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SCHOOL DELINQUENCY AND BELIEF IN SCHOOL RULES

Patricia Harris Jenkins
Temple University

Prepared under Grant No. 91-JN-CX-0003 from the
office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention,
Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

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The author is grateful to Cynthia Robbins, James Fyfe,
and Wayne Welsh for their helpful comments.

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of The
American Society of Criminology, New Orleans 1992.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between school delinquency and belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules. A multiple path analysis of data from a survey of 754 middle school students in grades seven and eight shows that low levels of belief in school rules are linked to increasing rates of school delinquency. In an elaboration of Hirschi's social bonding theory, the present research systematically examines the influence upon belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules of certain predictor variables. These may, in turn, affect the extent of students' involvement in school delinquency. An important finding of this study is that belief is an important intervening mechanism that helps to explain the effects of race, living with a stepparent, and parental involvement with schooling on school crime, school misconduct, and school nonattendance.

SCHOOL DELINQUENCY AND BELIEF IN SCHOOL RULES

The school system plays a major role in the socialization of American children. After the family, the school is the primary social institution to assume the responsibility of teaching children appropriate social behavior. Through the process of teaching educational skills and social values and providing rewards and punishments, schools are intended to empower children to become responsible, productive adults. Because youths spend much of their time in school, involvement in delinquent behavior among school-aged children may be affected by their educational experiences. The school, then, as an instrument of socialization, can play a major role in delinquency causation and prevention by combating delinquency within the school setting itself and by strengthening the bond between students and the educational process.

As used here, "delinquency" is defined as acts against persons or property in school which disrupt the educational processes of teaching and learning. This study examines the effects of belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules on three different types of school delinquency: school crime, school misconduct, and school nonattendance. School crime refers to the possession, use, or distribution of alcohol or drugs, possession of a weapon, larceny, and assaults on teachers, school officials, or other students. School misconduct includes use of abusive language, destroying or defacing school property, smoking, insubordination, failure to attend detention, cheating, and throwing things in class. Those involved in school misconduct disrupt the learning environment and are probably disposed to engage in other antisocial or criminal conduct. School nonattendance refers to class cutting, leaving school without authorization, and skipping school. Students who attend classes or school infrequently may suffer from underdeveloped intellectual abilities and may fail to develop marketable skills. Moreover, school nonattendance may often be the first step to school dropout.

Using Travis Hirschi's (1969) social bonding theory as a general framework, the present study contributes to our understanding of the critical problem of school delinquency by exploring the connection between belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules and delinquency in the middle school. Specifically, the analysis answers two important questions: First, what are the effects of personal background characteristics, family involvement in schooling, and ability grouping on students' belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules? Second, what is the impact of students' belief in school rules on students' involvement in school crime, school misconduct, and school nonattendance?

School Delinquency

Students are both the perpetrators and victims of school misconduct. Teachers as well as students may be victims of school misbehavior. Faced with the problem of school delinquency, public schools find it difficult to maintain school discipline. According to *The 23rd Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public School* (Elam, Rose, and Gallup 1991), the American public ranked lack of discipline as the second biggest problem facing public schools today, narrowly trailing drug use.

Because of the lack of research on middle school students and because much of the misconduct directed against schools, students, and teachers begins before students enter high school, this research will focus on students aged 11 to 15. Maintaining discipline appears to be more problematic in middle schools (e.g., grades 6 to 8) than in high schools. For example, from a recent national survey of students in public and private schools, aged 12 to 19, Bastian and Taylor (1991) report that students in 6th and 9th grades were more likely to be crime victims than were students in higher grades. Also students aged 12 to 15 expressed more fear of being attacked at school or going to and from school than did older students. According to Toby (1980),

misbehavior in schools may be more problematic at this age level because, unlike high schools, middle schools require attendance and, generally, suspensions are more likely than expulsions.

Research also suggests that middle school years are the time for adolescent experimentation with tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs. According to a national study (Johnston, O'Malley, and Bachman 1988), 56% of all seniors in the high school class of 1987 began drinking in the 6th to 9th grades compared to 36% in the 10th to 12th grades. Also, 29% began illicit drug use in the 6th to 9th grades compared to 28% in the 10th to 12th grades.

Furthermore, in a study of sixth and eighth grade students in four inner-city Chicago schools, Menaker, Weldon, and Hurwitz (1989) found that: 1) more than 50% of the students reported that money, clothing, or personal property was stolen from them at least once during the school year, 2) 15% of the students reported hitting a teacher at least once during the year, 3) 42% of the teachers reported that they had hesitated at least once to confront misbehaving students out of fear for their own safety, and 4) 39% of the teachers reported damage to or theft of personal property during the school year in which the study was conducted.

In *Turning Points: Preparing Youth for the 21st Century* (1989), the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents states that middle schools are "society's most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift" (1989, p.8), yet receive little attention in discussions of educational reform.

Social Bonding Theory and Belief in School Rules

According to Hirschi (1969, p. 26), "there is variation in the extent to which people believe they should obey the rules of society, and, furthermore, that the less a person believes he should obey the rules, the more likely he is to violate them."

Although the impact of belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of *school rules* on students' involvement in school delinquency has rarely been examined, evidence supports the view that the belief component of the social bond is related to delinquency (Paternoster, Saltzman, Waldo, and Chiricos 1983; Krohn and Massey 1980; Agnew 1985). Agnew's (1985) cross-sectional study reveals belief to have a negative effect on delinquency. Krohn's and Massey's (1980) research, examining the effects of the elements of Hirschi's social bonding theory, found that the belief component explained the highest proportion of the variance for minor substance use (e.g., alcohol and marijuana use). Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1985), assessing student and teacher victimizations in junior and senior high schools, found that students' perception of rule enforcement as fair and clear was inversely related to student victimization. They also found that for junior high school students, perception of rule enforcement as firm and clear influenced the level of teacher victimization experienced in the school.

The effectiveness of the belief component of the school social bond may be weakened when youths temporarily justify or rationalize their delinquent behavior. Sykes and Matza (1957) suggest that certain neutralization techniques--denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties--may temporarily neutralize or lessen social controls and enable youths to drift in and out of delinquent behavior patterns.

While most students would agree that rules are necessary for the process of learning in school, they may differ in their perception of the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules. Inconsistencies and ineffective practices associated with school rules themselves may cause many of the student behavior problems confronting education (Duke 1978). For example, a study of five junior and senior high schools in both urban and suburban schools, Hollingsworth, Lufner, and Clune (1984, p. 101) concluded that student rule-breakers are treated unevenly depending on "selective

perceptions and different definitions of acceptable student behavior." Also, Tattum's (1982, 1986) study of disruptive students in British secondary schools suggests that the relationship between rules and behavior is not static, but instead subject to interpretation, negotiation, and modification. That is, the discretionary process of rule enforcement allows teachers, counselors, the principal and vice-principal some degree of autonomy and variability in enforcement of school rules. Biased processing and punishing of some students and not others by teachers and others in positions of authority may reinforce patterns of deviancy in some students (Chambliss 1973).

The issues of personal dignity and self-control also appear to be central to some students' perceptions of school rules. According to Schwartz (1987, p.30), many youths experience authority as unfair when it "puts them in a humiliating position" or when it is viewed as excessive coercion. To put this another way, it seems that to the extent that youths perceive that their personal dignity has not been diminished and their right to govern themselves has not been unduly reduced, they will believe in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules.

Drawing on the conclusions of previous research, it is hypothesized that belief in school rules is inversely related to school delinquency and that certain predictor variables--personal background, family involvement in schooling, ability grouping--influence belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 here

Factors Affecting Belief in School Rules and School Delinquency

Personal Background Characteristics

Family size. Researchers have found high levels of misbehavior for students from large families (Tygart 1991; Myers, Milne, Baker, and Ginsburg 1987). Because parents of large families have more children to supervise, these parents may find it difficult to reinforce family rules or to be consistent in rule enforcement with all of their children most of the time. These perceptions of rules at home may be transferred to school rules and may lead children from larger families to have less belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules and to be more involved in school delinquency than students from smaller families.

Family Structure. Several studies have demonstrated that single-parent families or stepparent families have a critical impact on the development of delinquency (Slocum and Stone 1963; Chilton and Markle 1972; Nye 1973; Gove and Crutchfield 1982). Since children of single parent families are generally less supervised (Astone and McLanahan 1991) and may be accustomed to more freedom and independence at home, they are expected to have less belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of rules and to be more involved in delinquency than other students.

It is also predicted that students living with a stepparent have less belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules and are more involved in delinquency than other students (see, for example, Hirschi 1969; Johnson 1986; Nye 1973). When stepchildren visit a noncustodial natural parent, rules of behavior may conflict causing stepchildren to perceive rules as inconsistent or as manipulative tools. Some stepparents may be too permissive in an attempt to win the affection of their stepchildren, others may be too strict in order to maintain better control and encourage respect.

Mother's Education. Research relating school delinquency to social class bias contends that lower-class children (i.e., children of parents with less education) have difficulty adjusting to the behavioral standards of middle-class teachers and may perceive school rules as arbitrary and too strict (Cohen 1955; Hanna 1988; Toby 1957). In this study, mother's education serves as a proxy measure of social class. Therefore, mothers' educational level is hypothesized to be inversely related to belief in school rules as well as school delinquency.¹

Gender. Research shows that girls, more accustomed to restrictive norms, accept school rules more easily (Riley 1986). Also, since most school teachers are female (57% at the present research site), girls may identify better with teachers and perceive them as role models. In the present study, in-school suspension records for the first two report periods reveal that of the students assigned to the Alternative Learning Center for in-school suspension 65% were boys. Since girls seem to have fewer disciplinary encounters resulting in in-school suspension and are more likely to better identify with their teachers, we can expect them to have a stronger belief in school rules than boys.

Race-Ethnicity. Although there has been a general failure to examine the racial variation in the impact of belief in school rules on school delinquency, there is evidence that the racial composition of the school may have some impact on the role school bonding plays in delinquency involvement (Cernkovich and Giordano 1992). Research studies suggest that an uneven application of punishment policies results in disproportionate suspensions and expulsions of nonwhite students (Taylor and Foster 1986; England, Meier, and Fraga 1988). In the present study, suspension rates by race

¹ Father's education is not included in the analysis because many children, especially those from single-parent families, did not know their father's education.

were not available. However, school records for the first two marking periods of the academic year for students assigned to the Alternative Learning Center (i.e., in-school suspension) reveal that, although only 34% of the population is nonwhite, 70% of the students receiving in-school suspension were nonwhite. Also, comments during student interviews indicate that students perceive unfairness in disciplining nonwhite students. Nonwhite students are, therefore, expected to have less belief in school rules and be more involved in delinquency than white students.

Grade Level. It is generally agreed among delinquency researchers that participation in delinquency is greater among teenagers than younger pre-teens (Williams and Gold 1972; Rankin 1980). It is expected that eighth graders, having attended school longer than seventh graders, will be more aware of inconsistent rule enforcement, biased processing of rules by teachers, and arbitrary punishments. Therefore, eighth graders are predicted to have less belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules and to be more involved in school delinquency than seventh graders.

Family Involvement in Schooling. Parents involved in parent-teacher organizations, parent-teacher conferences, checking homework, attending activities, and monitoring their child's progress in school are more likely to promote a climate of trust and respect between their children and school authorities and a better understanding of school rules and procedures. Furthermore, parental involvement may have the potential to encourage children to develop greater stakes in conforming to school rules because of their desire to fulfill their parents' expectations. Therefore, students of families involved in schooling are predicted to have more favorable belief in school rules and to be less involved in school delinquency.

Ability Grouping. Students in low-ability classes have been found to have feelings of incompetence and have unsatisfying social relations in school (Gold 1978;

Metz 1978; Oakes 1985), and evidence suggests that self-perceived ability is associated with delinquency (Hirschi 1969). Dissatisfaction with curriculum placement may lead some students to generally have less belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules. Furthermore, observations in some low-ability classes revealed that teachers are less strict about students' having books, homework, and pencils, and calling out. Outside of these classrooms, perhaps students, confronted by teachers with stricter behavior standards, become resentful and unaccepting of school rules. Thus, it is hypothesized that ability grouping is positively related to belief in the fairness of school rules and inversely related to school delinquency.

Research Methodology

The analysis focuses on the relationship between belief in school rules and three types of school delinquency--school crime, school misconduct, and school nonattendance. This approach recognizes the role of factors such as personal background characteristics, family involvement with schooling, and ability grouping affecting school delinquency, but these factors are hypothesized to be mediated through disciplinary experiences and perceptions of justice at school. That is, belief in school rules may explain the effects of certain traditional predictors of school delinquency.

The sample consists of students ranging from eleven to fifteen years of age in grades seven and eight. All students were enrolled for the 1990-91 school year in a middle school located in an urban-suburban community in the State of Delaware. Approximately 34% of the students in the school are nonwhite. The school employs 48 white teachers and 6 nonwhite teachers. Fifty-seven percent of the teachers are female. The selection of this middle school was influenced by the following factors: 1) the school consists of only seventh and eighth grade students providing a rich source of young adolescents at a crucial period of growth and transition; 2) as a desegregated school, the

school provides the opportunity to examine students of different neighborhood origins and races.

School delinquency, once perceived as an urban problem, has become acute nationwide. In the urban-suburban district in which this study was conducted, for example, escalating disruption in the schools has caused experienced teachers to seek early retirement, some parents to form coalitions against problem students and lax administrators, and other parents to take their children out of public schools and place them in private schools. In recent months, at the present research site, teachers filed a grievance, alleging physical violence and threats and inadequate enforcement of punishments; parents complained to the district superintendent about beatings and threats by students, teachers being cursed and pushed, students carrying guns and knives in school, and the disproportionate suspending of nonwhite students. Also, state lawmakers passed a controversial bill empowering school boards to install metal detectors at school entrances to ensure that weapons do not come into the schools and requiring school officials to report assaults and other serious offenses believed to be criminal in nature.

Data Collection

An anonymous questionnaire was administered to all students who had parental permission to participate.² Students responded to questions relating to personal background characteristics, family involvement in schooling, ability grouping, belief in school rules, and delinquent behavior in school. Of 911 students enrolled in the school,

² To ensure parents were informed of the study, consent/refusal forms were sent to parents. Parents who did not wish their children to participate returned the portion of the form denying permission to participate in the project.

754 (83%) completed the questionnaire. Although the response rate was not perfect, the data are fairly representative of the overall school population. The data, however, may be less representative of students who are chronically absent from school. The average attendance rate is approximately 87% per day. Table 1 shows a comparison of the school population and the survey respondents. The table suggests that African-American students may have been underrepresented; however, it appears that some of the respondents who call themselves "other" are identified as African-American by the school.

Open-ended student interviews, attendance records, behavior referral records, observations and informal teacher interviews were used to inform questionnaire development and supplement the survey analysis.

Table 1 here

Measurement of Variables

The selection of questionnaire indicators of each construct was based on the initial observations and interviews conducted in the school prior to the administration of the survey. To ensure the reliability of multi-item scales, SPSS procedures generated 'alpha' statistics reflecting the contribution of each item to overall scale reliability. Items that detracted from the reliability of the index were deleted.

Personal background variables include **family size, family structure, mother's education, ethnicity, gender, and grade**. Family size, ethnicity and gender are all dummy variables. Size of family is measured by the number of siblings in

the family. More than four siblings (18%) is coded 1, four or less siblings 0.³ Family structure is coded as dummy classifications indicating whether the child lives with both parents (60%), a stepparent (16%), or a single parent (23%). In the regressions, "both parents" is the comparison group. Mother's education, which acts as a proxy for social class, is a four category ordinal scale indicating years of schooling completed. The mean on this variable, 3.1, is between 3 (some college) and 4 (graduated from college). Because there are so few Latino-American and Asian-American students, Latino-Americans and African-Americans are combined to form the "nonwhite" category and Asian-Americans are included in the "white" category. Nonwhites are coded 1, whites 0 based on the respondents' self-identification in the questionnaire. Males are coded 1, females 0. Seventh grade is coded 0, eighth grade 1.

Family Involvement with schooling variables represent the participation of the student's family in his/her school experience. These measures include **parental involvement** and dummy variables indicating if the student has a **sibling at school** or a **sibling who used to attend** the same school. The parental involvement measure (Chronbach's alpha = .59) is a seven-item index of parents' participation in schooling through volunteering in the school, going on class trips, belonging to the school Parent Teacher Association, and the frequency of parents' coming to school, talking about school at home, and checking homework. While the alpha for family involvement is not high, the scale provides a more reliable measure than any single indicator of family involvement.

³ The collapsed variable produces stronger effects than the original variable scaled 0 to 5 (for > 4).

Math placement is the ability grouping factor in this study.⁴ Mathematics classes are grouped homogeneously, with students of similar abilities grouped together. Although the school in this study asserts that it has no tracking policy, there is justification for using mathematics placement as an indicator of ability grouping. According to Oakes (1985), ability grouping by subject is considered a form of tracking. Also, classes may be considered "high status" because they are "highly valued in the culture and necessary for higher education" (Oakes 1985, p. 77). Students are selected for math placement on the basis of standardized test scores, prior mathematics success, and teacher recommendation. Algebra is coded 3, pre-algebra 2, general math 1, and remedial math 0.

Belief in school rules (Chronbach's alpha = .84) is a seventeen-item index indicating responses to the following questions: Most school rules are fair. The principal is tough and too strict. (no) Students are treated fairly by most teachers in this school. Rules in this school are too strict. (no) Schools should have rules. The vice-principal is tough and too strict. (no) The principal is fair most of the time. The punishments for breaking rules are the same in this school no matter who you are. Teachers in this school are too strict. (no) In your school how are the following groups treated? (the same) African-Americans? Spanish-Americans? Asian-Americans? Whites? Honor roll students? Male students? Female students? Students with poor grades?

⁴ It should be noted that foreign language classes were also considered as an indicator of ability grouping, but early analyses revealed no significant effect of language placement. Also math placement was considered to be more representative of a high-status course since student placement in foreign language classes is based more on student self-selection than ability.

The dependent variables representing school delinquency are measured by three indices: **School crime** (Chronbach's alpha = .82) is an index of 14 items indicating self-reported use of alcohol or drugs, selling drugs, theft from student or teacher, vandalism, fighting, and carrying a weapon. **School misconduct** (Chronbach's alpha = .82) is indicated by affirmative responses to questions about frequent talking in class, using inappropriate language, marking on desks or walls, cheating, refusing to do class work, not doing or copying homework, throwing something in class, wearing improper clothing, wandering the halls without a pass, being suspended, being sent out of the classroom, and being deprived of bus riding privileges. Finally, **school nonattendance** (Chronbach's alpha = .67) refers to positive responses about cutting class, being late for school or class, and cutting school.⁵

Data Analysis

The primary analysis technique is multiple regression. Although the relationships *between* personal background characteristics, family involvement in schooling, and ability grouping are not of central interest in this study, the multiple regressions will allow for such relationships by entering variables into the regression equation in steps. Personal background variables are presumed to influence family involvement variables, and both personal background and family involvement variables are presumed to influence ability grouping. First, belief is regressed on personal background factors to estimate how much they influence belief in school rules. Significant effects from that equation are retained and family involvement in schooling measures are added to the model. Significant effects from that equation are retained and

⁵ A complete copy of the questionnaire and scale components are available from the author.

math ability grouping is added to the model. This procedure allows for the examination of math ability grouping while controlling for relevant family involvement and background characteristics. It will also demonstrate whether background characteristics and family involvement have direct effects on belief or operate indirectly through ability grouping.

Second, school delinquency variables are regressed on the predictors of belief in stepwise regression to demonstrate the effects of the sources of belief in school rules on delinquency. Next the belief variable is added to the model to estimate how much it contributes to explanations of school delinquency. This procedure will allow comparison of the predictive importance of belief in school rules relative to other variables and demonstrate whether it is a significant predictor of school delinquency while controlling for personal background, family involvement in schooling, and ability grouping. Finally, the procedure will help demonstrate whether personal background, family involvement, and ability grouping influence school delinquency indirectly through belief in school rules as hypothesized. Means and standard deviations for all variables in the theoretical model, along with their correlation coefficients are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2 here

Results

The findings support the general hypothesis that belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules is inversely associated with school delinquency.

Predictors of Belief

Table 3 presents stepwise regression models to describe the effects of the predictor variables on the belief component of the school social bond. In Step 1

ethnicity, gender, living with a stepparent, and mother's education play important roles in predicting belief in school rules. As predicted, nonwhite students, boys, and students living with a stepparent have less belief in the fairness of school rules and their consistent enforcement. Mother's education has a significant inverse association with belief. In contrast, family size, living with a single parent, and grade level have no significant impact on belief in school rules. Thus, the hypotheses concerning these variables are not supported.

When family involvement in schooling factors are added (Step 2), parental involvement, as expected, has a significant positive association with belief in school rules. Parental involvement mediates the relationship between mother's education and belief. Contrary to expectations, currently or previously having siblings in the same school has no significant impact on belief in school rules.

Math placement (Step 3) has no significant impact on belief, although, interestingly, the addition of the variable increases the positive impact of parental involvement in schooling. The final model, combining personal background factors, family involvement, and math placement explains only 8% of the variance in belief among the students in this sample. The results summarized in this section demonstrate that belief in school rules is only modestly related to personal background, family involvement, and ability grouping.

Table 3 here

Consequences of Belief

Table 4 presents the effect of belief in school rules on **school crime**. As predicted, mother's education has large inverse effects on school crime, and being male, having a sibling in the same school, living with a stepparent, and living with a single

parent increase the likelihood of involvement in school crime. Having a sibling in the same school has the opposite effect of that hypothesized. That is, students with a sibling in the same school are more likely to be involved in school crime.

Belief in school rules, as predicted, has a strong inverse relationship with school crime. The results suggest that belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules is an important intervening mechanism that explains the effect of living with a stepparent on school crime. The large effect on crime of being male on school crime is only partially mediated by belief. Having a sibling in the same school directly affects school crime. The final model explains 23% of the variance of school crime which is 11% more than that explained by all variables except belief. Figure 2 presents the trimmed path model summarizing the effect of belief in school rules on school crime.

Table 4 here

Figure 2 here

Table 5 presents the effect of belief in school rules on **school misconduct**. When school misconduct is regressed on the predictors of belief, the important predictors retained in the model after adding family involvement (Step 2) and ability grouping (Step 3), respectively, are living with a stepparent or a single parent, mother's education, ethnicity, and gender. As with school crime, mother's education has a strong inverse relationship with school misconduct, and boys are more likely than girls to be involved in school misconduct. Also, living with a single parent, living with a stepparent and being nonwhite are significant predictors of school misconduct.

As hypothesized, belief in school rules has a strong inverse association with school misconduct (Step 4). Particularly striking is the reduction to nonsignificance of the effects of living with a stepparent and being nonwhite on misconduct when belief is added to the model. This suggests that the effects of those variables are explained by belief in school rules. The effects of living with a single parent, being male, and mother's education on school misconduct are not substantially reduced by the inclusion of the belief variable. The final model explains 20% of the variance of school misconduct compared to only 14% without the belief variable. The trimmed path model summarizing the effect of belief in school rules on school misconduct is presented in Figure 3.

Table 5 here

Figure 3 here

Table 6 presents the model predicting **school nonattendance**. The significant predictors of school nonattendance retained in the model after adding family involvement (Step 2) and ability grouping (Step 3), respectively, are size of family, living with a stepparent, living with a single parent, parental involvement in schooling, and math placement. As expected, there is a strong inverse association between belief and school nonattendance (Step 4). Adding belief to the model reduces to nonsignificance the effects of living with a stepparent, parental involvement in schooling, and math placement on school nonattendance. This may be related to increased home responsibilities of children from large or single parent families. Family size and living with a single parent have direct impact on nonattendance. In the final model, personal background, family

involvement, and ability grouping variables combined explain only 5% of the variance of school nonattendance. Adding the belief variable to the model increases the R-square to 12%. Figure 4 presents the trimmed path model summarizing the effect of belief in school rules on school nonattendance.

Table 6 here

Figure 4 here

Conclusions

This paper has explored some of the sources of variation in students' belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules and the impact of belief in school rules on school crime, school misconduct, and school nonattendance. Overall, the results support the hypothesis that belief in school rules is inversely related to participation in school delinquency.

A consistent and important finding is that belief in school rules mediates the effect of living with a stepparent, race, and parental involvement with schooling for school crime, school misconduct, and school nonattendance.

Another important finding is that personal background characteristics, family involvement in schooling, and ability grouping were observed to have only a modest effect on belief in school rules. Parental involvement had the strongest influence on belief. In addition, nonwhite students were more likely than white students to deny the consistent enforcement and fairness of school rules. These results suggest that parents and schools need to work together to increase students' understanding and acceptance of school rules. Although at the present research setting parents are encouraged to become

involved in school activities--for example, working in the office, tutoring students, chaperoning field trips, and staffing a homework "hot line"--emphasis should be placed on encouraging *greater* parental involvement in schooling, particularly for nonwhite students and boys. Perhaps providing parents with more meaningful roles in school governance, keeping parents better informed of their child's academic and social pursuits, and encouraging parent-teacher-student conferences can help close the gap between parents and school staff and build more trust and respect for school sanctions. The implication is that an effective process of school rule enforcement may enable students to perceive the rules as working *for* them, rather than *against* them. One could argue that to the extent that students perceive school rules as relevant and meaningful to their lives, they will accept them as fair.

The observations regarding nonwhite students' perception of school rules as unfair may point to a need to examine school records for possible discriminatory and inconsistent discipline practices. Research (Duke 1978; Tattum 1982) indicates that one of the consequences of inconsistent rule enforcement is that some students may perceive disciplinary practices as unfair and become disruptive as a result. It may be that inconsistent rule enforcement undermines student respect for the school disciplinary process. A closer look at behavior referrals and suspension records will provide a clearer picture of the disciplinary process and, perhaps, influence the school staff to implement programs to help teachers and students communicate more effectively and positively.

This study has limitations which may influence the generalizability of results. First, cross-sectional correlational data cannot establish causal links. Thus, the results do not establish causal relationships between the proposed determinants and consequences of belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules. Also, cross-sectional data cannot assess the possible impact of delinquency on belief in school

rules (e.g., Agnew 1985; Paternoster, Saltzman, Waldo, and Chiricos 1983; Thornberry, Lizotti, Krohn, Farnworth, and Jang 1991). Longitudinal data would allow a more comprehensive analysis of the causal processes linking belief in school rules to school delinquency. Further, the data cannot be assumed to apply to all middle schools. However, the hypothesized model is plausible and is more comprehensive than others in this area in its consideration of the effects of personal background characteristics, family involvement in schooling, and ability grouping on belief in school rules and school delinquency.

Traditionally, there has been a focus on race, social class, and tracking in discussions of schools and delinquency (Cohen 1955; Chambliss 1973; Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Hanna 1988). The results suggest that, for this sample, belief in school rules is a stronger predictor of delinquency than some of the classic predictors.

An earlier examination of the school social bond by the author, looking at commitment to school, attachment to school and involvement in school activities, indicates that the effect of belief in school rules remains strong even when controlling for commitment, involvement and attachment. Commitment to school and belief in school rules were strong predictors of school crime and school misconduct relative to the other two school bond components.

While prior research has examined the relationship between school bonding and delinquency, the present study explores the *sources* of one element of the school bond--belief in school rules. The findings suggest that explained variance in belief in school rules is low. Therefore, although belief in school rules appears to be an important predictor of school delinquency, it is clear that further research is needed to determine other *sources* of belief since it is not well explained by the predictors considered in this study. One possible source of belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school

rules is a student's past disciplinary encounter. Other possible explanations may be peer relations and nonschool delinquency.

Generally, the criminological and sociological literature on perceptions of justice has mainly focused on adults. The present study examines an additional aspect of justice-- conceptions of justice experientially and developmentally within the school setting . In sum, the findings are consistent with the social control perspective, suggesting that belief in the fairness and consistent enforcement of school rules is significantly related to school delinquency.

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Table 1. Characteristics of Survey Respondents Compared to Overall School Population (Percentages).

	School Population	Respondents
Gender		
Boys	49.3	50.0
Girls	50.7	50.0
Race		
White	66.5	66.1
African-American	27.8	22.0
Spanish-American	2.9	4.9
Asian-American	2.7	3.0
Other	0.1	3.9
Transportation to School		
School bus:		
From local area	65.4	67.5
From urban area	20.1	15.9
Walk or car	14.5	16.6
Grade		
Seventh	49.7	49.9
Eighth	50.3	50.1
Team		
7A	16.4	16.5
7B	15.8	16.5
7C	15.9	15.0
8A	17.1	17.4
8B	16.4	16.2
8C	17.1	16.9
Not on a team	1.3	1.5
N	911	754

Table 2. Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations of Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Size of Family															
2. Stepparent	.03														
3. Single Parent	-.05	-.24													
4. Mother's Education	.11	.08	.16												
5. Nonwhite	.15	.10	.21	-.17											
6. Gender	-.03	.04	-.07	.02	-.01										
7. Grade	-.02	.04	-.03	.06	.02	.03									
8. Sib at School	.16	.09	.04	.06	.12	.02	.06								
9. Use to Have Sib at School	.12	-.07	-.06	.05	-.04	-.08	-.03	.03							
10. Parental Involvement	-.07	-.05	-.18	.29	-.15	.00	.03	.02	.00						
11. Math Ability Grouping	-.10	-.13	-.16	.23	-.23	-.07	-.35	-.10	.05	.15					
12. Belief	.00	-.13	-.08	.12	-.19	-.12	-.01	-.10	-.01	.17	.12				
13. School Crime	.05	.13	.06	-.17	.12	.22	-.04	.18	.03	-.11	-.14	-.48			
14. Misconduct	.08	.12	.13	-.19	.18	.23	-.08	.11	.02	-.14	-.17	-.44	-.37		
15. Nonattendance	.11	.07	.13	-.13	.12	.07	-.06	.10	.03	-.14	-.13	-.47	-.39	-.17	
\bar{X}	0.18	0.16	0.23	3.07	0.27	0.50	0.49	0.13	0.38	2.83	1.69	8.01	5.77	3.9	11.4
SD	0.39	0.37	0.42	1.02	0.44	0.50	0.50	0.34	0.49	1.71	0.99	2.00	2.02	2.07	4.1

Note: Decimal points omitted for correlation coefficients.

Table 3. Effects of Personal Background Characteristics, Family Involvement, and Ability Grouping on Belief
(Standardized Coefficients in Parentheses).

	I	II	III
Personal Background			
Size of Family (0-3 sibs=0, more sibs=1)	.444 (.041)		
Stepparent (0,1)	- 1.367 (- .123)**	- 1.124 (- .100)*	- .985 (- .088)*
Single Parent (0,1)	- .577 (- .059)		
Mother's Education (< high school=1 to college grad=4)	.338 (.086)*	.219 (.056)	
Ethnicity (white=0, nonwhite=1)	-1.390 (- .148)***	- 1.311 (- .140)***	- 1.382 (- .149)***
Gender (female=0, male=1)	-1.114 (- .139)***	- 1.077 (- .134)***	- .926 (- .114)**
Grade (7th=0, 8th=1)	- .122 (- .015)		
Family Involvement			
Sibling at School (0,1)		- .804 (- .064)	
Sib Used to Attend (0,1)		- .056 (- .007)	
Parental Involvement in Schooling (0=low to 9=high)		.291 (.124)**	.355 (.150)***
Math Ability Grouping (remedial math=0 to algebra=3)			.159 (.039)
Smallest Paired N	623	623	699
Constant	11.758	11.213	11.217
Multiple R Squared	.079	.089	.084

* $p < .050$ (Two-tailed).

** $p < .010$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Regression of School Crime on Personal Background, Family Involvement, Ability Grouping, and Belief (Standardized Coefficients in Parentheses).

	I	II	III	IV
Personal Background				
Size of Family (0-3 sibs=0, more sibs=1)	.277 (.045)			
Stepparent (0,1)	.714 (.113)**	.696 (.110)**	.501 (.080)*	.441 (.069)
Single Parent (0,1)	.442 (.081)*	.499 (.091)*	.508 (.094)*	.335 (.061)
Mother's Education ($<$ high school=1 to college grad=4)	-.292 (-.132)***	-.280 (-.127)***	-.301 (-.138)***	-.255 (-.115)**
Ethnicity (white=0, nonwhite=1)	.352 (.066)			
Gender (female=0, male=1)	1.056 (.233)***	1.048 (.232)***	1.007 (.225)***	.855 (.187)***
Grade (7th=0, 8th=1)	.160 (.035)			
Family Involvement				
Sibling at School (0,1)		1.041 (.146)***	.974 (.137)***	.925 (.129)***
Sib Used to Attend (0,1)		.260 (.056)		
Parental Involvement in Schooling (0=low to 9=high)		-.082 (-.062)		
Math Ability Grouping (remedial math=0 to algebra=3)				
			-.123 (-.054)	
Belief				
				-.188 (-.331)***
Smallest Paired N	639	638	622	622
Constant	1.765	1.797	1.971	3.971
Multiple R Squared	.107	.128	.120	.230

* $p < .050$ (Two-tailed).

** $p < .010$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Regression of School Misconduct on Personal Background, Family Involvement, Ability Grouping, and Belief (Standardized Coefficients in Parentheses).

	I	II	III	IV
Personal Background				
Size of Family (0-3 sibs=0, more sibs=1)	.683 (.074)*	.601 (.065)		
Stepparent (0,1)	1.064 (.111)**	1.003 (.105)**	.964 (.099)*	.664 (.069)
Single Parent (0,1)	1.064 (.128)**	1.037 (.125)**	.954 (.114)**	.926 (.111)**
Mother's Education ($<$ high school=1 to college grad=4)	-.471 (-.141)***	-.441 (-.132)***	-.503 (-.149)***	-.458 (-.136)***
Ethnicity (white=0, nonwhite=1)	.737 (.092)*	.671 (.084)*	.690 (.085)*	.458 (.056)
Gender (female=0, male=1)	1.683 (.246)***	1.673 (.244)***	1.663 (.242)***	1.436 (.209)***
Grade (7th=0, 8th=1)	.485 (.071)			
Family Involvement				
Sibling at School (0,1)		.323 (.030)		
Sib Used to Attend (0,1)		-.237 (-.034)		
Parental Involvement in Schooling (0=low to 9=high)		-.116 (-.057)		
Math Ability Grouping (remedial math=0 to algebra=3)			-.255 (-.072)	
Belief				-.231 (-.269)***
Smallest Paired N	639	638	623	623
Constant	5.533	5.467	6.039	8.366
Multiple R Squared	.139	.139	.141	.201

* $p < .050$ (Two-tailed).

** $p < .010$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 6. Regression of School Nonattendance on Personal Background, Family Involvement, Ability Grouping, and Belief (Standardized Coefficients in Parentheses).

	I	II	III	IV
Personal Background				
Size of Family				
(0-3 sibs=0, more sibs=1)	.526 (.106)**	.480 (.097)*	.351 (.073)*	.390 (.081)*
Stepparent (0,1)	.486 (.093)*	.465 (.089)*	.405 (.079)*	.223 (.043)
Single Parent (0,1)	.695 (.155)***	.665 (.148)***	.469 (.106)**	.437 (.098)**
Mother's Education				
(< high school=1 to college grad=4)	- .156 (- .086)*	- .123 (- .068)		
Ethnicity (white=0, nonwhite=1)	.093 (.021)			
Gender (female=0, male=1)	.271 (.073)			
Grade (7th=0, 8th=1)	.257 (.069)			
Family Involvement				
Sibling at School (0,1)		.281 (.049)		
Sib Used to Attend (0,1)		.082 (.022)		
Parental Involvement in Schooling				
(0=low to 9=high)		- .092 (- .085)*	- .116 (- .107)**	- .070 (- .065)
Math Ability Grouping				
(remedial math=0 to algebra=3)			- .151 (- .080)*	- .123 (- .065)
Belief				
				- .127 (- .278)***
Smallest Paired N	634	633	705	690
Constant	1.445	1.593	1.679	3.006
Multiple R Squared	.063	.063	.050	.125

* p < .050 (Two-tailed).

** p < .010.

*** p < .001.

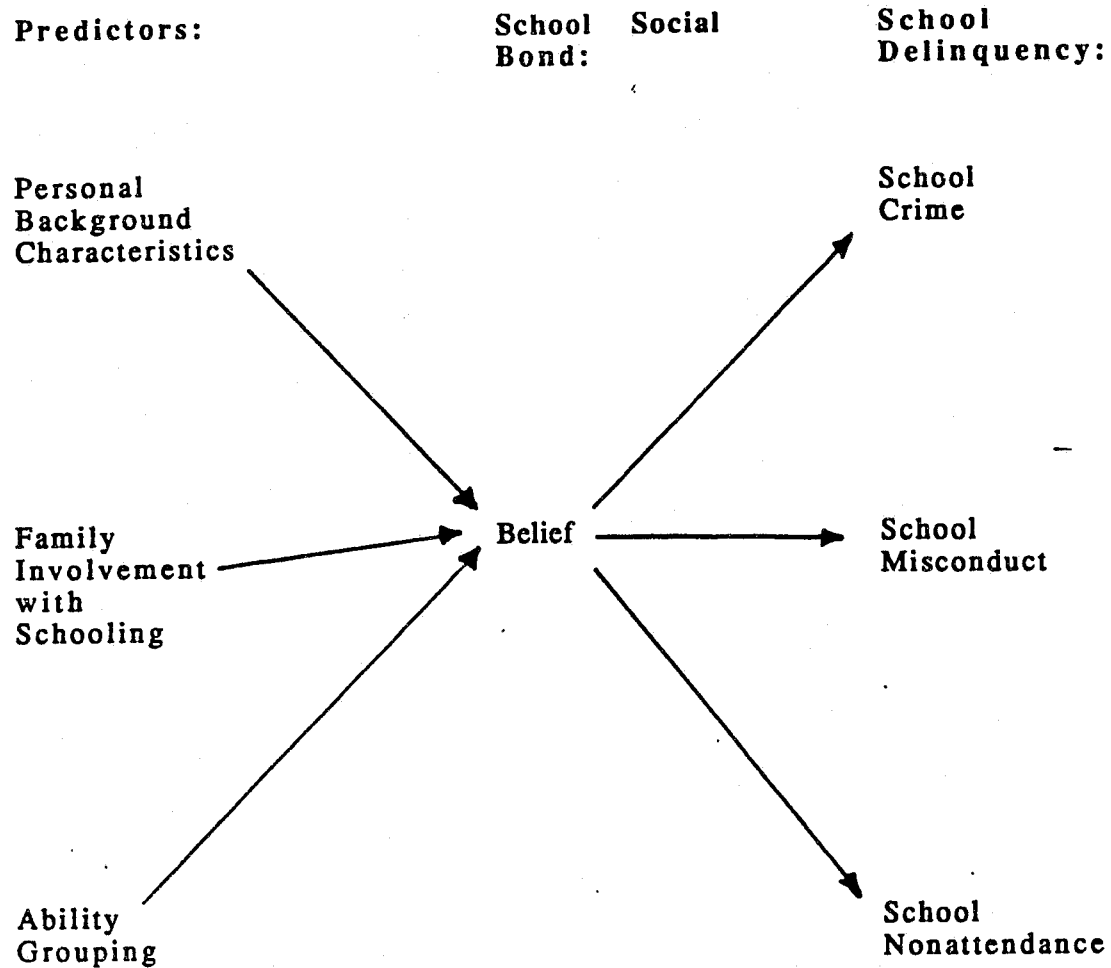


Figure 1. General Theoretical Model

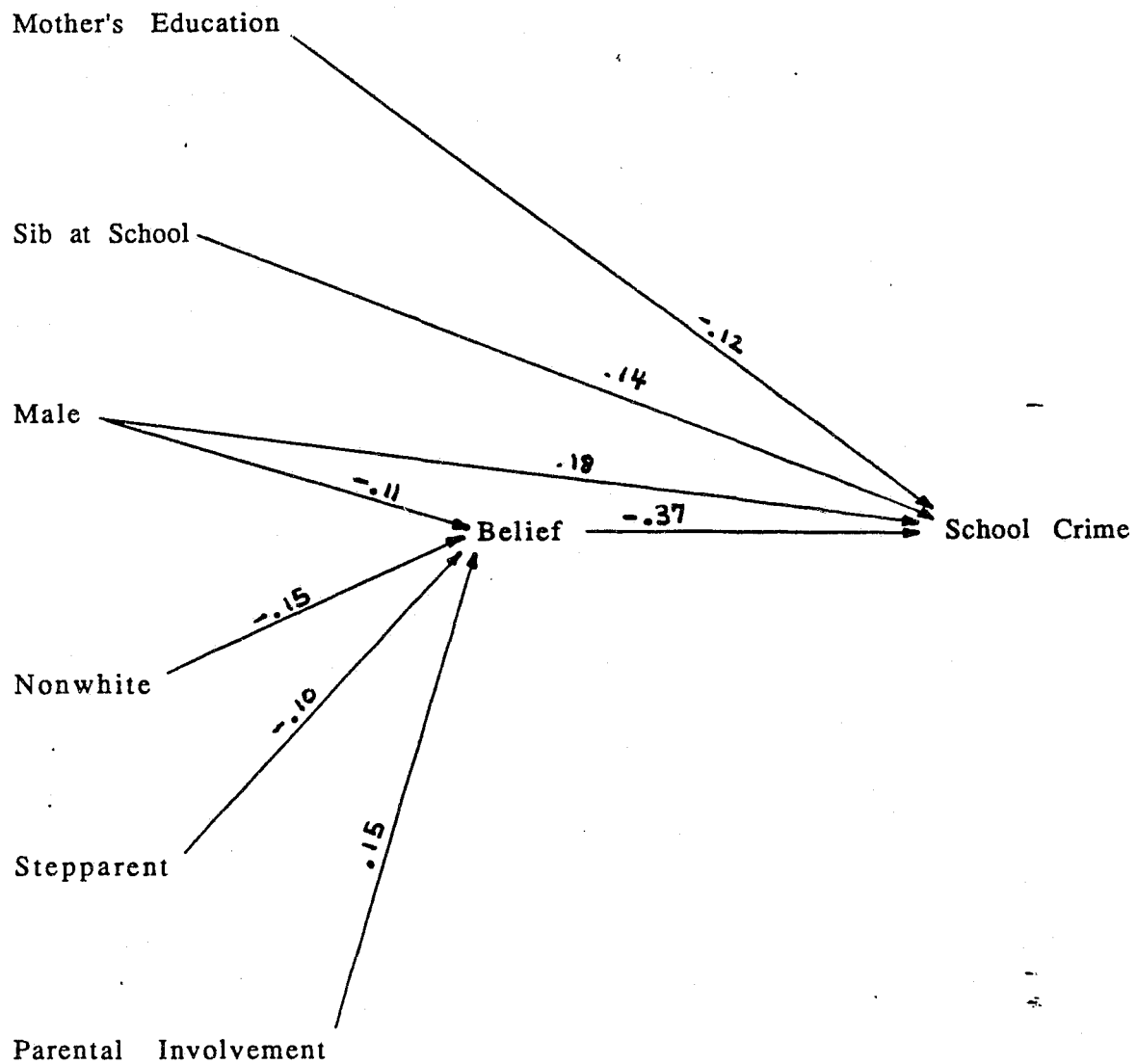


Figure 2. Trimmed Path Diagram and Standardized Coefficients for Belief and School Crime.

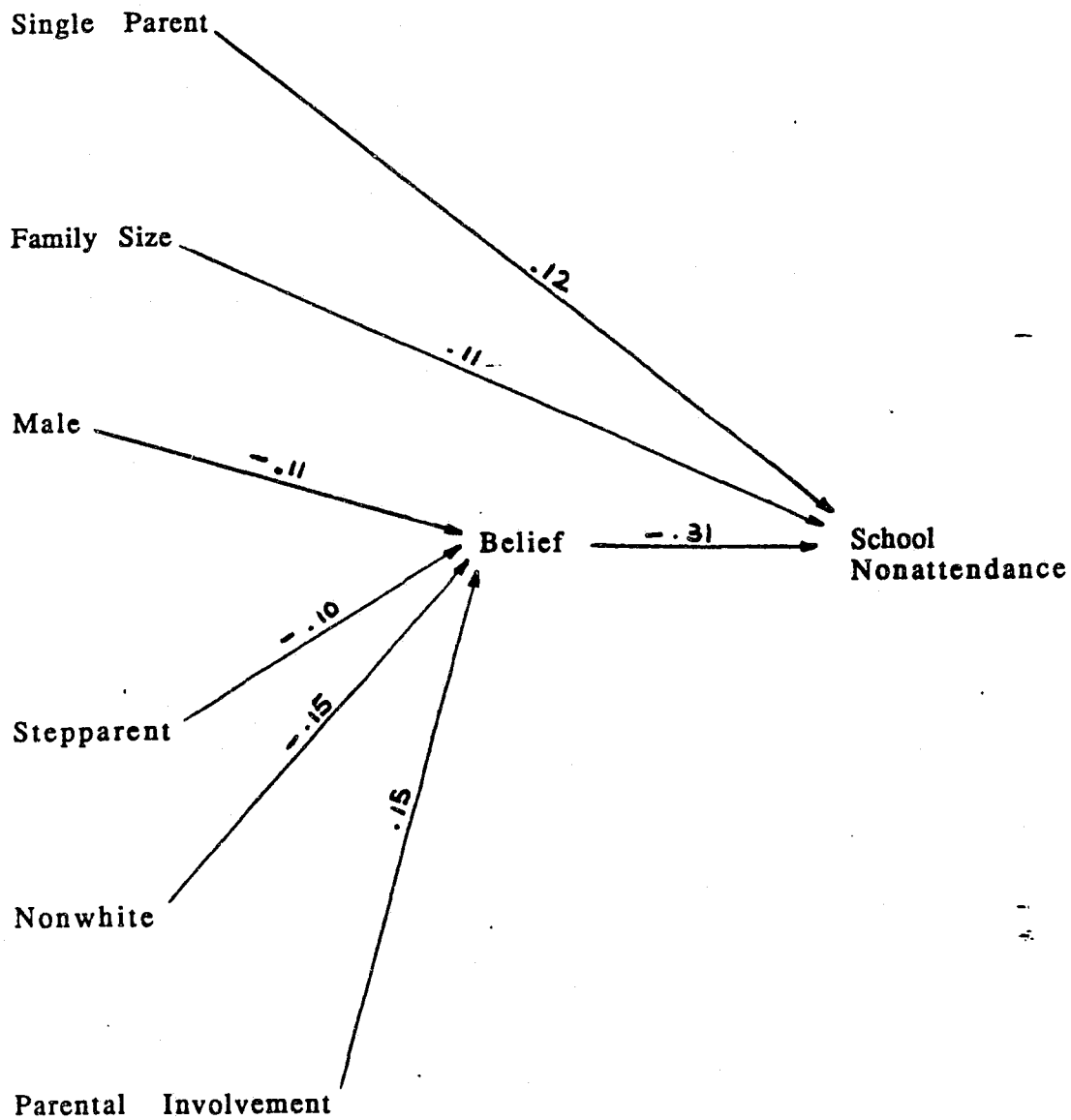


Figure 4. Trimmed Path Diagram and Standardized Coefficients for Belief and School Nonattendance.

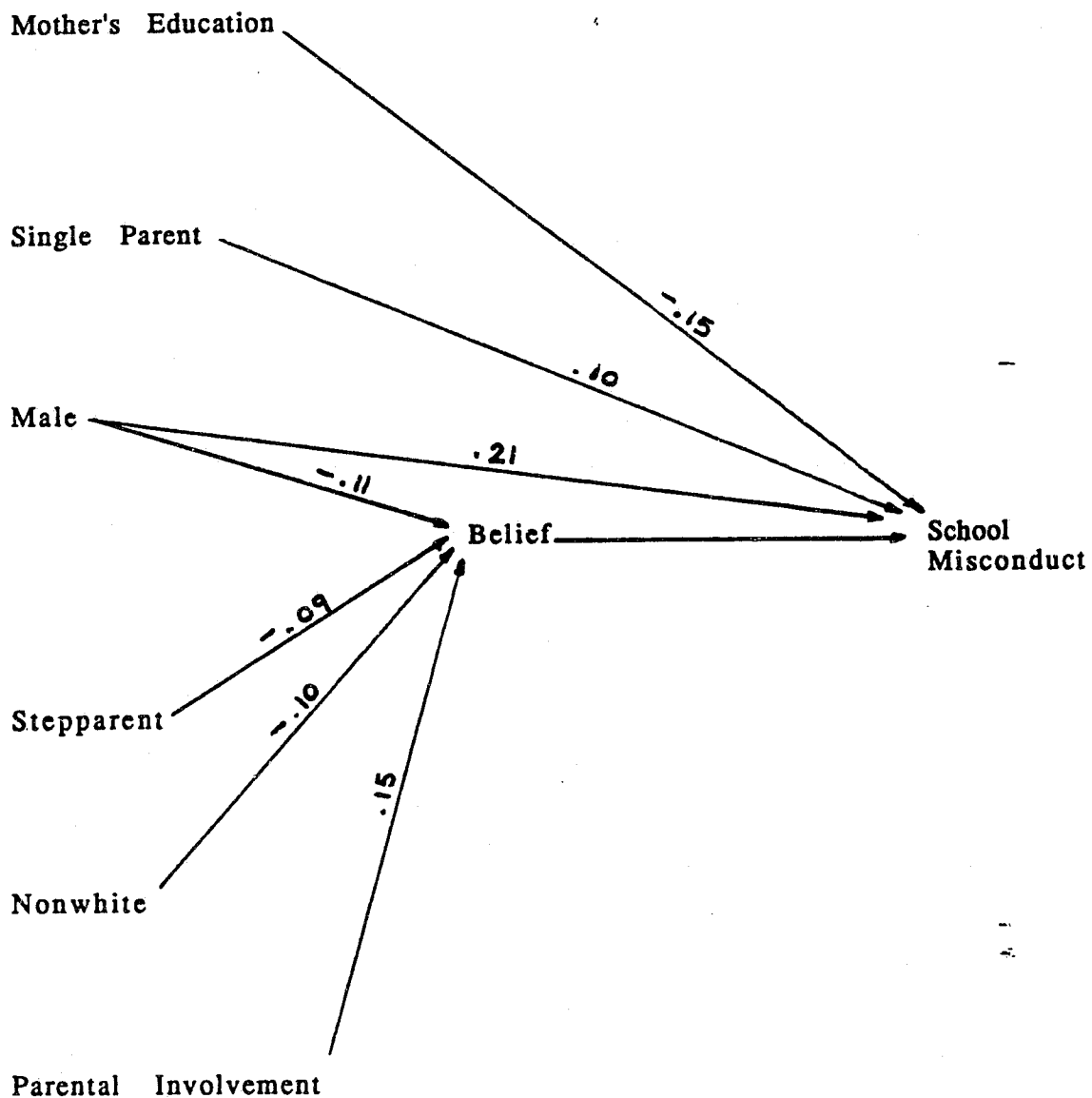


Figure 3. Trimmed Path Diagram and Standardized Coefficients for Belief and School Misconduct.