Beyond Family Structure:
Examining the Association between Family Instability and Childhood Delinquency

Thesis

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Abstract

The American family has undergone tremendous change over the last half-century; especially noticeable is the rise of family instability, characterized by transitions in family structure composition. While family demographic research links family instability—measured as the number of family structure transitions—to poorer child outcomes, delinquency research tends to rely on static measurement of family structure. I address this gap in the literature using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (n=2,492 children) to analyze the effect of family instability on childhood delinquency outcomes and contrast that effect with a transitional measure of family structure. Results reveal that children who experience any transitions are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior compared to children who experience no transitions. However, there is no evidence of an additive effect of the number of transitions on delinquency. In addition, when transitions are accounted for, the effect of family structure is no longer significant. This suggests that researchers and policymakers should pay more attention to family instability to better understand the roots of delinquent behavior and to address childhood inequalities.
Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank Dr. Hollie Nyseth Brehm, Assistant Professor at The Ohio State University, for her unwavering support and consistent guidance throughout this project.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my mother, Debra Englehart, and my partner, Ashley Bailes, for continuously challenging me and inspiring me to be better.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The contemporary American family looks considerably different from the American family of fifty years ago. Today, over half of all children will spend some amount of time in a family structure that does not consist of the biological nuclear family (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Concurrently, there has also been a large increase in nonmarital childbirths. These family structures, when compared to married families, are found to be significantly less stable (Osborne, Manning, and Smock 2007). This shift has attracted much attention from scholars and policy-makers who are concerned with how these family arrangements may reproduce inequalities in children’s life chances (McLanahan and Percheski 2008).

As it relates to instability, it appears their concerns are not misguided. Researchers consistently find that children reared in unstable families fair more poorly across a range of outcomes when compared to their peers who live in stable households (Waldfogel, Craigie, and Brooks-Gunn 2010).

Delinquency theory places enormous emphasis on family process for understanding delinquency. However, for the most part, delinquency research has not yet fully considered the important changes characterizing today’s American family. Within that literature, the primary focus has been centered around ‘intactness,’ comparing children from ‘broken’ families to children from biologically intact families, with little
differentiation among the numerous types of ‘broken’ family types (Apel and Kaukinen 2008) and no consideration of the family instability experienced by children. As a result, the literature may be attributing more significance to family structure than is warranted.

This paper revisits the relationship between family structure and childhood delinquency with an analysis of family instability. Building on existing delinquency literature, empirical and theoretical insights from family demographic research are brought to bare and inform the modeling. The aim is to test whether family instability is driving the effect of family structure. To do so, data from a sample of children from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study are analyzed to estimate the odds of engaging in delinquent behavior while using the number of transitions a child experiences as the primary predictor. The Fragile Families data improves on other data sets because it captures the experiences of a wider range of families than is the case in other national samples.

In the following section, I discuss the centrality of the family in social control theory. From here, I discuss the limitations of existing delinquency literature on family structure. To contextualize this claim, I provide an overview of the trends in American family life over the past half century, with a sharp focus on the rise in instability. Following this, I introduce the hypotheses to be tested, guided by the existing literature
on family instability effects. I then provide an overview of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, the measures used for analysis, and the analytical approach. The paper then concludes with the results of the study, a discussion on the significance and implications of the findings, and avenues for future research.
Chapter 2: The Centrality of Families

Durkheim (2012, p. 64) argued that, “We are moral beings to the extent that we are social beings.” Deviance arises when an individual’s bond to society is fractured. Ties to society result in socialization, or the adoption of norms and values that govern what is or is not acceptable behavior. For children, the family is the most fundamental unit of socialization (Simons, Simons, and Wallace 2004). As a result, delinquency theorists have long focused on the role of the family.

Building off of Durkheim, social control theory flips the question of why people break rules to why people follow rules, thus implying a tendency towards delinquency. Nye (1958) contends there are three answers: (1) direct control (via regulation of behavior), (2) indirect control (via attachment to conformers), and (3) internal control. These three elements are rooted in the family. Hirschi (1969), focusing on the latter two, contends that through the family, indirect controls arise when the child becomes bonded to conventional society and internalizes expectations of behavior, which in turn reduces the likelihood of delinquency. In a meta-analysis, Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (1986) examined the effects families have on delinquent outcomes and found that parental supervision, parental rejection, and parent-child involvement are the strongest predictors
of juvenile problematic and delinquent behavior. The empirical basis for social control theory, therefore, appears to be strong.

Sampson and Laub (1993) extend research on control theory by integrating Hirschi’s (1969) social control theory with coercion theory (Patterson 1980, 1982). Whereas previous control theory focused primarily on indirect controls, the new formulation places greater emphasis on direct control. The theory stresses the importance of family processes and posits that ineffective parents undermine effective socialization by unintentionally reinforcing problem behavior and utilizing ineffective punishment regimes (Patterson 1982). Successful childrearing, however, stems from monitoring behavior, reinforcing prosocial behavior, and consistently and reasonably punishing antisocial behavior (Patterson 1980). Sampson and Laub (1993) contend these direct parental controls work in concert with the indirect controls to ultimately tie the child to the family and then society. Indeed, results from their study demonstrate strong, direct effects of family processes on delinquency.

These family processes, however, are strongly associated with family structure (Sampson and Laub 1993). The implication, then, is that some family structures are more conducive to monitoring, disciplining, and fostering attachment between the parent and child. Indeed, Laub and Sampson’s (1988) research suggests that intact families are more
effective in cultivating the parent-child bond. Other research has found that intact families are also better able to establish and enforce rules regarding appropriate behavior (Cernkovich and Giordano 1987; Patterson and Dishion 1985; Wells and Rankin 1991). Furthermore, Rebellon (2002) found that direct supervision of children’s behavior most strongly mediates the association between family structure and delinquency. These studies, however, all treat family structure as a static variable. Yet, given recent family demographic trends, it is likely that the majority of American children experience instability in family structure. This instability, it is argued, may be more important than family structure at birth.
Chapter 3: Beyond Family Structure

Delinquency research heavily relies on cross-sectional measurement of family structure, typically taken at the first wave of data collection. In most cases, family structure is operationalized in dichotomous terms (Anderson 2002; Coughlin and Vuchinich 1996; Flewelling and Bauman 1990; Matsueda and Heimer 1987; Rosen 1985; Voorhis et al. 1988). In a meta-analysis, Wells and Rankin (1991) found that delinquency is approximately 10-15 percent higher for children from broken homes. In the years that followed, the broken-intact paradigm dominated discussions of family structure effects.

Apel and Kaukinen’s (2008) study marked an important step in the study of family structures effects. Recognizing the theoretical and empirical limitations of a binary measure of family structure, they analyzed the effects of 13 different cross-sectional family structures. Their results revealed the value of considering alternative family forms that go beyond the broken-intact model. Thus, their research is consistent with the supposition that the ‘broken’-intact paradigm has likely masked the great heterogeneity that exists under both umbrella terms and their respective effects. But, as they discuss in their conclusion, they were unable to account for the entire family structure history and instead relied on measures from a single point in time.
Chapter 4: The Rise in Family Instability

One of the most striking features of the change is the instability that characterizes many children’s family lives. While recent estimates suggest that by age 3 about 11% of children born to married parents will experience a family structure transition, approximately half of children born to cohabiting parents are expected to experience at least one family transition by the same age (Osborne et al. 2007). Another study suggests these may be modest estimates. Kennedy and Bumpass (2008) found that 70% of all children born to cohabiting parents experience a transition by the age of 12. They also estimated that 66% of children born to a single mother experience their mother’s transition into cohabitation, with about half of those resulting in marriage. Between 2005 and 2010, upwards of 40% of all U.S.-born children were born to a single mother or cohabiting parents (Payne, Manning, and Brown 2012), indicating the prevalence of family instability.

Moreover, many children experience more than one transition in family structure. One estimate suggests that nearly 20% of adolescents have experienced at least two transitions, with 7% having experienced three or more (Cavanagh and Huston 2008). What this literature suggests is that family structure at birth and subsequent transitions have profound impacts on the trajectory of children’s family lives that in turn prove
consequential across a variety of life outcomes (see Brown, Stykes, and Manning 2015 working paper for an overview) Overall, it underscores the importance of accounting for contemporary trends in family life because “unstable and complex families may be the most common counterfactual to the married two-biological-parent family” (McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider 2013).
Chapter 5: Hypotheses

Researchers examining the effects of family instability consistently find that children who grow up in unstable families fare worse than children raised in stable families across a variety of outcomes (Waldfogel et al. 2010). The instability hypothesis emerged out of the family stress literature and posits that changes in family composition produce stress, resulting in child outcome gaps. Frequently accompanying this stress is economic hardship, emotional strain, and a disrupted parent-child bond, further impeding socialization (Lee and McLanahan 2015). Fomby and Cherlin (Fomby and Cherlin 2007) build on this theory by arguing that any transition is potentially detrimental, regardless of type, because of the stress induced by change.

Indeed, research has repeatedly found support for the instability hypothesis. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Craigie (2008) found that family structure itself was not predictive of children’s vocabulary. However, children living in unstable families, defined as children who experience any transitions, had lower vocabulary scores than children from stable families. Relatedly, children who grow up in unstable families are less likely to be prepared for college and have lower levels of academic achievement overall (Cavanagh and Fomby 2012; Sun and Li 2009). Similarly, behavioral outcomes are influenced by family instability. Osborne and McLanahan’s
(2007) research shows that children who experience family transitions exhibit more behavioral problems than those who do not. Other studies have shown that children who grow up in unstable families are more likely to engage in risky behavior, such as marijuana use and engage in sexual activity at an earlier age (Cavanagh and Huston 2008; Fomby, Mollborn, and Sennott 2010).

Furthermore, research demonstrates that the degree of instability—or number of transitions—matters. Wu and Thomson (2001) find that the number of transitions a child experiences is negatively associated with behavioral outcomes. In other words, there is evidence that increasing degrees of instability produce even less desirable outcomes, providing further support for the instability hypothesis. In addition to the studies previously mentioned, many other studies find a linear relationship between the number of family transitions and child wellbeing (Cavanagh and Huston 2008; Cherlin et al. 1991; Osborne and McLanhan 2007; Wu 1996; Wu and Martinson 1993). The foregoing discussion informs the two hypotheses that are addressed below:

\[ H_1: \text{Family instability is associated with delinquency outcomes in childhood.} \]
$H_2$: With each additional transition a child experiences, there will be higher odds of engaging in delinquent behavior.

Given that family structure varies in its long-term stability, it is reasonable to conjecture whether the observed effects of family structure at birth are actually a function of family instability. As previously discussed, research has demonstrated that family structure influences family processes that ultimately lead to effective socialization (Sampson and Laub 1993). However, it is possible that what is really driving these diverging outcomes is instability. Instability potentially disrupts the family’s ability to monitor and discipline the child and also strains the parent-child bond, reducing the child’s attachment to the family and society. To address this, I propose the following hypothesis:

$H_3$: The effects of family structure at birth on delinquent behavior can be explained by the relative level of family instability a child experiences.
To test these hypotheses, I analyze data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). The FFCWS is a longitudinal study of 4,898 children born between 1998 and 2000 in U.S. cities with populations greater than 200,000. The study design included an oversample of births to unmarried parents, resulting in a sample where three-quarters of the births were to unmarried parents and one-quarter to married parents. Mothers and fathers (if present) were interviewed shortly after birth, with follow-up surveys conducted when the focal child was 1, 3, 5, and 9 years of age.

The FFCWS is well-suited for examining the effects of family instability on children’s behavior because it includes detailed information on family structure and transitions for the focal child from birth to age 9. It is also useful in that it includes an oversample of non-whites, allowing for greater comparison between racial groups. And, crucially, wave 5 (Year 9) of the study includes a 17-item scale of delinquent behaviors.

Analysis for this study will be based on 2,492 children. This smaller sample size results from excluding mothers who were not interviewed at all 5 waves ($n = 1,912$), those who lived with the focal child less than half of the time ($n = 176$), those who did

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1 I exclude mothers who did not participate in all 5 waves because this would result in an incomplete family structure history.
not report their complete residential history \((n = 73)\), and those who did not participate or provide a complete response to the delinquency scale component. List-wise deletion is used for any remaining missing data.

**Measures**

*Dependent variable.* This study uses a 17-item self-report scale of delinquent behaviors from the Year 9 survey. These self-reported behaviors range in severity from skipping school to arson.\(^2\) For each item, respondents were asked whether they engaged in the behavior \((1=\text{yes};\ 0=\text{no})\). If the child responded in the affirmative to any of the behaviors, they are coded as having engaged in delinquent behavior.

*Family Structure.* Family structure is a multinomial measure of whether the child was born to married biological parents, cohabiting biological parents, or a single mother, and is reported by the mother at birth.\(^3\) Though cohabiting parents are structurally identical to married parents, research has demonstrated that when you compare children raised in

\(^{2}\) A full list of the delinquent behaviors included in the scale can be found in the Appendix.

\(^{3}\) Mothers were not asked if they were residing with another partner who was *not* the biological father at the time of birth.
these structures against each other, children living with married parents fair better (Apel and Kaukinen 2008).

*Family Instability.* Family instability, or whether family structure transitions occurred, is measured as the number of maternal coresidential transitions from the child’s birth to age 9. At each wave, the mother was asked if she was living with a partner and whether that partner was the same as the previous wave. Every coresidential entrance or exit is coded as “1 transition.” For example, if the mother was living with the father at Wave 3 and a new partner at Wave 4, that would be counted as 2 transitions. This is one of the most common approaches to measuring family instability (Lee and McLanahan 2015). Beginning at Wave 4, the mothers were also asked about any additional cohabiting partners in between waves. These are used to recode the number of transitions between these waves. Since this question was not asked before these waves, I am likely underestimating the number of transitions prior to age 5. Because relatively few mothers experienced more than 3 transitions ($n = 219$), I collapse children who experience 3 or more transitions into one category.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean or %</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delinquency Incidence</td>
<td>53.57%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Structure at Birth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>35.55%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>39.65%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>20.91%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.41%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+</td>
<td>17.77%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below poverty line</td>
<td>38.52%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>83.29%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>51.53%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at Birth</td>
<td>25.07</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>15-43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS or Less</td>
<td>61.80%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Control Variables. The covariates included in the models include child, family, and maternal characteristics, and are commonly used as controls in research on family instability. All time-varying variables are taken from Wave 4, allowing for a lag in the
dependent variable. This allows for temporal ordering, ensuring that the outcome did not precede the predictors. Time-constant variables are taken from Wave 1. Included are the child’s sex (1 = male), if the child is a racial minority (1 = nonwhite), whether the family was living below the poverty line (1 = in poverty), the mother’s age at the time of the child’s birth, and whether the mother had a high school education or less (1 = HS degree or less). Descriptive statistics for all independent variables can be found in Table 1.

**Analytic Strategy**

This study uses logistic regression to estimate the effects of the number of family structure transitions on children’s delinquent behavioral outcomes. The outcome, a binomial measure of whether the child engaged in *any* delinquent behavior, is a function of family structural transitions, a vector of child, family, and maternal characteristics. Results are presented as odds ratios, or exponentiated betas. All values greater than one indicate increased odds of engaging in delinquency, whereas all values less than one indicated decreased odds.
Chapter 7: Findings

I first begin by examining the bivariate relationship between family structure at birth and maternal partner transitions in Table 2. As expected, children born to married parents are more likely to reside in a stable household through the first 9 years of their lives. Just slightly over a quarter of these children experience one or more transitions. Children who are born to cohabiting parents or a single mother are equally likely to experience any transitions. However, children born to single mothers experience slightly fewer transitions overall than those born to cohabiting parents. This confirms that family structure at birth is strongly associated with the level of instability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Maternal Partner Transitions</th>
<th>0 (n = 1,148) %</th>
<th>1 (n = 519) %</th>
<th>2 (n = 381) %</th>
<th>3+ (n = 444) %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Structure at Birth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married (n = 618)</td>
<td>74.92</td>
<td>10.36</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>7.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting (n = 886)</td>
<td>36.46</td>
<td>21.56</td>
<td>18.17</td>
<td>23.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single (n = 988)</td>
<td>36.64</td>
<td>26.72</td>
<td>18.02</td>
<td>18.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Bivariate Association Between Family Structure at Birth and Number of Transitions
Table 3 presents the results of logistic regression models on delinquent behavior. I begin by examining the relationship between family structure and delinquent behavior in Model 1, which also establishes a baseline for comparison. The disparities are immediately apparent. Children born to single mothers are at 30.8% higher odds of engaging in delinquent behavior compared to children born to married parents, controlling for all other variables in the model (p < .05). There is, however, no statistically significant difference between children born to cohabiting parents and children born to married parents. Though not presented in Table 3, pairwise comparison reveals that children born to single parents are at 25.3% higher odds than children born to cohabiting parents (p < .05). We can thus confirm that the family structure a child is born into is associated with delinquent outcomes. Marriage, however, does not seem to have any effect, suggesting that the presence of two parents is what actually matters.

In Model 2, I then examine the relationship between maternal partner transitions and delinquency, without the variables for family structure at birth. Mood (2010) contends that researchers cannot compare odds ratios across models with different independent variables. This examination tests the first hypothesis of whether children who experience any transitions are at greater odds of engaging in delinquent behavior, as well as the second hypothesis of whether the
number of transitions is positively associated with delinquent behavior, as suggested by the instability hypothesis. The most immediate takeaway is that children who experience transitions are more likely to exhibit delinquent behavior than children who do not experience any transitions. Compared to children who live through no transitions, children who experience one maternal partner transitions are at 30.8% higher odds of being involved in delinquent behavior, controlling for all other variables in the model (p < .05). Children who experience two transitions are at 41.5% higher odds of engaging in delinquent behavior than children who experience no transitions (p < .01). Those who experience three or more transitions are at 33.0% higher odds when, again, compared to children who experience no transitions (p < .05). This supports the second hypothesis. However, pairwise comparison (see Appendix) reveals there are no significant differences between children who experience one, two, or three or more transitions. Thus, there is no support for the second hypothesis. The takeaway, then, is that it is not the number of transitions that matter, per se, but whether any transitions have occurred.

Model 3 tests the third hypothesis of whether partnership instability mediates the effects of family structure at birth. This model includes both predictors for family structure at birth and family instability. When the number of transitions a child

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5 There is no formal mediation test for logistic regression.
Table 3. Logistic Regression Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>(s.e.)</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>(s.e.)</td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family structure at birth</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabitng</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td>(.121)</td>
<td>1.044</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0.268*</td>
<td>(.125)</td>
<td>1.308</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family instability</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 transition</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.269*</td>
<td>(.112)</td>
<td>1.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 transitions</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.347**</td>
<td>(.126)</td>
<td>1.415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+ transitions</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.285*</td>
<td>(.120)</td>
<td>1.330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Controls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below poverty line</td>
<td>0.359***</td>
<td>(.094)</td>
<td>1.433</td>
<td>0.375***</td>
<td>(.093)</td>
<td>1.454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>0.175</td>
<td>(.122)</td>
<td>1.191</td>
<td>0.190</td>
<td>(.118)</td>
<td>1.209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.730***</td>
<td>(.083)</td>
<td>2.075</td>
<td>0.743***</td>
<td>(.083)</td>
<td>2.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother's age at birth</td>
<td>-0.029***</td>
<td>(.008)</td>
<td>0.972</td>
<td>-0.027***</td>
<td>(.008)</td>
<td>0.974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother's educ HS or less</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
<td>(.097)</td>
<td>0.994</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
<td>(.096)</td>
<td>0.994</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 2,492

NOTE: * coefficient for single mother is significantly different from cohabiting coefficient

ABBREVIATIONS: OR = odds ratio; SE = standard error.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed tests).
experiences is accounted for, the effect of being born to a single mother is reduced to non-significance. Interestingly, pairwise comparison between children born to single mothers and cohabiting parents reveals a significant difference;\(^6\) children born to single mothers are at 26.8% higher odds of engaging in delinquent behavior (p < .05). The instability effects, however, remain significant predictors and are only modestly reduced in magnitude. Children who experience one transition are at 28.7% higher odds of engaging in delinquent behavior (p < .05), those who experience two are at 41% higher odds (p < .01), and those who experience three or more are at 34.2% higher odds (p < .05).

Some of the controls are also significant predictors. Analysis also indicates that sex is the strongest predictor, with males being at 2.1-times higher odds than females (p < .001). Children living in poverty are at 40.7% higher odds than children not living in poverty (p < .001). The mother’s age at birth is also a significant predictor. For every additional year at age of birth, the odds of engaging in delinquent behavior decreases by 2.4% (p < .01). The variables for race and mother’s education are insignificant predictors. Overall, the results demonstrate that the instability a child experiences is a more robust

\(^6\) Given that children born to those family structures experience similar levels of instability (see Table 2), this is unsurprising.
predictor of delinquent behavior than a static measures of family structure. This affirms the importance of accounting for family instability in studies examining the effects of family structure on delinquent outcomes.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

While there is a large body of existing literature on the association between family structure and delinquency, few studies have incorporated recent trends detected by family demographers. Notably, no studies to date have accounted for the frequency of family structure transitions and its effect on delinquency. This study attempts to address this issue by drawing on analyses from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.

Results from bivariate and cross-sectional analyses demonstrate the value in accounting for family structure transitions. Once those are accounted for, the effect of being born to cohabiting parents or a single mother, as opposed to married parents, is mediated. While the effect of being born to a single mother remains in relation to cohabiting parents, this can likely be explained by similar levels of instability. Further, once various controls are included, the effects of instability remain. This demonstrates that the number of family structure transitions has greater explanatory power than the arrangement the child was born into.

Though support for the instability hypothesis is demonstrated, I do not find support for an additive effect, which is commonly supported by research examining the number of family structure transitions and various other outcomes. In other words, the results from this study suggest that the number of transitions does not necessarily matter. The
differences in effects between the number of transitions for those experience one, two, or three or more are insignificant. Rather, what is important is whether any transition occurs. Children who experience any number of transitions are 28-41% more likely to report engaging in delinquent behavior.

In summary, these findings are important in two ways. First, they provide an important advancement in delinquency studies concerning the relationship between family structure and delinquency. Previous studies analyzing predictors of delinquency had not accounted for the number of transitions that occur through a child’s life course and the findings from this study demonstrate the explanatory power of this variable. Second, this study does not find support for an additive effect. Under this framework, we would expect to find that each additional transition results in a more delinquent outcome. While there is evidence to support the theory that stability results in more optimal outcomes, I find there is no statistically significant difference between those who experience one, two, or even three or more transitions.

There are, however, important caveats to be considered. First, delinquency is relatively uncommon across all subgroups. Thus, a 20- or even 40% increase in the likelihood of engaging in delinquent behavior still results in relatively low likelihood. Furthermore, previous research has found that family structure effects account for only a
modest amount of the variation in child outcomes (Wells and Rankin 1991; Apel and Kaukinen 2008). Second, and related to the first, this study examines delinquent behaviors amongst 9-year olds. One would not expect there to be very many prolific offenders—those who engage in numerous behaviors—within such a young population. Third, I may undercount the number of transitions prior to age 3 because the FFCWS did not ask participants how many partners they had lived with since the prior survey. Fourth, the FFCWS is not representative of the entire U.S. population but instead of only children growing up in cities with populations over 200,000, though there is no reason to believe these findings would not also be of relevance. And lastly, this study analyzed cross-sectional data, albeit with a lagged independent variable, preventing causal claims that other studies analyzing family instability have been able to argue (McLanahan et al. 2013). Nevertheless, this study is an important step in understanding the increasingly complex relationship between families and delinquency.

The growing body of research on family instability is beginning to unveil the complexity of this phenomenon and demonstrate the need for further testing. Future delinquency research examining this relationship would be wise to draw from these studies. One example would be to consider the type of transition and its relative affect on delinquency. As Lee and McLanahan’s (2015) recent study demonstrates, the type of
transition matters for children’s outcomes. Another important aspect to consider is the timing of transitions. Ryan, Claessens, and Markowitz’s (2015) study found that family structure transitions that occurred early in childhood were more detrimental than later transitions. One area that is gaining increased attention across the social sciences is the issue of population heterogeneity. Both of these studies have found that the effects of instability vary by race and class respectively (Lee and McLanahan 2015; Ryan et al. 2015). Researchers should continue to explore how other characteristics, such as gender, exacerbate or alleviate the effects of family structure transitions. In addition, research should explore how instability influences various family processes that have been found to be strong predictors of delinquent outcomes (Sampson and Laub 1993). But beyond instability, researchers should seek to better understand how complex and increasingly common living arrangements shape delinquent outcomes.

The increasing complexity of family life has garnered attention from scholars and policymakers alike who aim to better understand the implications for child development. Despite the centrality of the family in delinquency theory, little attention has been given to this growing body of literature amongst delinquency researchers. This study marks an important step in the study of family structure and delinquency by incorporating family structure instability, as measured by maternal partner transitions. The instability hypothesis
posits that unstable environments produce stress and contribute to child outcome gaps. Empirical studies by family demographers have repeatedly found support for this theory on child problem behavior outcomes. This study considers the effects on more serious childhood delinquent behaviors. While this study does not find support for the additive effect hypothesis, analysis reveals that children who experience *any* transition are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior. Furthermore, the effects of family structure at birth are mediated once accounting for instability and other controls. However, the effects of instability remain. This underscores the importance of accounting for family structure transitions, and family complexity in general, when attempting to better understand the family environment as a source of delinquent behavior.
References


## Appendices

### Table 4. Delinquency Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Delinquency Scale (alpha=.70)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purposely damaged or destroyed property</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taken or stolen something</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taken money at home</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheated on a school test</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a fist fight with another person</td>
<td>757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurt an animal on purpose</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gone into somebody's garden/yard/house</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ran away from home</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped school without an excuse</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretly taken a sip of wine, beer, or liquor</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoked marijuana</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoked a cigarette or used tobacco</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been suspended or expelled from school</td>
<td>433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written things or sprayed paint on wall</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposely set fire to building, car, other</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoided paying for things</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrown objects at people or cars</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study
Table 5. Pairwise Comparison of Family Structure Transitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Instability</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>Coef.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 vs 1</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>.141</td>
<td>1.082</td>
<td>0.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+ vs 1</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>.135</td>
<td>1.017</td>
<td>0.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+ vs 2</td>
<td>-0.062</td>
<td>.146</td>
<td>0.940</td>
<td>-0.050</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

נתי: OR = odds ratio; SE = standard error
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed tests)