

An Examination of the Relationship between Cohabitation and Adolescent Delinquency
Involvement

Robert A. Lonardo

Wendy D. Manning

Peggy C. Giordano

Monica A. Longmore

Department of Sociology
and Center for Family and Demographic Research

Bowling Green State University

Bowling Green, Ohio 43403

rlonard@bgsu.edu

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Background

Cherlin (2004) has argued that marriage is becoming increasingly “deinstitutionalized” in American society, citing the increasing prevalence of cohabiting unions as an important aspect of the transition occurring within traditional marriage. Early work by Bumpass (1998) documented a shift in what may be viewed as the conventional progression of courtship behaviors: dating, engagement, and marriage. More recently, however, a new pattern is emerging. Young adults are increasingly more likely to choose to cohabit before marriage. Cohabitation may or may not progress to marriage, but it is more often seen as a path toward marriage rather than simply a substitute. Additionally, being in a cohabiting relationship is not always marked by a firm decision to cohabit (Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman 2006), nor is it always an indicator of strong, continuous commitment (Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2004).

High rates of adolescents, nevertheless, still expect to marry, and these rates have remained consistently high since the 1970s (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Less is known concerning young persons’ views and expectations of cohabitation, however. Manning, Longmore, and Giordano (2007) found that half of their sample of adolescents expected to cohabit as a transition toward marriage while a substantially smaller percentage (6%) planned to only cohabit. These findings reveal that cohabitation is perceived as an acceptable precursor but not a viable substitute for marriage.

This paper draws on the union formation and adolescent risk behavior literatures to better understand young adults’ transition into cohabitation. The well-documented “premarital cohabitation effect” indicates that cohabitation prior to marriage without a concrete decision to marry (e.g., engagement) is associated with marital distress and divorce (Stanley, Rhoades, and

Markman 2006). Yet, Woods and Emery (2002) found that the effect of premarital cohabitation on marital stability is explained by several factors, including severe delinquency involvement.

At the same time, studies in the criminological literature treat romantic relationships (primarily marriage) during the transition to adulthood as an important factor related to adult desistance from crime. Sampson and Laub (1993) argued that marriage increases exposure to informal social control as one enters adulthood and is associated with significant decreases in criminal offending. Although Sampson and Laub's results supported their hypothesis that marriage reduces crime, some have argued that the finding may be spurious insofar as there is differential selection into marriage and cohabitation (e.g., Clarkberg 1999; Yamaguchi and Kandel 1985). Also, their work focuses on marriage but does not examine the effect of cohabitation on later delinquency involvement (see Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006). A significant limitation of Sampson and Laub's analyses is that they focused on a cohort of men who matured into adulthood during the 1940s. Current family trends, such as the rising age at first marriage (25 for women and 27 for men) and that most young adults cohabit highlights the importance of investigating linkages between problem behaviors such as criminal involvement and cohabitation as well as marriage.

We examine two research questions. First, why would delinquency lead to higher odds of cohabitation and earlier ages at first cohabitation? As noted by Manning, Longmore, and Giordano (2007), delinquent youth may opt for less permanent and stable cohabiting unions rather than the traditional path toward marriage. Manning et al. centered on adolescent expectations to cohabit and not on actual cohabiting experiences, and they found that delinquency was related to higher expectations to cohabit at the zero-order. After controlling for several covariates, however, the effect lost significance at conventional levels. Yamaguchi and

Kandel (1985) found that the use of marijuana and other illegal drugs was linked to a higher probability of premarital cohabitation. Also, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argued that the link between adult relationships and crime is spurious because both the tendency to cohabit and to engage in delinquent acts can be traced to the relatively stable trait of “low self-control;” conversely those with higher self-control will disproportionately enter into marriage and also tend to desist from offending as adults.

Second, why would cohabitation status predict decreases in delinquency? Following the life-course theory of informal social control developed by Sampson and Laub (e.g., 1993), cohabitation, like marriage, involves some amount of commitment and constraint (albeit a lower level than in most marriages) that could potentially influence offending levels. In line with prior research, for most adolescents cohabitation is seen as a stepping stone toward marriage, not a substitute, further supporting the view that cohabitation may exert downward pressure on involvement in delinquency (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007). In two studies, cohabitation reduced the use of marijuana and other illicit drugs (Duncan, Wilkerson, and England 2006; Yamaguchi and Kandel 1985). Sampson, Laub, and Wimer (2006) reported that cohabitation had a substantively large negative effect on criminal offending rates over time, but those who were cohabiting accounted for only 3% of the respondents in their study. This low base rate was undoubtedly influenced by the era in which these men made the transition to adulthood and possibly affected by the lack of racial/ethnic diversity within the sample. This suggests the importance of examining the connections between cohabitation and crime within the context of a diverse, contemporary sample that includes both women and men.

Hypotheses

Drawing on the family and criminology literatures, we expect the following:

Hypothesis 1. Young adults who were involved in higher levels of delinquency during adolescence have higher odds of ever cohabiting and younger ages at cohabitation.

Hypothesis 2. Cohabitation will be associated with declines in delinquency involvement.

Data and Methods

Data. The data for this study come from the four waves of the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS). Data collection occurred in 2001-2002 (n=1,321), 2002-2003 (n=1,177), 2004-2005 (n=1,114), and 2006-2007 (n=1,092). The first wave of adolescent subjects consisted of a stratified, random sample obtained from enrollment rosters (not based on school attendance) of students in grades 7, 9, and 11. The rosters represented 62 schools in seven school districts across Lucas County, Ohio. A parent or guardian also completed a separate survey at the first interview.

Measures. The dependent variables used to test the three hypotheses are ever having cohabited (1=yes [n=377], 0=no [n=640]) by wave 4, age (in years) at first cohabitation reported at wave 4, and the change (first difference) in delinquency from the second to the fourth interview wave. The focal predictor variable for hypothesis 1 is delinquency at wave 2 (during adolescence). For the second hypothesis, the independent variable of interest is cohabitation status in early adulthood, consisting of three dummy variables for never cohabited (n=645), currently cohabiting (n=185), and ever (not current) cohabited (n=201). The following controls (with indicators of the interview wave) will also be included in full regression models: gender (T1), race (T1), age (T4), parental monitoring (T2), peer delinquency (T2) (included as a control only for hypothesis 2), adolescent religiosity (T2), household type (T2), mother's education (T1), parental income (T1), percent neighborhood poverty (2000 U.S. Census), grades in school (T1 or T2), ever had sex (T2), dating status (T2), and traditional view of cohabitation (T2).

Analytic Strategy. Our first hypothesis will be addressed using logistic regression to test the odds of ever cohabiting. Zero-order and then models with controls will be estimated to identify the relationship of delinquency on cohabitation experience. We will evaluate the age at first cohabitation using ordinary least squares regression models. To test our second hypothesis ordinary least squares regression (at the zero-order and including controls) will determine the relationship between cohabitation status and change in delinquency.

Preliminary Results

Hypothesis 1. The initial hypothesis is tested with logistic regression of ever cohabiting on delinquency and controls. Results at the zero-order show that delinquency at the second interview wave is positively and significantly associated with odds of ever cohabiting. The coefficient for delinquency is 0.55 and has a p-value less than 0.0001. The odds ratio is 1.73.

After controls are added to the model, delinquency is no longer significantly related to odds of cohabiting ($b=0.11$; $e^b=1.11$; $p>0.05$). Therefore, the controls in the model mediate the effect of delinquency observed in the zero-order model. The following controls are associated with ever cohabiting: gender, age, household type, traditional views of cohabitation, currently dating, having had sex, grades, parental income, and percent neighborhood poverty. Our first hypothesis that delinquent youths are more likely to cohabit was not supported by these results.

The second part of hypothesis 1 was examined by testing how delinquency was associated with age at first cohabitating using OLS regression. Zero-order results indicate that the association between prior delinquency and age of first cohabitation is not significant at conventional levels ($p>0.05$). The regression coefficient is -0.15.

Although the zero-order regression showed a nonsignificant relationship for delinquency, we proceeded to add controls to the model. The effect of delinquency at T2 again fails to reach

statistical significance ($b=-0.11$; $p>0.05$). Age, having had sex, and grades are all related to age at first cohabitation in the full model. These results show that delinquency does not affect the age at which an adolescent first moves in with a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Hypothesis 2. We examine the influence of cohabitation on change in delinquency using OLS regression. The zero-order model reveals a significant negative relationship ($b=-0.15$; $p<0.01$) between current cohabiters and those who have never cohabited (reference category). Young adults who have ever cohabited (not currently) are not significantly different ($b=-0.04$; $p>0.05$) from the reference group. This suggests that cohabitation among young adults is associated with declines in delinquency.

In the multivariate models, the effect of cohabitation remains statistically significant until the model includes adolescent peer delinquency. In this model the difference ($b=-0.07$) between adolescents who are currently cohabiting and those who have never cohabited is not significant at the 0.05 level. The significant covariates in the model are gender, living in a household classified as “other,” peer delinquency, and having a mother who has not received her high school diploma or equivalent. Hypothesis 3 was not supported by the analysis.

Discussion

This study is in its preliminary stages, but as this is one of few analyses exploring the reciprocal relationship between cohabitation and involvement in delinquency among a recent cohort of young adults, a few results should be noted. First, as expected delinquent youth are more likely to have cohabited by the final wave, approximately four years later. This conclusion does not hold, however, when several controls are added. This suggests that delinquent youths are more likely to enter cohabiting relationships, but the relationship is not direct. Second and contrary to our prediction, adolescents who are involved in delinquency tend to begin cohabiting

at similar ages as their less delinquent peers. The final analysis reveals that current cohabiters report greater decreases in delinquency than those who have never cohabited. The association remains statistically significant after controlling for traditional sociodemographic characteristics. However, the “good cohabitation effect” is largely explained by peer delinquency. This indicates that the effect is largely indirect, acting as an inhibitor of involvement with delinquent peers, one of the most robust correlates of criminal activity. These results are similar to Warr’s (1998) findings focused on the “good marriage effect” but also show that cohabitation is associated with reduced contact with delinquent peers.

Further work will address the degree to which these results are conditioned by gender, race, relationship quality, or expectations to marry. We will also test other specifications of the dependent variable to develop a clearer picture of how delinquency predicts movement into cohabitation, weaving in and out of cohabitation, or never cohabiting. Additionally, intervening relationships may be explored using other statistical techniques.

This paper attempts to address how delinquency is tied to selection into cohabitation and the subsequent effect of cohabitation on later delinquency. These findings rely on a contemporary cohort of young adults who are facing changes in the economic and normative climate surrounding family formation. Prior work has examined the implications of cohabitation for marital stability and child well-being, but few studies have considered the implications of cohabitation for adult social well-being.

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