

## **The Role of Grandparents in Single-Mother Families**

**Rachel Dunifon**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**Department of Policy Analysis and Management**  
**Cornell University**  
**295 MVR Hall**  
**Ithaca, NY 14853**  
**607-255-6535 (phone)**  
**607-255-4071 (fax)**  
**[red26@cornell.edu](mailto:red26@cornell.edu)**

**Lori Kowaleski-Jones**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**Department of Family and Consumer Studies**  
**University of Utah**  
**225 South, 1400 East, AEB Room 228**  
**Salt Lake City, Utah 84112-0080**  
**801-585-0074 (phone)**  
**801-581-5156 (fax)**  
**[lk2700@fcs.utah.edu](mailto:lk2700@fcs.utah.edu)**

## **The Role of Grandparents in Single-Mother Families**

### *Abstract*

This paper asks two research questions: first, does living with a grandparent reduce the potential detrimental influences of single-parenthood on children? Second, does this relationship vary by race or ethnicity? We employ a random effects model using data from the NLSY79 mother-child files. Results from preliminary analyses suggest that, for black children, grandparent co-residence is not associated with delinquency. For white children, living with a grandparent is associated with reduced delinquency, but not particularly for children living with a single mother. Future work will expand the set of outcomes examined, as well as the age group of children we study.

### *Introduction*

Previous research finds that children growing up in a single-parent family fare worse than those in married-parent families on a variety of outcomes (e.g., McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). This paper examines the role of grandparent co-residence in moderating the influence of single-parenthood on children. In doing so, we make several contributions to the literature in this area. First, to address issues of selection into family living arrangements, we estimate random effects models. Second, this paper examines whether the role of grandparents and single-parenthood varies by race or ethnicity. This is important because of the higher prevalence of both single-parenthood and grandparent co-residence in African-American families, and because previous work found significant race differences in the influence of single-parenthood and cohabitation on children (Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones, 2002).

### *Data*

We use data from the 2000 and earlier survey rounds of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 merged mother-child files (NLSY79), a nationally representative survey designed by the U.S. Department of Labor to study variations in labor market behavior and experiences. The parents of the children we study were between ages 14 and 22 when first interviewed in 1979 and constitute a representative sample of individuals born between 1957 and 1965. Their ages ranged from 35 to 43 in 2000, and they have been interviewed annually since 1979 (biennially since 1994). Beginning in 1988, and biennially thereafter, interviewers administered the Child Self-Administered Survey (CSAS) to children of women in the original sample who were aged 10 and older. This data on children can be merged with that of their mothers, resulting in the NLSY mother-child file. Because each child can be assessed more than once, the data is stacked to create a child-year file in which each child contributes multiple observations.

### *Measures*

Delinquency. The key outcome used in this paper is a measure of delinquency comprised of 8 items from the CSAS. These items ask the child how often in the past year he or she has: stayed out later than his/her parents allowed, hurt someone badly enough to need a doctor, lied to parents about something important, taken something without paying for it, damaged school property on purpose, ever gotten drunk, skipped a day of school without permission, and stayed out a night without permission.

Family Structure. To measure family structure, we sum the total number of years from birth to a child's assessment point that he or she lived with the mother and no spouse or cohabiting partner (single parent) and the mother and her spouse (married parent). Years

in which the child was living with the mother and her non-married cohabiting partner are controlled as well.

Grandparent Co-Residence. We use a measure of whether the child's grandparent or great-grandparent lives in the household, taken at each wave.

Control Measures. All analyses control for the following measures: child race and sex, average income over the child's lifetime up to the assessment (logged), ages of the child and mother, number of children in the household (including the assessed child), total number of weeks the mother has been employed up to the assessment point, and total years of welfare receipt up to the assessment point. All analyses also include controls for the total number of family structure disruptions a child has experienced, and the duration since the most recent family structure disruption, at each assessment point.

#### *Method and Results*

To address issues of selection, we use random effect regressions, relying on repeated observations of family structure and the outcome of interest, delinquency, for each child. These analyses exploit the fact that we have several observations for each child in the NLSY.

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for the variables of interest in this paper. Table 2 shows the percentage of white and black children who live with a grandparent, separately for single- and married-parent families. Results show that, for all family structures, black children are more likely to live with a grandparent than white children. Additionally, children living with single mothers are most likely to live with a grandparent. Table 3 presents preliminary results from the random effects regression. For black children, there is no association between living in a single-parent family and child

delinquency, confirming earlier research (Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones, 2002). Additionally, for black children, living with a grandparent is not associated with delinquency for the whole sample, nor does it moderate the influence of single-parenthood on children. For white children, living with a single mother is associated with an increase in delinquency. Additionally, living with a grandparent is associated with a decrease in delinquency, but grandparent co-residence does not moderate the influence of single-motherhood on white children.

#### *Future Work*

Future analyses will expand the outcomes examined to include test scores, behavior problems, and measures of parenting behaviors. We will also expand the age range of children we examine. Finally, we will conduct separate analyses for Hispanic children and will include 2002 NLSY data.

#### *Summary*

This paper examines whether living with a grandparent helps to offset some of the potential detrimental effects of single-motherhood on children. Preliminary results find strong race differences in the relationship between family structure. For black children, grandparent co-residence does not play a role in influencing delinquency. For white children, living with a grandparent is a protective factor, but not especially so for those living with a single mother.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics: Means and Standard Deviations (unweighted)

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Delinquency	3.15	3.55
Lives with grandparents	.08	.27
Visits friends and relatives weekly or more	.32	.47
Child is black	.36	.48
Child's family receives welfare	.18	.39
Whether living in single-parent family	.27	.45
Whether living in married-couple family	.66	.47
Total years in single-parent family	3.52	4.23
Total years in a married-couple family	7.24	5.61
Log income	10.30	.99
Child age	12.29	1.58
Number of children in household	2.60	1.16
Total weeks of maternal employment	307.39	243.12
Total years of AFDC receipt	2.65	3.77
Maternal age	33.46	3.48
Yrs. since most recent family structure change	1.92	4.06
Total number of family structure changes	1.36	1.53

Sample: children aged 10-14 with non-missing measures of delinquency

Table 2. Whether child lives with grandparents (N = 3,530)

	<i>White Mean</i>	<i>Black Mean</i>	<i>Significance of difference white vs. black</i>
Single-parent families	.10	.15	p = .05
Married couple families	.04	.09	p = .06

Sample: children aged 10-14 with non-missing measures of delinquency

Table 3: Preliminary Random-effect regression results predicting delinquency

	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>
Single*Lives with Grandparent	-.02 (.15)	-.003 (.09)
Single	.02 (.05)	.07** (.03)
Lives with Grandparent	.06 (1.37)	-1.01* (.54)
Number of obs	493	2391

## References

- Dunifon, R. & Kowaleski-Jones, L. 2002. "Who's in the House? Race Differences in Cohabitation, Single-Parenthood and Child Development." *Child Development* 73(4): 1249-1264.
- McLanahan, S., & Sandefur, G. (1994). Growing up with a single parent: What hurts, what helps? Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.