HISTORY OF PARENTING AS PREDICTOR OF DELINQUENCY, MORAL REASONING AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN HOMELESS ADOLESCENTS

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Science in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

The Ohio State University
2008

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ABSTRACT

Fifty-five homeless youth between the ages of 14 and 20 years were studied in examination of the unique relationships between years spent living with each biological parent, self-reported delinquency, and moral reasoning among a homeless youth population. Subjects were administered a set of demographic questions, the National Youth Survey questionnaire, the Form-90 substance abuse interview, and the Socio-Moral Reflection Measure-Short Form. Correlations among variables were examined, and a linear regression model was tested. Delinquency was found to be significantly correlated with age and gender, with females displaying more delinquency than males. A regression model showed that delinquency could be predicted using variables age, gender and moral reasoning. Proportion of years spent living with father had different effects for males and females in the study. Moral reasoning scores for the sample were lower than would be expected from a normative sample, but were as expected from a delinquent sample.
Dedicated to my mom
Thanks to Dr. Natasha Slesnick for choosing me to work on her project and allowing me to collect data for my thesis.

I want to thank Dr. Michael Glassman, my advisor, for his support and encouragement throughout the Master’s program.

Thanks to Dr. John Gibbs for allowing me to use the moral reasoning measure that he and his colleagues developed.

I’d like to thank everyone who helped me with various parts of the thesis, including Yoonsuh, Travis, Rikki and Paula.

Finally, I want to thank Jackie for all her support and inspiration.
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Major Field: Human Ecology
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More and more youth are becoming homeless in America (Smoller 1999). In the early 1990s, estimates of number of homeless youth in America were as great as five hundred thousand (Smoller 1999). Recent estimates of American homeless youth from Congressional reports are close to three million (Rew 2008). Furthermore, estimates of homeless youth are probably very low, since most homeless youth never come in contact with the shelter system (Smoller 1999). Therefore, according to Smoller (1999), a large percentage of homeless youth are not counted in population estimates.

It seems as though there are countless reasons why people become homeless. Researchers have suggested several possible causes (Dail 2006; Jones 1989). Dail (2006) points to domestic violence and lack of affordable housing as major reasons for the rise in the homeless population. Jones (1989) also suggests that lack of affordable housing is a big issue, while also pointing to lack of proper health care for the mentally ill as well as poverty in general as causes of homelessness in America. Smoller (1999), taking a more sociological approach, states that the most common cause of homelessness among adolescents is dysfunction within their families.
The homeless population in America is growing in an alarming rate (Edney 2004), and many of these people are beyond the point of being able to be helped. They are suffering from chronic homelessness, which is a problem that may be costing American society significant amounts of money (Mitka 2006). However, there are thousands of children and adolescents out there that can be helped to turn their lives around (Slesnick et al 2007). The first step is to try to understand them.

The majority of homeless youth incidentally have a dangerous combination of risk factors for delinquency---male, minority, and from a low SES family are some of the critical factors (Williams et al 1999; & Tavecchio et al 1999). Homeless youth have one very distinct trait, however. They not only live in shelters, but in abandoned houses, and on the streets (Gaetz 2004). Thus far, research with this population has been very scarce.
One way to try to better understand homeless youth and their high frequency of delinquent behavior (Tavecchio et al 1999) is by studying their moral reasoning and the relationship between their moral reasoning and behavior. Several researchers have studied this relationship in normative populations (see Hanson & Mullis 1984; Palmer & Hollin 2001; Tarry & Emler 2007), but very few have done so with a homeless population (Tavecchio et al 1999). Adolescent delinquency has been suggested to be linked with such factors as poor parenting (Palmer & Hollin 2001; Bowman & Prelow 2007) and deficiency in the development of moral reasoning (Palmer & Hollin 2001; Tavecchio et al 1999; Bowman & Prelow 2007), among others. The current research attempts to examine the relationships between moral reasoning, parenting and delinquency in a sample of homeless adolescents.

2.1 Morality and delinquency

Extensive work has been done exploring the relationship between moral reasoning and delinquency. For decades, researchers have tried to determine the nature of this relationship, if in fact a relationship exists. Findings to this point are controversial. As
moral reasoning has been linked with the ability to take the perspective of others (Hart & Carlo 2005, Gibbs 2003), it seems almost a certainty that those without this ability would be more prone to behave in ways which may have harmful effects on other people. In fact, the ability to take the perspective of others is what separates preconventional (stage 1 and 2) children from conventional (stage 3 and 4) children (Gibbs 2003). Tavecchio and colleagues (1999) report that several, perhaps even most, studies have found a relationship between moral reasoning and delinquency. However, the authors point out that the relationship may be a moderate one.

On the other side of this long-fought argument, there is a fairly large group of researchers who say that while this idea makes sense, the relationship between moral reasoning and delinquency is a difficult one to find (Tarry & Emler 2007). Some researchers claim that links between moral reasoning and delinquent behavior are often found by ‘fishing’ through statistics (Tarry & Emler 2007). Others propose that delinquency might be linked to a combination of several risk factors, including poor parenting, associations with influential peer groups, and being a member of a minority group or of a low SES family (Williams et al 1999; & Tavecchio et al 1999).

It is quite possible that researchers cannot fully understand the relationship between moral reasoning and delinquency, because as some would argue, moral thought and moral action may be two very different things (Bandura 1991). Bandura (1991) suggests that moral acts do not come strictly from the individual’s moral reasoning, but from a combination of psychosocial factors. This may help to explain why some
researchers believe that there is no relationship between morality and delinquency (Tarry and Emler 2007)—it may simply be too difficult to measure.

Tavecchio and colleagues (1999) found moral reasoning to be related to frequency of delinquent acts among a normative sample of residential youth. However, in their sample of homeless youth there seemed to be no relationship between subjects’ stage of moral reasoning and frequency of delinquent behavior. More specifically, preconventional (currently at stage 1 or stage 2) youth from the residential sample reported more delinquency than their conventional (stage 3 or stage 4) counterparts. On the other hand, in the homeless sample the preconventional and conventional youth showed no significant difference in frequency of delinquent behavior. The authors attribute the delinquent behavior in the homeless youth to a lack of stable social relationships in their lives (Tavecchio et al. 1999). It should be noted that this was the only article that was found dealing with moral reasoning in a homeless population.

Using a similar design, but without a homeless sample, Palmer and Hollin (2001) found delinquent behavior in their sample of 94 adolescents to be linked with low levels of moral reasoning, as determined by the Socio-moral Reflection Measure-Short Form. This is a production measure which provides the researcher with both a global stage of moral reasoning as well as any sub-stage that may be present in the individual (Gibbs et al. 1992).

An idea which has been brought up in several studies is that there are two distinct ways of measuring moral reasoning (Gavaghan et al. 1983). The first is by using a production measure, where the subject must provide a written or oral response that is then
matched up with a stage of moral reasoning. The second is by using a recognition measure, where the subject must simply select a response from a set. It is thought that production measures are more effective (Gavaghan et al 1983). Often, subjects have the ability to recognize a ‘morally right’ response on a recognition measure, but they cannot produce a stage 3 or stage 4 response on their own using a production measure (Gavaghan et al 1983).

Gavaghan and colleagues (1983) found that in nine of eleven studies they examined in a meta-analysis, there was a significant link between subjects’ moral reasoning and their frequency of delinquent behavior, as determined by a production measure. However, in most of the studies in which a recognition measure was used, there was no relationship (Gavaghan et al 1983). This suggests that perhaps one reason that researchers are so divided on this topic is because they use different ways of measuring stage of moral reasoning.

Tarry and Emler (2007), in a study using a recognition measure for moral reasoning, found no relationship between stage of moral reasoning and delinquent behaviors in the past twelve months, even after controlling for age, IQ and social background. This is evidence that the delinquency that occurred in many of the subjects must be related to factors other than moral reasoning. The authors suggest that having negative attitudes toward authority may influence the frequency of delinquent acts committed by the youth. However, in another study of 125 adolescents (Hanson & Mullis 1984), researchers found a significant difference in moral reasoning in offender and non-offender youth.
One of the more recent additions to research linking moral reasoning to delinquency is the idea that people who exhibit pre-conventional, and specifically stage 2, responses are far more likely to exhibit delinquent behaviors (Gibbs 2003). As Gibbs (2003) states, as people develop more mature moral reasoning, their actions become more closely associated with their thoughts. This is because once a person reaches stages 3 and 4, they are more aware of what effect their actions might have on other people, or even on society as a whole. Therefore, they may be less likely to commit acts which would harm others or society (Gibbs 2003). Gibbs (2003) points out that in a study of delinquents and non-delinquents, the non-delinquents generally responded with stage 3 explanations, while delinquents’ responses typically were at stage 2. The idea is that people in stage 1 will not commit delinquent acts with any amount of regularity, because they are afraid of being punished for their actions. For example, a stage 1 child would say that he would not lie to a friend because “he will beat you up” (Gibbs et al 1992). However, at stage 2 the child would be less afraid of physical punishment, but would not yet consider other people’s feelings or needs. Gibbs (2003) mentions a 1994 study by Gregg and colleagues about moral judgment delay in which, on a question pertaining to obeying the law, “[n]on-delinquents generally gave Stage 3 reasons, for example…loss of trust in the world. In contrast, the delinquents’ reasoning generally appealed to the risk of getting caught and going to jail (Stage 2)” (Gibbs 2003, p. 149).
2.2 Morality in adolescence

It is strongly argued that during adolescence the average youth begins to spend more time with peers and less time with parents, and that peers may even become more important sources of emotional support than parents (Schmuck 1977; Freeman & Brown 2001). In the adolescent years, parents and peers both provide valuable opportunities for youth to experience role-taking opportunities (Gibbs 2003). These experiences, which force youth to take other peoples’ perspectives, lead to advancements in moral thought (Gibbs 2003).

If the child is not yet beyond stage 2 by the adolescent years, he is said to have a deficiency in moral reasoning development (Gibbs 2003). According to Gibbs (2003), this may be because the youth simply has not had enough experiences where he had to take the perspective of another person; he may not have had sufficient exposure to such social situations such as driving, peer pressure for smoking and drinking, or the possibility of joining the armed forces. These are situations which Hart and Carlo (2005) say force adolescents to make moral decisions.

2.3 Parenting and delinquency

Aside from peer relationships, quality of parent-child relationships and parenting in general may also have some implications on delinquency in adolescence (Palmer & Hollin 2001). Parenting style, amount of control and parental warmth are all thought to have some influence on subsequent delinquency in the adolescent years (Palmer & Hollin 2001). In a (2001) study, Palmer and Hollin found that indeed adolescents who reported
relatively high frequencies of delinquent behavior often also rated their parents as having low levels of supervision. However, the direction of the relationship is unclear. It could be that when parents fail to sufficiently monitor their children’s behavior, the children often begin to take advantage and commit delinquent acts. In the other direction though, it could be that children who exhibit high frequencies of delinquent behavior eventually force their parents to stop monitoring the children’s behavior with any amount of intensity. In this particular study, the authors were unsure about the nature and direction of this relationship. They were, however, confident that there is some relationship. In a similar study, Barnes and Farrell (1992) found that sufficient parental monitoring and relatively high levels of support for their children was related to low levels of delinquency in adolescence.

Besides interactions between parents and adolescents, other variables may also play parts in the very complex relationship between parenting and delinquency. Perhaps in a more broad sense, family life and stability may be incredibly important as well (Thornberry et al 1999). Thornberry and colleagues (1999) suggest that family transition ---divorce, several residence changes--- may be linked to adolescent delinquency, and they found that high frequency of family transitions was predictive of delinquency and drug use in adolescents in their sample.

2.4 Parenting and morality

In addition to the work that has been done examining the relationship between parenting and delinquent behavior in adolescence, a number of researchers have studied
the relationship between parenting and the development of moral reasoning in children.

Findings in this area, like those in the area of morality and delinquency, are far from certain. Researchers are not sure what aspects of parenting, if any, best promote or hinder the development of moral reasoning. Several factors have been thought to have some impact on children’s moral reasoning development. Bandura (1991) suggests that if parents display high levels of moral reasoning, their child will have a good chance to eventually reach the same level of reasoning. According to Bandura (1991), children model their moral reasoning after that of their parents. Other factors that have been shown to have an effect include parenting style, parental supervision and parental warmth (Palmer & Hollin 2001). One study indicates that simply the way in which the parent interacts with the child has significant impacts on the child’s moral development (Walker & Hennig 1999). For example, a parent who is defensive, critical and insensitive will likely hinder the child’s moral development. However, a parent who is child-centered, supportive and attentive will help the child to advance to more mature levels of moral reasoning (Walker & Hennig 1999).

Some research suggests that it may be the overall family climate which can promote or delay moral reasoning development in children. Pratt and colleagues (1999) suggest that parents who are very responsive to their adolescent’s voice generally promote mature moral reasoning in their children. In this particular study, high responsiveness in mothers was linked to progression in moral reasoning over a two year period (Pratt et. Al 1999). In contrast to the findings of Pratt’s study, Palmer and Hollin (2001) found that mature moral reasoning was promoted by low levels of child-parent
interaction and low parental involvement. However, it was noted that this is contrary to most other findings. Most research on the subject suggests that parents play significant roles in their children’s moral development and that delays in moral development are related to perceptions of poor parenting and conflictual parent-child interaction styles (White & Matawie 2004; Palmer & Hollin 2001).

2.5 Objectives/Hypotheses

Based on information that has been gathered from previous research, the following were the objectives and hypotheses for the current study.

The objectives of this study are 1) to observe the relationship between the proportion of years that youth were raised by the mother or father up to age 18 and the adolescent’s number of self-reported delinquent behaviors and severity of drug and alcohol abuse, and 2) to observe the way(s) in which youths’ current stage of moral reasoning, according to the Socio-moral Reflection Measure—Short Form (SRM-SF), interacts with the variables parenting, delinquency and substance abuse.

Hypothesis 1: Despite reporting above average frequency of delinquent behaviors and substance abuse, homeless adolescents will display moral reasoning which is comparable to that of the average youth in a normative population, as shown by other studies focusing on normative populations.

Hypothesis 2: Proportion of years raised by at least one biological parent is predictive of youths’ levels of moral reasoning, as determined by their score on the Socio-moral Reasoning Measure--Short Form.
Hypothesis 3: Proportion of years raised by at least one biological parent is predictive of self-reported substance abuse and delinquency, as determined by proportion of days of substance abuse reported on the Form-90, self-reported number of lifetime arrests, and delinquency scores reported on the Youth Self-Report.

Hypothesis 4: Current level of moral reasoning mediates the effects of proportion of years raised by at least one biological parent on delinquency and substance abuse.
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

3.1 Subjects

Homeless adolescents in a mid-sized Mid-western city who agreed to participate in the research were included. Eligibility requirements were that all subjects were homeless, aged 14-20, and reported recent substance abuse. Subjects must also meet the NIH definition of homeless. The majority (70.9%) of the sample was African American, and average age was 18.8 years ($SD = 1.55$). The sample of 55 homeless youth included 31 males and 24 females.

3.2 Procedure

Convenience sampling was used since randomly selecting homeless adolescents to participate would not be feasible. Instead, researchers and assistants recruited homeless adolescents at sandwich lines, soup kitchens, libraries and parks to participate in the research. Business cards were handed out providing potential participants with several telephone numbers, including a toll free 800 number to the research site, as well as the address to the site. Recruiters explained the research to the potential subjects and answered any questions that arose.
Data used in the present research were collected from February 2007 through February 2008. All data were collected in person, in a private office at a research site. However, some interviews were done from the site by telephone if subjects were unable to come to the site. Subjects were offered transportation to the research site or were given bus passes. Once at the site, subjects were assured that their responses would be confidential and were asked to sign consent forms. Once consent was given, the instruments were prepared and the subjects began completing the questionnaires. Each questionnaire is completed one time, with all instruments completed in a random order generated by computer. Each questionnaire took an estimated 10-15 minutes to complete, coming to a total time of about 40 minutes to one hour per subject. Subjects received thorough instructions for each individual questionnaire, and research assistants were available to answer any questions. Upon completion of the entire group of measures, subjects received a $25 gift card to a local department store as well as a $5 gift card to a fast food restaurant.

For scoring the moral reasoning questionnaire, two research assistants were trained using the manual developed by Dr. John Gibbs. Upon completion of training, twenty common questionnaires were scored by both assistants. Inter-rater reliability was assessed and found to be high (.95). Once reliability was established, the remaining questionnaires were divided randomly and scored individually by the research assistants.

Subjects who failed to complete the SRM-SF morality questionnaire with sufficient useable data (questionnaires are unusable if less than seven out of the eleven questions are answered with unusable data) were not included in the analysis. All other
questionnaires for this study were answered through a computer assisted interview in which subjects were unable to proceed until each question was answered (example: On a question which asks how many times in the past 3 months has the subject committed a delinquent act, only numbers, “don’t know,” or “refuse” are accepted)

Following data collection, analysis was conducted using correlations as well as linear regression in order to examine the relationships between variables.

3.3 Materials

The following materials, in addition to some demographic questions, were administered to each subject, in random order. Instructions were given before the subjects began each individual form.

The Youth Self-Report (YSR) is a 120-item scale that assesses internalizing and externalizing behaviors among children. Subjects read each of the 120 statements and respond according to how well each statement relates to his/her self. For example, for the statement “I get in trouble a lot,” subjects may choose “not true,” “somewhat true,” or “very true.” For the current research, only the nine statements which comprise the delinquency score are used. Answers range from 0-2, yielding delinquency scores that could range from 0-18. Higher scores indicate more delinquency. Part of the Child Behavior Checklist, the YSR is a widely used measure that displays high validity and reliability (Achenbach & Edelbrock 1982).

The Form 90 is a questionnaire about recent substance use where subjects are assisted in filling in a calendar of the past 90 days of drug and alcohol use. It is used to
determine the frequency and severity of substance use as well as subjects’ age of first use for each substance. Good reliability and validity have been observed for this measure in other studies (Tonigan, Miller & Brown 1997; Slesnick & Tonigan 2004).

The Socio-moral Reasoning Measure-Short Form (SRM-SF) is an eleven item questionnaire asking subjects about both specific and general moral topics, including contract and truth, life, and justice. Subjects choose whether each given situation (for example, helping a friend or obeying the law) is important, very important, or not important. These responses are scored as 0, 1, or 2, and are totaled to provide a moral values score which can range from 0 to 22. Next, subjects are asked to write at least two sentences explaining why they chose important, very important or not important. These explanations are coded and used to determine their SRMS morality score, which can range from 100-400. This score provides the researcher with the global morality stage and any sub-stages that may exist. Scores of 100-125 would be scored at stage 1, 126-150 would be scored at transition stage 1(2), 151-175 would be scored at transition stage 2(1), and so on. Transition stage 1(2) indicates a majority of stage 1 reasoning, with progression towards stage 2. Transition stage 2(1) indicates mostly stage 2 reasoning, with some stage 1 reasoning. For the current study, two research assistants scored twenty common questionnaires and obtained inter-rater reliability of 0.95. The rest of the questionnaires were chosen randomly to be scored by just one scorer.
The majority of the subjects in the sample (58.2%) are 19-20 years old, with only eight (14.5%) under the age of 17. Most of the sample is African-American (70.9%), and there are 31 males (54.5%) and 24 females. Demographic characteristics for the sample are outlined in Table 1.

As expected, youth spent more time living with their mothers than with their fathers. Over the past 90 days, subjects reported an average of over 60 days of tobacco use and over 50 days of marijuana use. Descriptive statistics for the main variables are represented in Table 2.

**Moral Reasoning/Values**

Moral reasoning responses were coded into numeric values, yielding a possible range of 100 – 400, where 100 would indicate stage 1 of moral reasoning. Scores in this sample ranged from 194-325, with an average score of 262.71 ($SD = 29.69$), which indicates transition Stage 3(2) of moral reasoning. This means that many subjects scored
close to Stage 3, but with Stage 2 tendencies. Average moral values score was 16.65 (SD = 3.40), with a range of 7-22.

**Delinquency/Arrests/Substance Abuse**

YSR delinquency scores ranged from 0-18, with 18 being the highest possible score. Subjects averaged 5.62 (SD = 3.83) on the delinquency scale. Subjects also averaged 1.87 lifetime arrests, but ranged from 0 to 17. Although subjects reported very high frequencies of substance use, it did not seem to have significant relationships with any other variables. The exception is that tobacco use was negatively correlated with years spent with the subjects’ mothers (r = -.312, p-value < .05).

**Gender differences**

Females reported significantly higher frequencies of delinquency (M = 7.25) than did males (M = 4.35). T-tests were conducted in order to observe differences in delinquency scores for males and females, which were found to be significantly different. [p-value (2-tail) < .005, T = -2.98, df = 53]. Proportion of years living with the father had different effects for males and females. Most notably, proportion of years living with the father was significantly correlated with number of arrests for females (r = .601, p-value < .005) but not for males (r = .188, p-value = .312). Also, proportion of years living with a single mother had a significant relationship with tobacco use in females (r = -.414, p-value < .05) but not in males (r = -.222, p-value = .229). An independent samples T-test revealed no significant differences in moral reasoning scores for males and females [p-
value (2-tail) = .272, T = -1.11, df = 53].

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. YRS MOM</td>
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</table>

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4.1
Correlations

Interactions of Variables

As reported in Table 4.1, delinquency was significantly correlated with subjects’ age (r = -.462, p-value < .001) and gender (r = .379, p-value < .005). Subjects’ SRMS score was highly correlated with tobacco use (r = -.312, p-value < .05). Also, proportion of years raised by father was related to both moral values (r = .314, p-value < .05) and lifetime number of arrests (r = .482, p-value < .001).
Predictors of Delinquency

A linear regression analysis was conducted, using delinquency as the dependent variable and age, gender, and SRMS as the independent variables. The ANOVA table (4.1) shows that the model was significant (p-value < .001), yielding an R-squared of .306. Therefore, from the model summary table, using this model one would expect that 30.6% of the observed delinquency can be explained with variables Age, Gender, and SRMS (morality). In the model, SRMS alone was not significant (p-value = .185), while Age (.002) and Gender (.052) were significant. The coefficient of Age is -.987, meaning that as age increases by one year, subjects’ expected delinquency score will decrease by nearly one whole point on average. The expected average delinquency score for females is 1.869 points higher than for males.

There were no significant findings after analyzing the mediating effects of moral reasoning on the relationship between parental presence and delinquency.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine the relationships between presence of mother and father, moral reasoning and delinquency in homeless adolescents. Hypotheses were tested using correlations as well as linear regression analysis. Some very interesting gender effects were found, and presence of the father was shown to be significant in several aspects of these adolescents’ lives. Although moral values had some significant relationships, moral reasoning was not significantly related with any of the major variables. Using other studies for comparison, the sample in this study displayed relatively low moral reasoning, which has been found to be common among delinquent samples (Gibbs 2007).

*Moral Reasoning*

Moral reasoning scores for this sample were lower than should be expected for this age group. However, work done looking at delinquent samples has shown that this type of sample will likely produce lower moral reasoning scores than a sample of non-delinquent adolescents (Gibbs 2007). The current study found that subjects in this study, specifically 18-20 year olds, displayed delays in moral reasoning development. The
average SRMS score for this age group was just over 261, which is considered to be delayed. However, Gibbs (2007) reports that delinquent samples typically exhibit lower moral reasoning scores than do normative samples. Since most subjects in this sample reported at least some delinquent behaviors, and homeless youth in general report frequent delinquency (Tavecchio et al 1999), relatively low moral reasoning scores are not surprising.

Gibbs (2007) examined the results of several studies using populations from across the world, all of which used the SRM-SF as the morality measure. Most of the samples in Gibbs’ meta-analysis had average moral reasoning scores that were much higher than in the current sample. Groups of eight and ninth grade students averaged about 30 points higher than the 18-20 year olds in the current sample. The only groups that were consistently comparable to the scores of this sample were the delinquent groups in other studies. In the current sample, the moral reasoning scores did not increase with age, contrary to researchers’ expectations.

There are several reasons why the subjects in this study may have scored low on the moral reasoning measure. It could be that homeless youth do not have the social experiences which would lead them to develop more mature moral reasoning. Without consistent peer groups, teachers and competent parents, perhaps these youth do not get to experience the role-taking opportunities that promote normative advancement of moral reasoning development. Another possibility is that parental presence, or parental warmth and support play a significant role. Since a great deal of the youth in this sample, and homeless youth in general, do not experience positive parent-child interactions, they may
be missing out on the help parents provide in the area of moral reasoning. A third possibility is that the SRM-SF is not suited to the homeless youth population. Some of the questions pertain to obeying the law, telling the truth and helping a stranger. These may be things that seem important to most of us, but perhaps are not important to homeless youth. To many of these youth, survival is the most important thing. If that means they have to break the law, they will likely report that obeying the law is not always important. Questions like these may stir up negative emotions for these adolescents, which may result in them responding with an explanation which would be scored at a low stage.

Delinquency

The current study found delinquency to have a significant relationship with age and gender among homeless youth, but delinquency scores could not be predicted by moral reasoning score. However, it may be possible to predict moral reasoning from delinquency scores, particularly when comparing delinquent groups to non-delinquent groups. Gibbs (2007) found this to be the case in his meta-analysis, which showed that delinquent samples consistently produced lower moral reasoning scores than the non-delinquents. Tavecchio and colleagues (1999) would contribute this delinquent behavior to a lack of stable social relationships. Another possibility is that as youth to start become involved in delinquent acts, their responses to the moral reasoning questions may begin to change, meaning that their moral reasoning score could be an outcome of their behavior, or of their social affiliations as well as their family experiences. Subjects in
this study, on average, displayed delays in moral reasoning as well as high frequencies of delinquent behavior. Delinquency scores overall on the YSR were more than one point higher on average than scores obtained from a normative sample of high school students in another study (Ronnlund & Karlsson 2006).

*Parental Presence*

This study found that the amount of time spent with the father in the household may have been somewhat responsible for higher moral *values* scores, as these variables were highly correlated. However, their SRMS moral *reasoning* scores were not significantly related to spending more or less time with either the father or mother. The study also suggested that time spent with the father had a positive relationship with the number of times subjects have been arrested in their lives, and this relationship was particularly strong among females. However, delinquency score, as reported by the YSR, was not related to proportion of years raised by either biological parent. This could be because nearly all homeless adolescents report delinquent behaviors (Tavecchio et al 1999), no matter what other circumstances may be. Simply experiencing homelessness may be the overriding variable that is most predictive of delinquent behavior among adolescents.

Spending a certain proportion of their lives with their father had different effects on males than it had on females. For example, females who spent relatively more time living with their fathers as compared to those who spent less time with their fathers reported significantly higher frequencies of arrests, although this seemed to have no impact on their self-reported delinquency. On the other hand, amount of time spend with
the father seemed to not be a significant factor among males, in terms of number of times they have been arrested or their delinquency score.

There are two likely possibilities for this unique relationship. The first possibility is that fathers have a sort of neutralizing effect on males, where they somehow reduce their sons’ delinquency as they spend more time with them. As Zimmerman and colleagues (1995) report, most research on the effects of father absence has been done with middle class white families. However, in their study they found that in black families fathers may play major roles in their sons’ well-being. They may provide support and act as a role model for their sons. Perhaps this effect simply doesn’t exist for females prone to delinquency, who often report not being close with their fathers. These girls also often perceive their fathers as unloving and not understanding (). If this is the case, perhaps spending more time with their fathers has relatively negative outcomes for girls, as opposed to boys.

The second possible explanation is that, particularly in a negative family environment, having a father in the household places females at risk for sexual abuse. Fleming and colleagues (1997) found alcoholism in the father to be a major risk factor for sexual abuse in girls. Furthermore, Chandy and colleagues (1996) report that females with a history of sexual abuse are significantly more likely to participate in delinquent behavior. They also found that protective factors against adverse outcomes of abuse included living with both parents and receiving care from adults. Typically, homeless females do not experience these protective factors and therefore are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior.
More delinquency in females

Delinquency scores for this sample were higher than what would be expected with normative populations, which supports other research on delinquency in homeless youth (Tavecchio et al 1999). Delinquency scores were particularly high among girls, who reported significantly more delinquent behaviors than boys.

Using a linear regression model, researchers found that delinquency could be predicted by a model containing the variables age, gender and moral reasoning. In this model, however, moral reasoning alone did not have significant effects. According to the current findings, older homeless youth are less likely to engage in delinquent behavior than are younger youth. In addition, females averaged nearly 100% more delinquency than males. This is consistent with other research in which females also reported more delinquency than males (Ronnlund & Karlsson 2006). According to the current findings, the most likely candidates for delinquent behavior in the homeless population would be young females. There are several reasons for why this would be the case.

Homeless adolescents experience a great deal of stressors in their lives, including physical and sexual abuse and other forms of family violence. However, Rosario and colleagues (2003) found that an adolescent’s coping strategy may regulate the negative effects of experiencing violence and other stressors. Since females tend to use more emotion-focused coping (Recklitis & Noam 1999), this may help to explain their increased delinquency in this situation. Females may also use more confrontational coping, which involves doing things they feel are wrong in order to gain acceptance by others (Rosario et al 2003). These things may often involve delinquent behaviors.
Where boys have traditionally been thought of as being more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, female delinquency is a phenomenon which is becoming more common in America (Kerpelman & Smith-Adcock 2005). According to Kerpelman & Smith-Adcock (2005), poor-quality relationships with their parents, including neglectful and abusive relationships, have become primary explanations for delinquency behavior among females. The most influential aspect of the relationship, in terms of influencing delinquency, seems to be the strength of the bond between the parents and the child. A weak bond with a young girl’s parents may lead to delinquent behavior (Kerpelman & Smith-Adcock 2005). It is possible that a combination of increased tendencies for externalization, poor family relationships and ineffective coping strategies could lead to the high frequencies of delinquency, as evidenced by the females in this study.

Limitations/Future Directions

There were several limitations in this study. One of the major limitations was the fact that it was impossible to choose subjects by the process of random sampling. This is not a conceivable strategy with this population. Homeless youth are a difficult population to study, largely for this reason. Instead, convenience sampling was used. This may limit the ability to generalize the results of the study. In addition, the morality measure was not designed to be used on homeless youth, although it can be used on children at very young ages, even pre-school aged children. Therefore, it may be a suitable tool. However, as all of the subjects report delinquent behavior, this measure might be somewhat biased towards this population. While many adolescents participate
in delinquent behavior for various reasons, homeless adolescents often participate in these behaviors out of necessity. There was no comparison group in this study, although comparisons were made to normative samples from other similar studies. However, it would be interesting to see what would be found if the study had included a comparison group that was not composed of strictly delinquent homeless youth.

Despite these limitations, this study adds to the literature in many ways. Some understanding has been gained of how moral reasoning, parental presence and other factors relate to delinquency in homeless youth. This study adds to the relatively newly studied areas of female delinquency and fatherhood as well as to the more traditionally studied field of moral reasoning. It is our intention that this study will lead to more research on this overlooked, but still very important, population.

It is recommended that future research extend the study using a larger sample size and a comparison group. In addition, more detailed questions about family interactions and parenting styles may add more to the limited literature on this subject. A measure about peer group relationships may also prove to be useful.
LIST OF REFERENCES


Table A.1
Demographic Characteristics (n=55)
<table>
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Table A.2
Descriptive Statistics of Sample
### Table A.3
Analysis of Variance of Delinquency by SRMS, Age & Gender

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<th>F</th>
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a  Predictors: (Constant), SRMS, AGE, GENDER
b  Dependent Variable: YSR.DEL
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<td>Std. Error</td>
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a Dependent Variable: YSR.DEL

Table A.4
Coefficients