

Factors that Encourage Children to Engage in Criminal Acts

Clara R.P. Ajisuksmo*

ABSTRACT

This study is intended to obtain a description of factors that encourage children to engage in criminal acts and become children under the supervision of correction and detention centers. This study applied a qualitative approach by conducting a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interview (KII). Two FGDs have been carried out, with one group of girls participating by four participants and one group of boys participating by four participants. The age of the participants ranged from 15 to 18 years old ($M = 16.6$). The KII was conducted with the head of the Educational and Counseling Division of the correction and detention center. The FGDs and KII were carried out at the correction and detention center for women and girls and for men in Tangerang, West Java Province, Indonesia. The result of this study indicated that poverty and economics are factors that influence children to commit crimes. Also, factors that encourage children to engage in criminal acts are personal factors, family environment, and peer pressure.

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Faculty of Psychology, Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia, Indonesia.

*Corresponding Author:
e-mail: clara.as@atmajaya.ac.id

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Article 1 paragraph (2) of Law No. 11 of 2012 concerning the Juvenile Criminal Justice System of The Republic of Indonesia, children in conflict with the law are children who are 12 years old but not yet 18 (eighteen) years old who are suspected of committing a crime, victims of criminal acts, and witnesses to criminal acts. The National Legal Development Agency, Ministry of Law and Human Rights of the Republic of Indonesia noted that in the 2020–2022 period, 2,338 cases of children in conflict with the law, consisting of 2,271 boys and 67 girls. The top three cases involving children in conflict with the law are theft (838 cases), drug abuse (341 cases), and other cases, including pornography, bullying, and traffic accidents (Putra, 2023). The Online Information System for Women's Protection and Children of the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia noted that in 2019, there were 10,742 cases of violence against children. The data showed that cases of sexual violence are one type of violence most often experienced by children (Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, 2020).

Article 28 G paragraph 1 of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia states that everyone has the right to protection of personal, family, honor, dignity, and property under his/her authority and is entitled to a sense of security and protection from the threat of fear to do or not do something which is a human right. However, society will view children in conflict with the law negatively. Even though children in conflict with the law have been rehabilitated, society still expects them to be closely supervised and to have environmental restrictions placed on them (Suhastini & Fitriana, 2022). Children in conflict with the law are often stigmatized and excluded from society, including school (Hasnda *et al.*, 2023; Hidayati *et al.*, 2022). Children who have a criminal history will be considered by society as untrustworthy, unintelligent, and dangerous (Hidayati *et al.*, 2022). What also happens is that news about children in conflict with the law is turned into a commodity that can increase the selling power of mass media, which can be detrimental to the child's future (Ilahi, 2018).



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Children are defined as individuals who are not yet 18 years old and are still the responsibility of their parents to care for and supervise them. However, some children struggle because they conflict with the law. Consequently, they must be in children's rehabilitation institutions under state supervision. They do not live with their families and cannot attend school. They also experience stigma and discrimination from society.

Previous studies reported that several factors encourage adolescents to engage in criminal activity. These factors are categorized into internal or personal and external or environmental factors (Frias-Armenta & Corral-Verdugo, 2013). Personal characteristics, namely self-efficacy and self-esteem, were found to be significant predictors of aggressive behavior tendencies among adolescents (Okon *et al.*, 2011). According to Frias-Armenta and Corral-Verdugo (2013), emotional and cognitive variables, namely impulsivity, low self-control, depression, anxiety, attention problems, ADHD, and empathy, are personal factors of adolescents that influence adolescents' engagement with criminal acts. Bobbio *et al.* (2020) also reported that personal characteristics are significantly associated with delinquency among youth.

According to Carrel *et al.* (year, as cited in Khan, 2018), individuals who commit crimes have no or low self-control. Such low self-control develops from an early age when parents do not give attention to their children or do not give punishment when their children do delinquent behavior.

The study by Reniers *et al.* (2016) indicated that age, sensitivity to reward, behavioral inhibition, impulsiveness, and anxiety in social situations influence risk perception and risk-taking behavior among adolescents. Reniers *et al.* (2016) reported that males perceived behavior as less risky took more risks, were less sensitive to adverse outcomes, and were less socially anxious than females. The study of Junger-Tas *et al.* (2004) on the pattern differences between male and female adolescents in delinquency indicated that social control practices by family and school have correlations for girls and boys to commit crimes. Tight and socially solid controls are more given to girls than to boys. Also, the study reported that social control practices by families and schools will be influenced by the culture in which families and schools are located.

Previous studies reported the importance of family life in influencing adolescents' engagement in criminal activities. The study of Okon *et al.* (2011) found that both personal and family characteristics predict adolescents' aggressive behaviors. Research by Omoponle and Olanrewaju (2020) reported that there was a significant correlation between family background, child-rearing practices, self-regulation, and adolescents' tendencies to criminal acts. Self-regulation makes the most significant contribution of these variables, followed by parenting patterns and family background. Harris-McKoy and Cui (2013) reported that lack of parental control was significantly associated with adolescent delinquency. According to Liu *et al.* (2019), a good relationship between parents and adolescents, indicated by less conflict, is very important in decreasing risky behavior in adolescents.

According to Esiri (2016), criminal behavior is learned through association with people who often commit crimes. The study of Augustyn *et al.* (as cited in Howell, 2019) revealed that parents' membership influenced the probability of children being involved in criminal gangs in criminal gangs. Among adolescents, peer pressure can also influence behavior as opposed to social norms that lead to criminal behavior. Kim and Fletcher (2018) and Müller *et al.* (2016) also reported that classmates are essential in influencing adolescents' delinquency and criminal activities. When the parent-child emotional bond is lacking or weak, and children find difficulties and challenges at home, they want to be fit and accepted by their peers. Peer pressure will be accepted (Esiri, 2016).

Previous studies reported that the rapid development of information and technologies that support the infrastructure of societal life influences the development of crime. According to Stalans and Finn (2016), the more sophisticated the information and technologies that are accessible, the more excellent the opportunity to bring up new types of crimes. Violent films that children watch on video and television will foster the development of criminal acts (Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Keikha *et al.*, 2020). Information technologies, the internet, and mobile apps influence the development of cybercrime (Stalans & Finn, 2016).

Poverty is also a predictor of adolescent criminal behaviors (Gunuboh, 2023; Sariaslan *et al.*, 2014; Shah *et al.*, 2019). According to Shah *et al.* (2019), lack of resources to fulfill their needs leads adolescents to engage in criminal acts. Shong *et al.* (2018) stated that poor and unhappy family conditions, as well as school failure, are two factors associated with children's criminal behavior.

Hay *et al.* (year, as cited in Gunuboh, 2023) stated that the parent-child relationship is a protective factor for children who commit crimes. However, this protective factor is sometimes disrupted by the economic and cultural factors of the community. This means that the quality of parent-child relationships will differ among communities and economic and cultural conditions. The effect of the parent-child relationship in disadvantaged and poor communities is different from that in privileged communities. As a consequence, children of the poor will be more involved in criminal acts.

The study of [Madise et al. \(2007\)](#) reported that poverty is the driving factor for female adolescents to be involved in early sexual activity and having sexual activity with multiple partners. These sexual activities are intended to get gifts or money.

Referring to the above explanation, this study is intended to obtain a description of the factors that encourage adolescents to be involved in criminal acts and become adolescents under the supervision of correction and detention centers. It is expected that the result of this study can contribute to the various stakeholders' helping children who have conflicts with the law.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study applied a qualitative approach by conducting two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews. The FGDs were carried out with one group of boys (four participants) and one group of girls (four participants), with ages ranging between 15 and 18 years ($M = 16.6$). A critical informant interview (KII) was carried out with the head of the education and counseling division of the correctional and detention for boys and girls in Tangerang, West Java, Indonesia.

Prior to the FGDs, all participants were asked to fill out and sign informed consent. FGDs and interviews were conducted separately at the correctional and detention center for girls and boys in Tangerang, West Java, Indonesia. FGD and Interview protocols were used as guidance for conducting FGDs and KII. [Table I](#) shows the characteristics of the FGD participants.

TABLE I: CHARACTERISTICS OF FGD PARTICIPANTS

Initials	Age	Case	Sex	Educ.	Detention period
L	18	Drugs abuse	F	Senior high	Na
P	17	Act of abortion	F	Senior high	Na
R	16	Premeditated murder	F	Junior high	3 years
Y	17	Premeditated murder	F	Senior high	3 years
W	15	Drugs abuse	M	Junior high	1 year 4 months
M	16	Sexual harassment	M	Junior high	1 year 3 months
I	16	Drugs abuse	M	Junior high	1 year
A	17	Theft	M	Senior high	7 months

The following table shows that the cases experienced by the participants of this study varied. More drug abuse (3 cases) than the pre-meditated murder (2 cases) and the immorality acts, namely abortion and sexual harassment (2 cases). Of the study participants, there was only one case of theft. All eight participants are still senior and junior high school students and have not yet completed their education.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Personal Factors

As mentioned in the previous studies ([Bobbio et al., 2020](#); [Frias-Armenta & Corral-Verdugo, 2013](#); [Okon et al., 2011](#)), the result of FGDs showed that adolescents' personal characteristics, namely lack of self-confidence, low self-control, lack of self-regulation, inability to refuse and easily to accept peer pressure, are among internal factors that influence adolescent's engagement to criminal acts.

"From myself...because it's too easy to follow" (Y, FGD girls).

"Because of peer interaction. It's also easy to get involved from myself" (R, FGD girls).

"It's just that I'm crazy... that's also because someone forced me to do it" (M, FGD boys).

"The socialpeer interaction... yeah, like that... I was invited by a friend and just for fun... I was often invited to do that... I was successful... well, in the end I was caught too" (A, FGD boys).

4.2. Family Life Factors

The result of the FGDs is in line with the previous studies that family life is essential in influencing adolescents to engage in criminal acts ([Harris-McKoy & Cui, 2013](#); [Liu et al., 2019](#); [Omonle & Olanrewaju, 2020](#); [Palomares, 2018](#)). The result of FGDs revealed that adolescents from families where parents frequently have conflict and oppose each other and where children very often become the victim of the conflict see the home as an unsafe and uncomfortable place to stay. Also, adolescents see their parents as people who will harm instead of the ones who will protect and take care of them. The FGDs also showed that adolescents' engagement in criminal acts is due to the divorce of their parents. Parental divorce has effects on the adolescents on the loss of being loved by parents as well as attention

from parents. Such distressing families push adolescents to find a safe and comfortable place as well as love and attention outside the home who do not necessarily have good morals. Outside the home, children do not learn social norms that are good and right that can be accepted by their environment. This means that a good family life with less conflict and the presence of parents is very important in decreasing risky behavior among adolescents.

“Because... My family has a broken home...” (Y, FGD girls).

“It’s the same as a family... my mother is divorced... but their love is still incomplete... there is no one to accompany me... my grandmother is not the same as my mother...” (P, FGD girls).

“Mom and Dad are separated... in fact, I didn’t hear any news from mom for long. But . . . now as I am in this prison mom keeps visiting me” (R, FGD girls) (R, FGD girls).

“Lack of knowledge from school...family...lack of knowledge...knowledge about what is wrong, what is right...” (L, FGD girls).

“Is this because of parental problems...my parents separated like...” (I, FGD boys).

“At first I used drugs just to escape... because I was disappointed and frustrated when I saw my parents... then I kept going...” (W, FGD boys).

“Parents also fight quite often.” (M, FGD boys).

4.3. Poverty and Economic Factors

Poverty is one among many factors that lead adolescents to engage in crimes. The findings of this study support the previous study carried out by [Sariaslan et al. \(2014\)](#), [Shah et al. \(2019\)](#), [Shong et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Madise et al. \(2007\)](#). It was revealed from FGDs that the participants engaged in criminal acts since their parents were poor and unemployed. Poverty could not provide sufficient resources to meet the needs of adolescents. In addition, many adolescents often compare themselves to others whose needs can be met because of their capable parents. For example, as revealed by the FGDs, adolescents want sophisticated gadgets to be accepted to hang out with their peers with the development of technology and information. This is due to their peers often making fun of adolescents if they do not have the latest gadgets. As was told by participants of the FGDs, they tried to fulfill their needs by selling drugs since the fees they get from selling drugs are high, without considering that what they are doing is against the law.

“It could be because parents don’t work and earn little... children see other children who want this and want that but can’t and end up doing things that are prohibited by the state. (drugs)” (L, FGD girls).

“The reason for using drugs...at first I didn’t want to bother my parents...I wanted to be able to earn my own money, right...” (I, FGD boys).

One of the FGD participants, namely P, aged 17 years, was in a correctional and detention center because of allegations of abortion. As it was expressed in the FGD, she had an abortion because she was involved in sexual activities to get money. She needed money since her parents had divorced, and she lived with her grandmother, who had no job and could not fulfill her needs. As a consequence of her sex activities, she got pregnant and decided to have an abortion since she was still a student at a senior high school. The result of this study supported the previous study carried out by [Madise et al. \(2007\)](#) that due to poverty, female adolescent involved in sexual activities intend to get money to fulfill their needs.

4.4. Peer Pressure

The previous studies ([Esiri, 2016](#); [Kim & Fletcher, 2018](#); [Müller et al., 2016](#)) reported that peer groups play a role in affecting adolescents’ delinquency and criminal activities. The FGD revealed that adolescents could not resist the pressure of their peers since they did not have strong self-confidence. They just accept what their friends ask them for without realizing the consequences.

“It’s just that I’m crazy... that’s also because someone forced me to do it” (M, FGD boys).

“The socialpeer interaction... yeah, like that... I was invited by a friend and just for fun... I was often invited to do that... I was successful... well, in the end, I was caught too” (A, FGD boys).

“Because of peer interaction. It’s also easy to get involved from myself” (R, FGD girls).

When the parent-child emotional bond is lacking or weak, and children find difficulties and challenges at home, then the children want to be fitted and accepted by their peers. In this situation, peer pressure will be accepted ([Esiri, 2016](#)).

5. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that personal characteristics, low education, family life, poverty of the family, and peer pressure are among the essential factors that encourage adolescents to commit criminal acts. Lack of self-control and self-regulation, as well as easy acceptance of peer pressure without realizing the consequences, are factors that lead adolescents to engage in crimes. The quality of family life also plays

a vital role in adolescents getting involved in criminal acts. Frequent conflict between parents, where children often become the victims, will lead adolescents to see the family as an unsafe and harmful environment. The divorce of parents, lack of parents-children emotional bond and control, as well as parents' ignorance of their children, are family life of children who have conflict with the law and brought them to the correction and detention center. The presence of parents plays an important role in developing adolescents' personalities, namely self-confidence, self-regulation, and negotiating skills with their peers. The role of parents is not channeled correctly due to a lack of parental guidance and attention. Therefore, to fill in the blanks, the child's association becomes uncontrolled. Children lack moral knowledge about right and wrong, which they should receive from their parents. In addition, there are needs or desires of children that parents do not provide. So, to meet these needs, children commit unlawful acts without thinking deeply about their future.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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