

December 2004

**Why Do Children in Single-Parent and Step-Families
Experience More Victimization?**

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ABSTRACT

In a national probability sample of 1,000 children aged 10-17, youth from single parent and stepfamilies experienced higher rates of several different kinds of victimization compared to youth living with two biological parents. Youth in stepfamilies had the highest overall rates of victimization and the greatest risk from family perpetrators, including biological parents, siblings and stepparents. Elevated risk in stepfamilies is fully explained by their higher levels of family problems and parental dysfunction. Victimization risk in single parent families is more affected by their lower socio-economic status and residence in more violence neighborhoods and schools.

KEYWORDS: child victimization, family structure, perpetrator characteristics, parental dysfunction, neighborhood violence

INTRODUCTION

Social policy and research continue to be legitimately concerned about how different family structures affect children's development and well-being. High rates of divorce and increases in children born to unmarried mothers, mean that over one third of all American children reside with only one parent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Moreover, given high rates of remarriage, it has been estimated that 23% of children currently under 18 will also spend some time in a stepfamily (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995).

Residing in a single parent or stepfamily is a robust risk factor for psychopathology and adjustment problems in children and adolescents (Hetherington, Bridges, & Isabella, 1998). Children from divorced and remarried families are more likely than children from nuclear intact families to have academic problems, externalizing and internalizing disorders, and to have lower self esteem and social competency (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Hetherington, Bridges, & Isabella, 1998). While certainly there are multiple causes of greater risk among children in divorced families, one important source of risk may be their greater exposure to victimization.

There is evidence that family structure may represent a central risk factor for childhood victimization. Based on a large national survey of 12-17 year olds, Lauritsen (2003) found that youth in single parent families experienced more stranger and non-stranger victimizations than those in two-parent families, independent of race and socioeconomic status. Finkelhor and Asdigian (1996) found that youth in stepfamilies were at particular risk, relative to other family structures, for sexual assault and parental assault, with a variety of other predictors controlled. Similarly, Turner et al. (2004) found that, relative to children living with two biological or adoptive parents, children living in single parent and step-families had greater lifetime exposure

to all forms of victimization, including sexual assault, child maltreatment, witnessing family violence and other major violence events.

Given the large body of literature pointing to the significance of child victimization for the development of psychiatric disorders, physical health problems, and poor social and economic outcomes (Molnar, Buka, & Kessler, 2001; Terr, 1991), specifying the social contexts that contribute to child victimization remains an important objective. Recent research suggests that exposure to multiple forms of victimizations may have particularly powerful consequences (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2004; Menard & Huizinga, 2001) and that cumulative victimization explains much of the difference in children's symptom levels across family structure (Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2004). To the extent that children in single parent and stepfamilies are at increased risk for victimization, efforts to identify factors that explain or contribute to their elevated risk are clearly warranted.

The specific objectives of this research are to:

- 1) Examine differences in recent victimization across family structure, comparing three groups of children-- those who are currently living: a) with two biological or adoptive parents, b) with a single parent, and c) in a step-family household;
- 2) Consider potential explanations for elevated victimization in single parent families and stepfamilies. Towards this aim, we will: a) examine variations in perpetrator characteristics across different family structures, and b) identify potential mediating or predisposing factors that might explain greater victimization among children in single parent and stepfamilies. Factors to be considered include family problems, parent-child conflict, parental monitoring, residential mobility, and neighborhood/school violence.

Family Structure and Victimization

Although past research suggests that youth in both single parent and stepfamilies may be at elevated risk for victimization, the mechanisms that increase risk in these families may differ. Paralleling research on child well-being (Thompson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994), the most influential factors for single parent families may revolve around lack of economic resources and time constraints, while stepfamilies may have more problems in the quality of family relationships. Applied to victimization, we hypothesize that youth in single parent families will experience greater risks from economic-related factors, such as residence in unsafe neighborhoods and high residential mobility, and from factors related to time constraints, such as poor parental supervision. In contrast, we anticipate that youth in stepfamilies will be experience greater victimization from family-generated risks, such as family problems and interpersonal conflict. These mechanisms should also translate into differences in perpetrator characteristics, with children from single parent families being at greatest risk for extra-familial victimization and those from stepfamilies showing the greatest risk for family-perpetrated victimizations.

Risk in Stepfamilies

Elevated risk of child victimization in stepfamilies may be the direct consequence of the presence of stepparent perpetrator in the household. There are several studies, for example, indicating that stepfathers are more often perpetrators of sexual abuse than are biological fathers (Finkelhor & Baron, 1986; Gordon & Creighton, 1988; Russell, 1984). There is also considerable evidence of elevated risk for child physical abuse in stepfamilies (e.g. Burgess & Garbarino, 1983; Daly & Wilson, 1987; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2004), although many of these studies do not directly test the relationship between abuser and victim (Giles-Sims, 1997). Giles-Sims (1997) outlines a number of factors that may contribute to the over-representation of

stepparents among child abuse perpetrators, including lower SES, higher interpersonal conflict, less commitment to the care-taking role, and selection factors associated with social dysfunction. To the extent that parents with problems (such as mental illness, history of unemployment, and/or drug or alcohol problems) are more likely to select into stepfamilies, we are also likely to also see more biological parents as perpetrators in these families.

Stepsiblings may also be significant perpetrators of victimization. Although child abuse researchers often fail to consider violence between siblings, victimization by siblings is relatively widespread (Goodwin & Roscoe, 1990; Hardy, 2001; Straus & Gelles, 1990; Wiehe, 1990) and has shown lasting consequences (Kessler & Magee, 1994). While we know of no research that has specifically compared sibling victimization across family structure, Dunn et al. (1998) found that children's adjustment in complex stepfamilies (households that include stepsiblings) was significantly poorer than those living in simple stepfamilies. While a number of reasons for this association are certainly likely, one factor may include greater victimization among siblings in stepfamilies.

Victimization in stepfamilies may be linked with a number of problems more common in stepfamilies, including parent-child conflict and other forms of family dysfunction. Stepfamilies are particularly likely to be characterized by parent-child conflict (Hetherington, Bridges, & Isabella, 1998) and relationship "negativity" (Dunn, Deater-Decker, Pickering, O'Connor, & Golding, 1998). While some of this reflects heightened conflict between children and stepparents (Fine & Schwebel, 1992; Hetherington, 1989; Thompson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994), research also shows poorer relationship quality between children and biological mothers when the father and child are not biologically related (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2000). Parent-child conflict is likely to contribute to or co-occur with child victimization by family

members and may even encourage greater victimization outside the household by reducing positive communication and involvement with children.

Child victimization often occurs against a backdrop of parental dysfunction and chronic family adversity, such as unemployment, parental alcohol or drug problems, parental imprisonment, marital discord or episodes of homelessness. Such family problems, while often co-existing with victimization, are likely to increase the risk of subsequent victimization and therefore can themselves represent risk factors for victimization exposure. Indeed, a substantial increase in the risk for child maltreatment has been associated with parental alcohol abuse (Sebre et al., 2004), parental substance abuse (Forrester, 2000), maternal depression (Bifulco et al., 2002), and wage-earner unemployment (Gillham et al., 1998). Children with incarcerated parents are also over-represented in child maltreatment cases (Phillips, Barth, Burns, & Wagner, 2004).

There is some evidence that family problems, such as those described above, are more often present in stepfamilies than in families with two biological parents (Amato & Keith, 1991; Dunn, Deater-Decker, Pickering, O'Connor, & Golding, 1998; Hetherington, Bridges, & Isabella, 1998). Many scholars have pointed to difficulties that arise from the formation of stepfamilies. It has been suggested, for example, that stepfamilies represent "incomplete institutions" with unclear norms for parenting and conflict resolution, and stress associated with greater isolation from relatives and their community (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Bray & Berger, 1993; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). These stressful circumstances, in turn, can reduce the psychological and social functioning of parents (Hetherington & Jodi, 1994). Therefore, family problems or dysfunction may mediate the association between family structure and victimization.

Social selection may also operate in the association between family structure and victimization. Dunn et al. (2001) found that negative parent-child interactions within

stepfamilies could be linked to parental problems and risks earlier in both parents' lives. Parents in stepfamilies are more likely to have left home early, experienced a teenage pregnancy, and have entered their first marriage at a young age (Dunn et al., 2001). Accelerated adult transitions, such as early marriage, have been associated with pre-existing indications of substance abuse (Chassin, Presson, Sherman, & Edwards, 1992) and other risky and unconventional behavior (Martino, Collins, & Eleickson, 2004). Since marriage at young ages is strongly associated with divorce (Teti & Lamb, 1989) and young single parents are more likely to remarry (Le Bourdais & Desrosiers, 1995), partners in remarriages may more often have problematic life course histories. Indeed, studies show that parents in stepfamilies are also more likely to have a history of employment difficulties, multiple relationships, and family conflict, even prior to the formation of the stepfamily (Amato, 1993; Booth & Edwards, 1992; Dunn, 2002; O'Connor, Thorpe, Dunn, & Golding, 1999; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Thus, adults with existing dysfunction may be more likely to both select into stepfamilies and possess characteristics that increase their children's risk of victimization.

Risk in Single Parent Families

Some of the conditions cited above that contribute to victimization in stepfamilies, such as lower SES and parental dysfunction, likely also operate in single parent families. Indeed, single parent families are most likely to live in poverty and experience the many stressors that arise from financial difficulties (Amato, 1999; Arendell, 1986; McLanahan, 1983). Economic deprivation, in turn, can contribute to inconsistent and "harsh" parenting (McLoyd, 1990). Low-income status and unemployment can also have direct effects on victimization by reducing basic resources necessary to support and care for children (Berger, 2004). However, while conditions in single parent families may have implications for family-perpetrated victimization, their

importance for extra-familial victimization may be even greater. The acute economic difficulties, poor neighborhood environments in which single parent families often reside, and poor parental supervision, may make children in this family type especially vulnerable to victimization outside of the household.

Single parent families may have particular problems with the monitoring of children. In general, parental monitoring involves tracking the child's whereabouts (Bulcroft, Carmody, & Bulcroft, 1998), ensuring adequate supervision, and awareness their child's friends and activities (Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993; Fisher, Leve, O'Leary, & Leve, 2003). There is considerable evidence that inadequate parental monitoring is associated with numerous forms of antisocial and delinquent behavior (Chilcoal & Anthony, 1999; Kolko & Kazdin, 1990; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1994). Although less research has focused on the impact of parental monitoring on victimization experiences, there is some evidence that children who are poorly supervised are more likely to be victims of crime (Esbensen, Huizinga, & Menard, 1999).

Research shows that single parents make fewer demands on their children and monitor their activities less adequately than do married parents in traditional families (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Cookston, 1999). Lone parents have considerably more demands on their time and energy, and are often less able to monitor children and maintain involvement in school and extra-school activities (Ram & Hou, 2003). To the extent that single parents provide less monitoring, this may represent one important mechanism by which children in these family forms are at increased risk for victimization.

Another possible source of risk in single parent families is residential mobility. Divorce is associated with multiple transitions for children that extend beyond changes in household structure and can contribute to poor outcomes (Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1995). An important

index of multiple changes is residential mobility, since moving households is often accompanied by changing schools, leaving friendship networks, having new peer contacts, and exposure to different neighborhood conditions. Residential mobility is typically higher for single parent families than in two-parent families (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994) and is likely linked low or unstable economic resources. There is reason to suspect that residential mobility might also increase exposure to victimization (Sampson, 1985).

Single parent families may also expose children to more dangerous neighborhood conditions. Community violence, in schools and neighborhoods, is likely to directly increase victimization exposure among children. Children in high community violence contexts (typically inner cities) are both more likely to witness violence and to experience personal victimization outside of the household (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). Since financial difficulties often force single parents to move into more dangerous neighborhoods (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; South & Crowder, 1998; South, Crowder, & Trent, 1998), this may represent one mechanism by which children in these family structures are at increased risk for victimization.

Hypotheses

The review of the literature cited above leads us to several hypotheses concerning family structure variation in child victimization and the factors that explain these differences:

- 1) Youth living in both single parent families and stepfamilies will report higher rates of victimization over the past year, compared to youth living with two biological parents.
- 2) Stepfamilies will be associated with the most *family-perpetrated* victimizations, given the interpersonal difficulties particularly characteristic of this family form. Single parent families will be associated with the most *extra-familial* victimization, given economic and

supervisory problems that may put their youth in more unsafe environments outside the household.

3) Stepfamilies will be most characterized by parent-child conflict and family problems and these factors will best explain higher victimization among stepfamilies. Single parent families will be most characterized by low parental monitoring, high residential mobility and high local violence, and these factors will best explain elevated victimization among single parent families

METHODS

Participants

This research is based on data from the Developmental Victimization Survey (DVS), designed to obtain prevalence estimates of a comprehensive range of childhood victimizations. The survey, using a random digit dial methodology, was conducted between December, 2002, and February, 2003 to assess the experiences of a nationally representative sample of 1,000 children age 10-17 living in the contiguous United States. Details concerning the sampling methodology and study procedures are reported elsewhere (Finkelhor, Hamby, Turner, & Ormrod, in press).

One child age 10-17 was randomly selected from all eligible children living in a household by selecting the child with the most recent birthday. First, a short interview was conducted with the adult caregiver (usually a parent) who indicated being “most familiar with the child’s daily routine and experiences”, and then the target respondent was interviewed. Up to 13 callbacks were made to select and contact a respondent and up to 25 callbacks were made to complete the interview. Consent was obtained from both the parent and the child. Respondents

were promised complete confidentiality, and were paid \$10 for their participation. The average length of the main interview was 45 minutes. Interviews were successfully completed with over seventy-nine percent (79.5%) of the eligible persons contacted.

Post-stratification weights were applied to adjust for race proportion differences between our sample and national statistics. We also applied weights to adjust for within household probability of selection due to variation in the number of eligible children across households and the fact that the experiences of only one child per household were included in the study.

Measurement

Family Structure. For the purpose of this research, family structure was defined by the current composition of the household. Specifically, three groups were constructed: 1) **two biological parent families** consisted of respondents living with two biological or adoptive parents, 2) **single-parent families** comprised respondents living with one biological parent only (the majority of these were divorced parents while approximately 30% were never married); and 3) **stepfamilies** consisted of respondents living with one biological parent and a step-parent. The relatively small number of respondents living with one parent and their unmarried partner were dropped from these analyses, as were youth living with other relatives or foster parents. In regression analyses, two biological parent families represent the comparison group.

Victimization. Measures of victimization exposure are based on items from the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ), a recently constructed inventory of childhood victimization (Hamby & Finkelhor, 2004). The JVQ was designed to be a more comprehensive instrument than has typically been used in past research, providing a description of all the major forms of offenses against youth. Moreover, its use of simple language and behaviorally specific questions enables the JVQ to be used for self-report by children as young as age 8. The JVQ obtains

reports on 34 forms of offenses against youth that cover five general areas of concern: Conventional Crime, Child Maltreatment, Peer and Sibling Victimization, Sexual Assault, and Witnessing and Indirect Victimization. Specific screener items reflecting the 34 types of events are presented in Appendix A. Follow-up questions for each screener item (not shown) gathered additional information needed to classify event types, including perpetrator characteristics, the use of a weapon, whether injury resulted, and whether the event occurred in conjunction with another screener event. Dichotomous measures indicating whether respondents were exposed to *any* victimization within each of six categories (sexual victimization, child maltreatment, physical assault, peer/sibling victimization, property crime and witnessing/indirect victimization) were constructed. In addition, a summary measure of victimization was developed that assesses exposure to multiple forms of victimization across all 34 specific types.

Family Problems. ‘Family problems’ was assessed by a measure that includes five events and chronic stressors, each representing problems likely to be associated with parent’s functioning. Respondents were also asked how old they were the last time the event occurred. Interviewers were trained to assist respondents in locating the timing of events by using the respondent’s grade in school as a point of reference. Problems include: parent imprisonment, parental unemployment, alcohol or substance abuse by family members, chronic parental arguing, and episode of homelessness. Two summary counts of exposure to family problems were constructed. The **pre-separation family problems** measure counts problems evident (for the last time) prior to the respondent’s age when he/she “stopped living with both biological parents”. The **post-separation family problems** measure is a count of problems evident anytime after or during the age of parental separation. Since data on the timing of stepfamily formation is unavailable, we were unable to make this additional distinction. For youth living in

non-divorced families (i.e. living with two biological parents or a never-married parent), we used the average age at parental separation among all divorced respondents to calculate their summary measures.

Parent-Child Conflict was assessed with a single item that was obtained in the parent interview (and therefore from the parent's perspective). Parents responded to "How often do you have arguments or disagreements with your ___ year old?" on a 5-point scale ranging from "never or almost never" to "very often".

Parental Monitoring was assessed with a summary score of three items where parents indicated the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: "I know who my ___ year olds friends are.", "I know where he/she is when he/she is not home.", "I know what my ___ year old is doing when I'm not with him/her." Parents responded on 4-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The reliability coefficient for the measure is .76.

Residential Mobility was based on the question: "How long has your ___ year old been living in this particular residence?" To consider the relevance of residential mobility on victimization exposure with the last year, a dichotomous variable was constructed indicating whether the child had moved residences within the last 18 months (0 = no; 1 = yes).

Local Violence. Local violence was constructed as a summary of two items that ask parents about violence in the respondent's school and neighborhood: "How much of a problem is violence in your ___ year olds school?"; "How much of a problem is violence in your ___ year olds neighborhood?". Parents answer each item on a 4 point scale ranging from "big problem" to "not a problem at all".

Socio-Demographic Factors. All demographic information was obtained in the initial parent interview, including the child's age (in years), and race/ethnicity (coded into 4 groups:

white non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, Hispanic any race, and other non-Hispanic race). Socio-economic status (SES) is a composite based on the sum of the standardized household income and standardized parental education (parent with the highest education) scores, which was then re-standardized. In cases where the data for one of the SES indices (most often income) was missing, the SES score is based on the standard score of the remaining index. In all regression analyses, gender is a dummy variable (female=1) and white non-Hispanic is the comparison group for race/ethnicity.

RESULTS

Variations in Victimization across Family Types

First, we addressed the basic hypothesis that children living in single parent and stepfamilies will experience higher levels of recent victimization (past year) than children living with two biological parents. A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to assess significant group differences between the three family structures on exposure to six specific categories of victimization (any sexual victimization, any physical assault, any property crime, any child maltreatment, any peer/siblings victimization, any witnessing or indirect victimization) and multiple victimization (exposure count across all 34 victimization types).

As shown in Table 1, significant group differences are evident for all victimization measures. Pair-wise comparisons indicate that youth in stepfamilies are significantly more likely to experience any sexual victimization, any physical assault, any child maltreatment and any peer/sibling victimization, than are children living in both single- parent and biological two-parent families. Single-parent families and those with two biological parents do not differ significantly on exposure to these forms of victimization. However, youth in both single parent

and stepfamilies are more likely to be exposed to property crimes and witnessing/indirect victimizations relative to those in traditional two parent families. Importantly, this pattern is also evident when considering total exposure to all types of victimizations. Youth from both single parent and stepfamilies report significantly greater exposure to multiple forms of victimization than do youth living with two biological parents.

Variations in Perpetrators across Family Types

We also hypothesized that different conditions or characteristics within families and/or the external contexts surrounding families may create different risks of intra-familial and extra-familial victimization across the three family types. To address this question we compared rates of victimization by any non-family perpetrator and rates of victimization by any family member across the three family forms. Data in the first row of Table 2 indicate that a significantly greater percentage of children in stepfamilies have experienced at least one incident of victimization (any type of perpetrator), followed by children in single parent families, followed by those living with two biological parents ($p < .001$). All pair-wise differences are significant. When comparing rates of *non-family perpetrated* victimizations (second row), youth in both single parent (74%) and stepfamilies (79%) have significantly higher rates than those residing with two biological parents (60%) ($p < .001$). However, single parent and stepfamily rates do not significantly differ. When looking at rates of *family-perpetrated* victimization (row 3), single parent and two-biological parent families have almost identical rates (38.7% and 38.6%). In contrast, a substantially greater percentage of youth in stepfamilies (63%; $p < .001$) reported at least one incident of victimization by a family member.

In sum, our hypothesis that two parent families would have the lowest levels of extra-familial victimization was confirmed. However, we did not find support for our expectation that

youth in single parent families would be more likely to experience victimizations from extra-familial perpetrators than youth in stepparent families. In contrast, our hypothesis that stepfamilies would have the highest rates of family-perpetrated victimizations was clearly supported by the data.

To further specify the source of greater family victimization in stepfamilies, we also calculated rates for specific family perpetrators. The bottom half of Table 2 reports the percentage of children in the sample reporting *any* victimization by a given type of family perpetrator. Striking differences across family structure are found in percentage of youth reporting any victimization by a biological parent living in the household. Biological parents in traditional households show similar rates of perpetration than do single parents (7.0% vs. 8.5 %, respectively).¹ However, the percentage of youth victimized by biological parents in stepfamilies (18.1%) is significantly and substantially greater than in the other family types ($p < .001$). In addition to the high rates of victimization by biological parents in stepfamilies, children in this family type also have additional (unique) exposure to victimization by stepparents. Specifically, almost 11 percent of youth report at least one victimization incident by a stepparent. Moreover, an additional 6 percent of youth in stepfamilies report at least one incident of victimization by a parent *not* living in the household – a rate similar to single parent families. The percent of youth reporting victimization by siblings is also significantly higher in stepfamilies (47.1%) than in either two-parent (33.6%) or single parent families (34.2%) ($p < .01$). This difference remained significant when controlling on number of siblings in the household (not shown). Although we were unable to distinguish between biological siblings and stepsiblings, this gives further evidence of greater within-household risk of victimization among youth in stepfamilies.

¹ Within two-parent families, biological mother = 3.4%; biological father = 5.8%

In sum, the greater risk of family-perpetrated victimization among youth in stepfamilies arises from multiple sources. Importantly, youth in stepfamilies are substantially more likely to be victimized by a biological parent than youth in other family forms. When we add the risk of victimization from stepparents and parents not in the home, it is clear that parents as a whole represent primary sources of victimization for youth in stepfamilies. Their greater likelihood of being victimized by siblings further adds to the risk of victimization by intimate family members in this group.

Family Structure Variations in Victimization Predictors

We hypothesized that certain factors may represent mediators between family structure and victimization or possible predisposing contexts that contribute to both family structure and victimization exposure. As an initial step, we tested for differences in these factors across single-parent families, stepfamilies and traditional two parent families. Specifically, a series of ANOVAS were performed to assess family structure differences on levels of pre-divorce family adversity, post-divorce family adversity, parent-child conflict, parental monitoring and neighborhood violence. Results are shown in Table 3.

There are significant overall group differences on every factor except parent-child conflict. Level of family problems evident prior to parental separation/divorce was significantly higher in stepfamilies, relative to both single parent and two biological parent families (assessed in this latter group as level of adversities present before age 4 -- the mean age at divorce among the divorced single-parent and stepfamily groups). With respect to post-divorce problems, all three pair-wise comparisons are significant, with stepfamilies again having the highest level of family problems, followed by single parent families and, finally, traditional two-parent families. Although we were unable to further specify adversities occurring after stepfamily formation, the

significantly higher levels of post-divorce problems among stepfamilies (relative to single parents) suggests elevated family difficulties generated by this specific family form. We note that, since it is possible that youth in stepfamilies are older on average than youth in other family forms and therefore may have had more time to accumulate lifetime adversities, we repeated these analyses controlling for age. The results (not shown) were almost identical to those presented in Table 3. Therefore, consistent with our hypotheses, family problems (particularly those evident after parental divorce) are highest in stepfamilies.

Interestingly, the significant family structure differences in parental monitoring run in the opposite direction than was hypothesized. Both single parents and parents in stepfamilies report greater monitoring of their children's activities than do parents in two-parent families. While it is not completely clear why these results emerged, it may reflect a tendency to increase monitoring in response to child victimization. Indeed, bivariate correlations (see Appendix B) show an unexpected positive relationship between level of parental monitoring and recent victimization. Thus, greater monitoring among single-parent and stepfamilies may be due to their higher levels of victimization and an association that flows causally from victimization to parental monitoring.

Contrary to our hypothesis, youth in stepfamilies are significantly more likely to have moved residences in the past 18 months than both single-parent ($p < .05$) and traditional two-parent families ($p < .001$), supporting the notion that it is children in this family form (not single parent families) who are most likely to experience multiple transitions and household instability. In contrast, it is single parent households that are most likely to experience unsafe neighborhoods and schools. Consistent with our expectations, single parent families report substantially greater local violence, relative to both stepfamilies ($p < .001$) and traditional two parent families ($p < .001$).

Effects of Family Structure on Victimization: Explanatory Factors

Analyses presented thus far supported our hypotheses that children in non-traditional family structures experience greater victimization and that there is some important variation across family structure in contextual factors that are likely to contribute to victimization exposure. In fact, bivariate correlations (see Appendix B) show significant associations between all of the hypothesized mediators and level of the victimization experienced in the past year. The following analyses are intended to: 1) assess the effects of family structure on children's exposure to victimization, independent of other socio-demographic correlates; and 2) determine the extent to which the contextual factors considered (pre-separation family problems, post-separation family problems, parental monitoring, residential mobility, and local violence) mediate or otherwise explain the association between family structure and victimization. Since our measure of multiple victimization represents the most inclusive indicator of victimization exposure and has been shown to have the strongest effects on child well-being (Finkelhor, Ormrod and Turner, 2004), multivariate analyses presented below focus exclusively on multiple victimization.

A comparison of the single parent and stepfamily coefficients across models 1 and 2 of Table 4 shows the contribution of age, gender, race and socioeconomic status (SES) to these associations. Although both non-traditional family structures remain significant contributors to victimization, controlling for other socio-demographic variables reduces the unstandardized coefficient (not shown) for single parent families by 26 percent while the coefficient for stepfamilies remains almost unchanged. Thus, the significant negative association between SES and victimization appears to explain about one-quarter of the higher victimization reported in single parent families (but not stepfamilies) relative to youth living with two biological parents.

In Models 3-7, the hypothesized mediators are entered separately to assess their individual contributions to each of the family structure-victimization associations (parent-child conflict was dropped from these analyses because of its non-significant bivariate association with family structure). All of these contextual factors, except parental monitoring, are significantly associated with victimization, independent of demographic factors. However, they vary in their effects on the family structure coefficients. While pre-separation problems, post-separation problems, and local violence each reduce the single parent coefficient to non-significance, only post-separation problems explains the stepfamily-victimization association. In fact, none of the other mediators (when considered alone) reduce the stepfamily coefficient by more than 12%.

In model 8, all contextual factors are considered simultaneously to assess their independent effects on victimization. In this model, demographic predictors of victimization (including family structure) are no longer significant. Both the pre-separation and post-separation family problems measures are independently related to recent victimization. Local violence also remains a significant predictor of victimization exposure. This final model explains 22.5% of the variance multiple victimization exposure.

In sum, we were able to fully explain the family structure-victimization associations by accounting for the hypothesized mediators. Our expectation that family problems would best explain elevated victimization among youth in stepfamilies was supported. 'Post-divorce family problems' was both the strongest independent predictor of recent victimization and the only mediator that accounted for greater victimization in stepfamilies. While family problems also mediated the association among youth in single parent families, other hypothesized mediators (such as local violence) also appear to contribute to elevated victimization in single parent families.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to examine family structure variations in children's exposure to victimization and to uncover potential sources of increased risk for youth in nontraditional family forms. Findings clearly confirmed our supposition that youth in single parent families and in stepfamilies experience greater victimization than do youth residing with both biological parents. Elevated victimization in these non-traditional families was evident both when considering the likelihood of *any* type of victimization in the past year and with respect to the *level* of victimization across multiple types. However, our results also indicate that risk of victimization is not equivalent in single parent and stepfamilies. Youth in stepfamilies report the highest overall rates, the highest levels of multiple victimization, and greatest exposure to several individual forms of victimization, including child maltreatment, sexual victimization, physical assault, and peer/sibling victimization.

The perpetrators of victimization also appear to differ by family type. Consistent with our hypotheses, youth in stepfamilies are at substantially greater risk for victimization at the hands of family members, compared to youth in either two-parent or single parent families. For youth in stepfamilies, elevated risk of family victimization arises from multiple sources within the household: biological parents, siblings, and stepparents. However, contrary to our prediction that non-family perpetrated victimizations would be greatest in single parent families, the elevated rates of extra-familial victimization did not significantly differ between single parent and stepfamilies.

Although our findings indicate that single parent families and stepfamilies share many of the same risk factors for victimization, there is some suggestion in these data that the mediating or predisposing processes vary somewhat for these two family forms. In support of our

prediction, elevated victimization among children in single parent families appears to be more strongly related to their lower SES and residence in more violent neighborhoods and schools. This is consistent with the specific types of victimization these youth suffer from, like property crimes and witnessing violence to others, and points to unsafe environmental contexts as the possible cause. This is also consistent with perpetrator data showing an elevated rate of victimization by non-family perpetrators compared to two-parent families, but a similar rate of family victimization.

For youth in stepfamilies, the higher rates of victimization appear most related to family problems. Youth in stepfamilies report significantly more family problems than do youth in other family structures, and post-separation family problems is the only contextual factor that statistically accounts for their substantially higher levels of victimization. Given the relevance of post-separation problems for stepfamilies, we believed it important to further specify the types of problems that are elevated in these families. This more detailed analysis showed that, while none of these problems applied to the majority, stepfamilies had particularly high rates of parental imprisonment compared to other families, in addition to elevated rates of parental unemployment, family drug/alcohol problems and chronic parental arguing (see Appendix C). Since these problems appear to represent markers of parental dysfunction, this is consistent with our findings showing high rates of victimization by *parents* in stepfamilies. The greater likelihood of child maltreatment among youth in stepfamilies also points to the significance of caregivers as perpetrators and the link between parental dysfunction and child victimization.

Relatively high levels of parental dysfunction in stepfamilies may be due to a complex mix of stressful family conditions, the outcomes of stepfamily formation and the selection into stepfamilies of parents with problems. For example, disagreements about family roles and

expectations, lack of support from relatives, and unresolved conflicts in past relationships may create especially stressful family conditions. Children, themselves, can also contribute to these problems in stepfamilies, showing disapproval or hostility toward their parent's marriage or new family members or engaging in delinquent or "acting out" behaviors that may elicit parental retaliation. In the context of such adversity, biological parents in stepfamilies may find themselves acting in particularly authoritarian or aggressive ways, since they are responsible for "keeping the peace" between their children and new family members. Thus, parent's attempts to cope with stressful family problems while managing resistant children may increase the risk of child victimization in stepfamilies.

Social selection may also be operating to bring more parents with problems into stepfamilies. Difficulties in parental functioning, as indexed by problems such as alcohol or drug use and parental imprisonment can both select respondents into stepfamilies (by leading to initial parental divorce and subsequent remarriage) and contribute to child victimization. For example, single parents experiencing high levels of parenting stress may seek a partner to help control difficult children. Individuals who have difficulties holding down a job may remarry in an attempt to ease financial burdens. Parents with low social competence yet high dependency needs may pursue remarriage as a way to resolve personal problems. In any of these examples, the greater pre and post-divorce problems in stepfamilies would reflect preexisting characteristics of parents that may also contribute to child victimization. While the current study is unable to differentiate between family problems that arose before and after stepfamily formation, the significance of parental dysfunction for child victimization and the overrepresentation of these problems in stepfamilies seem clear in these data.

It is important to note that our analysis suggests that it is not family structure in itself that produces more victimization. Because other variables were able to fully account for the family structure differences in victimization rates, it means that certain social contexts that occur with differential frequency across family structure increase the risk for child victimization. However, that does not mean that we should ignore family type in planning prevention strategies. Because family structure is a highly visible marker and associated with elevated risk, intervention efforts to reduce child victimization would benefit from considering single parent families and, especially, stepfamilies as target groups.

The analysis presented here suggests the possibility of employing different prevention strategies for stepparent and single parent families. If one goal of a differential strategy was to minimize the effect of dysfunctional parenting in stepfamilies, strategies involving counseling and parenting education around the time of stepfamily formation may be most effective. Civil authorities, religious institutions, and schools might help identify reconstituting families and work to provide counseling and education that might help protect children. State child protection agencies may also wish to train specialists and develop specialized materials for advising and counseling stepfamilies.

Our analyses suggest a somewhat different emphasis for protecting children from single parent families. If the main risk in these families comes from extra-familial perpetrators, dangerous neighborhoods and schools, then one possible goal is to provide such families with housing and financial options that allow them to escape such environments. While many current social policies around divorce attempt to do just this through such mechanisms as improving child support collections, the ultimate strategy is to make the schools and communities where such families reside safer.

In spite of the analyses suggesting differential mechanisms in the risk for children from different family structures, it may turn out that the best prevention strategies should target established risk factors for victimization (such as parental dysfunction, dangerous neighborhoods or the previous history of victimization) regardless of family structure. More research and more discussion with prevention specialists may yield additional insights about the strategic utility of the differences uncovered in this study.

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² For the purposes of compliance with Section 507 of PL 104-208 (the "Stevens Amendment"), readers are advised that 100% of the funds for this program are derived from federal sources, (US Department of Justice). The total amount of federal funding involved is \$353,233.

Table 1: Mean Victimization Scores by Type of Family Structure

Victimization	Two-Parent Families	Single-Parent Families	Stepfamilies	P-value (Pair-wise contrasts) ¹
Any Sexual Victimization	.12	.14	.21	<.001 (3,12)
Any Child Maltreatment	.13	.19	.37	<.001 (3,12)
Any Physical Assault	.50	.55	.64	<.05 (1,3)
Any Peer/Sibling Victimization	.55	.59	.70	<.01 (3,12)
Any Property Crimes	.28	.37	.43	<.001 (1,23)
Any Witnessing and Indirect	.45	.57	.62	<.001 (1,23)
Total (Multiple) Victimization	2.43	3.16	3.46	P<.001 (1,23)
N (unweighted)	641	196	125	

¹ 1,23 = two-parent families significantly different other family forms
1,3 = two-parent families significantly different from stepfamilies
3,12 = stepfamilies significantly different from other family forms
[all significant pair-wise contrasts at p<.05 or better]

Table 2: Rates of Victimization (% of children) by Child's Relationship to Perpetrator across Types of Family Structure

Perpetrator	Two-Bio Parent Families	Single-Parent Families	Stepfamilies	P-value (Pair-wise contrasts) ¹
Any Victimization	71.4	77.9	86.2	p<.001 (1,2,3)
Any Non-Family Perpetrator	60.0	73.9	79.0	P<.001 (1, 23)
Any Family Perpetrator	38.6	38.7	63.0	p<.001 (3,12)
Any Biological Parent in Household	7.0	8.5	18.1	p<.001 (3,12)
Step-Parent in Household	---	---	10.9	---
Any Parent not in Household	---	6.5	5.8	NS
Any Sibling	33.6	34.2	47.1	P<.01 (3,12)
N (unweighted)	641	196	125	

¹ 1,2,3 = all three family types significantly different from each other (p<.05)
 1, 23 = stepfamilies and single parent families significantly different from two parent families (p<.05)
 3,12 = stepfamilies significantly different from single parent and two parent families (p<.05)
 [all significant pair-wise contrasts = p<.05 or better]

Table 3. Mean Scores on Contextual Factors by Type of Family Structure

Contextual Factors	Two-Parent Families	Single-Parent Families	Stepfamilies	P-value (Pair-wise contrasts)¹
Pre-Separation Adversity	.01	.04	.08	<.001 (3,12)
Post-Separation Adversity	.43	.81	1.14	<.001 (1,2,3)
Parent-Child Conflict	2.39	2.41	2.52	NS
Parental Monitoring	4.12	4.35	4.42	<.05 (1,23)
Local Violence	3.22	3.77	3.11	<.001 (2,13)
Residential Mobility	.070	.10	.17	<.001 (3,12)
N (unweighted)	641	196	125	

- ¹ 1,23 = two-parent families significantly different other family forms
2,13 = single-parent families significantly different from other family forms
3,12 = stepfamilies significantly different from other family forms
1,2,3= all three family types significantly different from each other
[all significant pair wise contrasts = $p < .05$ or better]

Table 4. The Effect of Family Structure, Socio-Demographic Factors, and Hypothesized Predictors on Multiple Victimization: Standardized Regression Coefficients (SE)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Single Parent ²	.106*** (.225)	.078* (.252)	.073* (.251)	.039 (.232)	.074* (.251)	.069 (.249)	.076* (.251)	.025 (.229)
Step Family ²	.129*** (.260)	.127*** (.262)	.117*** (.264)	.031 (.247)	.126*** (.262)	.136*** (.260)	.119*** (.262)	.022 (.247)
Gender (female = 1)		-.037 (.177)	-.036 (.177)	-.050 (.163)	-.033 (.176)	-.035 (.175)	-.038 (.177)	-.046 (.160)
Age		.141*** (.040)	.138*** (.040)	.080** (.037)	.124*** (.041)	.121*** (.040)	.145*** (.040)	.046 (.038)
Black ¹		.044 (.278)	.044 (.278)	.034 (.256)	.042 (.280)	.023 (.278)	.050 (.278)	.016 (.256)
Hispanic ¹		.016 (.245)	.019 (.245)	-.026 (.226)	.017 (.245)	-.011 (.246)	.018 (.245)	-.047 (.226)
Other Race ¹		-.019 (.442)	-.023 (.451)	-.019 (.415)	-.018 (.460)	-.009 (.453)	-.016 (.451)	-.012 (.424)
Socioeconomic Status		-.073* (.098)	-.074* (.098)	-.019 (.091)	-.068 (.099)	-.047 (.099)	-.066 (.098)	.012 (.092)
Pre-separation Family Adversity			.074* (.529)					.062* (.482)
Post-separation Family Adversity				.414*** (.088)				.406*** (.088)
Parental Supervision					.047 (.064)			.060* (.059)
Local Violence						.160*** (.073)		.135*** (.067)
Residential Mobility							.081* (.309)	.055 (.283)
R²	.022	.052	.057	.202	.052	.074	.058	.225

+p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed tests)

¹ comparison group = white non-Hispanic

² comparison group = two biological/adoptive parents

Notes: standard errors are in parentheses; N = 961

APPENDIX A: Juvenile victimization questionnaire***CONVENTIONAL CRIME SCREENERS***

- 1) In the last year, did anyone use force to take something away from you that you were carrying or wearing?
- 2) In the last year, did anyone steal something from you and never give it back? Things like a backpack, money, watch, clothing, bike, stereo, or anything else?
- 3) In the last year, did anyone break or ruin any of your things on purpose?
- 4) Sometimes people are attacked WITH sticks, rocks, guns, knives, or other things that would hurt. In the last year, did anyone hit or attack you on purpose WITH an object or weapon? Somewhere like: at home, at school, at a store, in a car, on the street, or anywhere else?
- 5) In the last year, did anyone hit or attack you WITHOUT using an object or weapon?
- 6) In the last year, did someone start to attack you, but for some reason, it didn't happen? For example, someone helped you or you got away?
- 7) When a person is kidnapped, it means they were made to go somewhere, like into a car, by someone who they thought might hurt them. In the past year, has anyone tried to kidnap you?
- 8) In the past year, have you been hit or attacked because of your skin color, religion, or where your family comes from? Because of a physical problem you have? Or because someone said you are gay?

CHILD MALTREATMENT SCREENERS

- 9) Not including spanking on your bottom, in the last year, did a grown-up in your life hit, beat, kick, or physically hurt you in any way?
- 10) In the last year (since [month] when you were [age/grade]), did you get scared or feel really bad because grown-ups called you names, said mean things to you, or said they didn't want you?
- 11) When someone is neglected, it means that the grown-ups in their life didn't take care of them the way they should. They might not get them enough food, take them to the doctor when they are sick, or make sure they have a safe place to stay. In the last year, did you get neglected?

- 12) Sometimes a family fights over where a child should live. In the last year, did a parent take, keep, or hide you to stop you from being with another parent?

PEER AND SIBLING VICTIMIZATION SCREENERS

- 13) Sometimes groups of kids or gangs attack people. In the last year (since [month] when you were [age/grade]), did a group of kids or a gang hit, jump, or attack you?
- 14) In the last year, did any kid, even a brother or sister, hit you? Somewhere like: at home, at school, out playing, in a store, or anywhere else?
- 15) In the last year, did any kids try to hurt your private parts on purpose by hitting or kicking you there?
- 16) In the last year, did any kids, even a brother or sister, pick on you by chasing or grabbing your hair or clothes or by making you do something you didn't want to do?
- 17) In the last year, did you get scared or feel really bad because kids were calling you names, saying mean things to you, or saying they didn't want you around?
- 18) In the last year did a boyfriend or girlfriend or anyone you went on a date with slap or hit you? (Only asked of children age 12 and older).

SEXUAL ASSAULT SCREENERS

- 19) In the last year, did a grown-up you know touch your private parts when you didn't want it or make you touch their private parts? Or did a grown-up you know force you to have sex?
- 20) In the last year, did a grown-up you did not know touch your private parts when you didn't want it, make you touch their private parts or force you to have sex?
- 21) Now think about kids your age, like from school, a boy friend or girl friend, or even a brother or sister. In the last year, did another child or teen make you do sexual things?
- 22) In the last year, did anyone TRY to force you to have sex, that is sexual intercourse of any kind, even if it didn't happen?
- 23) In the last year, did anyone make you look at their private parts by using force or surprise, or by "flashing" you?
- 24) In the last year, did anyone hurt your feelings by saying or writing something sexual about you or your body?

- 25) In the last year, did you do sexual things with anyone 18 or older, even things you both wanted? (Only asked of children age 12 and older).

WITNESSING AND INDIRECT VICTIMIZATIONS SCREENERS

- 26) In the last year, did you SEE one of your parents get hit by another parent, or their boyfriend or girlfriend? How about slapped, punched, or beat up?
- 27) In the last year, did you SEE your parent hit, beat, kick, or physically hurt your brothers or sisters, not including a spanking on the bottom?
- 28) In the last year, in real life, did you see anyone get attacked on purpose WITH a stick, rock, gun, knife, or other thing that would hurt? Somewhere like: at home, at school, at a store, in a car, on the street, or anywhere else?
- 29) In the last year, in real life, did you see anyone get attacked or hit on purpose WITHOUT using a stick, rock, gun, knife, or something that would hurt?
- 30) In the last year, did anyone steal some thing from your house that belongs to your family or someone you live with? Things like a TV, stereo, car, or anything else?
- 31) When a person is murdered, it means someone killed them on purpose. In the past year, has anyone close to you, like in your family, a friend, or neighbor, been murdered?
- 32) In the past year, have you seen someone murdered in real life? This means not on TV, video games, or in the movies?
- 33) In the past year, have you been in a place in real life where you could see or hear people being shot, bombs going off, or street riots?
- 34) In the past year, have you been in the middle of a war where you could hear real fighting

**APPENDIX B. Correlations Among Hypothesized Predictors and Multiple Victimization
(N=962)**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Multiple Victimization	1.00						
2. Parent-Child Conflict	.158**	1.00					
3. Pre-Separation Family Problems	.096**	.018	1.00				
4. Post-Separation Family Problems	.435**	.109**	.055	1.00			
5. Parental Monitoring	.096**	.173**	.006	.007	1.00		
6. Residential Mobility	.092**	.036	.018	.119**	-.010	1.00	
7. Local Violence	.191**	.121**	-.025	.099**	.183**	-.040	1.00
Mean	2.7	2.4	.03	.61	4.2	.09	3.3
SD	2.8	1.0	.17	.98	1.4	.29	1.3

Appendix C. Rates of Specific Post-Separation Family Problems (% of Children) by Family Type

Post-Separation Problems	Two-Parent Families	Single-Parent Families	Stepfamilies	P-value (Pair-wise contrasts)¹
Homelessness	0.9	6.5	3.6	N.S.
Parental Unemployment	11.9	19.1	26.1	<.001 (1,3)
Parental Imprisonment	3.8	10.6	24.6	<.001 (1,2,3)
Family Drug/Alcohol Problem	10.6	20.1	25.4	<.001 (1,2,3)
Chronic Parental Arguing	15.9	24.6	34.8	<.001 (1,2,3)
N (unweighted)	640	199	138	

¹ 1,2,3 = two-parent families significantly different other family forms
1,3 = two-parent families significantly different from stepfamilies
1,2,3= all three family types significantly different from each other
[all significant pair-wise contrasts at $p < .05$ or better]

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