

Identifying Risk and Protective Factors Influencing Adolescents to Become Involved in Crime from the Perspective of Probation Officers

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Abstract

Juvenile delinquency denotes unlawful and criminal actions carried out by individuals under the age of eighteen, encompassing a spectrum of offenses from minor transgressions like truancy to more serious crimes such as burglary and violence. Understanding the motivations behind a minor's criminal behaviour is crucial for preventing future offenses. Addressing the underlying circumstances influencing a child's decisions becomes instrumental in guiding behavioural improvements. Minors engaging in unlawful activities may face charges in a juvenile court, leading to potential sentences. The significant concern revolves around why children, who should be experiencing a secure and joyful childhood, attending school, and under familial protection, find themselves entangled in criminal activities. Equally troubling is the question of what awaits these young offenders upon their release and attempts at societal reintegration. Holistic intervention programs are imperative for these individuals, offering educational initiatives and skill-building to facilitate positive reintegration into the community. This approach aims to empower them to become productive adults, steering clear of a recurrence of their transgressions. This study investigates the risk factors influencing Malaysian youth to engage in criminal activities and explores protective factors that can impede their recurrence of offenses. Conducted through a basic qualitative study, the research employed semi-structured interviews with two probation officers in a central state district. Drawing from their experiences, both officers identified various risk factors, including parental disengagement, peer pressure, unfavourable living conditions, and societal indifference, which significantly contribute to youth involvement in criminal activities. Conversely, the study revealed that parents, family, schools, and society at large play pivotal roles in deterring juveniles from criminal behaviours. By shedding light on these factors, the research aspires to deepen our understanding of the dynamics influencing adolescent criminal behaviour and contribute to the prevention of juvenile delinquency.

Keywords: Juvenile delinquents, factors to juvenile delinquencies, Malaysian adolescents, adolescents-at-risk

Introduction

The prevalence of criminal activity and wrongdoing remains a pervasive concern in society, with particular gravity when it involves young individuals. Juvenile delinquency, as the name suggests, describes wrongdoing or criminal acts carried out by children under the age of 18. (Nasimah, 2013). A juvenile is also defined as a kid who has achieved the age of criminal liability or responsibility, which in Malaysia is 10 years old, according to Section 82 of the Penal Code. However, Section 83 of the Penal Code outlines a conditional exemption from prosecution for children who are above ten but under twelve years old, providing that they have not yet developed adequate comprehension of the nature and consequences of their actions during the commission of the crime. Section 113 of the Evidence Act of 1950, which states that it is an unquestionable presumption of law that boys under the age of thirteen are incapable of committing rape, provides additional protection for the juvenile offender. This legal framework underscores the accountability bestowed upon minors once they reach the age of criminal responsibility, marking the initiation of potential encounters with the justice system. These clauses demonstrate that once minors reach the age of criminal responsibility, they will be held accountable for their involvement in crimes. Burglary, larceny, armed robbery, intoxication, drug use, sexual offences, vandalism, assault, harassment, loitering, and even gangsterism are just a few of the crimes connected to adolescent delinquency. The majority of these crimes are penalized by law; the less serious ones end in probation, while the more serious ones lead to incarceration (Nasimah, 2013). Understanding the intricate nexus between adolescence and criminal behavior is crucial, given the vulnerability of this age group to both positive and negative influences during the transitional phase from childhood to adulthood.

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to influences and changes, both good and bad, because they are in the period between childhood and adulthood. Adolescents who were raised with enough care, affection, and support were often better equipped to succeed in their endeavours and have a more optimistic attitude toward difficulties that they face in life. Meanwhile, it is evident that people who grow up in challenging circumstances and situations have a larger chance of committing crimes and other offences. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the majority of young offenders frequently have a history of unstable families, broken households, or having been mistreated or abandoned by their families or close relatives.

It is critical to understand why a minor commits a crime so that future crimes can be prevented. Addressing the circumstances that lead to the child's decisions can help them improve their behaviour in the future. Children who break the law might be charged in a children's court and sentenced to a punishment. It is a huge concern as to why children at such young ages become involved in crime when they should be leading a safe and happy life, being in school and protected by the family. Another alarming concern is that what will happen to these young offenders once they have been released from the system and attempt to reintegrate into society. Early intervention to prevent delinquency can have a big impact by lowering crime rates and tax expenditures associated with it. More importantly, it can increase children's prospects of leading law-abiding and fruitful lives. Therefore, this study attempted to determine the risk factors that influence Malaysian offenders to get involved in crime, as well as the protective factors that can hinder them from continuing to repeat any

kind of offences from the perspectives of probation officers dealing directly with adolescents charged in court.

Risk factors are known as "those features, variables, or dangers that, if present for a specific individual, increase the likelihood that this individual would develop a condition rather than someone chosen from the general population" (Mrazek and Haggerty, 1994). According to Kazdin et al, (1997), a risk factor indicates a higher likelihood of future offences. A risk factor is more precisely described as "anything that enhances the possibility that a person will suffer injury" in a report from the U.S. Surgeon General (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). Research into characteristics that may operate as a buffer between the presence of risk factors and the beginning of delinquency has sparked numerous discussion and study. Protective factors are known as these buffers. Protective factors are those, according to Pollard, Hawkins, and Arthur (1999), "factors that mediate or lessen the effect of exposure to risk factors, resulting in lower occurrence of problem behaviour." According to Rutter (1987), protective factors prevent the start of delinquency through four primary mechanisms: lowering risk, limiting harmful domino effects, fostering self-esteem and self-efficacy, and creating opportunity.

Adolescents, molded by their upbringing, encounter divergent life trajectories based on the presence or absence of care, affection, and support. Those in challenging circumstances are statistically more prone to criminal involvement, often stemming from unstable families, broken households, or instances of mistreatment or abandonment. Consequently, unraveling the motivations behind juvenile crime becomes paramount for effective prevention and intervention. The concerning reality of minors engaging in criminal activities prompts a deeper inquiry into the root causes and potential solutions. Beyond legal consequences, the lasting impact on a child's life trajectory raises questions about their reintegration into society after serving time in the justice system. Recognizing the need for early intervention to prevent delinquency, this study seeks to illuminate the risk factors that propel Malaysian adolescents into crime, as well as the protective factors that can shield them from repeated offenses. In addressing the significance of this study, it is imperative to underscore the broader societal implications. Early intervention not only curtails crime rates but also mitigates the tax expenditures associated with criminal justice proceedings. Moreover, it enhances the prospects of at-risk children leading law-abiding and productive lives. By examining the perspectives of probation officers directly involved with adolescents in court, this research endeavours to bridge the gap between theory and practical strategies for crime prevention.

To contextualize the study's significance, it is vital to elucidate the utility and effectiveness of exploring these risk and protective factors. As Mrazek and Haggerty (1994) define, risk factors increase the likelihood of an individual developing a condition, in this case, engaging in delinquent behaviour. On the other hand, protective factors act as buffers, mediating or lessening the impact of exposure to risk factors. The delineation of these factors into categories—individual attributes and personality, family environment, peer influence, and community—serves as a structured approach to comprehending the multifaceted nature of juvenile delinquency.

Various researchers categorize risk and protective factors in different ways. For the purposes of this study, risk and protective factors fall under four categories: individual attributes and personality, family environment, peer influence, and community. In essence, this study endeavours to not only contribute to the academic discourse on juvenile delinquency but, more importantly, to inform policies and interventions that can positively

shape the lives of young offenders. By examining the interplay of risk and protective factors, we aim to provide actionable insights that empower communities, families, and policymakers to foster environments conducive to the well-being and future success of at-risk youth.

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research design was employed to investigate the risk and protective factors influencing adolescents to become involved in crime in Selangor, chosen as the study location, which holds significance due to its representative nature. Selangor is one of the most populous states in Malaysia, encompassing diverse urban and suburban settings, providing a broad spectrum of experiences for adolescents within the criminal justice system. Two probation officers, carefully selected based on their extensive experience in juvenile justice and their roles in conducting assessments and recommending interventions, from a district within Selangor participated in the study. The criteria for selection included a minimum of five years of experience as probation officers, a comprehensive understanding of the local community dynamics, and a track record of working closely with juvenile offenders. These criteria were established to ensure that the selected probation officers possessed a nuanced perspective on the risk and protective factors influencing adolescents involved in criminal activities. It is noteworthy that in each district of the state, there are typically only one or two probation officers. These professionals play a pivotal role in the criminal justice system by conducting assessments, compiling comprehensive reports on adolescent characteristics, family history, social background, and environmental influences. Moreover, they provide recommendations for suitable punishments or sentences, which may be utilized by the court in future decisions. The choice of probation officers as key informants is rooted in their unique exposure to and personal relationships with juvenile offenders. This aligns with Patton's (2002) defense of purposive sampling, emphasizing the selection of participants who can provide significant insights into the research subject.

For data gathering, semi-structured interviews were employed, allowing the researcher to pose targeted questions for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Robson, 2002). The interview methodology received explicit approval from the university's ethics committee, ensuring transparency with respondents regarding the study's goals and guaranteeing complete anonymity throughout the investigation. To safeguard the identity of the informants, pseudonyms were employed during the data analysis phase. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed emerging themes and patterns, which were coded accordingly. The process of assigning pseudonyms was carried out following established ethical guidelines. Table 1 in the subsequent section presents the demographic profiles of the respondents, providing additional insights into the characteristics of the probation officers involved in the study.

The duration of each semi-structured interview was approximately one hour, and interviews were conducted in a confidential setting within the probation office. Ethical considerations were of paramount importance throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, emphasizing voluntary participation, and measures were taken to minimize potential harm.

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study, including the relatively small sample size of probation officers from a single district within Selangor. While their insights provide a rich understanding of the local context, generalizing findings to a broader geographic or cultural context should be approached with caution. Additionally, the focus on probation officers' perspectives may not encompass the full spectrum of factors influencing

adolescent involvement in crime, warranting further exploration from diverse stakeholders such as adolescents, parents, and community leaders.

Potential biases may arise from the subjective nature of qualitative data, as interpretations may be influenced by the researcher's perspective. Efforts were made to mitigate bias through transparent research practices, but it remains crucial to acknowledge the potential impact on the study's findings.

However, the findings offer valuable insights into the risk and protective factors influencing adolescents to become involved in crime. The nuanced perspectives provided by probation officers shed light on the multifaceted nature of adolescent criminal involvement, emphasizing the importance of addressing not only individual risk factors but also the broader socio-environmental context. Suggestions for future research include expanding the study to encompass multiple districts within Selangor or even other states, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of regional variations. Additionally, incorporating the perspectives of other key stakeholders, such as adolescents, parents, and community leaders, would provide a holistic view of the factors influencing juvenile crime. Longitudinal studies could further elucidate the dynamic nature of risk and protective factors over time.

Furthermore, exploring the effectiveness of existing intervention programs based on the identified factors could contribute to the development of targeted and evidence-based strategies for preventing juvenile delinquency. Lastly, investigating the potential impact of cultural and societal factors on the identified risk and protective factors would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of adolescent criminal involvement. These recommendations aim to guide future research endeavors, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding adolescent criminal behavior.

Table 1

Demographic of the Respondents

Name (pseudonym)	Alif	Bella
Age	45	39
Gender	Male	Female
Experience as a probation officer	4 years (2018 – 2021)	11 years (2010 – 2021)

Findings and Discussion

During interviews, the informants were queried regarding various aspects, including the families of the adolescents, their educational levels, social histories, types of committed crimes, and personal characteristics. This comprehensive approach aimed to discern potential variables contributing to juvenile delinquency among adolescents in Malaysia. Remarkably, the responses from the informants exhibited a striking consistency, with each providing additional details and observations, enriching the overall understanding. Thematic analysis of the collected data unveiled significant insights, highlighting key factors such as individual attributes and personality, family environment, peer influence, and community dynamics.

Individual Attributes and Personality

The initial recurring theme highlights the correlation between adolescent characteristics or personalities and juvenile misbehaviour. Consistent with prior research (Henry, Caspi, Moffitt, Harrington, & Silva, 1999; Lynam et al., 2000; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001, as cited by Waghmare

and Shinde, 2021), studies have indicated a link between heightened delinquent behaviours in teenagers and traits such as impulsivity, aggressive behaviour, and low conscientiousness. Alif and Bella's accounts further exemplify this pattern, noting that some young individuals they worked with exhibited impulsive tendencies, driven by desires for independence, autonomy in decision-making, and financial gain. These adolescents often rebelled against parental guidance, leading to reckless and irresponsible behaviours, and, in some cases, engagement in criminal activities. Importantly, many were oblivious to the legal consequences of their actions, emphasizing the critical need for heightened awareness among adolescents. Addressing this theme, it becomes evident that adolescents benefit greatly from increased awareness initiatives and avenues for self-expression. Providing them opportunities to reflect on their desires and communicate with trained professionals attuned to the challenges of adolescence becomes paramount. As the consequences of juvenile misbehaviour are often unclear to adolescents, proactive efforts to guide them through this transitional period can prove instrumental.

Undoubtedly, this theme warrants significant attention and consideration to comprehensively understand the risk and protective factors influencing adolescents' involvement in juvenile delinquencies. The imperative lies in equipping adolescents with the knowledge and support necessary to navigate this critical phase of development.

Family Environment

According to the informants, a significant proportion of adolescents involved in delinquency originate from low-income families with unfavourable and non-conducive home settings. The daily struggle to make ends meet, coupled with various financial and personal stresses, often hinders parents from providing the necessary attention and care for their children. Furthermore, both informants noted that many delinquents come from environments characterized by cramped living spaces, such as small houses with large family sizes, leaving adolescents with no personal space. This circumstance compels them to seek companionship outside the home, spending more time with friends than within the confines of their households.

Alif emphasized that a notable portion of delinquents emerges from broken families, including cases of divorced parents or a lack of parental figures in the lives of orphaned delinquents. This aligns with prior research indicating that adolescents residing in non-traditional family structures, particularly those with a single parent, are more likely to engage in delinquent conduct (Demuth & Brown, 2004, cited in Masood & Ali, 2019). Studies by McCurley and Sydney (2004) have further suggested that teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17, living in households with both biological parents, are less prone to behavioural problems than those in other family configurations.

Both Alif and Bella underscored that a significant number of delinquents originated from homes characterized by poor parenting. This implies that these adolescents either faced neglect, overindulgence, or insufficient attention from their parents, granting them the freedom to adopt rebellious behaviour, use delinquency as an outlet for pent-up emotions, or seek attention through negative actions. The adolescents' involvement in criminal activities appears to be exacerbated by their unmet fundamental needs and a desire for more, whether it be financial resources or attention (Khuda, 2019).

Peer Influence

Peer pressure emerges as a recurring theme based on insights gleaned from the informants' interviews. This phenomenon aligns with the social learning theory, which posits that individuals acquire behaviors through interaction with their peers. Notably, studies by Bernasco et al. (2013) and Osgood & Anderson (2004) have substantiated a robust connection between adolescents who spend time away from parental oversight with peers and engagement in criminal behavior.

Research by Bernasco et al. (2013) revealed that adolescents who socialize with peers away from home are more prone to criminal activities. Similarly, Osgood & Anderson's (2004) earlier study established a significant link between delinquency and 'unstructured socialization'—associating with individuals who defy social norms. Moreover, the informants emphasized how adolescents often turn to their peers for support and validation, particularly when faced with unsupportive family environments and academic struggles.

Both informants noted that the chosen peers of these teenagers shared similar familial and educational backgrounds, as well as common problems, often engaging in delinquent activities. Alif highlighted that while the choice of peers may have been misguided, teenagers were drawn to these associations for various reasons, such as the perceived reputation and acceptance gained through illegal activities and the allure of fun and enjoyment associated with delinquent behavior.

Moreover, earlier research (Bellair & McNulty, 2009; Papachristos, 2009; Ortega-Campos, Garcia-Garcia, Gil-Fenoy & Zaldivar-Basurto, 2016) underscores how gang membership fulfills critical needs among adolescents, including the desire for prestige, a sense of belonging, perceived protection, and respect. According to Jackson and Knepper (2013), gangs often serve as surrogate families for individuals lacking stability and love in their biological families. This exploration of peer pressure underscores the complex interplay between social influences and juvenile delinquency, shedding light on the multifaceted factors contributing to adolescents' engagement in criminal activities.

Community

Based on the insights gathered from the informants' interviews, both officers emphasized the significant impact of the community—comprising schools, teachers, neighbors, and society at large—on shaping the involvement of children in criminal activities. Simultaneously, they acknowledged the pivotal role these community elements play in deterring such behaviors. Alif underscored the crucial influence of teachers and schools, emphasizing the need for heightened attention to at-risk students. He advocated for the creation of more engaging and captivating teaching environments to capture students' interest and bolster their motivation. In contrast, Bella highlighted the influential role of authority figures, such as Agensi Dadah Kebangsaan, in conducting programs to raise awareness and educate young individuals about the consequences of drug-related activities.

Furthermore, Alif emphasized the responsibility of adults, particularly parents, in serving as positive role models for youngsters, recognizing that these adolescents often emulate adult behavior. Both officers called for a multifaceted approach, advocating for additional preventive, developmental, and intervention programs to address at-risk behaviors among teenagers. In practical terms, Alif proposed increased societal campaigns to educate the public about risky behaviors and the potential repercussions of delinquency. Additionally, creating community-based clubs or groups, both within schools and neighborhoods, was suggested as a strategic measure to reduce juvenile delinquency.

Importantly, both Alif and Bella concluded with a poignant reminder that everyone, including family members, friends, teachers, neighbors, and even strangers, should cultivate a culture of care and support. Extending a helping hand to young people in need of guidance can significantly contribute to the overall effort to mitigate juvenile delinquency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a wealth of prior research has extensively explored protective and risk factors influencing the likelihood of youth engagement in criminal behavior. The etiology of youth delinquency has been a subject of widespread discourse. Notably, it is crucial to recognize that human behavior is intricately shaped by the interplay between individual attributes and environmental influences. Predictive factors alone do not definitively foretell specific behaviors, including criminal conduct (Bobbio et al., 2020).

The journey towards delinquency is multifaceted, with factors broadly categorized into individual, social, and community domains, as indicated by various established studies. This investigation, conducted in the context of Malaysia, identifies individual attributes, family environment, peer influence, and community dynamics as prominent risk and protective factors contributing to juvenile delinquency. The implications of this study extend beyond mere identification, offering valuable insights for comprehending the contributing elements of adolescent delinquency. These findings underscore the importance of recognizing risk variables and advocate for the development of more comprehensive preventive, intervention, and rehabilitation programs by relevant authorities.

Furthermore, the analysis underscores the necessity for targeted awareness campaigns, especially tailored for at-risk youth, emphasizing the consequences of delinquency. Adolescents facing heightened risks may benefit from platforms enabling self-expression, self-reflection, and open communication with supportive adults adept in addressing the challenges of adolescence. In essence, this study not only contributes to the understanding of juvenile delinquency but also advocates for proactive measures to address the identified risk factors and nurture the potential for positive growth among adolescents.

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