

Socially isolated? How parents and neighbourhood adults influence youth behaviour in disadvantaged communities

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Abstract

William Julius Wilson's model of adult joblessness, community disorganization and their effects on youth problem behaviour de-emphasizes the range in children's outcomes across socially disorganized communities, and says little about the factors that influence this variation. It also does not address the *processes* by which family structure and relationships affect the well-being of African-American and poor youth. My work is part of a larger research agenda that has begun to address these issues by focusing on the differential rates of sexual activity among youth living in disadvantaged environments, and developing models to explain this variation. This work suggests that units of socially cohesive, stable adults exist among the social networks of successful children and families in poor neighbourhoods. It also points to the existence and functioning of alternative two-parent family structures and offers hypotheses for how family environment interacts with neighbourhood context to influence youth behaviour.

Keywords: African-American families; neighbourhood effects; family structure; socio-economic disadvantage.

In the past fifteen years, William Julius Wilson's work on the characteristics, causes and consequences of social disorganization in socio-economically disadvantaged urban communities has played a decisive role in shaping both the literature and social policy on how neighbourhood characteristics and contexts affect a variety of youth problem behaviours and family-related events, including early adolescent sexual debut, pregnancy and childbearing (Wilson 1987, 1996; Sampson and Wilson 1995). He uses two arguments to address environmental effects on youth

behaviour and outcomes. The first is organized under a comparative framework that evaluates the characteristics of disadvantaged and advantaged neighbourhoods to argue that differences between the two account for much of the variation in adolescent problem behaviour across environments. The second focuses on family formation among the disadvantaged as one explanation for youth problem behaviour, and argues that decreases in entry into and length of marriage along with increases in nonmarital childbearing among men and women in inner-city neighbourhoods have negatively affected adolescent behaviour in these communities through increased poverty in single-mother households and through the adult models of nonmarital sexual activity that these family structures represent.

High rates of adult joblessness guide both of these arguments. Diminishing employment opportunities for low-skilled, less educated, inner-city residents have resulted in high levels of unemployment, particularly among African-American men, and this joblessness among neighbourhood adults contributes to the social disorganization that produces youth problem behaviour in 'bad' versus 'good' neighbourhoods through weak adult social control of children in the community, and through weak adult/child social integration. Joblessness also weakens family structure in disadvantaged neighbourhoods by increasing relationship instability, decreasing rates of marriage, and increasing rates of nonmarital childbearing, resulting in delinquent behaviours including early sexual activity among youth.

William Julius Wilson's arguments have been profoundly influential in defining the research agendas and designs for urban poverty scholars, family sociologists, and other social scientists interested in child outcomes within a disadvantaged context. However, the model he first outlined in *The Truly Disadvantaged* and elaborated in subsequent works including *When Work Disappears*, suffers from two important limitations that impede our understanding of the relationship between community environment and adolescent adjustment. And since the field (both in family structure as well as in neighbourhood effects) has been so heavily dependent on his initial framework, it also suffers from these limitations. In effect, such a close following of Wilson's theoretical framework has produced an entire literature that largely 1) ignores the variation in youth outcomes across communities with similarly high rates of social disorganization – across 'bad' neighbourhoods – and can therefore tell us little about the factors that make a difference for children in high-risk settings, and 2) obscures the diversity, fluidity and complexity of family life in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Moreover, it is almost silent on the processes by which family structure in particular and the quality of relationships within families more generally affect adolescent well-being, particularly for African-American youth and youth living in family structures outside the traditional married, biological parent family and

single-mother family. All these processes are crucial to understand in disadvantaged contexts, but we know very little about them.

I begin to address each of these limitations by focusing on within-group differences in the risk of problem behaviour among African-American youth and among youth living in similarly disadvantaged environmental contexts. With respect to neighbourhood context, my work presents an alternative extension of Wilson's initial conceptualization by examining what happens when teenagers in disadvantaged contexts are able to select into the more socially organized aspects of their communities. I investigate the extent to which adolescents' perceptions of adult social control and participation in social networks of stable, working adults reduce the risk of early sexual activity. Is the social environment so detrimental that networks of stable adults are ineffective in promoting stability or encouraging positive behaviours, or are there pockets of stability within and around disadvantaged environments that can be protective? I provide preliminary evidence to suggest the latter, and offer ways to better test this hypothesis. My work complements other research in this area that also examines within group variation in family and adolescent responses to poor neighbourhood conditions, and some of that work is also presented in this essay.

With regard to the component of Wilson's argument concerning family environment and its effect on adolescent outcomes in inner-city communities, my research identifies two important considerations that extend his line of reasoning. The first calls attention to some of the alternative family structures in disadvantaged and black communities and their relationship to adolescent sexual activity, and the second examines not only the role and quality of relationships between mother and child but also the quality of relationships between the child and her father or father-figure and their association with early sexual activity, particularly in homes where the adult male is not the youth's biological father. Both these considerations acknowledge the diversity in family environment and family processes, and highlight the potential of adults in these family types to act in protective ways.

Neighbourhood context and adolescent sexual activity: Within-group comparisons

Wilson's 1987 and 1996 research regarding the link between the structural constraints of disadvantaged neighbourhoods and problem behaviour within those communities provided a framework for an impressive amount of empirical work documenting the effect of neighbourhood characteristics and contexts on a variety of outcomes, including adolescent sexual activity (Mayer and Jencks 1989; Crane 1991; Brewster 1994; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan and Aber 1997; Sucoff and Upchurch 1998; Moore and Brooks-Gunn, 2002). These studies generally support his

thesis that high levels of concentrated poverty create conditions that isolate residents from mainstream society, are more likely to offer adult models of joblessness and other negative behaviours, and provide lower levels of community social organization and social control over youth (Wilson 1987, 1996). While strong neighbourhoods integrate adults and children through 'extensive sets of obligations, expectations and social networks' that provide supervision and structure for youth, under Wilson's thesis the adults in disadvantaged neighbourhoods either fail to provide this type of structure, producing weak adult/child community integration, or produce strong integration but negatively influence youth because they are jobless or engage in undesirable activities (1996, pp. 61–2). His work suggests that poor urban neighbourhoods disadvantage the adolescents in them because they are less likely to possess collective processes that are important for healthy development.

The leading scholars in this literature tend to agree on specific neighbourhood characteristics that make for healthy and positive outcomes for youth, specifically the intergenerational closure of local networks, meaning the presence of an extensive set of obligations, expectations and interlocking social networks connecting stable adults to children (Sampson 1992; Furstenberg and Hughes 1997), and mutually agreed upon cultural expectations for the informal social control of children (Brooks-Gunn *et al.* 1993; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan and Aber 1997; Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls 1997; Sampson 2001). However, while the literature has shown that less of this type of collective efficacy and community integration exists in neighbourhoods characterized by high rates of concentrated poverty (Kornhauser 1978; Sampson 2001), Sampson, Morenoff and Earls' (1999) work also showed that concentrated disadvantaged did not play a significant role in constraining or generating adult-child exchange (p. 647). Furstenberg *et al.*'s 1999 work gives us reason to believe that some form of positive adult-child interaction continues to take place in inner-city neighbourhoods. To the extent that smaller cohesive and stable networks of adults continue to exist for families in larger disadvantaged communities, it follows that the adults who participate in them, as well as the youth who are the recipients of the social control that residents exert, may behave in more socially organized ways compared to others in the larger neighbourhood who are not part of these locality-based informal and formal groups.

Sampson has hypothesized that community social cohesion and collective efficacy may mediate the effects of concentrated disadvantage on violence and delinquent behaviours in poverty neighbourhoods (Sampson 1991; Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls 1997). However, findings of the association between fertility-related behaviour and neighbourhood context are often operationalized at the macro-level, using census tracts or standard metropolitan statistical areas as the unit of analysis. This obscures the influence of more proximate community

contexts and relationships on individual behaviour. In my dissertation research, I approached the relationship between neighbourhood disadvantage and individual behaviour by examining the extent to which an adolescent's positive perception of neighbourhood adults and the larger neighbourhood environment can act as a protective factor against early sexual activity and pregnancy. I hypothesized that adolescents who are able to turn to other adults outside the family for social support might also be more likely to receive the advice and direction needed to help avoiding early pregnancy. More generally, families who create and participate in more socially organized systems within the larger neighbourhood, and who involve their children in these groups may reduce the occurrence of early adolescent sexual activity.

Preliminary analyses

The Families in Communities [FIC] Study, led by P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, allowed us to shed some light on the within-group variation in sexual activity among a random sample of 300 adolescent girls living in three high-poverty Chicago neighbourhoods in 1996 (see Moore and Chase-Lansdale 2001 for a detailed description of the study). Results using the FIC data showed some support for my initial hypotheses. We examined two outcomes: sexual debut and pregnancy experience, and operationalized adult social support using two variables. The first summed and averaged three items from the perceived quality of neighbourhood scale (Korbin and Coulton 1994; Sampson, Morenoff and Earls 1999). Individuals were asked the extent to which they agree with the following statements: 'People in the neighbourhood help each other out when there's trouble,' 'People in the neighbourhood watch out for each other's children,' and 'A lot of people in the neighbourhood know each other.' Higher scores indicate greater *neighbour social support*. The second measure asked respondents to identify five adults they know outside of their household and to state whether each of these individuals received welfare. This measure was used to measure the proportion of adults in the teen's social network who received welfare, and assesses the economic instability of adults who can act as agents of socialization. It is a proxy for the *proportion of jobless adults in the adolescent's network*.¹

Bivariate analyses showed that adolescent females who perceived higher levels of social support from community adults were significantly less likely to initiate sexual intercourse and experience a pregnancy. Girls who participated in social networks of jobless adults were more likely to have initiated sex and to have experienced a pregnancy. In multivariate analyses controlling for background factors and quality of the mother-daughter relationship, greater social support, both through greater perceptions of adult neighbour support and lower proportions of jobless

Table 1. *Bivariate Statistics by Initiation of Intercourse and Pregnancy Experience⁵*

Variables	Abstained (N = 130)	Debuted (N = 159)	Never Pregnant (N = 213)	Ever Pregnant (N = 77)
	%	%	%	%
Age	15.72	16.64 ***	16.00	16.84 ***
Age at Menarche	12.30	12.22	12.20	12.16
Academic Performance	6.48	5.82 ***	6.15	6.03
Mother's Education	12.05	11.70	11.88	11.79
Income-Needs Ratio	1.11	.93	1.10	.77**
Family Welfare Receipt	.49	.51	.49	.53
% Married	23.10	9.40***	19.80	3.90***
% Cohabiting	16.90	22.60	21.70	15.60
% Single	60.00	67.90	58.50	80.50***
Quality of Mother-Daughter Relationship	4.07	3.75***	3.96	3.73*
Perceived Neighbor Social Support	2.81	2.65*	2.77	2.58*
Positive Peer Influences	3.47	3.18**	3.39	3.07**
Proportion of Network Receiving Welfare	.13	.21**	.14	.25***

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001
(N = 289)

Table 2. *Odds-Ratios for Logistic Regressions Predicting Pregnancy from Individual, Family and Community Characteristics.⁶*

Independent Variables	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D
Age	2.19***	2.16***	2.08***	2.07***
Age at Menarche	.83	.86	.80	.83
Academic Performance	.91	.93	.95	.98
Mother's Education	1.12	1.13	1.13	1.14
Income-Needs Ratio	.55*	.55*	.57	.57
Family Welfare Receipt	1.25	1.22	1.13	1.00
Single-Reference				
Married	.18*	.19*	.20*	.21*
Cohabiting	.65	.63	.68	.67
Mother-Daughter Relationship	—	.64	—	.71
Perceived Neighbor Social Support	—	—	.63	.65
Positive Peer Influences	—	—	.66	.69
Network Receiving Welfare	—	—	5.00*	4.92*
Constant	-11.65	-10.33	-8.55	-7.86
-2LL	276.29***	272.37***	262.60***	260.50***
Degrees of Freedom	8	9	11	12
Change in Model Chi-Square		3.83	13.59**	2.11

* p ≤ .05 ** p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001 (two-tailed tests)
(N = 289)

adults in the teen's social network significantly related to a lower risk of pregnancy experience.

Both Furstenburg *et al.* (1999) and Sampson, Morenoff and Earls (1999) found that in disadvantaged, urban communities, there were fewer expectations of adult participation in the informal social control of children. Parents were less trusting in the ability of neighbourhood adults to safely care for their adolescents and were more likely to restrict the level of interaction between residents and their children. My work suggests that given these lowered expectations for adult involvement in youth's lives, when positive participatory action by local adults does occur it is associated with better child outcomes. More generally, my work suggests the presence of strong adult/child community integration in inner-city neighbourhoods in ways that promote healthy adolescent well-being, at least in terms of delayed teen childbearing. So while this work is consistent with Wilson's hypothesis regarding the importance of stable relationships between youth and adults who provide supervision and act as positive agents of socialization, it also locates these relationships in disadvantaged contexts.

What remains unclear is the pervasiveness of these stable networks of adults throughout inner-city communities. We know that there are fewer in number here when compared to other, more socio-economically advantaged communities (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls 1997; Furstenberg *et al.* 1999; Sampson, Morenoff and Earls 1999), but we know less about where they are located and whether these adults are connected to formal organizations, or are merely local residents who manage to influence the lives of youth in more indirect ways. Furstenberg *et al.*'s work suggests that when parents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods create protective pockets of stability by inserting children into networks of stable adults and involving them in pro-social activities, these networks and organizations usually extend beyond the neighbourhood environment. We know that successful families are not limited by firm neighbourhood boundaries, and that individuals can draw resources from non-geographically bounded groups. Qualitative research in this field suggests that residential address may not be the principal location of neighbourhood experiences, and calls for the need for researchers to rethink the idea of firm ecological boundaries (Williams and Kornblum 1985; Burton and Graham 1998). However, there may be concrete differences between families who have greater or lesser capabilities in obtaining resources and building social relationships from individuals and organizations outside of their neighbourhood environments, and these differences may also influence how successful their children are at avoiding neighbourhood risks.

We also need to know how the adult networks created by more successful families in disadvantaged neighbourhoods function in a way that may result in delayed pregnancy and other desirable outcomes for

youth. How are childbearing attitudes and values transmitted by outside adults? One could see a direct transmission through one-on-one communication or participation in group activities. Alternatively one might hypothesize an indirect transmission through modelling. As children grow older and spend less time at home, the level of direct supervision decreases and peers exert an increasing influence on adolescent behaviour through their attitudes and behaviours (Whitbeck Conger and Kao 1993). In this context, indirect monitoring by adults outside of the household becomes progressively more important. Community adults are in a position to participate in this indirect supervision so the extent and nature of their interactions with youth are especially important, given the higher levels of neighbourhood social disorganization. The field needs more research on how neighbourhood adults influence youth behaviour in disadvantaged contexts. More generally, we will benefit from studies that focus on within-group differences in outcomes among youth in the inner city.

Family structure, family process and adolescent sexual activity

My research is part of a larger developing literature in the field of family studies which has begun to address the second component of Wilson's argument regarding family structure, family environment and adolescent behaviour. In chapter four of *When Work Disappears*, he argues that a combination of diminishing employment opportunities for low-skilled workers and changing norms and cultural patterns has resulted in decline in marriage, shorter durations of marital relationships and increases in nonmarital childbearing among inner-city African Americans. These factors together have weakened family structure among disadvantaged blacks and made it more difficult for families to effectively socialize children in ways that adequately prepare them for later success (pp. 105–6).

Now we know that the decisions adolescents make are shaped in important ways by family experience, since the family is the primary context for social, psychological and emotional development (Feldman and Elliott 1990). The literature has shown that parental relationship instability is disadvantageous for all family members, and that living in an unmarried household increases the likelihood of poverty and adjustment problems for children (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). However, Wilson presents black families as being led either by the traditional, married, two-biological parent form or the single-mother model. This dichotomized representation is a primary limitation in the structure of his argument because it ignores the tremendous fluidity into and out of family structures that takes place in disadvantaged and African-American groups, and it obscures the variety of family structures that exist among disadvantaged and African-American populations. For

example, in my (2001a) analysis of Round One of the NLSY97 cohort, I found that while 37 per cent of the larger sample were living in families outside of the two-biological parent structure, a full 60 per cent of African-American adolescents were living in these non-traditional households.² When compared to whites, African-Americans were significantly more likely to be living with never-married single-mothers and in maritally disrupted single-mother households. They were also more likely to be living in alternative two-parent families, including cohabiting households and first-marriage stepfamilies.³

Despite the increased presence of these family structures both in the larger society and in specific racial and socio-economic groups, very little has been written or theorized about their existence or how they affect adolescent well-being (Bumpass and Raley 1995; Bumpass, Raley and Sweet 1995; Smock 2000). This omission is particularly problematic when estimating the effect of family structure on African-American youth, who initiate sexual activity at earlier ages and who are more likely to spend time in one of the alternative family forms (Mott 1990; Wojtkiewicz 1992; Manning and Lichter 1996; Moore 2001a).

A second problem in the framing of Wilson's discussion of how black families influence youth behaviour is his inattention to other aspects of the home environment apart from family structure, such as relationship quality between parents and between parents and children, as well as child management strategies in discipline and monitoring. However, models that focus on household structure as the specific mechanism through which the family environment affects children's behaviour can be limiting, particularly when the more detailed features of the family context are collapsed into broader family classifications that may or may not have similar consequences for youth outcomes. We know little about the quality of relationships in these family forms and how they relate to youth outcomes.

Preliminary analyses

Some recent studies have begun to examine more closely the family forms that exist among African Americans to understand how family structure, particularly in alternative two-parent and single-parent households, influences early sexual behaviour, and how family process, measured through the relationship quality and the extent of supervision and monitoring, relates to youth sexual activity. I approached this question by examining the odds of sexual debut and pregnancy among the disadvantaged, African-American families in the FIC study for youth in never married and maritally disrupted single-mother households, cohabiting households, remarried households and traditional two-biological parent families (Moore and Chase-Lansdale 2001). In this sample of disadvantaged families, only 9 per cent of respondents were

Table 3. Descriptive Sample Characteristics for Adolescents in NLSY97 by Sexual Debut and by Race^{1,7}

	Sample (N = 3727)	% Initiated (N = 1081)	% Abstained (N = 2646)	Whites (N = 2624)	Blacks (N = 1103)
Initiated Intercourse	.27	.00	1.00***	.24	.43***
<i>Family Structure:</i>					
Two Biological Parents	.63	.49	.69***	.68	.40***
Remarried Stepfamily	.09	.13	.08***	.09	.08
1st Marriage Stepfamily	.02	.03	.02	.02	.04***
Cohabiting Household ^b	.03	.05	.02***	.02	.05***
Never Married Single-Mother	.05	.08	.04***	.03	.19***
Maritally Disrupted Single-Mother	.18	.23	.16***	.16	.25***
<i>Parental Support and Discipline:</i>					
Mother is Strict	.51	.45	.53***	.50	.59***
Father is Strict ^c	.56	.51	.57**	.56	.59
Mother is Highly supportive	.80	.74	.82***	.80	.80
Father is Highly supportive ^c	.66	.52	.71***	.67	.61*
<i>Background Characteristics:</i>					
Black	.16	.26	.13***	.00	1.00
Female	.49	.49	.49	.50	.48
Age 14	.34	.19	.39***	.35	.33
Age 15	.34	.32	.35	.36	.34
Age 16	.32	.49	.26***	.29	.33*
Early Pubertal Development (Females)	.13	.17	.11***	.11	.21***
Late Pubertal Development (Males)	.06	.06	.06	.05	.12***
<i>Income-Need Categories:</i>					
Poor (.00-1.00)	.10	.16	.08***	.10	.23***
Near Poor (1.01-3.00)	.31	.34	.30*	.31	.31
Not Poor (3.01-high)	.36	.29	.39***	.38	.18***
Missing Income-Needs Ratio	.23	.21	.23	.21	.28***
<i>Mother's Education:</i>					
Less than High School	.15	.21	.13***	.17	.24***
High School Graduate	.36	.41	.34***	.35	.39
Some College	.26	.22	.27***	.25	.22*
College Graduate	.20	.13	.23***	.21	.10***
Missing Mother's Education	.03	.03	.02 ⁺	.02	.05***

^aWeighted percentages and unweighted N.

^bNo biological father in this household structure.

^cAsked only of respondents living in two-parent households.

+ p < .10 * p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001.

living with two married biological parents. Five per cent were living in stepfamilies, and 20 per cent were living in cohabiting households.⁴ Thirty-nine per cent were living in never married, single-mother families and 25 per cent were living in maritally disrupted single-mother households.

Consistent with Wilson's argument, we found that the risk of early sexual activity was lowest for youth living in married households. However, we also found differences in the risk of sexual debut and pregnancy across alternative family structures. For example, the risk of sexual debut was significantly *lower* for youth in stepfamily households compared to individuals in all other family structures. Among girls who had initiated sex, the risk of pregnancy was lower for respondents in cohabiting compared to single-mother households. In this and other work, I offer hypotheses for why these relationships exist (Moore 2001a; 2001b). Other studies have also begun to recognize these alternative family forms and are finding differentials in the risk of problem behaviour for youth in them (Morrison and Ritualo 2000; Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones 2002). For example, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) found a lower risk of high-school dropout and teenage birth for African-American adolescents in stepfamilies. These youth had similar rates of problem behaviour as African-American teenagers in two-biological parent families, and lower rates compared to individuals in single-parent families (p. 76). Thompson, Hanson, and McLanahan (1994) also report better outcomes for adolescents in mother-stepfather compared to mother-partner and maritally disrupted single-mother households in academic performance, internalizing behaviours and externalizing problem behaviours.

Racial contingencies of family structure on youth behaviour

There may be important differences across race in the effect of alternative family types on the risk of adolescent sexual activity, and a few studies are beginning to support and develop this hypothesis (e.g. McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). I propose that the effect of living in a stepfamily may vary with the community and cultural context in which a family lives. Black children of all socio-economic types are significantly more likely to spend time in single-mother families (Wojtkiewicz 1992; Bumpass and Raley 1995). They are also more likely to live in socio-economically disadvantaged communities, as Wilson's (1987, 1996) and other work suggests (Crane 1991; Jargowsky 1997). For adolescents living in socially disorganized communities, the parental figure in stepfamily or cohabiting households may provide a source of stability, dependability, and discipline that is not present in the majority of peer homes by comparison. Within this context, black children living in alternative two-parent families may perceive themselves to be better off economically and socially compared to their peers in single-mother households and this sense of lower relative deprivation might contribute to a reduced likelihood of problem behaviours for adolescents in these family types. In a disadvantaged context, while living with two biological parents might still be the optimal family form, the presence of a second adult who acts in a parental way might translate into outcomes that are

Table 4. Odds-Ratios for Models Predicting Sexual Debut and Pregnancy Experience using Alternative Household Structure Measures^{a,8}

	Full Model Sexual Debut	Full Model Pregnancy ^b	Full Model Pregnancy ^c
Single – Reference			
Married Biological Parents	.75	.29	.32
Stepfamily	.08**	.18	.94
Cohabiting	1.36	.70	.48 ⁺
Other	1.79	.00	.00

⁺p ≤ .10 * p ≤ .05 **p ≤ .01 (two-tailed tests)

^a Models control for age, age at menarche, academic performance, mother's education, income-needs ratio, family welfare receipt, quality of mother-daughter relationship, perceived neighbor social support, peer influences, and proportion of adult social network receiving welfare.

^b Includes all respondents (N = 289)

^c Includes sexually experienced respondents (N = 159)

not as negative as would be expected in a more advantaged context where two biological parents are the norm.

In contrast, white children are more likely to live in socially organized neighbourhoods where the normative family structure consists of two biological parents (Wilson 1987, 1996; Sucoff and Upchurch 1998). Children who live in stepfamilies and other household types may perceive their family structure in a more negative way, contributing to a greater likelihood of problem behaviour. For this reason, the risk of early sexual activity among adolescents in alternative two-parent households compared to adolescents living with two biological parents may be greater among whites than among blacks.

Familial process and youth behaviour

Variation in household structure is only part of a story on family effects and adolescent outcomes. To truly understand how household adults influence youth behaviour, we must also know about the quality of relationships in the home. While much has been written about the mother-child relationship and its effect on youth outcomes, less is known about the relationship between father or father-figure and adolescent problem behaviour. This is particularly true with regard to alternative two-parent families. While Hetherington and colleagues have developed models to explain parent-child relationships in middle and upper-middle class white, remarried families (Hetherington, Cox and Cox 1982; Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington 1990; Hetherington and Clingempeel 1992; Bray 1999), we know surprisingly little about the quality of relationships between the children and father-figures who enter the household as cohabiting partners or through first-marriage stepfamilies. In addition, because marital relationships and nonmarital unions are embedded

within the context of different cultures, norms and expectations, the meaning of these family types may vary from one racial or ethnic group to the next and may be differentially associated with adolescent behaviour (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Orbuch, Veroff and Hunter 1999).

Whether or not a new father-figure exerts a positive influence on children's outcomes depends on a variety of factors including age and gender of child, measure of parental support, the nature of his relationship to the other household members, and how well he is received by the children in the home (Coombs and Landsverk 1988; Astone and McLanahan 1991; Thomson, Hanson and McLanahan 1994; Harris, Furstenberg and Marmer 1998). My larger research goal is to measure the quality of relationships between father-figures and children and develop models to estimate *how* father-figures contribute to children's well-being in these different family structures, apart from the economic explanations already established in the literature. Under what conditions do men in the home exert parental authority and supervision with children who are of no biological relation, and under what conditions are children accepting these efforts at parenting? Is there a relationship between community context and successful or receptive parenting from father-figures? We have some answers here with respect to middle and upper-income white children in stepfamilies, but know little about these family processes in other income groups, family structures, and neighbourhood contexts.

Preliminary analyses

Some of my work in this area has begun to address these issues by estimating the risk of early sexual initiation, comparing African-American and white youth in a variety of traditional and alternative family structures (Moore 2001a, 2001b). Analysing Round One of the NLSY97 cohort, I found important racial differences in the effect of family structure and father-child relationships between African-American and white youth. Among whites, the risk of early sexual initiation was significantly higher for respondents in almost every alternative family structure, while for blacks, none of the two-parent family structures was significantly different from the two-biological parent family with regard to risk of sexual intercourse, although the risk of sexual initiation was higher in both types of single-mother households compared to households with two biological parents. Strict and highly supportive parenting from father-figures in alternative two-parent households differentially related to odds of sexual initiation depending on family structure for whites, while for blacks parenting from father-figures was generally not associated with teenage sexual activity. Strict and supportive parenting from mothers in single-mother households had different effects on sexual initiation by race, depending on whether or

not the household was single through marital disruption or nonmarital birth.

There is a growing literature on the meaning, context, and social processes of fatherhood and father involvement for African-American fathers and fathers or father-figures who parent in disadvantaged environments. However, this literature is largely devoted to issues of employment, child support enforcement, relationship quality between partners, and strategies for survival, rather than parenting styles and interactions between fathers or father-figures and adolescents (Coley 2001; Edin and Nelson 2001; Jarrett, Roy and Burton 2002). Many studies consist of mothers' perceptions of father involvement, and some of this research concentrates on families with young children (Edin and Lein 1997; Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999; Carlson and McLanahan 2002). There are specific issues that remain unaddressed regarding the quality of relationships between parents, and between parents and adolescents in alternative two-parent households, and how these relationships contribute to short- and long-range outcomes for youth.

Future research

The results I have presented begin to address some of the important questions about relationships between fathers and adolescents, and how these relationships influence youth well-being, even though many more issues are raised than answered. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that 1) the quality of relationships between household adults and children are associated with children's behavioural outcomes; 2) the quality of relationships between children and father-figures in the home matter and are influenced by the position he occupies in the home (i.e. as a cohabiting partner, stepfather in a first-marriage or remarriage to the biological mother), as well as the types of family structure and the marital transitions previously experienced by the family; 3) there may be important racial differences in the way family structure influences children's outcomes; 4) there may be interaction effects between family environment (structure and processes) and neighbourhood environment (i.e. levels of community social organization) and their effect on children's outcomes. What does seem clear is that there are intricate associations between alternative family structures, parental discipline and support, and risk of sexual onset in mid-adolescence.

More broadly, we can view the hypotheses and findings presented in this essay as a springboard for future work on within-group differences in process and outcomes for youth. I am at the early stages of a larger research agenda that began on a path created by the work of William Julius Wilson, but that has taken its own twists and turns to create a new route for understanding the interaction between family environment, community context and children's well-being.

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Notes

1. We believe that welfare use is an adequate proxy for nonwork since only 2 per cent of adults in these networks received welfare and were also employed.
2. This sample only included youths in the NLSY97 aged 14 and older who were living with a biological mother.
3. Cohabiting households in this study include a biological mother and unrelated father-figure. First-marriage stepfamilies are created through a marriage which occurs after a nonmarital birth to a male who is not the youth's biological father.
4. Both remarried and first-marriage stepfamilies are included in the stepfamily category. Cohabiting households contain a biological mother and either a biological father or a mother's male partner who is not the teenager's biological father.
5. Table 1 reprinted from Moore, M. R. and Chase-Lansdale, P. L. 2001. 'Sexual Intercourse and Pregnancy among African-American Girls in High-Poverty Neighborhoods: The Role of Family and Perceived Community Environment', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, pp. 1146–1157, Table 2.
6. Table 2 reprinted from Moore, M. R. and Chase-Lansdale, P. L. 2001. 'Sexual Intercourse and Pregnancy among African-American Girls in High-Poverty Neighborhoods: The Role of Family and Perceived Community Environment', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, pp. 1146–1157 Table 4
7. Table 3 reprinted from Moore, M. 2001. 'Family Structure and Adolescent Sexual Debut in Alternative Household Structures' in R. Michael (ed.) *Social Awakening: Adolescents' Behavior as Adulthood Approaches*, New York: Russell Sage, Table 4.
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