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Congress's Role in Improving Juvenile Delinquency Data

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The Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is preparing a new survey that, if designed correctly, could provide more accurate data for states and local governments to use in their efforts to prevent juvenile crime. Put simply, in prior research to discern who is most likely to commit crime and what crimes are likely to be committed, the OJJDP has ignored family structure and thus has overlooked perhaps the most successful delinquency prevention "program" in America today--the intact married family. This means that for much of the past decade, its decisions have been based on incomplete and misleading data.

Fortunately, Congress is in a unique position to correct this glaring omission. It can and should set guidelines for the new OJJDP survey--the Census of Juveniles in Residential Base, now being designed--by stipulating in the appropriations process, the juvenile justice bill conference report (for S. 254 and H.R. 1501, the Violent and Repeat Juvenile Offender Accountability and Rehabilitation Act of 1999), or other vehicles that the OJJDP must gather detailed data on family background.

A growing body of research shows that the breakdown of the family unit is significantly associated with many of society's ills, including increases in poverty, crime, drug addiction, school drop-out rates, and poor health. The same data show that when fathers are absent from the home, the rates of juvenile delinquency rise very significantly.

What Americans are less likely to realize is that the federal and state juvenile correctional systems act as though such evidence did not exist. In 1993, Congress first required that the states address the issue of "Disproportionate Minority Confinement" for juveniles (Public Law 93-415, 42 U.S.C. 5601), focusing on race, not family structure. Since then, federal and state agencies have not looked at the relationship between intact marriage, other family structures, and juvenile delinquency.

The OJJDP, for example, failed to include family structure data in its current survey, Juveniles Taken Into Custody, which is recognized as methodologically unsound. Now the OJJDP is planning to replace that survey with a more robust survey, the Census of Juveniles in Residential Base. Even the new census, however, does not appear to seek information on the relationship of family structure to juvenile crime.

Limited state data strongly suggest that this is a significant oversight. Wisconsin, the only state to look at juvenile crime by family structure, offers researchers data that suggest the probability that juveniles from never-married, single-mother families (the weakest family structure by most social science measures) can be incarcerated as much as 22 times more often than juveniles from the strongest family structure, the always-married, two-parent family.

Policymakers, parents, educators, criminal justice officials, and the helping professions should be concerned to find out whether this relationship between family structure and juvenile delinquency incarceration rates bears up across the nation; if it does, that relationship should reshape public policy.

Congress has a role in improving the data on juvenile delinquency. It should set the guidelines for the OJJDP's data gathering process because, without clear direction from Congress, the data are not likely to be gathered. Congress should use the appropriations process to direct the OJJDP to gather specific

data on the family backgrounds of juvenile offenders, the subjects of the new census. The Federal Reserve Board's Survey of Consumer Finance, which does incorporate such information, provides a good model for the OJJDP to use.

Good research helps public policy formation. Although powerful evidence from studies during the past 12 years demonstrates that the intact married family is the most powerful "program" in preventing juvenile delinquency, however, these data are not gathered in federal surveys. Congress should ensure that this oversight is ended and that marriage and the family become part of the OJJDP's new survey. This would be a first step toward helping the nation both to understand one of the root causes of juvenile crime and then to design programs that reinforce the important institution of the family to drive down juvenile crime.

This article previously appeared at the Heritage Foundation.

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