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UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING JUVENILE DELINQUENCY: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS AMONG MALAYSIAN ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

Juvenile delinquency, characterised by unlawful actions committed by individuals under 18, raises considerable societal concerns, necessitating insights into its causes and preventive strategies. This study investigates the leading risk factors associated with delinquency among Malaysian adolescents, employing semi-structured interviews with two probation officers. Thematic analysis revealed family instability, lack of parental support, peer pressure, living environment, education gaps, and delinquents' attitudes as influential factors. The implications extend to understanding, risk identification, and program development for prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation. Furthermore, beyond investigating the causes, this research delves into the intricate dynamics of protective factors influencing Malaysian youth in criminal activities. Drawing from the experiences of the probation officers, the study identified that family, schools, and society at large emerge as pivotal deterrents, playing crucial roles in steering juveniles away from criminal behaviours. This comprehensive exploration aims to deepen our understanding of the multifaceted factors influencing adolescent criminal behaviour, providing valuable insights for the development and enhancement of targeted prevention strategies for juvenile delinquency in Malaysia.

Keyword: Juvenile delinquency, Adolescent offenders, Malaysian youth, Risk factors, Protective factors

INTRODUCTION

Wrongful conduct and criminal acts, particularly those committed by juveniles or adolescents, remain a pervasive concern globally. In the specific context of this study, juvenile delinquency refers to the commission of illegal or wrongful acts by individuals under 18 (Nasimah, 2013). The spectrum of crimes associated with juvenile delinquency encompasses various offences, including burglary, larceny, armed robbery, alcohol-related offences, drug offences, sexual offences, vandalism, assault, harassment, loitering, and gangsterism. These offences carry legal consequences, ranging from probation for less severe crimes to incarceration for more severe infractions (Nasimah, 2013).

The implications of juvenile delinquency extend beyond the immediate legal ramifications, reaching into societal, parental, and educational realms. Recognising the gravity of the issue, particularly in the Malaysian context, where understanding the contributing factors is paramount, this study delves into the primary influences on juvenile delinquency among Malaysian adolescents. By examining both the risk and protective elements associated with criminal activities, the research aims to provide comprehensive insights that can inform effective prevention and intervention efforts.

Understanding the intricacies of juvenile delinquency involves a nuanced exploration of risk and protective factors. Risk factors are characteristics or conditions that increase the probability of an individual engaging in delinquent behaviour compared to their peers in the general population. Recent research has identified family conflict and dysfunction, as well as neglect and maltreatment, as primary predictors of juvenile delinquency. Conversely, higher academic achievement and strong, positive parental relationships serve as protective factors against delinquency among at-risk youth. Interventions that have shown efficacy in reducing recidivism include family-based approaches, particularly family therapy, and community-based programs. These findings underscore the complexity of identifying and mitigating risk factors in juvenile delinquency (Azami et al., 2023).

Concurrently, protective factors act as buffers that mitigate the impact of exposure to risk factors, leading to a reduced incidence of problematic behaviour. Recent studies have identified key

protective factors, such as supportive family environments and positive peer relationships, which enhance resilience among at-risk youth. These factors operate through mechanisms like reducing exposure to risk, fostering self-esteem and self-efficacy, and creating opportunities for positive development. This framework underscores the critical importance of identifying and strengthening both risk and protective factors to effectively address juvenile delinquency (Aazami et al., 2023).

In delving into the primary influences on juvenile delinquency among Malaysian adolescents, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding that can inform effective prevention and intervention efforts, fostering a safer and more supportive environment for the youth.

METHOD

A qualitative research approach was employed to investigate juvenile delinquency among Malaysian adolescents. Semi-structured interviews, a fundamental component of the basic qualitative approach, were conducted with two probation officers who have firsthand experience with adolescents in court proceedings. Using probation officers as key informants provided valuable insights into the practical and legal dimensions of juvenile delinquency. Thematic analysis was applied to the interview data to distil essential findings and uncover patterns related to family dynamics, peer influence, socio-economic factors, and educational disparities. The data collection process adhered to an interview protocol sanctioned by the university's ethics committee, ensuring that respondents were informed of the study's objectives, and their identities were kept anonymous throughout the research. Pseudonyms were assigned during data analysis to further safeguard informant identities. Below are the demographic profiles of the respondents.

Table 1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

| | | |
|--|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Name (pseudonym) | Masran | Eliza |
| Age | 45 | 39 |
| Gender | Male | Female |
| Experience as a probation officer | 4 years (2018 – 2021) | 11 years (2010 – 2021) |

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed six overarching themes that contribute significantly to juvenile delinquency among Malaysian adolescents: family instability, lack of parental support, peer pressure, inconducive living environments, gaps in education and awareness, and the delinquents' attitudes toward unlawful behaviours. The study highlights the delicate balance between these factors, indicating that elements perceived as protective, such as family and societal support, can also turn into risk factors under certain circumstances. To ensure reliability and validity, inter-coder reliability was achieved by having two independent researchers code the transcripts, resolving discrepancies through consensus. Thematic validity was strengthened through member checking, where participants confirmed the accuracy of the themes, and expert validation, where findings were reviewed by specialists in juvenile delinquency. These measures ensured the trustworthiness of the data and interpretations, despite relying on a single instrument.

Risk Factors:

Family Environment: The insights provided by the informants underscore the significant influence of family environments on adolescent delinquency, particularly in the Malaysian context. The majority of adolescents engaged in delinquent activities hailed from inconducive family environments, often characterized by low income. Eliza highlighted that families earning less than RM2000 per month, with the breadwinner frequently self-employed and facing financial distress, were more susceptible to challenges. The struggle to meet basic needs amid financial and life pressures left parents with limited capacity to provide essential attention, guidance, and care for their children. This deficiency in parenting was identified as a key factor contributing to delinquency. The absence of adequate parental supervision, whether through neglect, overindulgence, or inattentiveness, created a void that allowed adolescents to act impulsively, engage in unlawful acts as a form of rebellion or emotional expression, or seek attention. The scarcity of basic needs and the desire for more resources or attention emerged as driving factors for adolescents' involvement in criminal activities, as evidenced by previous research

(Khuda, 2019). The informants concurred on the prevalent types of crimes among these adolescents, including possession of stolen goods, drug-related offences (commonly involving methamphetamine or 'syabu'), sexual assault, reckless motorcycle riding, and involvement in physical altercations. This underscores the diverse range of delinquent behaviours stemming from family-related challenges.

Academic Performance: Another prominent theme in the data is the link between poor academic performance and juvenile delinquency. Both informants noted a pervasive lack of interest in schools or learning among delinquents, with many only completing primary or lower secondary education. This disinterest often led to school dropout, expulsion, or removal from the education system by parents. Eliza also emphasized that some parents of delinquents had low academic achievements, highlighting the intergenerational nature of educational challenges. This finding aligns with research indicating that low academic performance and weak school engagement are significant predictors of juvenile delinquency. For instance, Boabeng et al. (2022) found that children become delinquent due to various reasons, including financial hardship, negative influences in their lives, and low academic achievement.

Peer Influence: The theme of peer influence emerged as a significant factor contributing to juvenile delinquency. Adolescents, grappling with inconducive family environments and poor academic achievement, turned to peers for relief and acknowledgement. Both informants highlighted that these peers often shared similar familial and educational backgrounds and were already involved in delinquent activities. The choice of peers, while possibly a poor judgment by adolescents, was driven by the allure of reputation and acceptance gained through criminal activities. This illusion of fun and enjoyment in anti-social behaviour, as well as the perception of gaining attention, belonging, and respect, attracted adolescents to engage in delinquency. These findings align with previous research highlighting being a gang member as fulfilling specific needs, such as status, belonging, protection, and respect (Bellair & McNulty, 2009; Papachristos, 2009; Ortega-Campos et al., 2016). Gangs were also identified as substitute families, providing security and love missing from their biological families (Jackson & Knepper, 2013).

Individual Attributes and Personality: The final theme points to individual attributes and personality as contributors to juvenile delinquency. Previous research linking impulsivity, aggressive behaviour, and low conscientiousness to increased anti-social behaviour in adolescents resonates with the observations made by the informants. Eliza noted tendencies among some adolescents to be impulsive and prioritise personal desires, such as independence, freedom, and earning money. This impulsivity often led them to rebel against parental guidance and engage in anti-social behaviours, including potentially criminal activities. Awareness creation and providing avenues for adolescents to express themselves and reflect on their needs and desires could prove beneficial.

Protective Factors:

Family Environment: The informants emphasised that adolescents in positive family environments and higher-income households tend to be less susceptible to delinquent behaviour. In supportive families, parents actively engage with their children, providing the necessary attention, guidance, and care. Adolescents living in conducive environments with personal space and a stable family structure are less inclined to spend excessive time outside the home engaging in risky behaviour. Maintaining a strong family unit, either through intact marriages or supportive single-parent households, acts as a protective factor against delinquency (Demuth & Brown, 2004, as cited in Masood & Ali, 2019; McCurley & Sydney, 2004). Both participants underscored the significance of positive parenting, indicating that effective parenting prevents rebellious behaviour and delinquency, offering an outlet for adolescents' emotional needs without resorting to criminal activities. Therefore, fostering a supportive family environment serves as a protective risk against juvenile delinquency.

Peer Influence: Conversely, positive peer influence emerges as a protective risk against delinquency. According to social learning theory, adolescents who associate with peers adhering to societal norms are less likely to engage in criminal behaviour (Bernasco et al., 2013; Osgood & Anderson, 2004). Both participants highlighted that adolescents who choose friends with positive influences are likelier to avoid engaging in delinquent activities. The importance of positive peer associations is reinforced by the idea that belonging to groups or clubs within the community can satisfy adolescents' needs for prestige, belonging, and respect without resorting to criminal behaviour (Bellair & McNulty, 2009; Papachristos, 2009; Ortega-Campos et al., 2016; Jackson & Knepper, 2013).

Therefore, cultivating positive peer relationships acts as a protective risk, steering adolescents away from delinquency.

Community: The community, including schools, teachers, neighbours, and society, plays a pivotal role in influencing adolescents positively and preventing delinquent behaviour. Both participants stressed the importance of schools in identifying and supporting at-risk students, making education engaging and motivating to deter them from criminal activities. Community figures, such as Agensi Dadah Kebangsaan, can contribute to prevention by conducting awareness programs about the consequences of drugs. Moreover, positive role models in authority figures and the availability of preventive, developmental, and intervention programs act as protective risks against at-risk behaviours among teenagers. By fostering a sense of belonging, care, and support in the community, adolescents are less likely to engage in delinquent behaviour. Thus, a supportive community environment serves as a protective risk against juvenile delinquency.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has provided comprehensive insights into the intricate dynamics of juvenile delinquency within the Malaysian context. Identifying risk and protective factors underscores the nuanced nature of the issue, emphasising the necessity for targeted and multifaceted interventions. The pivotal roles played by family, schools, and broader societal influences highlight the need for a holistic approach to effectively prevent, intervene, and rehabilitate juvenile offenders. This research contributes significantly to a deeper understanding of juvenile delinquency, paving the way for the development of robust strategies aimed at enhancing the well-being and prospects of Malaysian adolescents entangled in criminal activities. As we move forward, further exploration in this field can uncover new dimensions, fostering continuous improvement in strategies to address juvenile delinquency and bolster the positive development of our youth.

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