

Does a dysfunctional family increase the risk of criminality?



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This research aims to explore if a dysfunctional upbringing increases the likelihood of a person committing crime. For example, there are numerous factors that would lead people to label a family as dysfunctional, such as the lack of a male role model, poverty, a large family, or deviant parents. This research aims to investigate the impact of these factors and how some of these interact to produce a higher chance of criminality amongst young people.

There are several reasons why people commit crimes. For example, they may commit a crime such as fraud or theft to improve their financial position or may turn to violent crime because of their emotional state. One major debate is whether criminality is more heavily due to biological or social factors. (Farrington, 1988). There is almost certainly a biological component to criminality, however it is not yet clear the extent of this. (Ling et al., 2019) This essay will focus primarily on social factors, more specifically a child's upbringing and family structure.

One common theme amongst young male criminals is that they are lacking a father figure. Lone parent families headed by a single mother may mean that the child may be disciplined less harshly which leads to higher levels of deviance as they are less likely to consider the consequences of their actions in later life (Dornbusch et al., 1985). In addition, it has been suggested that lack of a male role model or father figure increases the likelihood of a child associating with delinquent peers meaning they are therefore more likely to engage in deviant behaviours themselves due to peer pressure (Steinberg, 1987). Another possibility is that they imitate their peer's delinquent behaviour because of social learning theory. For example, a study showed <https://assignbuster.com/does-a-dysfunctional-family-increase-the-risk-of-criminality/>

that behaviour can be learned through observation, instruction, imitation and reinforcement. (Burgess and Akers, 1966). This could be an explanation for crimes such as gang violence as well as explain the influence of peer pressure and peer groups.

Young males with absent fathers are also more likely to have poor emotional stability due to a lack of support from their father which could also lead to crimes such as violent outbursts, and financial crimes such as theft due to lacking job opportunities (Sampson and Laub, 1995). Young males without fathers are also more likely to lack social development and are more likely to develop aggressive tendencies and a 'hostile' attitude which can lead to crime and conflict. (Loeber, 1990)

Although factors such as absent fathers can cause delinquency alone, there is often an interaction between different factors. For example, an absent father can lead to poverty within families as the family are likely to rely on one salary. Poverty is linked to delinquency, poor mental health, and poor academic achievement. In addition, relative deprivation can be considered an underlying cause of violent crime. (Hsieh and Pugh, 1993).

A study conducted investigating the impact of poverty on 4, 300 children found that poverty was one of the reasons for offending amongst juveniles. They also found that poverty significantly increased the likelihood that a child would engage in violence and/or drug use even when other factors such as key personality traits such as impulsiveness, and parental relationships were controlled. (Smith and Mcvie et al., 2001).

Another aspect that must be considered is the impact nutrition has. Although this is more of a biological than social factor, nutrition can be linked to poverty as it is more likely that impoverished children lack nutrition in comparison to more wealthy families. For example, poverty-stricken children are likely to have a higher intake of saturated fatty acids opposed to fresh fruits and vegetables. (Nelson, 2000). Studies have shown that a lack of vitamins and minerals can lead to hyperactivity and overly impulsive behaviour, and zinc deficiency may lead to aggression by negatively impacting brain functioning. (Raine, 2002) which can lead to deviant and criminal behaviour.

Another way in which a family can be dysfunctional is that it can be extremely large. For example, a household with one parent and many children. Research has found that large family size is associated with greater delinquency even when variables such as income and parental criminality have been controlled. (Fischer, 1984). There are several theories as to why many siblings may increase the risk of delinquency. For example, the more children, the less parental attention can be given to each child, which can lead to conflict and irritation. (Farrington, 1983). This can lead to anti-social behaviour and may also lead to children from seeking approval and attention from peers instead, for example by joining gangs and imitating the deviant behaviour of their peers. (Short and Hughes, 2006). A large family size also leads to higher levels of family stress, less discipline, and higher levels of family instability, all factors which can lead to children lacking emotional stability (Derzon, 2009) which we could suggest leads to poor decision making.

The main question my research aims to address is ' Does a dysfunctional upbringing increase the likelihood of young people engaging in crime?'.

Although there are many factors that could lead to a dysfunctional upbringing, I have chosen to focus on ' Does a large family size increase the likelihood of young people committing crime?', Does the lack of male role model in a single mother household mean young boys are more likely to engage in crime? And ' Does a poorer upbringing increase the risk of children becoming criminals?'. When considering why people become criminals, I chose to focus on upbringing as there is a link between childhood deviance and adult criminality, and I believe it is therefore important to consider the reasons for this deviance and tackle the root cause of crime. For example, poor parenting can increase the risk of children joining deviant groups such as gangs which leads to violent crime. It can also lead to children developing behavioural problems and using illegal substances for example taking or selling drugs. (Simons and Robertson, 1989)

To investigate whether having a dysfunctional upbringing increases the likelihood of criminal behaviour, one research method I will use is a questionnaire made up of open questions. A questionnaire is a non-experimental design that consists of questions for the respondent to answer. (Brace, 2004) An advantage of using open questions is that they are more useful for sensitive topics. This is important for my research as it is regarding families and those with family issues or difficult upbringings may find this a sensitive topic. Using open questions also allows for unpredictable answers meaning surprising data could be collected. (Schuman and Presser, 1979) They also allow the participant to answer in their own way, which gives a

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more unique insight and allows the participant to elaborate slightly on their answer. For example, if a question was 'how many siblings do you have?' a closed question may restrict them to answer 'four siblings' out of a list but an open question means they could specify and say 'three biological siblings and one adopted sibling' which would provide potentially vital information. I believe using open questions for my research is more appropriate than closed questions as although closed questions are easier to analyse, they lack detail meaning it would be difficult to gain a real insight into people's thoughts and feelings which is essential as I am studying the link between their family lives and their criminal acts. (Lavrakas, 2008)

Some examples of the questions I will ask are 'To what extent do you believe that your upbringing has influenced your behaviour?' and 'Do you feel that you had a relatively poor upbringing in comparison to your peers?'. I have chosen to use a questionnaire as I believe it is more suitable than an observation. This is because I am studying past behaviour and not behaviour that is about to occur. Furthermore, the information regarding dysfunctional families will be provided by the participants. This is because it would be difficult to observe dysfunctional families in a covert observation (where the participants do not know they are being observed) which is likely to be the most useful type of observation. (McKechnie, 2008)

Another reason why I believe a questionnaire with open questions is a good research method is because it allows me to collect a large amount of qualitative data relatively quickly. By using a questionnaire, this means that I can reach a large sample which gives me a wider range of results. (Gillham, 2015) This therefore increases the generalisability and representativeness of <https://assignbuster.com/does-a-dysfunctional-family-increase-the-risk-of-criminality/>

my results as the participants are likely to be a more varied group of people for example from a wide range of backgrounds and family types meaning the results can be applied to more people.

I have chosen to collect qualitative data as it is more detailed and will therefore allow me to draw more valid conclusions. Although it is more difficult to analyse, it allows respondents to fully explain their thoughts and answers which is essential for my research as I need as much context as possible regarding both their upbringing and any offences they've committed. (Almeida et al., 2017)

Another research method I intend to use is interviews. An interview consists of an interviewer asking the participants questions face to face. I would use semi structured interviews as these are more flexible than unstructured interviews. A semi structured interview consists of some open ended pre-prepared questions but also unprepared questions. An example of some pre-prepared questions I will use are ' Are you in contact with your father currently' and ' Do you have a good relationship with your family?' which will lead on to other questions after they have been answered. This means that they give the participants chance to elaborate on their answers and allow new questions to arise as a result of previous answers. (Given, 2008). For example, if when asked about whether their father was absent during their childhood, a respondent may give more detail that could lead to further questions. This means that a large amount of rich, qualitative data can be gathered. Another advantage of using a semi structured interview is that they allow the interviewer to build a better rapport with the participant. This

makes the participant more likely to speak truthfully and, in more detail, as they trust the interviewer. (Lavrakas, 2008)

The sample I would use for this research is 400 participants aged 18-35 who have criminal convictions. I would send questionnaires to 200 males and 200 females in order to prevent gender bias and to ensure my results will be representative of both males and females and more generalisable. I will then interview any male respondents with absent fathers to answer the question ' Does the lack of male role model in a single mother household mean young boys are more likely to engage in crime?'. I will ask specific background questions such as ' do you feel that you have a poor relationship with your father' and ' do you believe your lack of father figure has influenced you to seek approval from your peers?' before asking questions relating to deviant or criminal behaviour such as ' Do you believe if you had a more stable upbringing you would have still engaged in crime?' to determine if their upbringing influenced them. I will do this because this is an extremely sensitive topic that relies on a rapport between the respondent and the person asking the questions. Although there is likely to be only a small sample, this will still allow me to get a deeper understanding of the influence of family structure to help me draw valid conclusions as to whether this could be a cause of deviance and highlight areas for further research. For example, if it appears that there could be a correlation, I would want to study this with a much larger sample and isolate certain factors such as whether they have attempted to talk to their parent in adulthood or cultural differences.

There are some issues that could arise in my study. For example, ethical issues. One ethical issue that I must consider is confidentiality. I need to ensure that all identities are kept private and no names are given. I will do this by not mentioning any names when publishing the results of my research. Another ethical issue I need to consider is informed consent. (Henningesen, 2017) This is where participants give their consent and are fully aware of the aim of the research. I will be requesting consent however not informed consent as if the participants knew the aim of the research (to investigate if dysfunctional families increase the likelihood of criminality) they may change their answers to suit the aim of my research which would decrease the validity of my results.

Furthermore, one ethical issue that could arise is protection from harm. Being asked sensitive questions in the questionnaire and interview could cause the participants to become distressed, for example if they are asked to recall details of childhood trauma this could cause them to get upset. To prevent this, I will ensure my questions are asked in a sensitive way as to not upset the participants.

In order to make my study more ethical, I intend to debrief the participants who participate in the interviews once the interviews are over. I will tell the participants the aim of the study and assure them that their answers will be kept confidential.

As well as ethical problems, there are methodological issues I could face. For example, my study could be considered impractical as interviewing is a very time-consuming method. This is because I must physically ask the

respondent questions face to face. In addition, using a semi-structured interview means that the interviews are likely to be longer than if I conducted a structured interview. (Alshenqeeti, 2014) This is because using semi structured interviews means that new questions can arise because of what the respondent answers and therefore they are likely to be a lot longer. In order to rectify this, I have chosen to use a questionnaire as well and only interview 15 participants. This allows me to still collect the data I need but means my study is less time consuming.

Another issue could be the reliability of my results. As I am using a questionnaire with open questions, this is less reliable than if I used closed questions. This is because the results are likely to be less consistent as respondents can write their own answers and are not choosing from fixed answers or ticking an answer. (Reja et al, 2003) However, I intend to improve reliability by standardizing all the questionnaires. I will do this by giving all participants the same questions in the same order. This will improve the reliability and consistency as it is easier for another researcher to replicate it and get similar results.

One issue with the validity of my results is that my research is only representative of one country as my research will only be conducted in the UK. This makes my research ungeneralisable to other countries and cultures as other cultures may respond differently, for example, in countries where the median income is a lot lower, participants would be less likely to identify their families as 'poor' or feel that they had a deprived upbringing. In addition, in some countries and cultures having a large family is not a sign of family dysfunction as it is very common and even celebrated. This limits the <https://assignbuster.com/does-a-dysfunctional-family-increase-the-risk-of-criminality/>

usefulness of my research as it cannot be applied to everyone due to different characteristics such as parenting differences. (Bornstein, 2012)

One way of rectifying that my study is unrepresentative would be to conduct my research with a larger sample of people from a wide range of countries to get a broader view of how family dysfunction influences deviance and varies from country to country. (Kobayashi et al., 2019) This would make my research more useful, however, this is not very practical as it is time consuming and costly. Therefore, I would have to research this in the future or use secondary data that has already been collected by other researchers to save time.

I have chosen to undertake this research as I believe it is essential to study the causes of crime because crime is extremely prevalent in society and is a big issue that I believe can only be tackled by first tackling the root causes. My study contributes to the nature/nurture debate as it suggests that criminal behaviour is not due to the person themselves or their personality traits, but how they grow up and how they spend their early lives. I have chosen to study families as although there is a lot of research into the effect of father absence and family structure on deviance I feel that there is still room for more studies. It has already been proven that upbringing can influence behaviour later in life (Meredith et al., 2011) but I believe that more research is needed to determine the extent as to which this contributes to criminality.

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