and the amount of control the parent has over the adolescent's life. Those three components of the parenting process are self-reported by the adolescents who have participated in this study. Review of the research suggests that the family structure affects the way in which parenting processes occur. The parenting process in single parent families may reflect a lack of resources and support. As stated in the earlier section this lack of resources and support could be taxing to a single parent and could possibly impact his/her psychological state. This parenting process is more effective when the parent's psychological well-being is stable enough to promote involving and engaging the

adolescent (Belsky, 1984). Typically an authoritative parenting style works best for adolescents from various backgrounds and ethnicities (Baumrind, 1991). An authoritative parenting style is one that lends the parent to be flexible, responsive, supportive, communicative, and demonstrate active monitoring of the adolescent's whereabouts and peer networks as well as maintain consistent disciplinary practices (Belsky, 1984). The opposite parenting style to authoritative would be an authoritarian parenting style, where the parent is demanding and not responsive (Knafo, 2003).

In 1996 Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Zelli and Huesman conducted a study based on the data drawn from the Chicago Youth Development Study. In this study they examined the parenting practices and family relationships among violent offenders. They noted that poorer discipline practices, less cohesion, and less family involvement were reported in the group self identified as violent offenders. Across ethnic and socioeconomic groups for this study, poor parental monitoring, poor discipline, and lack of family cohesion were general risk variables for serious delinquency. African American families reported more monitoring and greater cohesion in the self-reported non-delinquent and non-violent group. A parent's awareness and supervision of an adolescent's activities and peers or lack there of has consistently been a predictor of adolescent behavior (Dishion & McMahan, 1998).

Poor parental monitoring is believed to lead to an adolescent's involvement with delinquent and antisocial peers (Patterson & Dishion, 1985). Laird, Pettit, Bates and Dodge (2003) reported in their longitudinal study of 396 adolescents living in the Midwestern portion of the United States, that an adolescent's behavior might be influenced by the adolescent's perception of their parents' monitoring level, suggesting

that if an adolescent perceived his parents' monitoring to be high, they would be less likely to engage in delinquent behavior. This finding is based on the self-report of adolescent and parents in regards to parental knowledge and delinquent behavior. Their finding suggests that parental knowledge (monitoring) appeared to inhibit an adolescent's future involvement in delinquent activities. Over the course of the study, escalation in delinquent behavior was linked to a reduction in parental knowledge. Laird et al. suggested that this might be due to the adolescent aging and parents withdrawing from monitoring activities, or that information was not easily obtained or surrendered by delinquent adolescents.

Smetana, Crean, and Daddis (2002), studied sociodemographic factors, parental monitoring, family decision making, ratings of rules, parent-adolescent conflict intensity, attachment to parents, observer ratings of mother-adolescent communication, and problem behaviors in 86 African American adolescents. The sample size included 42 females. The mean age was 13.08. All of the participants in this study completed questionnaires separately. Filling out the questionnaires separately allowed parents and adolescents to provide individual responses to the measures on the questionnaire. All of the participants also participated in a video-taped conflict discussion between mothers and adolescents (FIT, family interaction task) and were observed by a designated observer. In cases when adolescents reported more parental monitoring there were fewer problem behaviors on the part of the adolescent. This parental-adolescent process was supported by reports from both mothers and adolescents. Problem behavior was reported more frequently in males than females, suggesting less parental control present in the

cases of males. In general parents have a greater investment in the activities and socialization of daughters than sons (Flannery, Hussey, Beibelhausen & Wester, 2003).

A study conducted in 2004 in which self-report questionnaires were administered to 2,568 adolescents in 9 high schools from Wisconsin and Northern California examined several areas of parenting including parental knowledge (monitoring), to determine the relationship that parental influences have on adolescent problem behavior. The population consisted of only freshmen, sophomores and juniors. In this study Fletcher, Steinberg, and Williams-Wheeler (2004) discovered in their feedback from the adolescents surveyed that adolescent involvement in delinquency was associated with lower levels of parental knowledge (monitoring). They determined based on the findings in their study that higher parental knowledge is predictive of lower levels of adolescent involvement in problem behavior.

Communication is a critical component of interpersonal relationships and is viewed as one of the keys to understanding the dynamics of family relationships (Clark & Shields, 1997). In their study of 271 African American adolescents (ages 10 – 14, evenly divided by gender), Strom et al. (2001) found that there was more communication between daughters and mothers than sons and mothers and that females reported less delinquency than males. This finding suggests the possibility of a relationship between communication and delinquency. In a sample of 132 Caucasian adolescents and their parents, Klein, Forehand, Armistead and Long (1997) examined family and parent predictors of delinquency. Families that participated in the study were either intact or single parent families. One of the predictors that they highlighted in their study was that of maternal communication/problem solving. Maternal communication/problem solving

was assessed through observational measures in which they gave each parent and child the same task across participants and then one task specific to the family. The family was monitored for a period of time to assess the communication between the parent and child. The results of their study indicated that maternal communication/problem solving skills during early adolescence inversely predicted severe delinquent behaviors during early adulthood. They also noted that the higher rates of index crimes (crimes of more severity) arrests and convictions were reported from those adolescents who came from families where there was poor maternal communication and other family stressors.

Although it is not one of the three components examined in this study it is important to note that adolescents who have suffered abuse and neglect in their homes could be at risk for delinquency. Our study does not focus specifically on these issues but their relationship to the parental-adolescent process is applicable. There are three earlier longitudinal studies that are referenced throughout the research on juvenile delinquency. Those studies are the Rochester Youth Development study, the Denver Youth Survey, and the Pittsburgh Youth study. Under the OJJDP in 2004, Thornberry, Huizinga and Loeber (2004) conducted a correlates and causes study. One of the factors that seemed to be consistent across the study was that the earlier onset of aggression and problem behaviors in children tend to lead to more serious delinquency later in adolescence. Serious delinquency refers to acts of violence, robbery, etc. as opposed to truancy, under age smoking, etc. Thornberry et al. also found that children with the highest level of delinquency reported being maltreated as children and adolescents in their family. Maltreatment as defined in Thornberry's study refers to physical punishment or abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, etc. Wood et al. (2002) in their study of incarcerated adolescent

females and exposure to violence found that females reported significantly higher levels of sexual abuse and physical punishment than males in a similar study. This study conducted by Wood et al. suggested that higher levels and exposure to sexual abuse, physical punishment in the family, and community violence could lead to delinquency in female adolescents. The same population of incarcerated females reported higher levels of exposure to violence in the home and community than their male counterparts. 46% of the incarcerated females were African American, and the remainder was Latino. The sample size was 100 incarcerated females taken from juvenile correction facilities in Los Angeles. Those females that reported gun involvement meaning carrying a gun, gun usage, or owning a gun also reported high family risk, lower perception of social support from their families, and high levels of physical punishment.

As mentioned earlier, none of the individual three components of the parenting process are suggested by the research to be the sole contributor to delinquency in adolescents, but rather a combination of the components and other environmental factors (family structure, stressor, etc.) impact and relate to delinquent behaviors exhibited by adolescents. This study will isolate each of those components as they relate to delinquency in adolescents as well as combine them in order to get a full perspective of the relationship between family structure, parenting process and delinquency.

#### *Parental-Adolescent Attachment and Delinquency*

There is some research and studies that suggest attachment and connection/cohesion as critical components of the family process in relation to delinquency. That is to say, adolescents who feel more connected to their parent(s) feel more supported and attended to thereby engaging in less delinquent and problem

behavior. There is extensive research suggesting the bond established in infancy and childhood has an effect on emotional stability and self esteem in later years (Carlson & Sroufe, 1995). It is believed among some researchers in the field that adolescents who perceive a strong attachment to their parents are more inclined than their peers who perceive a weak attachment, to adhere to their parents' limits, rules, and expectations, as well as consider their parents' reactions when tempted to engage in delinquent behavior (Marcus & Betzer, 1996). Pittman, and Chase-Lansdale (2001) surveyed 302 African American adolescent females and mothers (inclusive of kinship care) on the Southside of Chicago. The questionnaire administered to adolescent participants measured psychological and behavioral functioning, perceptions of parenting stress, perceptions of parents' parenting, and use of community services. Their research found that adolescents who reported being disengaged from their mothers also displayed more minor delinquent behaviors than those teens felt more engaged with their mothers. Some of the behaviors identified as minor delinquent by their study were premature sex and sexual promiscuity. These types of delinquent behavior will not be addressed in this study, however there have been findings suggesting that African American adolescents tend to engage in either sexual activity or substance abuse as delinquent behavior (Mott & Haurin, 1988).

African American children with a sense of familial support and attachment engage in less delinquency than those children that attach to delinquent companions (Joseph, 1995). Gangs are the result of children needing to bond with other children that share similar experiences in an attempt to form the lacking familial attachment. In the earlier-mentioned OJJDP study conducted by Thornberry, Huizinga and Loeber (2004), gang membership was prevalent in a third of all of the adolescents in the studies



reviewed. In addition, those children reported as gang members had the highest level of delinquency. Arbona and Power (2003) conducted a study consisting of over 1,000 high school students from a large city in the southern United States. The students were classified into three ethnic backgrounds; African American, Mexican American and European American. In their study across all three ethnicities, they found maternal attachment to be a predictor of the students' self report of engagement in delinquent behavior, indicating a greater attachment leading to less engagement in delinquent behaviors.

Based on the findings in her study, Joseph (1995) suggests that the origin of delinquency in African American adolescents is lack of attachment. Her study had a sample of 333 adolescents drawn from public schools, juvenile courts, and juvenile correction facilities in New Jersey. African American adolescent females made up 43% of the study. Those females reported as delinquent were involved in assaults, robberies, and under age alcohol consumption. Attachment to school and attachment to delinquent companions served as strong indicators of delinquency across both genders in this study. Adolescents who are attached to school may be more goal driven, have a vision for their future therefore less likely to engage in behaviors that might jeopardize their goals. Family structure and family processes impact an adolescent's need to attach to delinquent companions. It is possible that adolescents who perceive their parent(s) as providing very little warmth and nurturing, might seek for that warmth and nurturing as well as a sense of self, and identity with delinquent companions.

Bean et al. (2003) conducted a study with a population of 75 African American and 80 European American adolescents, coming from the Midwest United States, with

measures that focused on demographics, parenting behavior, self esteem, and academic achievement. Findings suggest that maternal support was linked to positive self-perceptions in African American adolescents. Perceived parental attachment by adolescents could also develop from a parenting style such as authoritative. When there is a high expectation for a close and affectionate relationship from the parents to the adolescent it leads to a better adjusted adolescent in several different areas inclusive of self-esteem/image (Baumrind, 1991). Additionally, Hughes and Demo (1989) found that positive parental high regard perceived by African American adolescents, led to higher self-esteem reports when compared to Caucasian adolescents.

#### Research Question

Based on the review of the literature and research, this study seeks to examine the relationship among family structure, parental monitoring, parent-adolescent communication, parent-adolescent attachment, parenting style, and delinquency among African American adolescent females. This study will also examine each of those variables as they relate independently to family structure.

1. What is the relationship between family structure and delinquency?
2. What is the relationship between family structure and parental monitoring?
3. What is the relationship between family structure and parent-adolescent communication?
4. What is the relationship between family structure and parent-adolescent attachment?
5. What is the relationship between family structure and parenting style?

6. What family structure and parenting processes are associated with delinquency among African-American female adolescents?

## Chapter III

### Methods

In this study on delinquency in relation to family processes with African American adolescent females, quantitative data previously collected through the Virginia Adolescent Resiliency Assessment (VARA) will be analyzed. The VARA is a 174-item instrument designed to offer a broad perspective into various areas in the life of an adolescent inclusive of their behaviors, attitudes on issues, and value system. The first 6 items gather demographic information from the adolescent such as age, sex, marital status of parents (which pertains specifically to a piece of this study), and with whom the adolescent lives with.

#### Participants and Procedures

VARA participants were comprised of 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students from high schools, located in rural, ethnically diverse Virginia counties in the southeastern part of the state. Entire school census procedures were used such that all students in the schools were invited to participate. Parents of potential participants were notified of the survey and its purpose through a passive consent form that was sent home with all students actively enrolled. Parents who elected for their children not to participate were asked to contact the school to withdraw their consent. Students also had the option to withdraw themselves from participating in the survey. Procedures for the survey's administration, involved devoting one classroom period to the completion of the paper and pencil questionnaire. Either a teacher or a volunteer member of the community facilitated the process in each classroom by providing instructions to the students, fielding students' questions if necessary, and collecting the surveys in an envelope at the end. The VARA

surveys were anonymously completed and collected; and as mentioned earlier, students who had the option to withdraw from participating in the survey at any point voluntarily completed the surveys. Those students who withdrew from participating in the survey were allowed to have study hall in the school library during the time allotted for completion of the VARA.

### Demographics

For the purpose of this study only the African American female participants are included (n=501). The average age of the African American female participants sampled for this study was 14.97 years, with a range of 12 – 18. One question asked participants in this study to describe their living arrangement. Specifically, ‘Whom do you live with most of the time?’ Responses included mother and stepfather, father and stepmother, mother and father (biological or adoptive), with mother only, with father only, half the time with my mother, half the time with my father, with parent and another adult (non-relative), group home or foster home, with a relative (grandparents, aunt, uncle, brother, sister, etc.), and I live alone or with friends. For the purpose of this study, non-intact families (n=219) included with mother only, with father only, half the time with my mother, half the time with my father, with parent and another adult (non-relative), group home or foster home, with a relative (grandparents, aunt, uncle, brother, sister, etc.), and I live alone or with friends. Intact families (n=279) included mother and stepfather, father and stepmother, mother and father (biological or adoptive).

### Instruments

The measures for this study were derived from the Virginia Adolescent Resiliency Assessment, a 174-item survey which was based on both a survey conducted by Stephen

Small from the University of Wisconsin-Madison/Extension (Small, 1991) and the 1998 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Center for Adolescent and School Health, Centers for Disease Control, 1999), a nationally recognized survey designed to assess the at risk behaviors of young people. VARA, in addition to collecting participant demographics, also consists of self-report measures covering topics including: how teens spend their time; health care issues; personal safety and violence; mental health; alcohol, tobacco, and drug use; diet and exercise; perceptions of the community, school, and friends; parent-teen relations; and sexuality.

### Measures

#### Parental Monitoring

Participants completed an eight-item Parental Monitoring Scale (Small & Kerns, 1993). The participants were asked how often the eight items were true for them: 1) “my parent(s) know where I am after school”; 2) “If I am going to be home late, I am expected to call my parent(s) to let them know”; 3) “I tell my parent(s) whom I'm going to be with before I go out”; 4) “When I go out at night, my parent(s) know where I am”; 5) “My parent(s) know who my friends are”; and 6) “My parent(s) know the parents of my friends”; 7) “My parent(s) know what I watch on television”; 8) My parent(s) monitor my computer/internet use”. Students chose from out of six possible responses: “*never*”, “*rarely*”, “*sometimes*”, “*often*”, “*very often*”. Each question's score ranged from 0 to 4 with “*never*” scored as 0. These items were combined into a scale with Cronbach’s alpha = .78.

#### Parent-Adolescent Communication

Seven survey items assessed the degree of parent-adolescent communication perceived by the adolescent (Small, 1991). The teens were asked how often in the past year they communicated with their parents (or the adults they live with) about each of the following topics: 1) drugs and alcohol; 2) sex and/or birth control; 3) job or education plans after high school; 4) personal problems/concerns; 5) teachers or classes in school; 6) dating; 7) things they enjoy. Five possible responses included “*never*”, “*rarely*”, “*sometimes*”, “*often*”, “*very often*”. Each question's score ranged from 0 to 4 with “*never*” scored as 0. These items were summed to form a scale with Cronbach’s alpha = .79.

#### Parent-Adolescent Attachment

Three survey questions addressed parent/child attachment as perceived by the adolescent. Teens were asked to rate their parents on a scale with four possible responses, “*never*”- 0, “*rarely*”- 1, “*sometimes*”- 2, “*most of the time*”- 3, “*always*”- 4”. Each question's score ranged from 0 to 4 with “*never*” scored as 0. The statements were: 1) my parent(s) are good parents; 2) my parents care about me; and 3) my parents respect me. These items were combined into a scale with Cronbach’s alpha = .78.

#### Parenting Style

One survey question addressed parenting style by asking how most of the important decisions made between the adolescent and their parent(s) or other adult they live with were decided. The responses “they ask my opinion, but they have the final say”, “we talk about it and together we come to a decision”, “they discuss the decision with me but then let me decide”, were recoded with the following value: 1= authoritative. The other responses “they tell me exactly what to do”, “they trust me to

decide for myself”, “they don’t care what I do, so I decide for myself”, were recoded with the following value: 0 = nonauthoritative. The nonauthoritative representing other parenting styles such as permissive and authoritarian.

### Delinquent Behaviors

The final portion of the survey used for this study was that which focused on self-reported adolescent behaviors. This was a 6-question section with 4 responses offered: “never”; “1-2 times”; “3-4 times”; and “5 or more times”. Each question's score ranged from 0 to 4 with “*never*” scored as 0. The six items examined for this study were whether or not an adolescent: “ran away from home”; “drove a car without permission”; “purposely damaged property that did not belong to him or her”; “taken something from a store without paying for it”; “broke into some place like a car or building”; “and got into trouble with the police”. These items were combined into a scale. Cronbach’s alpha for these items = .74.



## Chapter IV

### Results

Table one illustrates the percentage of African American adolescent females who engaged in each delinquent behavior at least one time in the past year. About 20.2% of the participants reported cutting class, indicating 100 participants in the study participated in this type of delinquent behavior. The greatest percentage of participants participating in delinquent behavior was the 26.5% who reported having stolen from a store. This means that 130 of the participants reported having stolen from a store.

The relationship of each parenting process to the delinquency scale was examined across family structure. Table 2 is a correlation matrix of the parenting processes and delinquency scale for each level of family structure. In the case of non-intact families there was a positive relationship between delinquency and parental communication ( $r = .159, p < .05$ ) such that in the non-intact families authoritative parenting is associated with less parental monitoring ( $r = -.143, p < .05$ ), less parent-adolescent attachment ( $r = -.167, p < .05$ ), and less parent-adolescent communication ( $r = -.196, p < .01$ ). Parental monitoring had a positive relationship to parent-adolescent attachment ( $r = .402, p < .01$ ) and parent-adolescent communication ( $r = .377, p < .01$ ).

In the case of intact families, delinquency was inversely related to parental monitoring ( $r = -.367, p < .01$ ), parent-adolescent attachment ( $r = -.208, p < .01$ ) and positively related to authoritative parenting ( $r = .203, p < .01$ ). This indicates that in the intact family structure more parental monitoring and attachment between parent and adolescent are associated with fewer reports of delinquent behaviors. It also suggests that authoritative parenting is positively associated with delinquency.

Paired sample t-tests were used to compare family structure across the parenting processes variables and the delinquency scale. The differences between the mean scores were compared between “non-intact” and “intact” responses on each variable. An examination of Table 3 reveals no significant differences between the groups.

Regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between parenting processes and delinquency. These were conducted separately for non-intact (n=219), and intact (n=279) family structures. These analyses are summarized in Table 4 (non intact) and Table 5 (intact). Inspection of the beta coefficients indicated in the case of non-intact families significant predictors of delinquency were parental monitoring (B = -.200, p=.05 ) and parent-adolescent communication (B = .174, p=.05). In the intact families, parental monitoring was the only significant predictor of delinquency (B = -.337, p=.05).

## Chapter V

### Discussion

Results of this study suggest that the levels of engagement in delinquent behaviors were relatively similar among African American adolescent females from non-intact families and those from intact families. This study also suggests that the parenting processes in the two family structures, non-intact and intact, are similar for African American adolescent females.

The results from this study suggest that parental monitoring is an important predictor of delinquent behavior in African American adolescent females regardless of family structure. These data are consistent with the findings in the literature that suggests the parent's knowledge of their kids activity through conversations and disclosure from their child is key to lower levels of delinquent behavior (Kerr & Stattin, 2000).

Parent-adolescent communication seems to play a role in delinquent behaviors of African American adolescent females in non-intact families. It is unclear, however, how this process operates. These data from this study suggest the greater the parent-adolescent communication, the greater the involvement in delinquent behaviors for African American adolescent females. It is difficult to determine exactly what is being reported by this finding. It could be that negative parent-adolescent communication precedes the delinquent behavior, or that the more the adolescent engages in delinquent behavior the more the parent is communicating with her in regards to concerns, consequences, and expectations. The balance (positive, negative) of the communication between parent and adolescent is impossible to determine based on the wording of the questions for that measure.

Both parental monitoring and parent-adolescent communication are components of parental control and behavior control. One way to define parental control is the extent to which the parent makes decisions about the child's life more than they allow the child to make his or her own decisions about their life (Fletcher et al., 2004). Parents might feel a need to have to make more decisions in regards to the life of their adolescent out of a need to protect the adolescent from community risk factors. This might be especially true in the case of non-intact family structures. In asserting more parental and behavioral control, single parents may be more aware of their adolescent's whereabouts and have knowledge of the peer network and activities. All of this information if accurately acquired requires communication between the adolescent and the parent. Good parent-adolescent communication has been associated with less serious delinquent behavior (Clark & Shields, 1997).

Previous research has also suggested that parent-adolescent attachment is a major component of delinquent behavior among African American adolescents (Joseph, 1995; Pittsman & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). Findings from the current study support this relationship for African American adolescent females living in intact families, but not for those in non-intact families. It may be that the attachment between parent and adolescent is less available in the cases of non-intact families. A lower level attachment may be due to what has been mentioned in the review of the literature in cases of non-intact families, employment hours, lack of support and resources, which would leave little opportunity to establish and maintain a healthy attachment. Also, in the cases of non-intact families parents may rely on kinship care (Bowser, 1991). So it could be that there is an attachment to another parental figure other than the biological mother or father such as a

grandmother or another relative that would not be reflected in the data gathered in this study. In the case of intact families there is more support and access to resources just by virtue of the structure, which allows more availability for the adolescent to attach to a parent or both.

According to OJJDP a large percentage of the arrest records for female offenders are truants and runaways. In this study, one of the largest areas of reported delinquency was in cutting class (20%, truancy). However, only 8.5% of the participants in the study reported running away. These differences may be related to the geographic location from which the sample was extracted. In smaller rural communities there could be potential for more neighborhood monitoring, such that participants engage in fewer delinquent behaviors out of fear of people in the community reporting behavioral observations back to parent(s). It may also be that living in a more rural community limits the access to some of the at risk elements that are more prevalent in larger cities. Future studies should compare delinquency behaviors of the population in this study to that of a study in an urban city.

It is important to recognize that the African American community relies heavily upon kinship care in cases of a single parent or absence of parents (Bowser, 1991). In these situations family structure takes a different form from traditional white America. In cases of kinship care, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins have roles that function as parental for African American adolescents. In these parental roles the extended family member can serve as a surrogate parent and role model to the adolescent.

This study's findings suggest that family structure is not a predictor of delinquency in African American adolescent females. When comparing the parent

processes between the two family structures, the African American adolescent females in the non-intact families reported parenting processes similar to those adolescents from intact families. These findings contradict much of the research suggesting that the parenting processes in non-intact families are different from the parenting processes in intact families. Perhaps the narrow margin of family difference could be related to kinship care. It is possible that participants of this study did not report whether or not they spent time with relatives. For example, it could be that a relative supervises the adolescent after school or during the hours when her parent is unavailable due to work schedule. The responses offered are not inclusive of the possibility of kinship care and support.

#### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The data for this study are based on adolescent's self report about their perception of parenting processes and delinquency. It is important to note that parenting processes in both family structures accounted for a relatively small amount of variance in delinquent behavior (5-15%). This suggests that other processes should be examined. A more comprehensive study should include multiple perspectives and variables from other contexts (e.g.: parents, school, friends, etc.). Current data from this study is only a snapshot of time in the adolescent's life. Future studies should include longitudinal data to examine if delinquency behaviors shifted as the adolescents aged and whether or not the parenting processes changed. It may be that as the adolescent matures, perspectives on parenting processes could change. Also with maturity internalizing self-control could develop decreasing engagement in delinquent behaviors, and the family structure could also change (divorce, marriage).

Future studies should include a more comprehensive measure of parenting style. In the present study only one question addressed parenting style. The question asked how decisions pertaining to the adolescent's life were made. Collaborative decision or the lack thereof is only one component of authoritative parenting style or a non-authoritative parenting style.

### Clinical Implications

Based on these findings, clinical treatment of delinquent African American adolescent females in non-intact families and delinquent African American adolescent females in intact families would need to focus on parental monitoring. Parental monitoring was found to be a predictor of delinquency in both family structures.

A clinician working with a non-intact family could explore with the parent ways in which monitoring could be established and maintained with some regularity and consistency. Some of the interventions could resemble having the adolescent check in with mom when she gets home from school, and prior to going out for any type of recreation. The research referenced kinship care and the need for non-intact families to establish support networks (Bowser, 1991). A clinician providing treatment to a non-intact family could explore with the parent other support networks and kinship care that could be utilized to assist in monitoring the adolescent. It might be that a relative or neighbor checks in with the adolescent periodically when the parent is unavailable, or that the adolescent goes to the home of a relative, friend, or neighbor when the parent is not at home. It could also be helpful to the family if the parent became more active in the adolescent's school performance and behavior through correspondence with teachers and checking assignment books for current assignments, upcoming quizzes, test scores, etc. A

clinician might work with a non-intact family in establishing times throughout the course of the week that would focus solely on spending time with one another which could help the parent learn more about the adolescent's life.

In working with an intact family dealing with delinquency issues with their African American adolescent female a clinician could work with a couple in establishing a system for being more aware of the comings and goings of their adolescent, and maybe even create a time in which they spend talking about different issues that occurring in the life of their adolescent. If a couple chooses to designate one partner as the lead contact in regards to the adolescent's social activities, and peer network it would be important for the couple to establish a means of passing the information to the other partner keeping he or she informed.

### Conclusion

This study examined a population that is not frequently examined in regards to delinquency, African American adolescent females. This study only addressed a limited number of variables in regards to its purpose; there are many more issues that could be examined with this specific population. Despite these limitations, this study represents data that could be useful when providing treatment to different family structures dealing with adolescent delinquency specifically in the case of African American adolescent females. This study revealed that processes that have a relationship to delinquency are similar across family structures. In the case of both non-intact families and intact families, parental monitoring was the primary predictor of delinquency. The findings of this study suggest that family structure is not an indicator of delinquency but rather the



parenting processes within the family structure are better predictors of delinquency in African American adolescent females.

**Table 1:** African American Adolescent Female Delinquency Mean Scores

	<u>Percentage engaging in Delinquent Behavior at least one time in the past year</u>
cutclass	20.2
runaway	8.5
fakeid	4.8
drive w/o permission	10.3
damage property	13.3
stole	26.5
broke into a place	3.8
got in trouble w/police	9.9

**Table 2:** Correlation of Parenting Processes and Delinquency

Correlations: non-intact families (n=219) and intact families (n=279)

	Delinquency	Parental monitoring	Parent-Adolescent attachment	Parent-Adolescent communication	Authoritative Parenting
Delinquency	1	-.102	.004	.159*	.008
Parental monitoring	-.367**	1	.402**	.377**	-.143*
Parent-Adolescent attachment	-.208**	.450**	1	.262**	-.167*
Parent-Adolescent communication	-.114	.351**	.289**	1	-.196**
Authoritative Parenting	.203**	-.232**	-.149**	-.289**	1

(Note: Non-intact families are represented in the top half of the diagonal. Intact families are represented in the lower half of the diagonal),

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Table 3:** T-Tests comparing Parenting Processes and Delinquency across responses to Family Structure variables.

Variable	Mean (SD)		
	<u>Non-intact</u> n=219	<u>Intact</u> n=279	t
Parental monitoring	2.79(.74)	2.80(.69)	-1.53
Parent-Adolescent attachment	3.52(.71)	3.57(.60)	-.936
Parent-Adolescent comm.	2.11(.97)	2.25(.90)	-1.66
Parenting style	.43(.49)	.36(.48)	1.50
Delinquency	.16(.25)	.18(.35)	-.702

**Table 4:** Regression Analysis of Parenting Process variables on Delinquency of African American adolescent females in Non Intact families (n=219).

Variable	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	F(df)
Parental monitoring	-.200*	.030	2.407(4,177)*
Parent-Adol. attachment	-.097		
Parent-Adol. communication	.174*		
Parenting style	.005		

Note: \* indicates significance at  $p < .05$

**Table 5:** Regression Analysis of Parenting Process variables on Delinquency of African American adolescent females in Intact families (n=279).

Variable	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	F(df)
Parental monitoring	-.337*	.151	12.188(4,247)**
Parent-Adol. attachment	-.110		
Parent-Adol. communication	.084		
Parenting style	.106		

Note: \* indicates significance at  $p < .001$

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