
Family and Delinquency

Resocializing the Young Offender

**Ludwig L. Geismar, Ph.D.
Katherine Wood, Ph.D.**

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All names and other identifying information have been fictionalized throughout the text. Resemblance to any persons, living or dead, is not intended.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The family's role in the genesis and control of juvenile delinquency is recognized widely. A good deal of popular literature, journal articles, clinical writing, social welfare case studies, and police reports provide evidence of the connection between disturbed family situations and the deviant behavior of young people emerging from these family backgrounds. It is therefore surprising that relatively little effort has been devoted to systematic study and related writing about the interrelationships between the two phenomena.

The most plausible explanation for this state of affairs is the discipline separation of the family and crime study areas. Families have been studied by anthropologists, sociologists, an occasional social and clinical psychologist, and, in a highly focused way, by home economists, lawyers, and general economists. Juvenile delinquency has been the concern of criminal justice, law, and sociology. The sociologists who have devoted most effort to research and

scholarship in both areas, family as well as delinquency, have pursued these interests within the framework of fairly separate subdisciplines: family sociology and the sociology of social deviance and control. This separation is reflected in the formulation of college curricula and in the structuring of professional activities at conferences and in the publishing field.

Divisions among academic disciplines and subdisciplines do not denote an abnormal situation. They are an essential part of the structure that allows for specialization with regard to research, knowledge building, and training in given fields of study. Inevitably, however, divisions also serve to inhibit the pursuit of knowledge, as James D. Watson (1968) intimated when he learned to jump discipline boundaries on his way to discovering the structure of the DNA.

Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1950) and F. Ivan Nye (1958 and 1973) furnish an example of how the frontiers between criminology and family sociology can be crossed successfully to produce substantial studies linking the fields theoretically. Family variables, mainly of a structural nature, have been utilized by many writers on the subject of juvenile deviant behavior. Family sociologists have recently taken stock of the relationship between family life and deviant behavior (Bahr, 1979).

The present volume is written from an applied perspective. Its goal is the cumulation of knowledge that may lead to more effective approaches for coping with juvenile delinquents. The apparent salience of family factors in the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders was brought home in a recent study involving one of the authors (Coull, Geismar, & Waff, 1982), in which family functioning and the family's relationship to the young probationer were very significantly related to recidivism. A review of the existing literature on the subject of family and delinquency revealed converging evidence of the role of family in the etiology

as well as the control of juvenile deviant behavior. A number of delinquency treatment programs scattered throughout the country have taken family life as a point of reference in intervention, but there is very little systematic research on outcomes. Treatment programs tend to be established without undue concern for theoretical issues or empirical evidence. In defense of this approach one might argue that social problems do not wait for the maturing of scholarship. However correct that assessment may be, the actual cost of trying to solve problems by applying inappropriate or ineffective methods may well outweigh the presumed benefits of timely intervention.

The authors of the present volume take the unequivocal position that services and policies should be the end result of a process that examines theoretical relevance and draws on empirical evidence with a direct bearing in the field. The end result is likely to be not a definitive prescription for treatment but an intervention model, the efficacy of which can be tested in terms of the criteria of outcome that are allied with the model.

The caution expressed relative to any proposed strategy of intervention must be extended to include a warning about the cure-all potential of family treatment. The field of juvenile delinquency has been subjected to close scrutiny with the aid of numerous theoretical and empirical investigations that collectively have demonstrated the multivariate etiology of the problem. Few people will be tempted to seek in the family either the single cause of juvenile deviant behavior or the only arena in which treatment can be successfully undertaken. The point of the present statement is rather that the family variable has been grossly neglected in the social and behavioral science literature and that the professional treatment field has given it unsystematic attention at best. It is the writers' goal, then, to contribute to a reversal of these trends and to stimulate researchers and practitioners toward endeavors that tap the

intricate connections between family and juvenile delinquency.

We shall seek to accomplish this objective by first reviewing the literature that juxtaposes juvenile delinquency and a variety of family variables. Our next concern is the relative significance of selected family factors in the etiology of delinquency. That discussion is linked to an attempt to identify family functioning patterns as they bear on efforts to resocialize juvenile offenders. This will be followed by a critical review of family treatment programs aimed at the control or prevention of deviant behavior among young people. Finally, the process of sorting out theoretical writings and empirical data collected by the authors leads to the beginning formulation of a model for intervention aimed at rehabilitating the young delinquent.

FAMILY VARIABLES DEALING WITH JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

The literature is replete with efforts, spanning decades, to determine the relationship between juvenile delinquency and family variables. Sociological studies have focused primarily on structural variables such as family size, broken home, social class, and employment status of parents (for instance, Cohen, 1955; Glueck & Glueck, 1950; Lees & Newsom, 1954; Monahan, 1957; Shaw & McKay, 1932; Slocum & Stone, 1963). Psychological and psychiatric research has been largely limited to intra- and interpersonal dynamics drawn from clinical experience (for example, Aichhorn, 1935; Bowlby, Ainsworth, Boston, & Rosenbluth, 1956; Eissler, 1949; Friedlander, 1947; Johnson, 1949). Numerous competing single variable theories have emerged (anomie, labeling, differential association, and so on) whose advocates have a predominantly sociological identification (Merton, 1949; Schur, 1971; Sutherland, 1939).

Efforts at integrating into an empirically defensible framework the identified sociological and psychological correlates that link the family and juvenile delinquency are

of recent origin (Bahr, 1979; Johnson, 1979). The failure to recognize different sources of delinquency and to articulate a comprehensive framework has undoubtedly restricted success in some studies (Rodman & Grams, 1967, pp. 203–205). Becker's (1963) assessment of 16 years ago, valid now as it was then, points to an additional problem:

There simply are not enough studies that provide us with facts about the lives of delinquents. Many studies correlate the incidence of delinquency with such factors as kind of neighborhood, kind of family life, or kind of personality. Very few tell us in detail what a juvenile delinquent does in his daily round of activity and what he thinks about himself, society, and his activities. (p.166)

There is, indeed, a paucity of research that considers simultaneously the intrafamilial mechanisms and the intrapersonal dynamics of the delinquent, or that adequately explores the cause-and-effect relationships between family function variables and delinquent behavior (Bahr, 1979; Gable & Brown, 1978; Langner, McCarthy, Gersten, Simcha-Fagan, & Eisenberg, 1979).

STRUCTURAL VARIABLES

Among family variables that have received the broadest attention over the longest period of time, *structure* occupies first place. Its ready availability undoubtedly accounts for its extensive use. The main structural variables that have been investigated in connection with juvenile delinquency are family size, birth order, broken homes, and working mothers.

Of these four, family size has been given least attention because of its close correlation with other variables, such

as poverty and certain types of ecological and ethnic characteristics, and also because family size has been fluctuating over time. The Gluecks (1950, pp. 93–95, 119) and Slocum and Stone (1963) identified family size as a factor in delinquent behavior, and so did Nye (1973, pp. 38, 56–58), even where mother's employment status was controlled. Reiss (1952) found that a greater proportion of delinquents from large families had poor ego structures, and Hirschi (1971, pp. 239–241) reported that total number of children in the family is correlated with juvenile delinquency. Others who in recent years have found family size to be associated with delinquency include Andrew (1976) and Biles (1971).

Birth order also has been examined relative to delinquent behavior, and available evidence points to intermediary children being overrepresented in the delinquent population (Biles, 1971; Glueck & Glueck, 1950, p. 120; Lees & Newsom, 1954; Nye, 1973, p. 37). Nye's own data showed that both the youngest siblings and the intermediaries are more likely to become delinquents. Haskell and Yablonsky's explanation (1974, p. 103) with regard to the in-between children is that they get squeezed out of the family into gangs because the parents tend to give more attention to the oldest and youngest offspring. Hirschi, however, reaches the more general conclusion that there is only an erratic relationship between delinquency and ordinal positions when family size is controlled (1971, p. 241).

In a society that has traditionally considered the two-parent home as the norm and the optimum environment for raising children, broken homes have been viewed as a potential source of trouble by lay persons and social scientists alike. Robison (1960) reports that the U.S. Children's Bureau published statistics for as early as 1928 showing that 29 percent of all boys and 48 percent of all girls brought to court were not living with both parents (p. 109). She cites even earlier Census Bureau statistics indicating that in 1923 almost one out of two children (46 percent)

in institutions came from broken homes. Studies done in California (Mathews, 1923) and Oklahoma (Sullenger, 1930) also demonstrated that about half of the delinquents in two studies originated in broken homes. Shulman (1949) and Smith (1955) also found broken homes related to juvenile delinquency but less crucially than family discord and deficient parent-child relationships (Shulman) or poverty, social disorganization, and differential treatment by law enforcement and social agencies (Smith). Slocum and Stone (1963), who surveyed students in several public high schools with the aid of a questionnaire, established a clear link between broken homes and "delinquency type behavior" (violation of certain conventions and laws).

One of the most widely cited among the early research studies on delinquency and broken homes is the work of Shaw and McKay (1931), who interviewed the families of 7,278 boys aged ten to seventeen in 29 Chicago schools and 1,675 boys who had appeared in Cook County Court. Rate of broken homes generally correlated with age of boy and also was associated with ethnicity, but it showed no significant relationship to juvenile delinquency. Extensive data analysis led the researchers to conclude that broken homes as such are not as important a factor in delinquency causation as the cumulative effect of family discord.

Monahan (1957), who compared 44,448 appearances of 36,245 boys and girls in the Philadelphia Municipal Court, found that there was a greater proportion of repeat appearances in every type of broken home than in unbroken homes. McCord, McCord and Zola (1959, p. 83) and Nye (1973, p. 47), using multivariate analyses, report no difference in delinquent behavior between those whose homes were broken before age five and those whose homes were broken later. On the other hand, Nye's (1973) research relying on student questionnaires did find that children of broken homes are overrepresented in state institutions and that they commit slightly more delinquent