



# Why Youth People Commit Criminal Acts

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## Abstract

Juvenile delinquency, as a form of socially unacceptable behavior, is a current socially negative phenomenon that imposes the need for greater community engagement in solving a number of unresolved problems that are accumulating and deepening from year to year. Juveniles commit crimes alone, in peer groups and with adults. The number of committed criminal acts is also increasing, during which juveniles show special ruthlessness, cruelty, and persistence in committing property criminal offenses committed in a short period of time.

**Keywords:** Juvenile; Behavior; Crime; Justice

## Introduction

A theory is an explanation [1]. It tells why or how things are related to each other. A theory of crime explains why or how a certain thing or certain things are related to criminal behavior. For example, some theories assume that crime is a part of human nature, that human beings are born evil. In those theories, human nature is the thing explained in relation to crime. Other theories assume that crime is caused by biological things (for example, chromosome abnormalities, hormone imbalances), psychological things (such as below-normal intelligence, satisfaction of basic needs), sociological things (for instance, social disorganization, inadequate socialization), economic things (such as poverty, unemployment), or some combination of all four kinds of things. In the chapters that follow, a variety of things associated with crime are examined. (Note that, unless indicated otherwise, the term crime includes delinquency.)

Scientific theories are comprised of (1) concepts, (2) definitions of concepts, and (3) propositions. Those “things” mentioned in the previous paragraph, including criminal behavior, are called concepts. Concepts are words or phrases that represent some phenomenon in the world. The object of theory is to explain the interrelationship of concepts, that is, how concepts are related to each other. For example, through theory, we might attempt to

explain how the concepts of crime and poverty are interrelated. Does poverty cause crime? Does crime cause poverty?

## Adolescent Crime

Adolescent crime has been studied using many labels [2]. The most common label for adolescent criminal behavior has been delinquency. Delinquency encompasses a range of norm-breaking behaviors that apply to adults and minors. Behaviors for which adults are criminally responsible include drug use and violent offenses against other persons (e.g., assault), property (e.g., vandalism, arson), and public order. In addition to criminal violations, minors also are responsible for status offenses.

Research has shown that children who engage in problem behaviors are likely to be exposed to multiple risk factors. Multiple-risk factors (e.g., childhood defiant behavior, impulsivity, parental impulsivity, and aggressiveness) contribute directly to engagement in problem behaviors as well as other negative outcomes (e.g., undermined parenting practices). These other negative outcomes, in turn, further contribute to problem behaviors as when lax parental monitoring leads to negative peer associations and overall declines in monitoring of negative behaviors. The earlier a child engages in problem behaviors, the more likely he or she is to continue such behaviors throughout his or her adolescent and adult years.

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In addition to the negative impact criminal behaviors have on offenders, their families, and their victims, there are external costs to society in terms of loss of productivity, legal costs, treatment, rehabilitation, and/or incarceration.

Explanations of juvenile delinquency require consideration of two sets of elements [3]. These are, on the one hand, the driving forces, the reasons or motives behind the act and, on the other, the obstacles that stand in its way, the restraints that inhibit its occurrence. In principle, it is possible to construct an explanation of delinquency that gives each set of elements, if not equal weight, at least some role in the outcome. In practice, equal treatment of motives and restraints turns out to be difficult. Once the theorist tends in one direction or the other, logic quickly takes him to an extreme position. As a result, theories of delinquency usually focus on one set and ignore or exclude the other. Theorists favoring motives of course find support for their position in human nature, the logic of science, and in the brute facts of experience. Those favoring restraints find, in the same places, equal support for their views. The choice between these extremes then takes on the character of an all-or-none political or ideological decision, with the student asked to choose between causation and deterrence, between social science and law, between the liberal and conservative approaches to public policy.

## Parenting

The notion that parents are responsible for or otherwise influence their children's positive and negative behaviors has existed for thousands of years [4]. Ancient Greeks, Romans, Chinese, and others considered the roles of parents in ensuring that children become responsible, productive, and law-abiding adults. And this emphasis continues today, perhaps more so now that at any point in human history. The large number of popular parenting books, media, and academic research attest to its depth and breadth.

The concept of parenting has biological, legal, and social aspects. The notion of a biological parent has been complicated in recent years by advances in reproductive technology, which, in turn, have affected the legal status of parenting. Although a subsequent section on family structure will return to some biological and legal characteristics of parenting, at present the most important aspect involves the social. Parenting as a social endeavor involves various facets of childrearing responsibilities, including relations between parents, with children, and with the broader social structure that has concerns about socializing children (e.g., educational institutions). Childrearing is also seen as entailing moral responsibilities. Parents are accountable for making decisions that are in the best interests of their children, protecting them from harm, and providing resources that allow their children to develop physiologically, mentally, and socially.

While divorce is a reality in our society, parents can work together to provide a united message about the importance of

education for their children [5]. Reinforcing the importance of education in both homes provides the child with consistency with regards to academic success. In addition, as difficult as it may be, parents could attempt to be present at school functions, provide academic resources in both homes and present a uniform message regarding homework and grades, again reinforcing the importance of school and the educational experience. When parents are present at school events and school activities involving their child, it not only reinforces the parent-child bond, but also validates the student's involvement in school improving the student-school bond.

Parents can also be present in the life of their children by knowing who their kids are hanging out with and what they are doing. Of particular note inquiring about how their child is doing in school and within the school environment. A parent can make a substantial difference in the life of their child simply by monitoring how he or she is doing. Parental involvement can potentially lead to higher grade point averages and lower levels of participation in delinquency, drug use and association with delinquent peers. All of which will improve a student's bond to school. Delinquency research consistently identifies association with delinquent peers as the strongest predictor of juvenile delinquency. If parents know their child's friends it might make a significant impact on their child's delinquent behavior and help ensure that the student is successful in the school environment.

## Behavioral Labeling

A general trend toward socialization occurs during this time [6]. With respect to physical aggression, this downward trend continues through adolescence. Two things change as children move into adolescence, however: opportunities for engaging in problem behavior increase, and adults react differently to misbehavior. Alcohol, other drugs, and weapons become more available to youths, thus increasing the potential harm to self and others resulting from their antisocial behavior. Work becomes available, providing discretionary money with which to purchase illegal commodities. Parental supervision diminishes. Association with delinquent peers becomes easier. These increases in opportunities for problem behavior explain the increase observed in certain types of problem behavior during adolescence. Also, whereas delinquent acts in early and middle childhood are usually responded to informally by parents and teachers, delinquent preadolescents and adolescents are more at risk for official sanction by police and the courts. This shift in response creates the appearance of a rapid increase in antisocial behavior in early adolescence when only official records are examined.

One advantage to being able to identify genetic or neuropsychological predictors of criminality is early intervention [7]. A primary objective of such research is identifying the potential of juvenile offenders to reoffend. However, using



genetic, biopsychological, or other physiological measures to identify juveniles with a greater likelihood to reoffend poses a number of ethical and social challenges.

The risks of labeling juveniles as biologically predisposed to reoffend seem clear. Labeling is particularly powerful in children, influencing their scholastic careers in addition to future employment. The impact of biological labeling on children can be greater than that of behavioral labeling. We know, for example, that a finding of “low IQ” influences how children are treated beyond the impact of the intelligence level itself. While most teachers and others who work with children understand that children go through developmental phases, so that the misbehaving child today may mature into a well-behaved adolescent later, what kind of developmental benefit-of-the-doubt would a teacher give a student who is believed to be biologically predisposed to bad behavior?

The impulse, should we believe we have biological predictors for delinquent behavior, would be to track or intervene early in selected juveniles. Yet research shows that there are significant risks in separating juveniles out of the mainstream, even to administer justice. For example, juveniles who offend similarly are much more likely to end up in the adult penal system later in their lives if they get involved in the juvenile justice system in the first place—in other words, those that get caught, or those caught who are not released with a warning but arrested or turned in, are far more likely to reoffend than those who get away or are let go. So it is worrisome that “potential” juvenile offenders might be placed in a preventive program, or that “biological” offenders might be given more intense or different involvement in the juvenile justice system. The entire enterprise could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Characteristics and/or risk factors are generally considered those factors that are associated with an increased probability that a juvenile will engage in illegal acts [8]. A variable may be identified as a “risk factor” if it is associated with the youth before he or she is adjudicated as a juvenile delinquent and if it still exists after other possible confounding variables have been controlled. A variety of risk factors appear to place certain youth at risk for engaging in illegal acts, although the mere presence of such risk factors does not imply causation or indicate that a particular individual will, in fact, engage in such acts. Such risk factors only suggest that there will be an increase in the probability that a youth will engage in delinquent behavior—they do not make it a certainty. It is notable, however, that research has found a cumulative effect of risk factors, in that having multiple risk factors places a youth at a greater risk of engaging in illegal acts and problematic behaviors.

## Prevention

Four types of prevention can be distinguished [9]. Criminal justice prevention refers to traditional deterrence, incapacitation and rehabilitation strategies operated by law enforcement and criminal justice agencies. Situational prevention refers to interventions designed to reduce the opportunities for antisocial behaviour and to increase the risk and difficulty of committing antisocial acts. Community prevention refers to interventions designed to change the social conditions and social institutions (e.g. community norms and organisations) that influence antisocial behaviour in communities. Developmental prevention refers to interventions designed to inhibit the development of antisocial behaviour in individuals, by targeting risk and protective factors that influence human development.

Prevention methods should be based on knowledge about risk and protective factors [10]. Numerous risk factors have been identified for different types of antisocial behaviour, but there has been insufficient research on risk factors for the antisocial syndrome in general or for APD (Antisocial Personality Disorder) or psychopathy. It is unclear how far risk factors are the same for all types of antisocial acts. Important risk factors include conduct disorder, hyperactivity-impulsivity-attention deficit, low intelligence and attainment, inconsistent or harsh discipline, poor parental supervision, divorce/separation of parents, and socio-economic deprivation. However, little is known about the influence of these risk factors on different stages of antisocial careers such as onset, persistence, escalation, duration or desistance, or about the independent, interactive or sequential effects of risk factors.

## Internal Control

Scholars, professionals, and lay people debate what causes young people to commit crimes [11]. Some argue that there are “bad” individuals who already from childhood are out of control and that many of them become life-course persistent delinquents. Others argue that juvenile delinquents are to a high degree a product of their environment: the worse their environment, the worse their behavior over time.

Childhood is usually seen as a period in which individuals have not yet fully developed self-control and their impulses tend to lead to misbehavior and acts of delinquency. This is why parents, teachers and other adults during the period from childhood into adolescence help to modulate children’s poor internal controls, teach them skills to navigate problems in life, and help them avoid inflicting harm on others. Thus the years across childhood and adolescence are seen as a crucial period in which to bring about in young people a shift from external to internal controls. However, in late adolescence and early adulthood the appearance of physical maturity does not necessarily mean that mental maturity has been fully achieved and that internal controls are



completely formed and are regularly exercised by the young person.

The presence and growth of internal controls can be evidenced in several complementary ways:

- More mature judgment.
- Better decision-making in offending opportunities.
- Better executive functioning, reasoning, abstract thinking, planning.
- Less influence exerted by immediate undesirable consequences than longer-term possible desirable consequences.
- Better impulse control, less likely to take risks and commit crimes for excitement and more likely to make rational prosocial choices.
- Better emotion regulation and self-regulation.
- Less susceptibility to peer influences
- Avoidance of self-harm.

## Juvenile Justice

The legal route in assigning criminal responsibility to juveniles begins with an arrest [12]. A similar process is in place for adult offenders. There are exceptions, however, such as the fact that police officers are required to notify the parent or guardian of an arrested juvenile offender. Like adult offenders, juveniles as offenders are fingerprinted and charged at central booking. Then the arresting police officer describes to the prosecutor on duty verbally and through the officer's paperwork the circumstances of the charges and the availability of victims and witnesses. A "complaint" is generated only after the prosecutor and the arresting officer make an assessment of "probable cause" based on available evidence and after they agree on the charges to be brought before the criminal court. This assessment is not purely discretionary; it is constrained by law and evidence.

As is the case with adult offenders, after the grand jury indicts, the case is then moved to trial court for the determination of a hearing date. At that point, there is usually a bench conference involving the prosecutor, the defense attorney, and the judge. The juvenile's plea of innocence or guilt is considered along with any considerations for the unique circumstances of the juvenile. At the hearing, the juvenile's defense counsel may argue that his client played a minor role in a group offense or that circumstances beyond the juvenile's control led to the offense. The defense counsel at times refers to the juvenile's need for treatment and might tell of the juvenile's troubled family situation. In turn, the prosecutor counters by relating, as required by statute, the severity of the crime, the injuries inflicted, prior record, and the general strength of the state's case.

About 1.6 million youths under age 18 are arrested each year for crimes ranging from loitering to murder [13]. Though most

juvenile law violations are minor, some young offenders are extremely dangerous and violent. More than 800,000 youths belong to street gangs. Youths involved in multiple serious criminal acts, referred to as repeat or chronic juvenile offenders, are considered a serious social problem. State juvenile authorities must deal with these offenders while responding to a range of other social problems, including child abuse and neglect, school crime and vandalism, family crises, and drug abuse.

Clearly, there is an urgent need for strategies to combat juvenile delinquency. But formulating effective strategies demands a solid understanding of the causes of delinquency. Is it a function of psychological abnormality? A reaction against destructive social conditions? The product of a disturbed home life? Does serious delinquent behavior occur only in urban areas among lower-class youths? Or is it spread throughout the social structure? What are the effects of family life, substance abuse, school experiences, and peer relations?

The study of delinquency also involves the analysis of the juvenile justice system—the law enforcement, court, and correctional agencies designed to treat youthful offenders. How should police deal with minors who violate the law? What are the legal rights of children? What kinds of correctional programs are most effective with delinquent youths? How useful are educational, community, counseling, and vocational development programs? Is it true, as some critics claim, that most efforts to rehabilitate young offenders are doomed to failure? The reaction to juvenile delinquency frequently divides the public. While some people favor policies that provide rehabilitation of violent offenders, other Americans are wary of teenage hoodlums and gangs, and believe that young offenders should be treated no differently from mature felons. Should the juvenile justice system be more concerned about the long-term effects of punishment? Can even the most violent teenager one day be rehabilitated?

The informal nature of the juvenile court operation is also exemplified by the options available to the judge upon a finding of delinquency [14]. These options are often called dispositions. Dispositions include informal probation, or taking the case under advisement for a period of time to see whether the offender is able to change his or her behavior. The judge can also order the child to pay restitution to the victim, such as repairing damaged property or giving the victim monetary compensation for losses. The offender may also be ordered to pay a fine to the court or the community. All of these dispositions may be included as part of probation, formal or informal. Under formal probation, the offender is ordered to be supervised by a probation officer and to adhere to specific rules and regulations, such as attending counseling sessions, observing curfews, and attending school. At the end of a specified period of time (six months to a year, for example), the offender is brought back to court and his or her behavior is once again examined. At this point, however, the



particulars of the original case are less relevant than the subsequent behavior of the offender, as attested by the supervising probation officer.

Besides restitution and probation, all of which occur in the community, juvenile court dispositions include placements outside the offender's home. One type of placement is an order to live with another relative or perhaps a referral to the state's foster care system. The most restrictive disposition is commitment to the state system of juvenile correction.

## Conclusion

Since social circumstances favor the increase of juvenile delinquency, the problem becomes much more complex, both in terms of combating this socially negative phenomenon, and in terms of canceling the harmful consequences of committing a crime. Juveniles represent the most sensitive category that is most affected by the crisis of the social community, so their reaction to these phenomenon is reflected in both antisocial behavior and the commission of crimes. In such conditions, the question arises as to the effective reactions of the entire legal system and enhanced social control over the criminal behavior of young people, both in criminal sanctions and in special prevention programs for certain groups of juveniles who show behavioral disorders. The notion of delinquency is closely related to the conflict with society, its value system, norms and laws. It includes more severe forms of antisocial, anti-social, socio-pathological and criminal behavior. The occurrence of delinquent behavior is particularly affected by critical periods such as war and post-war circumstances, strained social relations, economic crisis, poverty, unemployment, housing and material difficulties, refugees, moral crisis, crisis of value systems, crisis in the family, etc. Juvenile delinquency is a product of the troubles, dissatisfaction, crises, problems, and hopelessness of young people.

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