

Juvenile Delinquency among Malaysian Adolescents: Probation Officers' Accounts on Driving Factors and Curbing Strategies

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Abstract

Defined as illegal or wrongful acts committed by minors under 18, juvenile delinquency poses a significant concern to society, legal authorities, parents, and educators. Adolescents involved in juvenile delinquencies may be subjected to legal action by the court system, which can result in outcomes detrimental to their future. Theories on juvenile delinquencies proposed several grounds and explanations for adolescents' involvement in unlawful activities, and a principal element is an inability to conform to societal norms stemming from issues relating to family background, peer influence and socioeconomic status. However, further insights are needed into the causes of adolescents' involvement in unlawful activities and strategies to prevent or curb the increase in juvenile delinquencies, particularly within the Malaysian context. This study investigates the leading factors of juvenile delinquencies among Malaysian adolescents and provides insights into the risk factors associated with juvenile delinquencies. A basic qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews was employed, and significant findings were drawn from the experience of two probation officers dealing directly with adolescents charged in court. The interview data were transcribed and thematically analysed, and the results suggest factors such as family instability, lack of parental support and involvement, peer pressure, inconducive living environment, poor education and awareness, and the delinquents' attitude toward unlawful behaviours highly influence their involvement in crimes. These findings have implications for understanding the contributing factors to juvenile delinquencies, identifying risk factors, and strategising the development of preventive, intervention and rehabilitation programs by the relevant authorities.

Keywords: Adolescents-at-risk, Factors To Juvenile Delinquencies, Juvenile Delinquents, Malaysian Adolescents, Strategies To Curb Juvenile Delinquencies

Introduction

Wrongful conduct and criminal acts remain a pressing concern for society worldwide and even more so if these acts were committed by juveniles and, in the context of this study,

adolescents. Juvenile delinquency refers to illegal or wrongful acts committed by minors under 18 (Nasimah, 2013). Crimes associated with juvenile delinquency include but are not limited to burglary, larceny, armed robbery, alcohol offences, drug offences, sexual offences, vandalism, assault, harassment, loitering, and gangsterism. Most of these crimes are punishable by law, with the less severe leading to probation, while more severe crimes result in incarceration (Nasimah, 2013).

Adolescents and Juvenile Delinquency

Being in the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, adolescents are the most susceptible to influences and changes, either positive or negative, around them. Adolescents brought up with sufficient attention, love, and support are generally able to thrive in their life's pursuits and have a more positive outlook on life's challenges. Meanwhile, those growing up in harsh conditions and challenging environments are believed to be at a higher risk of committing crimes and offences. Consequently, it is no surprise that most young offenders often have a history of broken homes and troubled families and have suffered abuse or neglect by their families or close relatives. Poverty is also a factor that puts children at risk. Some children come into conflict with the law as they struggle with learning disabilities and mental health problems. Others become involved in gang activity or with drugs and alcohol at a young age, which eventually paves the way to juvenile crime. Undeniably, lack of parental attention, scarcity or deprivation of basic needs and other negative social feelings of unhappiness, worry and disappointment experienced at a tender and transitional age could touch and scar them severely (Khuda, 2019).

Every time an adolescent comes into conflict with the law, they are at a crossroads, and this crossroad presents an opportunity to turn their life around from poor decisions, missed opportunities, future crime, and regrets to a life of potential success, social integration, fulfilment and self-actualisation. The Malaysian Government has recognised that a comprehensive adolescent justice system is the key to capitalising on these opportunities. Following extensive research and discussions with relevant bodies such as UNICEF and the Malaysian Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia has made significant progress toward improving community-based supervision and rehabilitation programmes for child offenders, mainly by introducing interactive workshops. Nonetheless, rehabilitation shouldn't be the solution to dealing with juvenile delinquency. More emphasis should be given to identifying risk factors that could lead adolescents to conflict with the law.

As mentioned in the famous proverb, *Prevention is better than cure*; this paper, as part of a more extensive study, discusses the potential factors driving juvenile delinquency among adolescents in Malaysia from the perspectives of probation officers dealing directly with adolescents charged in court. The views and experience of probation officers are essential sources of information because the moment an adolescent is found to have come into conflict with the law, the selected probation officer instantly becomes their supervising officer.

In Malaysia, probation officers work for the Department of Social Welfare under the purview of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Malaysia. They are responsible for making assessments and writing reports on the adolescent's personality, family background, social history and environmental influences and recommending the most appropriate penalty or sentence to be enforced on the offender. The probation officers are also responsible for overseeing the adolescent's and their family's compliance with the court's ruling, monitoring the adolescent's progress, and providing counselling to eliminate behavioural issues. Ultimately, the probation officer's report determines the next course of

action for the adolescent; hence it can be said that the probation officer's role is vital in determining the adolescent's future.

Factors Contributing to Juvenile Delinquency

Researchers have concluded 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 (Shader, 2004). A risk factor may increase the probability of offending but does not make offending a certainty. Therefore, studying risk factors is critical to enhancing prevention programs with limited staffing and funding. Identifying which risk factors may cause delinquency for particular sets of youth at specific stages of their development may help programs target their efforts more efficiently and cost-effectively. A report on risk factors (Herrenkohl et al., 2001) summarised that risk factors fall under three broad categories: individual, social, and community. At the individual level, several studies have linked prenatal and perinatal complications to various health problems that negatively influence development (McCord, Widom, & Crowell, 2001). Tremblay and LeMarquand (2001, p. 141) suggest that the best social behaviour characteristic to predict delinquent behaviour before age 13 appears is aggression. Other personal characteristics linked to delinquency include hyperactivity, concentration or attention problems, impulsivity and risk-taking and later violent behaviour, low verbal I.Q. and delayed language development (Hawkins et al., 1998; Seguin et al., 1995). It was also found that children with low academic performance, low commitment to school, and low educational aspirations during the elementary and middle school grades are at higher risk for child delinquency than other children (Herrenkohl et al., 2001).

Social factors include family characteristics such as poor parenting skills, family size, home discord, child maltreatment, and anti-social parents (Derzon & Lipsey, 2000; Wasserman & Seracini, 2001). Involvement in a delinquent peer group and the presence of anti-social peers have been associated with delinquency (McCord et al., 2001). The researchers further highlighted that community factors such as unfavourable school policies regarding punishment, suspension and expulsion, and a neighbourhood with high levels of poverty and crime could also influence the likelihood of delinquency.

According to Constantinides (n.d.), minor delinquency is, in most cases, episodic, occasional or incidental, and is the main feature of teenage 'explosions' and subsides in intensity and frequency at the end of the age of entering adulthood. However, recent years have seen an increasing trend of juvenile crime internationally on both violent crimes and multi-recidivist juvenile offenders. Incorrect criminal and social reactions to juvenile crime may consolidate the new criminal behaviour and increase the severity of this in the future. It is projected that 50% of children with anti-social behaviour would be developed into anti-social adults. 50-75% of juvenile offenders will become adult criminals. The reasons for getting involved in crimes include a complex family environment with the physical or emotional absence of parents, low standard of living, being a foreigner in a country, degraded urban environment, indifference or excessive strictness of parents and teachers, learning difficulties, poor school performance, drop out of school, aggressive behaviour of other peers, creation and activation of juvenile gangs, negative use of internet social networks, video games and electronic gambling. Ortega-Campos et al. (2016) found that the risk factors associated with higher re-offending rates are anti-social peers, age at baseline of committing sanctionable anti-social behaviour, problems in school and criminality in family members.

Efforts to Curb Juvenile Delinquency

Malaysia has made progress in recent years in improving community-based supervision and rehabilitation programmes for child offenders, mainly through the introduction of interactive workshops. However, these programmes remain under-resourced, and the volunteer mechanisms meant to support this process are not functioning effectively or as per their mandate. Programmes tend to be ad hoc and focus primarily on the parent-child relationship, with limited emphasis on interactive, experiential learning programmes for the children. Malaysia currently has a cadre of highly dedicated district-level probation officers and professional counsellors tasked with supporting children in conflict with the law and their families. However, due to a shortage of staff, training and resources, most have limited ability to provide individual guidance and support to children (Kassim, nd; Casey, 2013)

Since adolescents are the future generation of the country and need to be developed into healthy and productive individuals, it is imperative that they are not involved in criminal and illegal activities. Nevertheless, some teenagers are more prone to risky behaviours and are already involved in crimes. This phenomenon makes finding a solution to managing juvenile delinquencies more crucial than ever. Therefore, this study aims to identify factors driving juvenile delinquencies and explore the best strategies to reduce further involvement in risky behaviour (re-offending) among adolescents sentenced by the juvenile court. The following research questions guided this study

RQ1: What are the factors contributing to juvenile delinquency among Malaysian adolescents?

RQ2: What are the strategies needed to curb juvenile delinquency among Malaysian adolescents?

Methodology

This study employs a basic qualitative research design. Two probation officers from one of the districts in Selangor were recruited as participants in this study. For the reader's information, each district in a state has only one or two probation officers. As noted earlier in the introduction section, probation officers are responsible for making assessments and writing a report on the adolescent's personal attributes and family background, social history environmental influences and providing a recommendation of the most appropriate penalty or sentence for the adolescent, which the court will later refer to before the passing of the final verdict. Considering their exposure and close relationship with the juvenile delinquent, probation officers are a rich source of information that can shed light and provide insights needed for this study. This aligns with Patton's (2002) justification for purposive sampling and the selection of participants that could illuminate the question under investigation.

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews, allowing the researcher to probe accordingly to better understand the phenomenon (Robson, 2002). The data collection process followed an interview protocol approved by the university's ethics committee that required the researcher to inform the informants of the purpose of the study and ensure the complete anonymity of their identities throughout the study. Alternately, pseudonyms were given to represent the informants in the data analysis whilst masking their identities. The informants were asked four main questions, and when necessary, further responses were teased out through follow-up questions. The data collected from the interviews were analysed thematically, and emerging themes and patterns were coded accordingly. Below are the informants' demographic profiles.

Table 1

The demographic 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) |

Findings and Discussion

To identify the factors that could potentially be the driver of juvenile delinquency among adolescents in Malaysia, the informants were asked questions relating to the adolescents' family background, education level, social history, types of crime, and personal attributes. Meanwhile, to explore the strategies for reducing adolescent involvement with delinquencies, the informants were asked to share their thoughts and experience on the best strategy, action and program that could help curb risky behaviour. Responses from the informants were almost identical, with some additional information and insights provided alternately between the two. For the first question, the themes that emerged from the data analysis were family environment, poor academic performance, peer influence and individual attributes. For the latter, the themes that emerged from the analysis were 'family members', 'peers', 'Department of Social Welfare' and 'prevention, developmental and intervention programmes'.

Factors Contributing to Juvenile Delinquencies

Responses from the interview revealed that family environment, poor academic performance, peer influence and individual attributes were the main contributing factors to juvenile delinquencies.

Family Environment

According to the informants, a majority of the adolescents engaged in delinquencies came from inconducive family environments and families with low income compared to those from higher-income families. According to one of the informants, Eliza, low-income families earn less or a little over RM2000 (approximately USD500) per month. Masran also stated that often, the breadwinner/s of the family tend to be self-employed and, in some cases, are also embroiled in financial distress. Juggling between making ends meet and dealing with financial and other life pressures often results in the parent's inability to provide the attention, guidance and care needed by their children. Apart from that, the informants revealed that most delinquents also came from families where good parenting was absent. This means that the parents either neglected them, spoilt them, or did not pay enough attention to the children hence allowing them to act at will and opening a window for them to be engaged in unlawful acts as a form of rebellion or expression of pent-up emotions, or to seek attention. This scarcity of basic needs and the desire to have more money or attention drove the adolescents' involvement with crime (Khuda, 2019). Both the informants concur that the types of crimes these adolescents were normally involved with were possession of stolen goods, drugs ('syabu' or methamphetamine being the most common), rape or sexual assault, reckless riding (motorcycles), and being involved in fights.

Academic Performance

The second theme that emerged from the data was poor academic performance. Both informants revealed that a common element shared by these delinquents was a lack of interest in schools or learning. Both Ezlin and Masran noted that a large majority of the adolescents only completed their primary or lower secondary education. Ezlin added that some did not complete their high school education because they were not interested in learning and often skipped school. Consequently, these adolescents either dropped out of high school or were expelled by the school, while some were taken out of the schooling system by their parents. Interestingly, Ezlin also noted that some of the parents of these juvenile delinquents also had low academic accomplishments, with most only completing year six and lower secondary school and some possessing a high school certificate. It is evident that disinterest in schooling and learning could lead to these adolescents' involvement in other activities that may include those detrimental to their future. This finding aligns with Herrenkohl, Hawkins, Chung, Hill and Battin-Pearson's (2001) discovery that children with low academic performance, low commitment to school, and low educational aspirations during elementary and middle school grades are at higher risk for child delinquency than are other children.

Peer Influence

Another theme that emerged based on the informants' interviews was peer influence. This theme is related to the two themes discussed above, where often, due to an inconducive family environment and poor academic achievement, these adolescents turn to their peers for relief and acknowledgement. This was highlighted by both informants, who also mentioned that the peers these adolescents were involved with tended to have similar familial and educational backgrounds and issues and were already involved in delinquent activities. In his response, Masran noted that the selection of peers may have been a poor judgment on behalf of the adolescents, but among the reasons that attracted them to these peers was the image of reputation and acceptance gained through committing unlawful activities and the illusion of fun and enjoyment through anti-social behaviour exhibited by the gang members. This impression makes the adolescents believe that turning to gangsterism, anti-social behaviour, and criminal activities could give them the attention, sense of belonging and respect they sought. This concurs with findings by previous studies, which found that being a part of gangs fulfilled certain needs of the members, including the desire for status, a sense of belonging, perceived protection, or respect (Bellair & McNulty, 2009; Papachristos, 2009; Ortega-Campos, García-García, Gil-Fenoy & Zaldívar-Basurto, 2016). Jackson and Knepper (2013) also suggest that gangs function as substitute families and provide the protective security and love these adolescents did not receive from their biological families.

Individual Attributes and Personality

The final theme reveals that juvenile delinquency was also attributable to the individual attributes or the adolescents' personalities. Previous research has shown that impulsivity, aggressive behaviour and low conscientiousness in adolescents were linked to increased anti-social behaviour among adolescents (Henry, Caspi, Moffitt, Harrington, & Silva, 1999; Lynam et al., 2000; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001 as cited by Waghmare and Shinde, 2021). A similar trend was relayed by Eliza whereby some of the adolescents she has worked with showed tendencies to be impulsive and only followed their heart's desires, such as the desire for independence, freedom to decide and to earn money. This subsequently led them to rebel

against their parents' advice and better judgment and fall into anti-social behaviours and potentially criminal activities. At this stage, most of these were unaware of the repercussions of the crimes they committed and the legal implications that could befall them should they be found guilty. Therefore, creating awareness and providing avenues for adolescents to express themselves, reflect on their personal needs and desires, and share their feelings with those trained to deal with the growing pains of adolescence will be beneficial to them. Although more in-depth research is required to investigate the influence of personal attributes on juvenile delinquencies in the Malaysian context, this theme, though only mildly evident in the data collected, requires attention and consideration to fully understand the factors driving adolescents' involvement in juvenile delinquencies.

Strategies for Reducing Adolescent's Involvement in Delinquencies.

Four pertinent themes emerged from the interview data, and they were family members, peers, the Department of Social Welfare, and prevention, developmental and intervention programmes.

Family Members

According to the informants, it is essential to have psychological support from family members. Masran stated that parents need to have more awareness about issues relating to adolescence. Additionally, parenting knowledge is also essential as a guideline to understanding more about adolescents and their developmental process. He also suggested that parents need to show a positive attitude and example in front of the kids for them to imitate good behaviour. On the other hand, other family members, such as siblings and relatives, can also play a role in establishing a positive relationship and taking good care of each other. Ezlin echoed Masran's opinion on the need for good parenting skills, emotional and psychological support, and a positive and supportive environment in the family to help curb tendencies toward juvenile delinquencies. She also added the need for parents to be more aware of their children's whereabouts and activities and firmer in shaping their behaviour.

Peers

The other theme that emerged from the findings was peers. The informants highlighted that it is important for adolescents to surround themselves with a good circle of friends because, at this stage, adolescents are prone to be influenced by and follow their peers. Peer influence is crucial irrespective of whether the influence is positive or negative because of its potential to shape behaviour. Therefore, the selection of peers should be done appropriately to prevent adolescents from engaging in risky behaviour. In addition, the informants have also added that the school environment also needs to be supportive, and one way of doing this is by focusing more on the students who need help in terms of psychological and discipline issues.

Department of Social Welfare

The third theme revealed is the role of the Department of Social Welfare or better known as the Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM). According to Masran, JKM should create more awareness programmes to enhance society's understanding of adolescents' developmental stages and needs in the current context. Apart from that, JKM should also continuously empower their officers with the knowledge and skills required to deal with

adolescents with risky behaviour and perform their duties more effectively and efficiently. Ezlin also suggested that JKM provide counselling services to parents or families struggling to deal with problematic adolescents so they would be able to curb any risky behaviours. Finally, both informants proposed the need to educate and inform society, in particular, the adolescents and their parents/families, on what consists of risky behaviour, juvenile delinquencies, and its repercussions from social and legal perspectives.

Prevention, Developmental and Intervention Programmes

The final theme that emerged from the interview with Masran is to have more prevention, developmental and intervention programmes as one of the strategies to reduce at-risk behaviour among adolescents. For prevention, the informant suggested introducing more awareness programmes at the societal level on at-risk behaviours and the consequences of being delinquent. In addition, establishing clubs or organisations in schools and the community could also be one of the ways to curb adolescent activities, as they can be used as a platform for developmental and intervention programmes. Furthermore, school counsellors must play a significant role in the process by being the point of reference and the first responders to students who appear at risk of delinquency. Masran also suggested that as part of a preventive measure, the media should undertake a more prominent role in promoting awareness among its viewers by clearly displaying warnings and parental guidance advisory for content depicting substance abuse, violence, explicit scenes, and other risky behaviours. Additionally, censorship, either through trimming sensitive content or blurring risky behaviours and inserting warnings along with its potential repercussions at specific scenes, could also act as preventive measure. Finally, the informant emphasised that everyone in the community should be vigilant and work together alongside the authorities to help adolescents in need of advice, monitoring, and intervention.

Discussion and Implications

Many previous studies have identified the protective and risk factors that could predict crime risk behaviour among adolescents. Different stakeholders have also debated what factors could potentially lead to delinquency among youths. Despite the findings, it is essential to note that the predictive factors alone do not necessarily predict a particular behaviour or, in this study's context, criminal behaviour because humans and their behaviour result from complex interactions between their environment and personalities (Bobbio et al., 2020). Nonetheless, viewing the phenomenon objectively based on findings of numerous and established research, the path to delinquency is determined by various factors, among which can be broadly categorised into three categories: individual, social, and community or broken down into more specific elements.

This study found that among the prominent factors driving juvenile delinquencies in Malaysia were family environment, academic performance, peer influence and individual attributes, consistent with previous studies' findings (Mohideen et al., 2016; Rathinabalan et al., 2017). This confirms that despite the different research contexts, the drivers for juvenile delinquencies are similar worldwide. The findings also support the claim that juvenile delinquency occurs due to a form of dysfunction in the offender's family, social environment (school or peers) and/or personality (Zakaria, 1990; Guevara & Bautista, 2008; Ngale, 2009; Villanueva, 2006).

In analysing strategies for curbing juvenile delinquencies, the themes that emerged corresponded with the factors contributing to juvenile delinquency, where family members

and peers were revealed to be the most important variable in addition to the role of the Department of Social Welfare, and prevention, development and intervention programmes. According to Jessor and Turbin (2014), delinquencies occur due to risk and preventive factors such as identity confusion, family members, helplessness, risky behaviour, control and support. For adolescents, parental attachment and control and a positive sense of belonging at school play a significant role in the prevention of psychological and emotional issues that can lead to delinquency (Aisyah et al., 2020; Chien et al., 2019; Cristiano et al., 2020; Hoeve et al., 2012; Latiffah et al., 2018; Winarini et al., 2018), and the findings of this study further support these postulations. Apart from that, the role of the authorities, and in this study, the Department of Social Welfare and schools, in organising preventive, development, and intervention programmes and advocating awareness are again reaffirmed as having the potential to help curb risky behaviours among schooling adolescents as advocated by Gerlinger et al. (2021) and Zastrow and Hessenauer (2022).

The findings of this study have implications not only in understanding the contributing factors to juvenile delinquencies but also in identifying risk factors and developing more comprehensive preventive, intervention and rehabilitation programs by the relevant authorities, namely the Department of Social Welfare and schools. More importantly, the role of parents, family, and peers emerged as a critical risk factor for juvenile delinquencies and the fundamental element in preventing or curbing risky behaviours. The findings also suggest that awareness programmes which expose adolescents, particularly those at risk, to the consequences of delinquencies and punishments are essential. As a follow-up to the awareness programmes, providing avenues for adolescents to express themselves, reflect on their personal needs and desires, and share their feelings with those trained to deal with the growing pains of adolescence are essential and could significantly benefit adolescents at risk.

Suggestions for Future Research

Given this study's limitations, such as the number of respondents and the inability to interview convicted adolescents as initially planned due to the Covid19 pandemic, it will appear presumptuous to generalise the findings of this study to other districts or against other similar but more comprehensive studies. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies broaden the range of respondents to include the convicted adolescents and their social connections, such as guardians, peers and teachers, so a more holistic picture can be drawn. Additionally, longitudinal studies could enrich the existing body of knowledge by providing insights into the rehabilitation process and its effectiveness in remedying or curbing delinquent behaviours.

Conclusion

To conclude, the findings of this study highlight the crucial role family and peers play in an adolescent's life. Adolescence is the time when the most rapid changes occur physically, emotionally, and socially. Hence, receiving sufficient emotional support, assistance with identity development, promoting positive socialization, and guidance for academic success can help in preventing risky behaviours. Additionally, the findings also emphasize the role played by the school and the Department of Social Affairs in preventing and intervening at the onset of risky behaviours through targeted awareness and development programmes. The right set of family, peer, societal, and authority support can help set adolescents on a path towards a healthy and positive adulthood and vice versa.

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