

Tangled Threads: Investigating Child Criminality, Social Equity, and Disrupted Families

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Abstract. This article delves into the intricate relationship between social justice, child criminality, and fragmented families. It explores how societal inequalities, limited opportunities, and disrupted families contribute to juvenile involvement in crime, aiming to shed light on solutions from a social justice perspective. Juveniles in the criminal justice system often hail from disadvantaged backgrounds with disrupted families. This study aims to dissect these connections and suggest strategies for breaking cycles of criminal behavior and family breakdown. Through qualitative interviews with juveniles engaged in criminal activities due to family disruption, this research captures nuanced narratives and unveils the intricate ties between family turmoil and criminal conduct. This study's significance lies in its potential to inform both academia and policy. By understanding the dynamics between social justice, child criminality, and fractured families, it offers insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers, contributing to equitable societies that prioritize children's rights.

Keywords: Child Criminality; Disrupted Families; Social Equity

1 Background

Nowadays, many children commit deviations, as actions that are not usual for them to do. Children are in a social pattern that increasingly leads to criminal acts such as the use of illegal drugs, abuse, theft, rape, extortion and even murder [1]. However, when involved in a criminal act of theft, adults will undergo a standard legal process [2].

Challenges posed by minors entangled in legal issues, whether as victims or perpetrators, are universal predicaments. To address this, the international community, supported by United Nations (UN) agencies, has implemented a range of protective measures for children. An illustrative instance is the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice, a framework embraced globally to uphold children's rights and welfare.

Juvenile delinquency, also known as youth crime or minor offenses, encompasses unlawful actions committed by individuals below the legal age of majority. This threshold varies across jurisdictions, generally spanning from 7 to 18 years. In Indonesia, legislative frameworks addressing juvenile offenses include Law Number 35 of 2015 amending Law Number 23 of 2002 on Child Protection, and Law Number 11 of 2012 on the Juvenile Criminal Justice System.

As stipulated in Article 1 of Law Number 35 of 2015, a child is defined as an individual below 18 (eighteen) years, extending even to those in the prenatal stage. Law Number 11 of 2012 delineates a child in conflict with the law as someone aged 12 (twelve) to below 18 (eighteen), suspected of engaging in criminal activities. Moreover, this definition encompasses children involved in legal conflicts, those victimized by crimes, and those who serve as witnesses to criminal acts.

Derived from information sourced from the Ngawi District Prosecutor regarding minors embroiled in legal conflicts, a total of 25 instances of such cases were documented throughout 2022. Among these, 16 cases were attributed to theft, 5 to physical assaults, 2 to incidents involving sexual activity with minors, 1 to fraudulent activities, and the remaining case to the unauthorized distribution of narcotics (Ngawi District Prosecutor, 2022).

Based on this context, this article seeks to bridge existing gaps in understanding the intricate relationship between social justice, child criminality, and fractured familial units. It is widely recognized that juveniles

enmeshed in the criminal justice system frequently emerge from disadvantaged backgrounds, often marked by family breakdowns. This study aims to scrutinize the systemic factors culminating in this unfortunate nexus and to explore potential strategies for interrupting the cycle of both criminal behavior and family disintegration.

This study aspires to contribute to the academic understanding and policy formulation within the realm of child criminality and social justice. By unraveling the dynamics between social justice, child criminality, and family fragmentation, the journal intends to offer valuable insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers working towards a society that champions equity and safeguards the rights and welfare of children, especially those embroiled in the criminal justice system due to family disruptions.

2 Method

The research will adopt a qualitative approach, relying on in-depth interviews with 6 children entangled in the criminal justice system due to familial breakdown in Ngawi District Prosecutor. This qualitative approach aims to extract nuanced narratives, providing deeper insights into personal experiences and perceptions, as well as the intricate relationship between family disruption and criminal behavior. Moreover, these interviews are semi-structured, allowing for open-ended discussions that explore the participants' backgrounds, family experiences, reasons for engaging in criminal behavior, and their perspectives on social justice. The collected qualitative data underwent meticulous transcription and thematic analysis, utilizing coding to identify recurring themes and patterns. To ensure validity, the research incorporated triangulation by using multiple data sources, member checking through participant feedback, and peer review of the methodology.

3 Result and Discussion

Drawing from Jessor and Costa's research (1991) [3], this study underscores the influence of psychosocial factors in shaping children's behavior. These factors encompass personality, environment, and the adolescents' own conduct, with intricate interrelations. The interplay between personality and environmental elements culminates in the formation of child behavior [4]. In this context, these elements serve a dual role: as catalysts for risky behavior emergence and as guardians against the likelihood of engaging in such behavior. The family, as a critical environmental factor, significantly contributes to this process, largely stemming from parental roles.

Numerous studies consistently confirm that parental treatment significantly shapes the onset of risky behaviors in children [4,5]. Within the familial sphere, parents function as prominent role models. Consequently, parents unable to provide positive role modeling can inadvertently foster a propensity for children to transgress societal and legal norms [6].

Remarkably, the study sample comprised 25 adolescents enmeshed in criminal cases, most of whom hailed from families marked by disharmony. The term "less harmonious" encapsulates instances of broken homes, orphanhood, and family disruptions. While the family factor plays a significant role in influencing juvenile criminal behavior. The family serves as the primary and foundational environment for children, where they acquire norms, values, and behaviors that shape their character and actions later in life. Here are several ways in which family factors can impact juvenile criminal behavior:

- Loss of Role Models:

Children tend to emulate the behaviors of parents and other family members. Growing up in an environment where criminal or negative behaviors are tolerated or even normalized may increase the likelihood of adopting similar behaviors. In unstable family environments, adolescents might seek solace or distraction from their family problems through their peer group. If this peer group engages in delinquent behavior, the adolescent may become more susceptible to criminal activities as a way to fit in or cope with their personal issues.

"Given my parents' separation, I lack role models to imitate behavior. This led me to seek companionship with older friends who became my role models. Eventually, they influenced me into committing criminal acts."
- VPW (Perpetrator of Aggravated Theft/Snatching with an Adult).

Several studies have shown that children may imitate their parents' negative behavior [7,8]. In the eyes of the children, parents possess a higher status. Any behaviors of the parents, including their negative behaviors, can be seen as advantageous actions which demonstrate great social status or authority [8]. Thus, children emulate

their high-status role model's behavior because they perceive it to be desirable and because they want the same status as their parents [8].

- Family Instability:

Family instability, such as divorce, parental death, or financial problems, can create stress and uncertainty for children. Divorce or separation of parents can be a particularly challenging experience for children. The emotional turmoil and disruptions associated with these events can create stress, anxiety, and sadness. Adolescents might react to these feelings by seeking outlets for their frustration, sometimes through acts of rebellion or criminal behavior. On the other hand, the loss of a parent due to death can have profound emotional and psychological effects on children. Grief and mourning can manifest in various ways, including anger, depression, and acting out. Some children may turn to risky or criminal behavior as a means of coping with their overwhelming emotions.

"I resorted to theft due to the constant arguing at home. Daily exposure to my parents' arguments stressed me out. I found solace in spending time with friends in the neighborhood. Additionally, I needed money to play mobile legend (a mobile game) as it helped me alleviate stress, prompting me to steal." - AR (Perpetrator of Aggravated Theft/Snatching with an Adult).

"My parents rarely give me money, every time they are asked for money the answer is always 'none'. While I need money to hang out. So, I stole to have money. - AF (Perpetrator of Aggravated Theft/Snatching with an Adult).

In relation to family instability, there is a very consistent finding that broken homes, which are typically characterized as homes with a single parent, have consistently found to be related with greater rates of delinquency than intact homes [8]. The lack of a family as a cohesive unit may have a negative effect on childhood and how kids interact with others [9]. When the family fails, other socializing organizations will become increasingly important in a child's life. Reflecting on AR's case, AR finally relied on playing games with his friends to find comfort. To preserve the comfort provided by playing games, he would do anything to be able to always play the game, not to mention that the needed action is in the form of a criminal action.

- Lack of Supervision:

Insufficient supervision and attention from parents or caregivers can create opportunities for children to engage in risky behaviors, including criminal acts. Also, a family environment that doesn't prioritize education, ethics, and moral values can result in children lacking an understanding of the consequences of their actions. This can make them more vulnerable to engaging in criminal behavior. In the absence of parental supervision, children may spend more time with their peers, and this can increase exposure to peer pressure. Unsupervised gatherings with peers who are involved in delinquent behavior can lead to adolescents making choices they wouldn't make under parental supervision.

"My parents work, leaving me alone at home often. Capitalizing on the chance, I engaged in inappropriate behavior. I know it's wrong, and I was impulsive. But with my parents rarely at home, I had the chance to do it." - DSA (Perpetrators of Sexual intercourse with children)

"Since I dropped out of school, I didn't receive much guidance about what's right and wrong. At home, my parents didn't instill values because they were busy working. This led me down the path of criminal activities." - VPW (Perpetrator of Aggravated Theft/Snatching with an Adult).

Numerous findings indicate that inattentive parenting promotes a variety of delinquent and abnormal behaviors [7,10-13]. Children with negligent parents frequently lack adult supervision, for example, parents are leaving their children alone for extended periods of time or entrust them to others who may abuse them. Negligent parents frequently overlook the availability of illegal drugs, firearms, and/or pornography within reach of younger children [14] and tend to emotionally distance themselves from their kids while responding very minimally to their needs [15,16]. In the situation where children are suffering from a lack of parental guidance, children's delinquent behavior increases. Simons & Conger (2007) [17] and Hoeve et al. (2011) [18] finally noted that neglectful parents were at greatest risk of having children involved in delinquency.

- Parenting Disruption:

Inconsistent or overly authoritarian parenting styles can lead to conflicts between children and parents. Rigid disciplines, little to no flexibility, and a highly regimented atmosphere are the characteristics of overly authoritarian parenting styles. Parents with overly authoritarian parenting styles are more likely to be very controlling and less open to their kids' choices [19,20]. The emotional toll of inconsistent or authoritarian parenting can be significant. Feelings of inadequacy, anger, and low self-esteem may develop. In an attempt to cope with these emotions, some juveniles may turn to criminal activities as a way to regain a sense of control or self-worth. It can finally trigger feelings of being undervalued or lacking control, which may push them to seek alternative forms of expression, including criminal behavior.

"I feel my parents don't care about me; they seem preoccupied with their own matters. So, I engaged in theft to gain attention from both of them. Perhaps by doing this, my parents would pay more attention to my actions."
- AF (Perpetrator of Aggravated Theft/Snatching with an Adult).

Even if neglectful parents often result in juvenile delinquency when compared to other parenting styles, overly authoritarian parenting styles can also provide opportunities for children to engage in criminal behaviors. Children are more inclined to revolt by turning to delinquency as they push back against the restrictions on their independence [21]. Several studies have confirmed the positive relationship between the implementation of overly authoritarian parenting styles and juvenile delinquency [16,20,21].

- Peer Pressure:

Peer pressure is a social phenomenon where individuals, especially adolescents and teenagers, are influenced by their peers to conform to certain behaviors, attitudes, or actions. It's a powerful force that can significantly impact a young person's decisions and actions, often driven by a desire for social acceptance, fitting in, or gaining approval within their peer group. When families don't provide sufficient emotional and social support, children may seek recognition or acceptance from their peers. This can lead them to engage in groups that encourage criminal behavior.

"At first, I was challenged to join in. So, I followed my friends, participating in group assaults. To appear cool, I joined in, gaining recognition from my peers. If I didn't join, I'd be seen as weak and fearful. Thus, I went along with it." - RWP (perpetrators of bullying)

According to Steinberg and Monahan (2007) [22], peer pressure is the influence of peers on other people that shapes their ideas and behaviors. Peer groups play a significant role in shaping adolescent behavior after childhood. Children will inevitably spend more time with people outside of their immediate family as they get older [23]. Oxford and colleagues (2000) [24] found that peer affiliations with deviant behavior are strongly associated with delinquency.

In conclusion, the family factor plays a crucial role in influencing juvenile criminal behavior, with multifaceted implications. This study has underscored several key insights into how family dynamics and circumstances can contribute to or mitigate the likelihood of juveniles engaging in criminal activities.

The loss of positive role models within broken or dysfunctional families can expose juveniles to negative influences, pushing them towards adopting behaviors that contravene societal norms. Family instability arising from factors like divorce, parental discord, or financial stress can amplify emotional turmoil among adolescents, leading to a potential outlet in criminal activities.

Insufficient parental supervision and a lack of attention may create a void in a child's life, making them susceptible to risky behaviors, including criminal acts. Similarly, parenting styles marked by inconsistency or authoritarianism can breed resentment and a quest for alternate means of self-expression, sometimes manifesting as criminal behavior.

Furthermore, the absence of a strong educational and moral foundation within the family environment leaves adolescents ill-equipped to comprehend the consequences of their actions. This gap in understanding can render them more vulnerable to engaging in criminal pursuits.

Peer pressure, particularly when exacerbated by a lack of familial support, can compel adolescents to seek validation and acceptance from external sources, even if it means participating in criminal groups.

In light of these insights, it becomes evident that addressing juvenile criminal behavior necessitates a holistic understanding of familial dynamics. Interventions that promote positive parenting, provide emotional support, and foster open communication within families are crucial in deterring youth from entering the realm of criminal activities. Equipping families with resources to maintain stability and offer a nurturing environment can ultimately contribute to curbing the cycle of juvenile criminality and fostering healthier communities.

4 Conclusion

This proposed journal addresses a pivotal yet often overlooked subject situated at the confluence of social justice, child criminality, and familial disintegration. By delving into the intricate factors underpinning this relationship, this research aims to provide a significant contribution to the discourse on effective strategies for prevention, intervention, and support. The findings stand poised to shape policy formulation, emphasizing restorative justice and comprehensive aid for children navigating the interplay of criminality and familial discord.

Based on the presented results and discussions, a palpable link emerges between social justice, child criminality, and fractured familial units. The pivotal role of a family as the primary source of ethical learning and positive examples becomes challenged in the face of family breakdowns. However, it's important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which solely draws from case studies at the Ngawi District Prosecutor in 2022. Thus, it cannot be extrapolated as a universal benchmark. Recommendations for future research point towards exploring the correlation between family fragmentation and juvenile crime on a broader scale. Such endeavors could yield more comprehensive insights to inform policy and interventions effectively.

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