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# The correlation of the delinquent behaviors of institutionalized children in conflict with the law with parental discipline, peer delinquency and neighborhood disorganization

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## Abstract

**Introduction** The increasing prevalence of children in conflict with the law is a problem in Metro Manila. This study aimed to understand the factors, specifically parental discipline, peer delinquency, and neighborhood disorganization that predispose a child to engage in delinquent acts.

**Methods** This was a correlational study in which children in conflict with the law who were institutionalized at the Manila Youth Reception Center were surveyed. The subjects were given three sets of questionnaires which measured parental discipline, peer delinquency, and neighborhood disorganization, respectively. Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was computed using SPSS.

**Results** Delinquent behavior is very weakly and positively correlated with peer delinquency ( $r = 0.18$ ) and neighborhood status ( $r = 0.10$ ), and is very weakly and inversely correlated with parental discipline ( $r = -0.10$ ). These correlations were not statistically significant.

**Conclusion** The study showed that parental discipline, peer delinquency, and neighborhood disorganization may influence a child's delinquent behavior.

**Key words:** CICL, delinquency, parental discipline, peer relations, neighborhood disorganization

Juvenile delinquency has been a subject of major research in the fields of law, criminal justice, and psychology. Statistical data from the World Youth Report indicate that in virtually all parts of the world,

except in the United States, rates of youth crime rose in the 1990s.<sup>1,2</sup>

It is well recognized that delinquents reside in communities that have high delinquency rates. They attend schools with unclear and inconsistently enforced rules and have poor teacher-student relationships. They often live in deprived areas characterized by neighborhood disorganization, physical deterioration, and high residential mobility.<sup>3,4</sup> The relationship between parent-child interactions and delinquency has not however, been straightforward since a variety of family variables (such as parental attachment, hostility, rejection,

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supervision, and involvement) have been proposed to influence adolescent's delinquent behavior.<sup>5,6</sup> However, the role of parental involvement may be considered debatable in some cases due to the tendency to seek autonomy and independence from the family, and divert towards peers. Peers, on the other hand, influence the youth's beliefs and attitudes about what is appropriate or inappropriate, and behavior.<sup>7</sup> Together with parental involvement and environmental factors, it is undoubted that a child's peer relations also affect development.

As a response, this study sought to better understand the root and risks of delinquent behavior of children in conflict with the law. This study aimed to 1) describe the demographic profile of the children in an institution; 2) determine the correlation of specific factors: a) parental discipline, b) peer delinquency and c) neighborhood disorganization with the delinquent behavior of children in conflict with the law; and 3) determine the factor that has the strongest correlation with delinquent behavior.

## Methods

This was a correlational study that looked into the factors, specifically parental discipline, peer delinquency, and neighborhood disorganization that may predispose a child to engage in delinquent acts in a Philippine urban setting. Those institutionalized in the Manila Youth Reception Center who met the inclusion-exclusion criteria were randomly selected in batches and made to answer an integrated questionnaire. Results from the questionnaire were interpreted through correlation with the aid of SPSS. This study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the medical center.

The respondents were male or female children, 14 to 18 years old, in conflict with the law (CICL) who were currently confined in the Manila Youth Reception Center in Ermita, Manila. Inmates who were diagnosed with psychiatric illness and those with other medical conditions that made them unfit to participate were excluded. The computed sample size was 106 using the prevalence rate of 0.38, and 1.96 for the level of confidence. Respondents were randomly selected in batches of 10 to 15 per group.

Children in conflict with the law were youth offenders confined in Manila Youth Reception Center who had either official or pending cases. Delinquency was behavior deviating from the norm of the age group and was determined through their official

criminal records from the facility. The factors or antecedent conditions that may have caused or increased the likelihood of committing an offense and were present before the delinquent act were: parental discipline, peer delinquency and neighborhood disorganization.

Parental discipline, how the biological parents or parental figures discipline the child, was measured through the use of the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ). The questionnaire consisted of 18 5-point Likert-type items (nine items each that focused on the mother and father, respectively).<sup>8</sup> The items were answered from 1 (never) to 5 (always); the scores of each item were summed and graded as follows: weak (1-30), moderate (31-60) or high (61-90) parental discipline.

Peer delinquency, the involvement of close friends in various delinquent behaviors, was measured by the use of the Self-Report Delinquency Scale that was previously validated to be used for the measurement of peer delinquency.<sup>9</sup> The respondents were asked to indicate if any people whom they considered their close friends had engaged in the stated behaviors within the last year, scored as 1 (no), and 2 (yes). The responses of the items were summed for each respondent to generate a measure of the extent of delinquency among peers. Those who scored 1-27 were categorized as having low; 28-55, moderate; and 56-82, high peer delinquent involvement.

Neighborhood disorganization is the lack of access to social protection, health and education opportunities, presence of a poorly structured physical environment and rampant delinquency, and violence seen in the community. Based on journals that looked into neighborhood influence on juvenile delinquents, a survey questionnaire was constructed and administered for pilot testing. A 17-item questionnaire was tested on 35 participants and analyzed using a reliability test. It was modified accordingly and was trimmed down to a 13-item questionnaire answerable by yes (2) or no (1). Validation of the tool was conducted by a professional. The questionnaire was scored accordingly: low (1-8), moderate (9-16), high (17-26) neighborhood disorganization.

The questionnaires were obtained and pilot-tested and found to have high Cronbach's alpha coefficients (parental discipline 0.73 with items trimmed to 16; peer delinquency 0.95 with items trimmed to 41; and neighborhood disorganization 0.72 with items

trimmed to 13). These scales were translated into Filipino by the researchers, and were reviewed by a professional. Questionnaires on parental discipline, and peer delinquency were validated by previous studies in the Philippine urban setting. The neighborhood disorganization questionnaire, on the other hand, was validated by an expert.

At the institution, respondents were oriented on the purpose and objectives of the study. Respondents answered the questionnaires in batches of 10-15 persons. Permission for participation was obtained through a written agreement secured from the parental guardians of the institution, and assent from the respondents themselves. Upon accomplishment of assent forms and verbal agreement to participate in the data collection, the researchers distributed the questionnaires. Each researcher was tasked to monitor and help explain further the items to the respondents. It took 15-20 minutes for each subject to answer the questionnaire. The identity of each respondent was coded to maintain confidentiality.

After data were collected, scores were encoded in Microsoft Excel and analyzed through SPSS for Windows. Correlation analysis using Spearman's rho was done to determine the relationships between delinquent behavior and parental discipline, peer delinquency and neighborhood disorganization.

## Results

There were 106 respondents, almost 90% of whom were males aged 16-18 years (Table 1). Most of them did not finish grade school and only one-third reached high school. Their offenses included but were not limited to the following: theft, qualified theft, robbery, breaking and entering, arson, carnapping, assault, rape and murder. Table 2 shows that less than half of their parents were married and that one out

**Table 1.** Demographic profile of respondents.

| Characteristic                 | Number (%) |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| Age (years)                    |            |
| <16                            | 9 (8.5)    |
| 16-18                          | 97 (91.5)  |
| Gender                         |            |
| Male                           | 88 (83)    |
| Female                         | 18 (17)    |
| Highest educational attainment |            |
| Grade school graduate          | 1 (0.94)   |
| Grade school                   | 66 (62.3)  |
| High school graduate           | 3 (2.8)    |
| High school                    | 33 (31.1)  |
| College graduate               | 0 (0)      |
| College                        | 1 (0.94)   |
| No answer                      | 2 (1.9)    |

**Table 2.** Information of respondents' parents and/or caregivers.

| Characteristic  | Number (%) |           |
|---|------------|-----------|
| Parents' civil status   |            |           |
| Married   | 45 (42.5)  |           |
| Separated   | 24 (22.6)  |           |
| Never married   | 33 (31.3)  |           |
| Widow/widower   | 2 (1.9)    |           |
| No answer   | 2 (1.9)    |           |
| Primary caregiver   |            |           |
| Both parents  | 54 (50.9)  |           |
| Mother  | 23 (21.7)  |           |
| Father  | 5 (4.7)    |           |
| Extended family (e.g. grandmother, aunt, etc.)                  | 23 (21.7)  |           |
| No answer   | 1 (0.9)    |           |
| Parents' occupation   | Father     | Mother    |
| ISCO-08 4 (clerical support workers)                            | 2 (1.9)    | 2 (1.9)   |
| ISCO-08 5 (service and sales workers)                           | 8 (7.6)    | 10 (9.4)  |
| ISCO-08 6 (skilled agricultural, for-estry and fishery workers) | 3 (2.8)    | --        |
| ISCO-08 7 (craft and related trades workers)                    | 5 (4.7)    | --        |
| ISCO-08 9 (elementary occupations)                              | 63 (59.4)  | 32 (30.2) |
| Unemployed  | 8 (7.6)    | 50 (47.2) |
| No answer   | 17 (16.0)  | 12 (11.3) |

of two CICL were raised by both parents. Majority of the respondents' fathers had elementary occupations based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO), while almost all of the mothers were unemployed or plain housewives.

At least seven out of 10 respondents felt that parental discipline was just right, that they were loved, and that they had moderate ability to control their actions, as seen in Table 3. More than 90% of respondents had committed misbehaviors and/or violations of laws while at least three-fourths had friends who had committed misbehaviors and/or violations of laws.

**Table 3.** Additional information on respondents.

| Characteristic  | Number (%) |
|---|------------|
| Manner of discipline at home                                  |            |
| Harsh   | 4 (3.8)    |
| Just right  | 97 (91.5)  |
| No discipline   | 5 (4.7)    |
| Feel loved by their parents or caregivers                     |            |
| Yes, very much  | 80 (75.5)  |
| Yes, but not so much  | 22 (20.8)  |
| No  | 4 (3.8)    |
| Ability to control actions and behaviors                      |            |
| Strong  | 7 (6.6)    |
| Moderate  | 77 (72.6)  |
| Weak  | 22 (19.8)  |
| Committed misbehaviors or violations of laws                  |            |
| Yes, several times  | 53 (50.0)  |
| Yes, once or twice  | 45 (42.5)  |
| No  | 8 (7.5)    |
| Have friends who committed misbehaviors or violations of laws |            |
| Yes, several times  | 67 (63.2)  |
| Yes, once or twice  | 16 (15.1)  |
| No  | 23 (21.7)  |

Spearman's Rho correlation coefficient was computed and showed that delinquency had a very weak direct correlation with peer delinquency ( $r = 0.18$ ), neighborhood disorganization ( $r = 0.10$ ), and a very weak inverse correlation with parental discipline ( $r = -0.10$ ). Peer delinquency had the highest correlation with delinquency among the three parameters. The correlations were not statistically significant.

## Discussion

In recent years, studies that have focused on the risk factors related to juvenile delinquency grouped them into three broad categories: the individual, social, and community categories.<sup>14</sup> In this study, the researchers focused on the social and community categories and neighborhood disorganization.

Most studies on juvenile delinquency focus on parental influence and assert that those children who received adequate parental supervision had lower risks for delinquency. Findings of the present study are consistent with studies that showed a positive correlation between negative parental relationships and juvenile criminal activity.<sup>3</sup> The results showed that delinquency is negatively correlated with parental discipline, consistent with Farrington's conclusion that when children receive weak disciplining from parents, they become more delinquent. The results are consistent with the findings of the Pittsburgh Youth Study that poor parental supervision and low persistence in disciplining predispose a child to eventually become delinquent. When looking at different factors in the analysis of parental discipline, three of the six can be considered as negative forms of parental discipline (scolding and criticizing, imposing obedience of the child without explaining why, and the use of physical punishment), indicating a negative parental relationship with the adolescent. The results are consistent with the findings of McCord regarding poor parental supervision and negative forms of disciplining such as use of physical punishment and rejecting attitude predict delinquency.<sup>6</sup> McCord showed that adolescents with parents who had both high demands and responsiveness resulted in better outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

Adolescents may become predisposed to delinquent behaviors as they become more peer-oriented and start to build relationships outside the family.<sup>7</sup> Those who tended to fraternize with delinquent peers were noted to have increased delinquency.<sup>11</sup> A study on Vietnamese youth showed that there was less likelihood of exhibiting delinquent behaviors or becoming gang members if they did not associate with delinquent peers, even if they had the same problems in school and in their neighborhood.<sup>13</sup> This shows that peers are a significant factor in predicting delinquent behavior. A study by Childs, Sullivan and Gullede found that peer delinquency significantly predicted a child's delinquency, such that one unit of increase in peer delinquency was found

to lead to a 5.1% increase in the expected count of a child's delinquent behavior.<sup>16</sup>

This study showed that among the three factors, peer delinquency had the highest correlation with delinquency, consistent with Kornhauser's finding that that peer delinquency is the most robust predictor of delinquency in a child.<sup>10</sup> Majority of the participants in the present study had peers who were involved in theft, property violation, gang fights, use and selling of drugs, school truancy, and cheating in school. The study showed a very weak positive correlation between delinquency and peer delinquency, suggesting that the behavior of peers affects the delinquency behavior of an individual but may not play a significant role in how one becomes a delinquent. The researchers found that this may be attributable to the selectiveness of the peers' involvement in delinquency. Respondents who were institutionalized for drug abuse tended to have friends who also engaged in drug-related activities and scored lower in the other aspects of delinquency, thereby causing a positive but insignificant relationship between delinquent behavior and peer influence.

Nevertheless, studies show that peers play a vital role in the development of delinquent behavior. This may be because this developmental stage is geared towards participating frequently in different activities outside the family. Adolescents are more likely to be influenced by peers rather than their family because they value independence and sense of self. Since they engage in social experimentation, they are more vulnerable to doing activities that are against the law. Furthermore, it must also be noted that many of this study's participants came from broken families, stressing the importance of the family.

Neighborhood disorganization also played a significant role in the etiology of the delinquent behaviors of the respondents. Majority of the subjects said that rampant delinquency in the neighborhood, observed violence, poor physical condition of the neighborhood, and limited access to social protection, health and education opportunities predisposed them to commit delinquent behaviors. The results showed a very weak positive correlation between delinquency and neighborhood disorganization. Wilson showed that exposure to violence may predispose a child to commit violent behavior and being a victim of violence puts a child at a greater risk of developing antisocial behavior.<sup>15</sup>

A child who knew an adult criminal in the neighborhood, or had been exposed to delinquent acts and disorganization in the community was most likely to engage in violent acts.<sup>5</sup> The result of the study may be attributed to the differences in the personality and neighborhood experiences of the respondents.

The results may have been due to measurement constraints, being limited only to available variables. First, the familial aspect of the study is broad and complex. Various familial factors such as parental nurturance, parental presence, family communication, parental values and broken family, may closely influence parental discipline, which was the focus of this study. In addition, peer variables were limited to the perception of peer delinquency rather than the actual occurrence of delinquency, as this study relied purely on self-report measures. Second, the child may have been selectively involved with a specific group that engaged only in a specific behavior such as theft, but not in other behaviors such as robbery, kidnapping, or drug trafficking. Third, as the study is mostly self-report, there is the possibility that adolescent reports in this study overestimate their own projections onto others to make them appear more similar to themselves.

This study used only three factors - parental discipline, peer delinquency, and neighborhood disorganization - in relation to a child's delinquent acts. A recommendation for future studies would be to explore other factors or shift the focus. It would also be preferable to factor in the effect of broken families when exploring parental influences on CICL. Second, only one institution was surveyed. It may be more fruitful to survey several institutions to be able to compare the neighborhood features of different populations. The differences between the areas of the responsibility of different institutions may factor in on child delinquency as well. Also, the sample size was limited because only one institution was surveyed, which may have affected the significance value of the study. Third, because self-report measurements rely on the participants' truthful answers to personal questions, it is recommended that parental and/or peer reports of adolescent delinquency be obtained. Lastly, it may also provide more depth to the study if a qualitative approach is added on top of the quantitative approach in order to assess other factors in relation

to the items in the questionnaire to gain more understanding of the complexity of the subject.

The study showed that parental discipline, peer delinquency, and neighborhood disorganization may influence a child's delinquent behavior. Overall, the results of this study are consistent with many other studies on delinquency in an urban setting in developing countries.

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