

## **Family Instability and the Exposure to Violence in Childhood and Adolescence**

Shannon E. Cavanagh, Robert Crosnoe, Chelsea Smith, and Haley Stritzel  
Population Research Center, University of Texas at Austin

Family instability, or the movement of biological and/or social parents in and out of children's lives, has emerged as an important marker that both reflects the lived experience of a growing proportion of American children (Cherlin 2010) and challenges their future social development (Lee and McLanahan 2015). Numerous studies have shown that such instability is associated with behavioral and academic problems as well as accelerated sexual and fertility behaviors across the early life course (see Crosnoe and Cavanagh 2010). Less work has considered young people's exposure to violence but there are reasons to expect that such a link exists. After all, the emotional stress, employment changes, residential moves, and economic fluctuations that often go along with partner change can disrupt household routines and interfere with sensitive parenting and parental monitoring. Children too become stressed following a partner transitions. Together, these structural and interpersonal changes can alter young people's everyday lives and increase their opportunity to observe violence. We know, for example, that family structure is linked to adolescent problem behavior through changes in parental monitoring and peer groups associated with moving (Foster and Brooks-Gunn 2013; Matsueda and Heimer 1987). This sequence parallels research emphasizing how exposure to violence arises in disorganized settings in which youth are disconnected from adults and have uncertain life opportunities (Browning and Jackson 2013; Jain and Cohen 2013; Zimmerman and Messner 2013). Thus, partner changes may increase youth's exposure to violence. Knowing how such exposure happens can help to identify protective factors that might guard against it.

We expect that much of this link operates through a set of intrafamily processes. We start from the assumption that all parents seek to protect their children from harm and violence but can face real constraints on translating their intentions into behavior in everyday life. In general, parents seek out safe and secure housing for their children. They also provide the emotional, social, and economic resources that children can draw on when their physical space is violent. Family instability, however, may interfere with these behaviors or undermine their impact. Partner transitions can leave parents depressed, stressed, under-resourced, and unsupported, disrupting household routines and interactions that are related to safety. Residential moves, often linked with partner change, may also be associated with the amount of violence children observe. Children can also become stressed following their parents' partner transitions and may seek out new, less supportive peers and neighborhoods.

These associations likely operate differently in different developmental periods and ecological contexts. Although growing evidence points to instability in early childhood as especially consequential for development (Cavanagh and Huston 2008; Fomby and Bosick 2013), children in middle school and older may have more opportunities to be exposed to violence than younger children because they navigate broader networks and settings. Similarly, this focal association may be moderated by the neighborhood context in which adolescents live. The implications of partner entrances or exits might be more pronounced in places with fewer opportunities for social mobility and positive peer/adult associations and buffered in places when residents serve as a social safety net and protect young people when families cannot (Dupéré et al. 2012; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). Thus, we consider both age and neighborhood context as potential moderators of this link between family instability and exposure to violence during adolescence.

Using data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN), this study examines the association between family instability and exposure to violence and the degree to which intrafamily processes mediate this link. We begin with characteristics of the resident parent, specifically reports of depression and parenting quality, as potential mediators linking family instability and exposure to violence. Next, we will add residential moves and children's own internalizing behaviors as potential mechanisms. Finally, we will consider the extent to which these associations are moderated by children's age and by neighborhood collective efficacy.

#### Data and Method

*Data.* The PHDCN was a multi-level, longitudinal dataset with parent reports, child assessments, and a community surveys. The Community Survey measured characteristics of the respondents' neighborhoods as well as their relationships with their neighbors, while the Longitudinal Cohort Study captured the personal characteristics and the changing circumstances of respondents' lives. Almost 1,000 children ages 0, 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18 and their caregivers were selected for the Longitudinal Cohort Study and were followed over three survey waves: Wave 1 1994-1997 (W1), Wave 2 1997-1999 (W2), and Wave 3 2000-2001 (W3). As a result of the stratified probability sample of neighborhoods, participants are racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse. The analytic sample included children from the age 3, 6, and 9 year old cohorts across ( $n = 2,810$ ).

*Measures.* The outcome was a scale of children's exposure to four types of violence: seeing a fight, seeing an attack with a weapon, hearing gun fire, and seeing someone get shot. Self-reports at W3 were coded into continuous measures of the frequency of each experience in the past year (0 = never to 10 = 10 or more times) and combined into an overall scale that ranged from 0 to 40. Primary caregivers who were the child's biological mother or father reported at W1 on their own union status and the relationship between that romantic partner and the focal child, which were combined to create a categorical variable for family structure (married biological parent family, cohabiting biological parent family, married stepparent family, cohabiting stepparent family, and single parent family). Family instability was measured as any change in family structure between W1 and W2. Potential mechanisms were intrafamily processes at W2. Maternal depression was defined as feeling depressed every day or almost daily for two or more weeks in a row over the past year. Parenting quality was measured with a scale of how frequently parents engaged in 8 activities with their children (1 = less than once per month to 4 = at least a few times per week), such as reading together, praising the child, and doing hobbies together. All models controlled for sociodemographic covariates: primary caregiver's age at W1, socioeconomic status at W1 (SEI score ranging from -3 to +4), child's gender (1 = female), and child's race/ethnicity (black, Latino/a, other race/ethnicity, with white as the reference category).

*Plan of analyses.* We conducted a path analysis in a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework to examine the magnitude and significance of associations between family instability, family stressors, and exposure to violence. Because the outcome was a count variable with many respondents reporting never being exposed to any such types of violence (i.e., a value of 0), Poisson regression models were conducted in Mplus using Monte Carlo integration and maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors.

#### Preliminary Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the analytic sample. On average, children had witnessed violence—defined as fights, attacks, gun fire, and shootings—about three times in the

past year. Note that this analytic sample of children were 3-9 years old at W1 and waves were about 3 years apart, meaning those children were 9-15 years old at W3. More than half of children lived with both biological parents at W1, although 30% of respondents lived with a single parent. Almost one-quarter of children experienced family instability between W1 and W2. About 20% of mothers were depressed, and parents engaged in positive parenting activities, on average, a few times each month.

Turning to multivariate results, Figure 1 displays path analysis results with standardized coefficients connecting family structure, family instability, intrafamily processes, and exposure to violence across W1, W2, and W3. Poisson regression models in Mplus predicted the outcome with two estimates: one for exposure to violence across the exposure to violence scale and one for only when exposure to violence was zero. These preliminary results suggest that family instability between W1 and W2 was associated with counts of observed violence at W3, net of important covariates including family structure at W1. That association operated, in part, through maternal depression. In other words, parents who experienced a partner change reported higher levels of depression at W2, which, in turn, was linked to children's exposure to violence.

#### Next Steps

In subsequent analyses, we will add measures of residential instability and children's behavior problems to the model represented in Figure 1. We will also unpack exposure to violence, considering where such violence occurs (at home vs. outside of the home) and including other types of violence that children may observe. Finally, we will consider whether these associations are moderated by age to reveal developmental stages when children may be most sensitive to the connection between family instability and exposure to violence, and by neighborhood to investigate whether children living in neighborhoods characterized by collective efficacy are protected against at least some of the link between instability and violence.

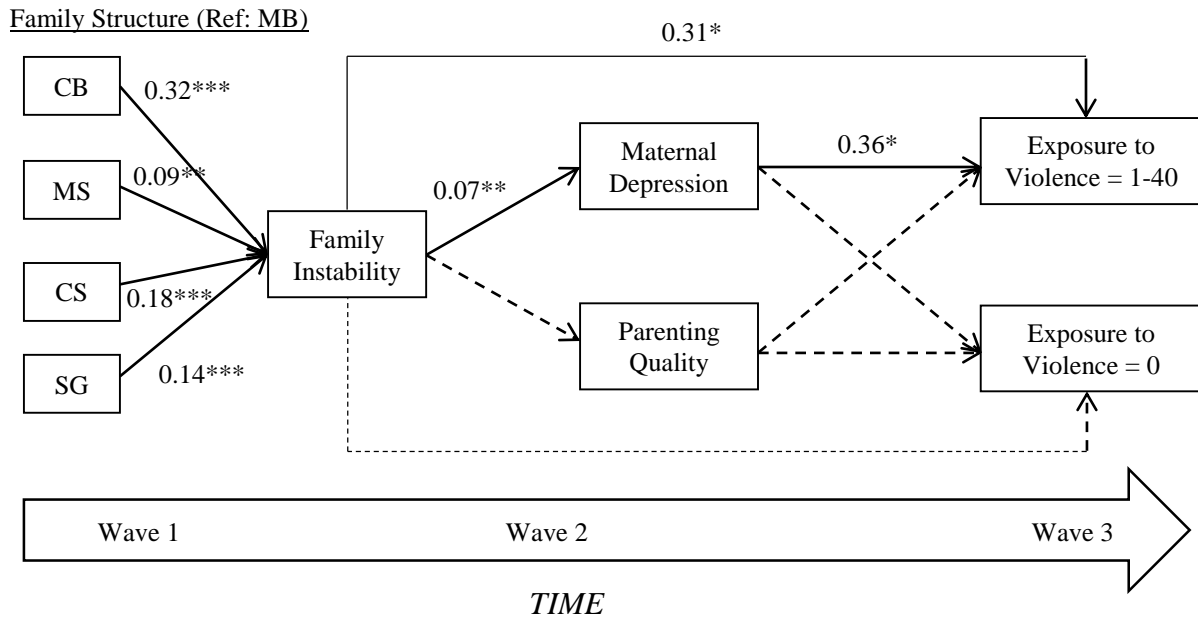
#### References

- Browning, Christopher R., and Aubrey L. Jackson. 2013. "The Social Ecology of Public Space: Active Streets and Violence Crime in Urban Neighborhoods." *Criminology* 51(4):1009-1043.
- Cavanagh, Shannon E., and Aletha C. Huston. 2008. "The Timing of Family Instability and Children's Social Development." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70(5):1258-1270.
- Cherlin, Andrew J. 2010. "Demographic Trends in the United States: A Review of Research in the 2000s." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72(3):403-419.
- Crosnoe, Robert, and Shannon E. Cavanagh. 2010. "Families with Children and Adolescents: A Review, Critique, and Future Agenda." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72(3):594-611.
- Dupéré, Véronique, Tama Leventhal, and Frank Vitaro. 2012. "Neighborhood Processes, Self-efficacy, and Adolescent Mental Health." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 53(2):183-198.
- Fomby, Paula, and Stacey J. Bosick. 2013. "Family Instability and the Transition to Adulthood." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 75(5):1266-1287.
- Foster, Holly, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. 2013. "Neighborhood Influences on Antisocial Behavior During Childhood and Adolescence." Pp. 69-90 in *Handbook of Life-Course Criminology*. New York: Springer.
- Jain, S., and A. K. Cohen. 2013. "Fostering Resilience among Urban Youth Exposed to Violence: A Promising Area for Interdisciplinary Research and Practice." *Health Education and Behavior* 40(6):651-662.
- Lee, Dohoon, and Sara McLanahan. 2015. "Family Structure Transitions and Child Development: Instability, Selection, and Population Heterogeneity." *American Sociological Review*.
- Leventhal, Tama, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. 2000. "The Neighborhood They Live In: The Effects of Neighborhood Residence on Child and Adolescent Outcomes." *Psychological Bulletin* 126(2):309.
- Matsueda, Ross L., and Karen Heimer. 1987. "Race, Family Structure, and Delinquency: A Test of Differential Association and Social Control Theories." *American Sociological Review* 826-840.
- Zimmerman, Gregory M., and Steven F. Messner. 2013. "Individual, Family Background, and Contextual Explanations of Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Youths' Exposure to Violence." *American Journal of Public Health* 103(3):435-442.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics ( $n = 2,810$ )

	Frequency, %	Mean (SD)
Exposure to Violence at W3		3.17 (4.68)
Family Structure at W1		
Married biological parent family	52.84%	
Cohabiting biological parent family	9.28%	
Married stepparent family	3.03%	
Cohabiting stepparent family	4.48%	
Single parent family	30.38%	
Any Family Instability W1-W2	23.55%	
Intrafamily Processes at W2		
Maternal depression	20.23%	
Parenting quality		3.16 (0.53)
Sociodemographic Covariates		
Primary caregiver's age at W1		33.21 (7.76)
Socioeconomic status at W1		-0.16 (1.39)
Child's gender is female	49.50%	
Child's race/ethnicity		
Black	33.77%	
Latino/a	48.13%	
White	14.32%	
Other race/ethnicity	3.78%	

Figure 1. Path Analysis Connecting Family Instability and Exposure to Violence



Note:  $n = 2,671$ ; MB = married biological parent family, CB = cohabiting biological parent family; MS = married stepparent family; CS = cohabiting stepparent family; SG = single parent family; solid lines represent significant pathways, dashed lines represent insignificant pathways; standardized coefficients show; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ , †  $p < .1$ ; model controls for primary caregiver's age at W1, socioeconomic status at W1, child's gender (female), and child's race/ethnicity.