

Examining the explanation for juvenile delinquency criminology essay



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For decades, researchers have made numerous efforts to find a thorough explanation for juvenile delinquency. The results of these endeavors have offered possible reasons as being both biological and social (Schmalleger, & Bartollas, 2008). It is still unsettled as to what causes have the greatest influence on adolescence crime, but it is undoubted that some factors clearly have an effect. Recent studies have suggested that the direct relationships a child has with concrete social elements, like his family, friends and community, are likely to give some predicate involvement in crime (Schmalleger, & Bartollas, 2008). This paper will identify and discuss the environmental influences of family, peer pressure, and community and their effects on juvenile delinquency.

Keywords: family, peer pressure, community, juvenile delinquency, environmental influence

Much time and energy has been spent in attempting to understand the causes of delinquency. Several theoretical models have been developed to describe the relationship between variables and outcomes as it relates to delinquent behavior. Some studies have pointed to the interaction of risk factors, the multiplicative effect when several risk factors are present, and how certain protective factors may work to offset risk factors (Palermo, 2008). Also, studies have noted that the presence of certain risk factors often increases a youth's chance of performing criminal actions (Megens & Weerman, 2010).

Individual, social, and community factors have currently been identified as risk for juvenile delinquency. Individual factors can be defined as prenatal

and perinatal; and studies have revealed that approximately 80% of violent youth offenders, rated high in delivery complications (Schmallegger, & Bartollas, 2008). Researchers also continue to suggest that psychological, behavioral, and mental characteristics such as low verbal IQ and delayed language development are also linked to delinquency (Schmallegger, & Bartollas, 2008). Social factors, usually defined as family and peer influence are also important in the development of delinquent behavior. It is well documented that children that are maltreated and/or have delinquent friends run a greater risk of developing delinquent behavior themselves (Valdas, 2008). Finally, community factors, which are school policies that attach importance to suspension and expulsion, and youths residing in disorganized or adverse neighborhoods, have been identified as strong factors for increased risk of participating in criminal acts by juveniles (Palermo, 2009).

Today, social structure theorists still offer that the cause of juvenile crime is not within the person themselves but is due to external factors. They further believe crime is created by social structures such as poverty, a peer group who believes there is nothing wrong with crime, and/or a racial imbalance in the justice system (Palermo, 2009). Current research has shown an exclusive focus on juvenile conditions in U. S. cities. The focal point continues to be on the complex nature of interdependencies between social conditions and behavior of individuals on one side and ecological context factors on the other side (Palermo, 2009). I suggest that a clear outlook on the efforts required by society, schools, and families to reduce juvenile delinquency is being revealed through these studies to show important factors leading juveniles to delinquency.

Family Influence on Juvenile Delinquency

Probably the strongest influence in our lives is the family we grew up in. Birth order, personality of our parents, treatment by our siblings, socioeconomic status of the family all shape who we become. These influences, also taught us what society deems as “proper” behavior. Small children do whatever impulse entered our heads (Regoli, Hewitt, & Delisi, 2007). They do not know that it was socially unacceptable to eat with fingers, to play with the vase on the coffee table, to hit another sibling or to break toys (Regoli, Hewitt, & Delisi, 2007). These rules and many other were introduced and re-enforced to most people by parents. Historic review of in the fields of humanities and science clearly put forward the family as the foundation of human society (Valadas, 2008).

There is a common joke often told to new mothers and fathers that parents always screw up their kids, it is just a matter of how bad. I suggest that there may be some truth to this adage. Recent studies show that seventy to eighty percent of families are considered dysfunctional by family therapists (Aaron & Dalliare, 2010). It is must be noted that sometimes no matter how well intentioned and how well informed parents may be, they cannot know exactly the correct way to rear a particular child. However, many others are intentionally neglectful and not well informed to the detriment of the child. Much evidence supports the proposition that children who are rejected by their parents, who grow up in homes with considerable conflict, or who are inadequately supervised are at the greatest risk of becoming delinquent (Valadas, 2008). All would agree that adolescence is a time of expanding vulnerabilities and opportunities that accompany the widening social and

geographic exposure to life beyond school or family; but it all starts within the family (Megens & Weerman, 2010). Researchers agree that family plays a large part in delinquency; thus understanding how the family and how the juvenile within the family works gets to the core of delinquency (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010).

In the realm of family functioning there is a theory known as the coercion theory, which suggests that family environment influences an adolescent's interpersonal style (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010). Youth with coercive interpersonal style tend to become involved with others that have similar styles, and these relationships tend to increase the likelihood of being involved in delinquent behavior (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010). Thus, understanding the nature of relationships within the family, to include family adaptability, cohesion, and satisfaction, provides more information for understanding youth that are risk (Valada, 2008). I propose that understanding the cohesiveness of the family may eventually be a predictor for the frequency of delinquent acts because studies have revealed that family behaviors, particularly parental monitoring and disciplining, seem to influence association with deviant peers throughout the adolescent period. Among social circumstances which have a hand in determining the future of an individual, I suggest that out of the many environmental factors researchers have developed to understanding the causes of juvenile delinquency, the family unit plays the greatest role. I support this conclusion with the fact that society has always placed a heavy burden on families by assigning the responsibility for childrearing to parents with little or no guidance. Individual family units must transmit values so as to lead children

to accept societal rules based on their own understanding. Therefore, it should be no surprise to find that family life bears the strongest relationship to juvenile delinquency.

Peer Influence on Juvenile Delinquency

There is considerable evidence to support that peer relationships influence the growth of problem behavior in youth (Regoli, Hewitt, & Delisi, 2007; Schmallegger, & Bartollas, 2008). Peer influences can be defined as pressure either planned or unplanned exerted by peers to influence personal behavior (Schmallegger, & Bartollas, 2008). Peer groups provide important developmental points of reference through which adolescents gain an understanding of the world outside of their families (Megens & Weerman, 2010). Failure to develop close relationships with peers can result in a variety of problems for adolescents that range from delinquency and substance abuse to psychological disorders (Megens, Weerman, 2010). It has also been documented that higher peer stress and less companionship support from peers has been associated with a lower social self-concept in adolescents (Palermo, 2009). Research has consistently documented a high correlation between peer and youth deviance; ironically, the most common public interventions for deviant youth involve segregation from mainstream peers and aggregation into settings with other deviant youth (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Given the rise of public concern and research on this issue, there still needs to be more understanding on the conditions under which these peer contagion effects intervention, youth developmental levels, and strategies for managing youth behavior in groups.

Many studies have found a consistent relationship between involvement in a delinquent peer group and delinquent behavior (Megens & Weerman, 2010). Literature has noted that for youth ages 12-14, a key predictor variable for delinquency is the presence of antisocial peers (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Factors such as peer delinquent behavior, peer approval of delinquent behavior, attachment or allegiance to peers, time spent with peers, and peer pressure for deviance, have all been associated with adolescent antisocial behavior (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Conversely, research has shown reported that spending time with peers who disapprove of delinquent behavior may curb later violence (Megens & Weerman, 2010). Thus, I conclude that the influence of peers and their acceptance of delinquent behavior is significant and this relationship is magnified when youth have little interaction with their parents.

Community Influence on Juvenile Delinquency

A dramatic way neighborhood and community environments can affect residences lives is through the influence on educational outcomes of the children. The Juvenile Justice System's involvement with kids within the special education system is currently a hot topic (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). When the federal special education law was passed in 1975, Congress found that most children with disabilities were not receiving an appropriate education, and that millions of children were excluded from school altogether (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Today, schools continue to suspend and expel students with disabilities for behaviors that are a direct result of their disabilities (Li & Lerner, 2011). These children often become delinquent, feel worthless, are viewed as failures, stop trying, and/or end up in the

juvenile justice system as a result of their treatment by those who are charged with educating them (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005).

School policies can best be defined as various goals and assigning the proper authorities that makes school governance and management possible (Li & Lerner, 2011). Studies have reviewed the impact of school policies concerning grade retention, suspension and expulsion, and school tracking of juvenile delinquency and have reported that these policies, which disproportionately affect minorities, have negative consequences for at-risk youth (Li & Lerner, 2011). For example, suspension and expulsion do not reduce undesirable behavior, and both are linked to increased delinquent behavior. Studies have also revealed that large schools with formal and severe punishment structures in place had more incidents of students misbehaving (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005).

Recently there has been a growth in the development and application of prevention programs (Li, & Lerner, 2011). Most have been directed at adolescents and are based in schools. I suggest that there will be a continued growth in these programs because school is a key locus for intervention. This is based simply on the fact that these institutions aside from family have access over extended periods of time to most of the population of young people.

There is a general consensus in the general public that juvenile delinquency is concentrated in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Existing research has revealed a powerful connection between juveniles residing in an adverse environment and their participation in criminal acts

(Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Sociological theories of deviance state that disorganized neighborhoods have weak social control networks; that weak social control, resulting from isolation among residents and high residential turnover, allows criminal activity to go unmonitored (Megens & Weerman, 2010). For example, according to Jane Jacobs, a writer and community activist, who has primary interests in urban decay, identified in her writings that a greater tendency for crime occurred in large publicly accessible areas created by the newer forms of urban planning (Jacobs, 1961). She also pointed out that the new forms of design broke down many of the traditional controls on criminal behavior; and used the example of the ability of residents to watch the street and the presence of people using the street both night and day (Jacobs, 1961).

In studies of predominantly male adolescent samples, neighborhood adversity has been linked to both minor and serious forms of delinquency, to the presence of gangs, and to a broad range of criminal activities (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Research however, has largely ignored the influence of neighborhood factors on the development of delinquent behavior in girls despite the fact that issues relating to etiology or opportunities for intervention within neighborhoods apply equally often for both girls and boys (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Neighborhoods influence children's behavior by providing the values that lead them to perceive how to act (Palermo, 2009). Communities in which criminal activities are common tend to establish criminal behavior as acceptable, because tolerance for gang activities varies by community. In neighborhoods in which gangs are respected, gang membership may generate loyalties that increase the likelihood of violence

(Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Studies have further revealed that friendships among delinquents seem to involve closer ties as well as greater mutual influence than do friendships among non-delinquents (Palermo, 2009). It is thus fair to suggest that through ties of friendship, neighborhoods have multiplying effects.

Conclusion

Arrest records indicate that the majority of crime committed in the United States is associated with youths more than any other demographic (Megens & Weerman, 2010). The prevention of delinquency is a complex problem with no simple solutions. However, risk factor analysis offers a way to determine which youth are most likely to become delinquent (Palermo, 2009). The approach also allows practitioners to tailor prevention programs to the unique needs of individual youth and communities.

Agreeing with the correlation of social factors to juvenile delinquency, I propose like many others studying in this field, that there is no single path to delinquency and note that the presence of several risk factors often increases a youth's chance of offending. However, I do strongly concur with the long history of research that links family dysfunction as a major factor with future criminal offending. In part because parents monitor and provide nurturance to children, it is thought that the loosening of bonds among family members may result in more criminal involvement (Valadas, 2008). Thus, I suggest further studies on the family unit are necessary to gain more understanding on delinquent behavior.

Recently researchers and policy makers have regarded juvenile delinquency as one of the world's most critical social issues. Regardless of the causes, juvenile delinquency carries a high cost to the American system. These costs can be measured in terms of money spent and lost, but more importantly as the moral costs to society.