

Risk Factors for Delinquency among Adolescent Boys in Trinidad and Tobago

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Various risk factors for juvenile delinquency have been identified but the extent to which they are applicable in Trinidad and Tobago has not been investigated. We conducted a case-control study comparing risk factors in delinquent and non-delinquent boys.

Methods: Assessment of delinquent behaviour over the course of the preceding year was undertaken via the self-report delinquency scale while the Rosenberg self-esteem scale was used to assess self-esteem.

Results: We found low academic achievement, living environment and family arrests positively correlated with delinquency in adolescent boys in Trinidad and Tobago. However, contrary to our hypotheses, self-esteem, punishment and family structure (single parent families) were found to be unrelated to the development of juvenile delinquency.

Conclusion: We recommend interventions at the community and family levels. Rehabilitation and academic programmes may help to directly address the issue of juvenile delinquency in Trinidad.

Keywords: Juvenile delinquency, risk factors, Trinidad

Factores de Riesgo para la Delincuencia Entre los Jóvenes Adolescentes en Trinidad y Tobago

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RESUMEN

Objetivo: Se han identificado varios factores de riesgo para la delincuencia juvenil, pero no se ha investigado la medida en que son aplicables en Trinidad y Tobago. Llevamos a cabo un estudio de casos y controles, comparando los factores de riesgo en los adolescentes varones delincuentes y no delincuentes.

Métodos: La evaluación del comportamiento del delincuente en el transcurso del año anterior se emprendió mediante la escala de delincuencia auto-reportada, mientras que la escala de auto-estima de Rosenberg se utilizó para evaluar la autoestima.

Resultados: Hallamos que el bajo rendimiento académico, las condiciones de vida, y los arrestos de familia, tenían una correlación positiva viviendo medio ambiente y familia detenciones correlacionadas positivamente con la delincuencia en los adolescentes en Trinidad y Tobago. Sin embargo, contrario a nuestras hipótesis, hallamos que la autoestima, el castigo y la estructura familiar (familias mono-parentales) no estaban relacionados con el desarrollo de la delincuencia juvenil.

Conclusión: Recomendamos intervenciones a nivel comunitario y familiar. Los programas de rehabilitación y los programas académicos pueden ayudar a abordar directamente el tema de la delincuencia juvenil en Trinidad.

Palabras claves: Delincuencia juvenil, factores de riesgo, Trinidad

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INTRODUCTION

The term juvenile delinquency refers to the commission of criminal acts and status offenses by minors (1). A juvenile delinquent is legally defined as someone under the age of 18 years or someone who has not reached the age of maturity who

commits an act that is punishable by law. Delinquency in general is characterized by deviant behaviour that lies outside of accepted societal norms and includes, theft, substance abuse, larceny, sexual offences and homicide (2). Adolescents exhibiting delinquent behaviour experience significantly adverse outcomes including criminality, school failure, unemployment and poor peer relationships. Furthermore, juvenile delinquents are more likely to become teenage parents and this behaviour tends to be reinforced in their children (3) thus, creating a cycle that is difficult to break. Boys are more likely to be delinquent than girls though the causes for this are unclear. More stringent social controls and less exposure to criminogenic peers have all been postulated to explain this observation (4).

Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies in various societies have identified the risk factors for juvenile delinquency to include socio-economic status (5), academic achievement (6–8) family structure, family arrests (9, 10), living environment (11), punishment (12) and self-esteem (13, 14).

Causal modelling studies in delinquency suggest harsh punishment, low parental supervision and low academic achievement leads to association with delinquent peers and delinquency activities (15). Most adolescents involved in juvenile delinquent behaviour live in backgrounds with minimal resources and economic deprivation (6). Having a convicted family member (12) predicts a boy's likelihood of delinquency independent of other factors (10, 16). Many studies have shown that poor attachment to parents (17) and low parental supervision which are associated with single families are also significantly linked to delinquency. Sauvola *et al* (16), reports that delinquency rates are 10–15% higher in single parent homes than intact families and this may be due to the fact that low supervision and weak parent-child relationship (18, 19) in conjunction with unemployment and financial hardship exert extra stresses on a single parent family thus, making regular child-monitoring difficult. Well-monitored youths tend to be less involved in delinquency and other norm-breaking behaviour (20, 21). One study in the Cameroon showed that most parents of surveyed juvenile delinquents in a correctional institute had low paying jobs which kept them for long periods far away from their children (22). That same study also showed that juvenile delinquents came from homes where both parents were married (22). This suggests that there is no consensus on the role of family status in juvenile delinquency (22). Indeed in a setting where there is a supportive network of people such as: aunts, uncles, grandparents and neighbours, single parenting may not be a risk factor for juvenile delinquency.

Self-esteem is also known to be negatively correlated with delinquency (13, 14). This is not surprising given the fact that a vulnerable young person growing-up in an unstable and frightening environment would more than likely have a poor sense of self-esteem. Low self-esteem weakens societal ties (14). According to social bonding theory, weakened ties decrease conformity to societal norms thus, increasing delinquency (23). Individuals who feel a sense of inferiority tend

to externalize their behaviour which may lead to hostility towards others (14). Juveniles with low self-esteem are also more prone to join gangs (24). Other research however, points to the fact that high self-esteem may be indicative of egocentrism which may manifest as disregard for and devaluation of others (25).

This study focussed on adolescent boys and attempted to identify the risk factors that may be correlated with delinquency in this population.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Participants

A case-control study comparing risk factors in delinquent boys and non-delinquent boys was conducted. Boys from the St Michael's School for Boys were recruited ($n = 39$, mean age = 14.9 years) as the delinquent sample. Of this group, twenty-six of the boys were committed and thirteen were remanded to this institution by a court of law after being referred for being out of control.

The non-delinquent sample also consisted of 39 boys (mean age = 15.9 years) who live and/or attend school in South/Central Trinidad and who had no previous history of disciplinary or deviant behaviour.

Materials and measures

Three questionnaires were used to collect data for this study. A two page demographic questionnaire was used to assess family status and academic achievement. Assessment of delinquent behaviour over the course of the preceding year was undertaken *via* the self-report delinquency scale which was developed for the National Youth Survey (26). This scale consists of 45 items which describe specific behaviour and asks for an estimate of the number of delinquent acts. Behaviours to be rated ranged from; "having purposely damaged or destroyed property that belonged to a school" to "how many times in the last-year have you used marijuana". However, because the normative sample used in this survey was based on a North American population, a number of items on the scale were omitted (*eg* items pertaining to the use of illegal drugs). Additionally terms such as "hiking" were explained to participants. For scoring purposes, the delinquency scale was divided into two parts: 1) Delinquent behaviour and 2) Drug-use. Incidences of delinquent acts were indexed against the hypothesised risk factors. Drug use was indexed against academic achievement, living environment and self-esteem.

The Rosenberg self-esteem scale (27) consisting of a 10-item questionnaire which rates responses on a Likert scale with responses ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" was used to assess self-esteem.

Procedure

We interviewed the thirty-nine adolescent boys from the St Michael's School for Boys. These boys made-up the delinquent set. They met the requirements for delinquency as they were there *via* court placements for committing violations,

ranging from substance abuse to minor assaults. The boys were separated into two groups (remand and committed) and interviewed at the school on two separate days.

Post briefing, the questionnaires were administered to the boys. However, because many of them were unable to read, the researcher sometimes assisted with reading and clarifying a few terms in the questionnaires. The boys were instructed to omit three questions pertaining to drug use as these were not applicable to Trinidad's society. The boys in the remand group were all cooperative and total administration time took 1.5 hours. The committed group who were interviewed under the supervision of the school's resident security officers were a bit more disorganized and the interviewer repeated the instructions numerous times. Total administration time for the committed group was one hour 55 minutes.

The non-delinquent sample consisted of 17 boys from the Claxton bay neighbourhood and 22 from the SERVOL life Centre at Forrest Park, Claxton Bay. Permission was given by parents who signed consent forms. Verbal consent was given by some parents who personally knew the researcher. The researcher visited the homes of the non-delinquent boys to administer the questionnaires and their parents had the option to overlook the procedure. As the boys were occupied with school work or extra-curricular activities, administration time took approximately one week.

Permission to administer the questionnaires to the students of SERVOL was granted from the South Regional Coordinator. Administration time took one day. The boys came from the Adolescent Development Programme (ADP) class, automotive repairs and welding class. Administration was done during the recess and lunch break. The total time spent on administering the questionnaires was three hours 30 minutes.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medical Sciences, The University of the West Indies. Participant or parental consent was given either verbally or in writing after the procedure was explained. Prior to the first meeting with participants the manager of the St Michael School for boys was furnished with a copy of the questionnaires in order to ensure that appropriateness was realized. Permission to administer the questionnaires to the students of SERVOL was granted from the South Regional Coordinator.

RESULTS

The mean scores and standard deviations for the total sample, self-report delinquency and self-esteem are located in Tables 2–4, respectively.

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the total sample for age.

Table 2 provides the mean scores and standard deviations of the two groups based on the responses given to the self-report delinquency questionnaire. These results indicated

Table 1: Mean scores and standard deviations for age

	n	Mean	SD
Delinquent	39	14.9	1.34
Non-delinquent	39	15.9	1.39

that delinquent boys scored higher on measures of delinquency compared to those in the non-delinquent group, whose scores were also elevated but not on the level of the delinquent group.

Table 2: Delinquency means and standard deviations between delinquent and non-delinquent groups

	n	Mean	SD
Delinquent	39	129.08	94.95
Non-delinquent	39	55.44	40.37

Table 3 provides the mean scores and standard deviations of the delinquent and non-delinquent groups for self-esteem. The self-esteem scores for both groups showed minimal differences from which it can be inferred that both groups show high-levels of self-esteem.

Table 3: mean scores and standard deviations on self-esteem for delinquent and non-delinquent groups

Rosenberg's self-esteem scale	n	Mean	SD
Delinquent	39	30	4.31
Non-delinquent	38	32.9	2.65

The risk factors identified to be linked to delinquency, *ie* academic achievement, family background, family arrests, living environment and punishment are compared between two groups and explained as follows:

Eighty-five per cent of the delinquent group showed lower academic achievement whereas in the non-delinquent group, this figure was fifty-six per cent. In the non-delinquent group this figure (56%) is somewhat elevated; however, it is still much lower when compared to the delinquent group.

Family structure showed that of the delinquent group, 51% lived in single parent families (extended/other = 31%, nuclear = 17.9%), whereas, 41% of the non-delinquent group lived within a nuclear family structure (single parent = 38%, extended/other = 22%).

Table 4: Family structure percentages

Family structure	Delinquent group	Non-delinquent group
Single parent	51%	38%
Extended/other	31%	22%
Nuclear	17.9%	41%

The rate of family arrests and/or conviction was 62% in the delinquent group while in the non-delinquent group the rate was, 44%. Both groups were punished to similar extents (delinquent group = 79.5% and non-delinquent group = 75%).

The majority (69.2%) of the delinquent group resided along the East-west corridor while, 30.8% resided in areas

comprising of South, Central and Tobago. Within the non-delinquent group, 81.3% resided in areas comprising of South, Central and Tobago while 18.8% resided along the East-west corridor.

Correlations

Table 5: Correlation of family arrests and delinquency

	n	r	Sig (two-tailed)
Family arrests	71	0.261	0.028

Results are significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 6: Correlation of academic achievement and drug-use

	n	r	Sig (two-tailed)
Academic achievement and drug-use	78	-0.241	0.034

Table 7: Correlation of living environment and drug-use

	n	r	Sig (two-tailed)
Living environment and drug-use	77	0.242	0.034

Table 8: Correlation of self-esteem and drug-use

	n	r	Sig (two-tailed)
Self-esteem and drug-use	77	-0.244	0.032

Regression

A single model fit for delinquency did not emerge using the enter method: $F(7, 62) = 2.137, p > 0.05$. The model accounts for 10.3% variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.103$). Only living environment ($\beta = 0.273, p < 0.05$), family arrests ($\beta = 0.312, p < 0.05$) and academic achievement ($\beta = -0.237, p < 0.05$) were found to be significant predictors.

DISCUSSION

Low academic achievement, living environment and family arrests positively correlated with delinquency in adolescent boys in Trinidad and Tobago. However, contrary to our hypotheses self-esteem, punishment and family structure (single parent families) were found to be unrelated to the development of juvenile delinquency. Preventative intervention in this context should thus, focus on bolstering academic achievement, reducing family arrests and enhancing the living environment. Indeed studies indicate that protective factors against delinquency include low emotional distress and high educational aspirations (6).

We found an inverse relationship existed between lack of academic achievement and participation in delinquent behaviours which is in alignment with prior findings (28). Additionally youth with above average academic achievement

while incarcerated are more likely to re-enter school upon release and youth with above average school attendance are significantly less likely to be re-arrested one year post release (8). These suggest that academic achievement is a direct buffer against delinquency. Indeed, the act of performing well at school can serve to also increase self-esteem and self-reliance which in prior studies have been found to be associated with delinquency.

As lack of academic achievement was also found to be a risk factor in Trinidad and Tobago, initiatives aimed at increasing commitment to school and academic achievement could act as a protective measure against delinquency. In Trinidad and Tobago, much emphasis is placed on the academic aspect of school although there are alternative available programmes. Encouraging students who are not academically inclined to re-route into vocational programmes may be one way to halt a delinquent trajectory. Additionally, the introduction and reinforcement of extra-extracurricular activities in schools may be another route. Interventions in delinquency are more favourable the younger the person. Thus, early identification and rechanneling is crucial.

The United Nations World Youth Report [2005] (29) states that urbanization and the area of residence is integral in the development of delinquency. Other findings show that crime rates increase as urbanization increases and economic opportunities decrease (30). We also found that living environment to be significantly associated with the development of delinquency. The majority of the boys in the delinquent group resided along the East-west corridor in Trinidad and Tobago and this area is associated with high levels of urbanization, unemployment, congested housing and high crime rates. The pairing of these with adverse living and family environments could propel an adolescent along a delinquent path. Frequently, vulnerable adolescents live in depressed areas that are lacking in social stability.

Efforts to encourage community cohesion in an attempt to prevent boys who are at risk from becoming influenced by the wrong elements are therefore recommended. Communities can promote development through community events, recreational activities and public awareness of community resources.

Delinquency negatively impacts on childhood and adolescent development because of its strong association with adult criminality. Early effective intervention is likely to reduce this progression and be associated with crime prevention (31). In alignment with prior findings which showed that the conviction of a close relative predicted a boy's own convictions (9) we also found a history of family arrests to be a risk factor. Murray *et al* explained that this might be due to younger male siblings imitating the older siblings' antisocial behaviour (32). In order to address this, supporting criminal parents and siblings and educating and supporting them *via* programmes in proper parenting may be useful. This can be accomplished through home visits, parent management training and child skills training. Mentoring of at risk youth with

older boys who are on a non-delinquent trajectory may serve as an alternative example that these boys emulate. We found no associations between juvenile delinquency and family structure, self-esteem, punishment and socio-economic status.

Fifty-one per cent of the delinquent group and 38% of the non-delinquent group were boys from single family households. Although the majority of the delinquent group lived within a single family structure, the result was not statistically different thus, we cannot conclusively state that family structure in Trinidad and Tobago is associated with delinquency. Usually a single family status implies other factors are at play such as poor parent-child-monitoring and deficient parent-child ties. In situations, however, where an extended family structure is evident and where aunts, uncles and grandparents or neighbours contribute to child rearing, the risk factor associated with single parenting may be attenuated.

We did not find punishment to correlate with delinquency. The instrument used in assessing this risk factor simply consisted of one question which required a “yes” or “no” answer to “are you punished when you did something goes wrong?” A more in depth probe of this question that addresses other dimensions of punishment (emotional, verbal) as well as the severity of physical punishment may yield different findings. Indeed a lack of punishment may also indicate a lack of instilling discipline in a child and this may in turn point to low parent-child bonding or monitoring which is also a predictor of delinquency.

Using long-term longitudinal assessments *versus* cross-sectional or retrospective surveys may be an improved method of determining causal factors of juvenile delinquency in Trinidad and Tobago. Monitoring a large community population of high-risk youth with regular follow-ups from childhood into adulthood may be the best method of establishing causal factors of juvenile delinquency.

We discovered that an inverse relationship exists between self-esteem and drug-use. This suggests that an adolescent with low self-esteem may be more likely to be involved in drug-use. Reasoner (25) also found that juveniles low in self-esteem to be involved in deviant behaviour such as drug-use in order to compensate for feelings of low self-esteem. We also found that drug-use and lack of academic achievement was inversely correlated with each other suggesting that with low academic achievement a boy is more likely to use drugs. Such a finding may also be attributed to association with delinquent peers and environmental factors.

Limitations

Compared to previous studies investigating juvenile delinquency, the sample size in this study was relatively small. The results obtained should thus be viewed with caution and not generalized to the wider population. For a more rigorous approach, we advise that a larger sample size be utilized. Additionally, most studies on juvenile delinquency utilize a cross-sectional or retrospective analysis of risk factors. Along

with this we suggest that a longitudinal study be undertaken with high-risk youth.

Most studies have found low socio-economic status to be a major risk factor for delinquency hence we matched the two groups by controlling for this. Further research should thus, seek to examine whether socio-economic status is a risk factor for juvenile delinquency in Trinidad and Tobago.

CONCLUSION

We identified the risk factors associated with delinquency in Trinidad and Tobago to be lack of academic achievement, family arrests and living environment. In line with this, we recommend interventions at the community and family level. Expending community and correctional resources on prevention, rehabilitation and academic programmes may help to directly address the issue of juvenile delinquency in Trinidad and Tobago.

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