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The Effect of Socio-Economic Risk (Criminogenic) Factors and Psychological Perspectives of Juvenile Delinquency: Psychodynamic and Cognitive Approaches

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Abstract

Juvenile delinquency is a complex phenomenon. When considering the causes of crime, the effects of internal and external factors are quite important. More precisely, we can talk about factors related to society and factors related to the individual. If we examine the causes of crime in terms of factors related to the individual, psychological theories find application in this very part of criminological studies. It would not be right to stick to a single theory when considering juvenile delinquency, which is generally of close interest to criminology and criminal law. However, considering the changes children show in their developmental stages, psychological theories are inevitable when explaining this phenomenon. Psychodynamic, social learning and cognitive theories are particularly important in explaining juvenile delinquency within the scope of psychological theories. The psychodynamic perspective emphasizes the influence of unconscious processes, unresolved conflicts from childhood, and the role of family dynamics in shaping an individual's propensity for delinquency. The social learning approach highlights the significance of environmental factors and observational learning. This perspective argues that adolescents learn behaviors through the modeling of significant others, such as peers and family members. The reinforcement of these behaviors through positive and negative feedback further contributes to the persistence of delinquent actions. The cognitive approach focuses on the mental processes that underpin decision-making and the interpretation of social cues. It suggests that delinquents often exhibit cognitive distortions, such as attributing blame or justifying harmful actions, which skew their perceptions of morality and consequence. This perspective underscores the importance of cognitive restructuring and intervention programs aimed at fostering critical thinking and empathy to combat delinquency.

Keywords: Juvenile delinquency, juvenile crime, psychodynamic theory, social learning theory, cognitive theory.

Introduction

Juvenile delinquency remains a critical global concern, with profound implications for public safety, youth development, and social stability. Socio-economic factors set up the main risk area. Psychological theories explain how those factors effects personal behavior. Putting socio-economic elements together with psychodynamic, social learning, and cognitive theories gives almost a full picture of juvenile delinquency.

In the period of rapid economic, cultural, and demographic changes in societies, youth are increasingly exposed to criminogenic risk factors like poverty, social disorganization, family instability, and lack of access to education and social services. These factors may particularly heighten vulnerability to deviant behaviors when combined with emotional, cognitive, or developmental challenges.

Understanding how socio-economic risks interact with psychological dimensions is thus essential to the formulation of comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies. Childhood is a critical period during which the foundations of an individual's personality development and emotional structuring are laid. Traumatic experiences during this period, events such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, neglect, domestic violence, loss of a parent, or interfamily conflict, can negatively impact a child's psychosocial well-being.

Such experiences can lead to distortions in an individual's self-perception, undermined confidence, and inadequate emotional regulation, paving the way for later criminal behavior.

Psychological theories provide an important framework for understanding the causes of child and adolescent delinquency. In this context, for the aims of this paper psychodynamic, social learning, and cognitive theories will explain the process by which individuals turn to crime from different perspectives, shedding light on the psychological mechanisms underlying behavior. Within psychology, two theoretical frameworks-psychodynamic and cognitive-offer insightful analysis into the processes leading to juvenile offending. Psychodynamic theory places significant emphasis on early childhood experiences, unconscious conflicts, and emotional regulation difficulties, which may result in delinquent behavior as a maladaptive response to unresolved inner conflicts. Cognitive approaches, however, center more on how the offending young person perceives and interprets their social environment and then acts upon that perception, pointing to such issues as defects in moral reasoning, information processing, decision-making, and problem-solving.

By combining these psychological viewpoints with socio-economic criminogenic factors, the present paper will provide a more comprehensive account of the origins and development of juvenile delinquency.

The Effect of Socio-Economic Risk (Criminogenic) Factors on Juvenile Delinquency

From a criminological point of view, criminogenic factors are key and basic in order to explain the causes of juvenile delinquency. When examining the causes of juvenile delinquency, it is necessary to include etiological factors. The process of identifying the problem and the source of crime and delinquency is certainly not simple; it depends on various factors directed at the individual and the social environment.

In criminology, when researching the etiological characteristics of crime and delinquency, we encounter a distinction between endogenous and exogenous, or internal and external risk factors in etiology. According to this division, endogenous factors in etiology focuses on the individual and the reasons that led to their involvement in crime and delinquency, while exogenous factors in etiology focuses on society and the changes that occur within it, which certainly affect the occurrence of crime and delinquency.

The etiology of juvenile delinquency should be investigated from the perspective of macro and micro causes of delinquency. However, given that these are delinquents who differ in their biological, psychological, and social characteristics from adults, it is certainly necessary to place greater emphasis on the specifics of criminogenic factors as the main indicators of the causes of delinquency in juveniles, as well as endogenous and exogenous factors as a very significant segment of the overall etiology of juvenile delinquency. Criminogenic factors are the most important segment of the etiological part of juvenile delinquency.

Most often in the literature, the following basic criminogenic factors appear: poverty, unemployment, wealth and migrations but they are not the only factors that can be presented as causes that influence juvenile delinquency, so with globalization, the development of society, and the development of technology, we get new categories of criminogenic factors that serve as indicators of the causes of delinquency. Scientifically verified knowledge of the etiology of juvenile delinquency and the study of the factors that determine juvenile delinquency locate criminogenic factors at three levels: general level (covering the material socio-economic conditions of life), special level (the microenvironment in which the child lives, develops and

forms a personality) and individual level (the personality of the delinquent with his biological, psychological, emotional, intellectual abilities) (Arnaudovski, 2000).

Today, there are different classifications of criminogenic/risk factors in criminology. Some factors focus on internal and external, some on primary and secondary, while some focus on actors related to the individual and society.

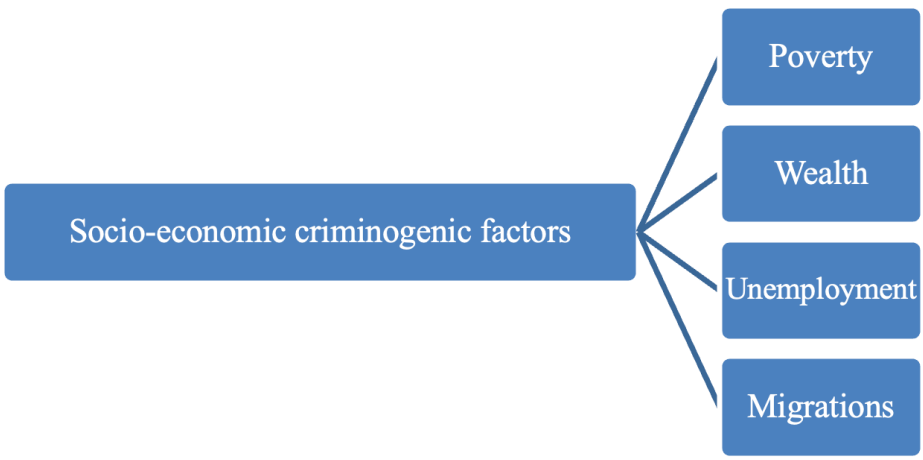


Figure I: Classification of socio-economic criminogenic (risk) factors

Poverty as a Risk Factor

Poverty is an expression of class inequality in a society, it is closely related to begging, vagrancy and even migrations. According to UNICEF nearly 900 million children worldwide experience multidimensional poverty – meaning they lack necessities like food, water, shelter, education and healthcare. From the criminological perspective, poverty appears as one of the main factors of juvenile delinquency.

Poverty is one of the strongest structural predictors of juvenile delinquency. Children who grow up in economically deprived environments often face chronic stress, limited supervision, and fewer prosocial opportunities, all of which increase the likelihood of engaging in delinquent behavior. Research shows that economic hardship can disrupt family functioning by increasing parental stress, reducing effective parenting, and limiting the time and emotional resources parents can devote to their children (Conger et al., 2010).

Poverty directly affects the involvement of children in socio-pathological phenomena, especially prostitution and vagrancy. Poverty creates aggression towards the child, which later turns into participation in delinquent activities.

There are so-called "delinquent areas" or "delinquent environments" in which poverty is more prevalent and hence the delinquency rate is higher; these are ghettos, poor neighborhoods of large cities with poor living conditions and deficient recreational facilities. Poor education, unfavorable living conditions, and a poor environment are important characteristics of poverty.

Poverty leads to children working in unfavorable conditions that hurt their proper development. In order to provide conditions for existence, the development, health, education and safety of the child are neglected.

Migrations are a very significant factor in explaining the impact of poverty on juvenile delinquency, because a large percentage of migrant children face poverty and very poor living conditions, hence they find the solution in crime and delinquency. In conditions of war when poverty is most prevalent, the rate of crime and delinquency shows a growing tendency and finally, the class division in a society between rich and low-income families undoubtedly has a direct impact on juvenile delinquents.

Wealth as a Risk Factor

To explain the influence of wealth, the child's family should also be given space. Thus, in wealthy families, the possibility of committing crimes and involving children in delinquency is not excluded, even though the family has a satisfactory financial situation. Here, we will discuss different types of crimes that do not coincide with those associated with poverty.

To delve into the essence and influence of this factor on the child, the following three elements, which mutually influence one another, are crucial: family, supervision and the financial status of the family.

Within the framework of this criminogenic factor, we most often talk about some of the sociopathological types, especially drug addiction (use and trafficking in narcotics), prostitution, and computer crime, which have recently become characteristic of juvenile delinquents, as well as organized crime.

Prostitution is one of the oldest professions, which was previously associated only with poverty. However, older research suggests that this sociopathological

phenomenon is characteristic of people affected by poverty and misery, but today we associate prostitution not only with poverty, but also with wealth. It is mostly female juvenile delinquents who practice this profession with people from the upper class of society; in this case, it is not about coercion, but rather about the child's own initiative, and hence, we return to the same problem: lack of supervision by the family. Today, the use and sale of narcotics is becoming an increasingly widespread phenomenon, especially for minors aged 15 to 18 (during secondary education).

Unemployment as a Risk Factor

One of the main threats arising from the economic crisis is unemployment. The unemployment rate of a country is closely related to the relationship between unemployment and delinquency; more precisely, this means that the higher the unemployment rate in a society, the higher the rate of juvenile delinquency and, by extension, crime in general.

Within the framework of juvenile delinquency, the unemployment situation of the child and the child's family is considered, as well as the effects arising from this situation, which are insufficient material resources that lead to the child's dissatisfaction with his life and demands, and hence his delinquent activities to more easily obtain material resources.

The issue of criminogenic factors is indeed very complex, and it is obvious that they often overlap, i.e., have a close relationship when defining their impact on delinquency.

Unemployment as a criminogenic factor not only affects the economic situation of family members and society, but it also represents a chain of many other negative conditions that affect the development of the child, such as:

- Exclusion of the child from the educational process due to lack of funds,
- Participation of children under 15 years of age in the labor market with poor and difficult working conditions that can disrupt their health
- Begging and begging, which show a growing tendency in North Macedonia
- Living in environments in which the child remains directly under the influence of gangs and criminal groups
- Disruption of interpersonal relationships and, of course, committing delinquent activities.

Migrations as a Risk Factor

In recent years, with the serious emergence of the migrant crisis, migration has proven to be a very influential criminogenic factor on crime and delinquency. The relationship between migration and delinquency is not a new phenomenon; this issue in the United States began to be monitored and researched in the mid-20th century. Migrations not only contributes to an increase in the rate of crime and delinquency, but at the same time, serious forms of crime such as human trafficking, child trafficking, migrant smuggling, and prostitution occur here.

In this context, it is particularly important to emphasize one of the most serious crimes: the sexual exploitation of children which can be defined as a serious violation of their rights and a deeply disturbing issue that demands urgent attention. It involves the manipulation, coercion, or abuse of children for sexual purposes, causing immense harm and long-lasting consequences. Child sexual exploitation refers to the use of children for sexual purposes, which can manifest in various forms. These include child pornography, child trafficking, child prostitution, online grooming, and the production and distribution of explicit materials involving children (Metaj & Ibish, 2024).

Importance of Psychodynamic Theories

The psychodynamic theory assumes that individuals develop in stages, and that abnormalities may emerge during these stages, resulting in inhibited personality development. This leads to conflicts between an individual's personal desires and the constraints imposed by society, which can lead to criminal behavior (Shoemaker, 2018). The roots of the psychodynamic theory to juvenile delinquency date back to Sigmund Freud (1900/1953). According to the psychodynamic theory, crime occurs when certain desires and tendencies repressed in the individual's subconscious deviate from normal behavior and transform into abnormal behavior (Sözen, 1986).

The psychodynamic theory posits that criminality is a manifestation of the fundamental structures that constitute a person's psychological framework, including Freud's conceptualizations of the "conscious" and "unconscious" and the interactions between the id, ego, and superego. Therefore, this theory posits that criminality is primarily a result of the psychic conflict between the unconscious ego and the conscious superego (Vold & Bernard, 1986).

Sigmund Freud (1923), the founder of this theory, proposed that personality consists of three fundamental structures: the id, the ego, and the superego. From the psychodynamic theory of criminality, a child classified as mentally balanced is characterized by the harmonious functioning of these three personality factors, balancing each other and enabling the child to function normally. Freud's structural model of personality, comprised of the id, ego, and superego, provides a useful framework for explaining criminal behavior. Driven by primitive instincts and the pleasure principle, the id seeks immediate gratification. The id can be identified as the source of antisocial behavior and attempts to meet the individual's desires and needs at the expense of society. The ego mediates between these drives and the reality principle, while the superego represents internalized moral standards and focuses on the social norms and values the child learns through socialization (Freud, 1925; cited in Thompson & Morris, 2016).

Delinquent behavior occurs because of imbalance between these three parts of our personality and is thought to be a symbolic way of meeting our unconscious needs (Siegel et al. 2006). Freud emphasized the influence of parental parenting on ego and superego development, explaining criminal behavior as the overdevelopment or underdevelopment of the superego during childhood (Geçtan, 2003; Öncül, 2017; Shoemaker, 2018).

In delinquent children, the superego is often inadequately developed due to inconsistent discipline, neglectful or overly authoritarian parental attitudes, emotional neglect, or the lack of stable parental figures (Alexander, 1930). Psychodynamic theorists emphasize that juvenile delinquency is often an expression of family dysfunction. Aggression in children may be the result of imitating inadequate or even violent parental behavior (Kostic, 2013). Parental conflict, inconsistent discipline, or the absence of a father figure can disrupt a child's ego development and moral internalization (Glueck & Glueck, 1950). According to the studies of Ardoin and Bartling (2010), the most important causes of juvenile delinquency are father absence, mother absence, domestic violence, alcohol or illegal substance use, parent or siblings who have received a custodial sentence, child mental health history, and poverty.

Traumatic experiences during childhood can lead to problems with secure attachment to parents. Children with emotional attachment problems, in particular, may exhibit impaired empathy and understanding of others' emotions due to a lack of secure attachment relationships. This can lead to aggressive, unruly, or antisocial behavior patterns (Bowlby, 1969). From a psychodynamic perspective, the roots of delinquency are often traced back to early attachment failures and parental

rejection. Emotional deprivation, harsh punishment, or inconsistent care can lead to feelings of anger, frustration, and insecurity in the child. If these feelings are repressed, they can later manifest as aggression or defiance of authority (Bowlby, 1944; Blos, 1962). Internal conflicts, which often stem from a conflict between the id and the ego and lead to guilt, are extremely painful for the individual. Therefore, the individual pushes them into the unconscious. They then develop coping strategies called defense mechanisms to cope with the conflicts. However, these defense mechanisms can lead to problematic personality traits and problematic behaviors such as delinquency (Söylev, 2022). Criminal behavior can also be understood as the result of maladaptive defense mechanisms. Psychologically traumatic experiences such as neglect, abuse, and overly authoritarian or inconsistent parenting styles undermine a child's sense of security, negatively impacting both self-development and impulse control. This leads to the maladaptive and dysfunctional use of defense mechanisms, which form the psychological basis of behaviors defined as criminal behavior. Research shows that family dysfunction, neglect/abuse, and negative parenting behaviors weaken children's ability to regulate their emotions, resulting in the increased use of more primitive defense mechanisms and an increase in delinquent behavior (Aazami et al. 2023). For example, a child who unconsciously harbors anger toward a rejecting parent may direct this hostility toward peers, property, or authority figures. These behaviors serve as unconscious attempts to regain control over distressing emotions.

In his psychodynamic theory, Alfred Adler (1870-1937) conducted research on children who committed crimes and linked criminal behavior to a lack of social attention developed from childhood. According to Adler, crime is not solely caused by environmental or physical conditions; its underlying basis lies in an inferiority complex. Adler argued that an inferiority complex can have mental, physical, or social origins, emphasizing that such feelings drive individuals to strive for success but also lead them to engage in criminal behavior, particularly due to factors stemming from parental attitudes within the family (Söylev, 2022).

In conclusion, the psychodynamic theory addresses juvenile delinquency within a holistic framework that encompasses not only visible behavior but also childhood traumas, family relationships, emotional needs, and unconscious processes. It offers a comprehensive understanding of both the prevention of criminal behavior and the promotion of healthy personality development. From a psychodynamic perspective, juvenile delinquency emphasizes the decisive influence of early childhood experiences, unconscious conflicts, and family interactions on an individual's

behavioral patterns. This framework highlights the importance of early diagnosis, psychological support, and family-based interventions when working with children who are prone to delinquency.

The Cognitive Approach

The cognitive theory is a theoretical framework that explains juvenile delinquency through an individual's thinking styles, problem-solving abilities, social information processing processes, and cognitive distortions. According to this theory, the basis for a child's delinquency lies not in environmental factors but in how they perceive, interpret, and evaluate their environment. In other words, behavior is determined not by the situations a child encounters, but by the thought patterns they develop about these situations. Criminal behavior, in turn, often emerges as a result of faulty thinking patterns, often referred to as cognitive distortions (Beck, 1967; Dodge, 2006; Walter, 2006; Walters, 2012).

A core concept of the cognitive framework is cognitive distortions, which refer to biased, inaccurate, or irrational thought patterns that justify or rationalize harmful actions. Young offenders frequently exhibit distortions such as externalizing blame, minimizing the consequences of harmful actions, devaluing the victim, and egocentric justification (Walters, 2012). For example, beliefs such as "violence is the only way to gain respect," "everyone breaks the rules," or "I'm not responsible because others provoked me" reflect maladaptive cognitive schemas that reinforce criminal behavior (Gibbs et al., 1995).

The cognitive theory addresses the mental processes underlying criminal behavior. These mental processes (e.g., social information processing, decision-making, schemas, and attributions) can be situational, that is, specific to the moment of the incident and a specific behavior, or they can point to more enduring factors that pave the way for the emergence of this behavior. For example, children with high aggression have been shown to be less sensitive to facial expressions and nonverbal messages in social interactions, to interpret these more inaccurately, and to have difficulty understanding others' emotions (Öncül, 2017).

Studies highlight these children's negative experiences with violence and the schemas these experiences create. Through these schemas, children may interpret others' intentions and behaviors in a more hostile manner and attribute more positive meanings to aggressive behavior. A criminal-positive mindset becomes a significant causal factor predicting the likelihood of this behavior recurring (Walter, 2012).

Cognitive distortions frequently exhibited by individuals with criminal tendencies include thinking patterns such as placing blame on others, justifying harmful actions, or minimizing victim responsibility. Such thinking impairs both an individual's moral judgment and their ability to properly evaluate the consequences of their actions. According to Kohlberg's theory of moral development, most criminally predisposed youth exhibit moral thinking focused on avoiding punishment or self-interest, making it difficult for them to develop behaviors consistent with social values.

Kohlberg, a leading figure in cognitive development theory, discussed three levels of moral development: Preconventional (Premoral), Conventional, and Postconventional (Autonomy). The first level Kohlberg identified, the preconventional level, is the stage in which a child's behavior is guided by rules established by others. During this stage, children generally attempt to avoid punishment by obeying the rules of their parents and caregivers. The second level, the conventional level, is the stage in which children adopt the rules of others and conform to social expectations, even if this sometimes goes against their own interests. Finally, the postconventional level refers to the stage in which an individual develops their own ethical principles and values and chooses to act accordingly. According to this model, criminal behavior stems from individuals who are morally immature. Kohlberg argued that moral thinking must first be developed before moral action can occur. According to Kohlberg, not reaching the pre-moral period, that is, having a low level of moral development, is one of the main reasons for juvenile delinquency (Maxfield & Babbie, 2009; Cited in Alparslan, 2023; Kohlberg, 1958; Cited in Thompson, 2025).

The cognitive theory generally considers juvenile delinquency within the broader context of thought processes, arguing that antisocial behavior stems from distorted thinking, inadequate moral reasoning, and deficiencies in interpreting social information. This framework suggests that delinquency should be assessed not only through behavioral outcomes but also through the cognitive processes, thinking styles, and moral evaluation mechanisms that lead to these outcomes. In this regard, programs that focus on cognitive restructuring, strengthening social problem-solving skills, empathy training, and improving moral reasoning have been found to be effective in interventions for children prone to delinquency. Consequently, it can be argued that practices aimed at preventing and reducing juvenile delinquency should be supported by holistic approaches that target cognitive processes.

Conclusion

At its core, juvenile delinquency is multifaceted, stemming from socio-economic conditions interacting dynamically with psychological mechanisms. A recurring emphasis in this paper has been placed on how structural variables-poverty, community disorganization, family instability, and inadequate availability of basic services-provide the socio-economic environments in which youngsters are more susceptible to criminogenic influences. Psychological theories particularly psychodynamic and cognitive perspectives offer critical understanding of the internal mechanisms that influence how juveniles perceive, interpret, and ultimately respond to these socio-economic criminogenic factors.

Psychodynamic approaches emphasize the long-term influence of trauma and emotional dysregulation during early childhood years, showing how unresolved inner conflicts may be manifested as antisocial behaviors. Cognitive theories point to impairments in moral reasoning and problem-solving that can distort a teenager's understanding of social situations, leading to harmful, maladaptive decisions.

These varied perspectives reinforce the need for an integrated framework for understanding juvenile delinquency, one that incorporates both structural conditions of risk elevation and the mediating psychological processes that influence individual behavior.

Only when psychological development is located in its wider socio-economic context can a full and subtle understanding of delinquency emerge, along with clearer routes to effective prevention and intervention. Ultimately, strategies for tackling juvenile offending have to be aimed not only at relieving socio-economic disadvantage but also at promoting healthy psychological development so that young people have the emotional, cognitive, and social resources to negotiate their environments without recourse to crime.

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