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## **An Analysis of Risk Factors for Juvenile Delinquency: Case Study the Republic of North Macedonia**

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### **Abstract**

Many countries in Europe and around the world are currently facing the problem of juvenile delinquency. In order to better understand the juvenile delinquency, as well as to explore main reasons and risk factors that contribute to the occurrence of delinquent and criminal behavior among juveniles, this paper is focused on an analysis of the data contained in the files of juveniles serving prison sentences in the Republic of North Macedonia. Having in mind that the research has been conducted in the Juvenile Prison in Ohrid and the fact that this prison is only for male juveniles, in the research, there is no data analysis for female juvenile delinquents. The results from this study show that the juvenile delinquency is a very complex phenomenon that occurs due to different factors and for the prevention and suppression of which, a coordinated and serious social action is needed. This analysis showed that juveniles serving prison sentences have not developed adequate social skills to deal with the problems and challenges they face in everyday life. Therefore, they manifest various forms of socially unacceptable behaviors, which is in conflict with existing moral and legal norms. The lack of social skills is one of the indicators which shows that the family, but also society, have misperceived the phenomenon and have negatively contributed in the process of building personalities of these young people with acceptable moral values and behaviors. To this end, the family and society have failed to exert adequate educational influence on these juveniles.

**Keywords:** juveniles; risk factors; juvenile delinquency; delinquent; criminal behavior.

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## **1 Introduction**

Juvenile delinquency is a term used to explain how the juvenile is in conflict with the society, i.e. its norms, values and laws. This type of behavior, in a way, represents a "youth rebellion against the adult world" and includes children who are in conflict with the law and juvenile offenders.

Broadly defining, juvenile delinquency refers to behaviors that violate the legal and moral norms in a certain society and which provoke a social reaction aimed at protecting social goods and values, while in a narrower sense it means violating only the legal norms. Juvenile delinquency represents a very sensitive issues, given its negative consequences for victims, society, and juvenile offenders themselves [1]. According to Villanueva [2], juvenile delinquency refers to an anti-social act or a child/minor/youth's behavior which deviates from the normal pattern of rules and regulations, custom and culture which the society does not accept.

Juvenile delinquency refers to the anti-social act or behavior that is against the norm, culture, customs and regulations of the society and is committed by young people [3]. Juvenile delinquency also refers to illegal acts committed by minors. Delinquent behavior is a violation of the laws established within the juridical system.

Juvenile delinquency, as an extremely complex phenomenon, should be treated in a different way compared to criminal behaviors of adults. Current systems of criminal justice and rehabilitation are usually focused on punishing the offenders, while contributing very little for the compensation of the damage as a result of the crime. Also, these systems often fail to identify the reasons and background that led the offender to commit the specific act.

In the context of juvenile delinquency, relevantly significant is the concept of “Justice for children”. This concept refers to children who have come into conflict with the law (i.e., children who have been identified, charged or recognized as violators of criminal law), children who have found themselves in the role of victims or witnesses of crime, as well as children at risk of being involved in the criminal justice system (whether because of their social status or because they committed an offense that would be considered as a crime if they were legally mature). It can be said that this is a comprehensive concept, aimed at the best interests of all children who have come into contact with the legal and judicial systems. It covers various aspects, such as prevention, diversion, rehabilitation, assistance and support services, and protection measures. The concept of justice for children differs from the term "juvenile justice" because it covers not only children who are in conflict with the law, but all children who are in contact with the law, such as child victims and child witnesses.

The treatment, educational and alternative measures, as well as penalties concerning children at risk and juvenile offenders in the Republic North Macedonia are regulated under the Law on Justice for Children [4]. According to this Law, a child over 16 years of age can be punished only if it would not be justified to impose an educational

measure. Under the conditions determined by this law, the following punishments may be imposed on a juveniles over 16 years of age (Article 50 of the Law on Justice for Children)[4]:

- prison for children;
- financial penalty;
- ban on driving a motor vehicle of a certain type or category; and
- expulsion of a foreigner from the country.

Prison for children can be imposed only as a main punishment. Prison for children may be imposed on a child criminally responsible over the age of 16 who has committed an act provided by law as a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment of five years or a more severe sentence, if the offense was committed under particularly aggravating circumstances and in high degree of criminal responsibility of the perpetrator and it would not be justified to impose an educational measure. Prison for children cannot be shorter than one or longer than ten years (Article 51 of the Law on Justice for Children) [4].

On the other hand, Juvenile delinquency refers to the existence of numerous negative social circumstances in which children grow up and requires unambiguous and complex intervention in order to eradicate the factors that contribute to such behavior, as well as correction of the child's behavior. On one hand, Juvenile delinquency is characterized by a constant increase in the number of crimes and on the other hand as a decrease in the age of the juvenile offenders. In addition, there is evidence showing the seriousness of the crimes and increasing levels of it, the cases of serious crimes committed by juveniles are becoming more and more present. The features depicted regarding modern juvenile crime stress out the emerging need of a systematic multidisciplinary approach on several levels, in order to successfully and appropriately cope with this social negative phenomenon.

## **2. Research Questions and Methods**

This paper poses a main research question: What are some of key individual, family, school and peer-group factors contributing to the increasing juvenile delinquency in Republic of North Macedonia? To answer this question, firstly, literature review regarding juvenile delinquency has been undertaken in order to properly define the key elements, which theoretically describe the phenomenon. Additionally, an analysis of the domestic regulations has been used, in order to offer a better understanding of the normative and institutional framework that refer to juvenile delinquency. Finally, this paper concentrates in the analysis of the data contained in the personal files of juveniles serving prison sentences. For that purpose, on June 3, 2019, a visit was made to the penitentiary-correctional institution Juvenile Prison - Ohrid. During the visit, an interview was conducted with the psychologist from the resocialization department and a detailed analysis of the data contained in the individual files of juveniles was conducted.

The penitentiary institution Juvenile Prison – Ohrid is for male juvenile offenders. At the study conduction period, a total of ten (10) juveniles were serving prison sentences (7 juveniles are 17 years old and 3 juveniles are 16 years old). Regarding the nationality, most of the juveniles serving prison sentence are of Albanian

nationality (6 juveniles), but there are also 3 juveniles of Roma and 1 juvenile of Turkish nationality.

The data about the type of crime for which the juvenile is serving a prison sentence shows that:

- 3 juveniles committed murder;
- 3 juveniles committed robbery;
- 2 juveniles committed aggravated theft;
- 1 juvenile committed smuggling of migrants; and
- 1 juvenile committed serious acts against the safety of people and property in traffic.

### **3. Risk and Protective Factors**

Risk factors refer to those factors which increase the likelihood of delinquent behavior, while protective factors refer to those conditions and influences which reduce this probability, i.e. reduce the potential harmful effect of risk factors. Protective factors strengthen the individual capacities and increase the overall individual's resilience. No isolated risk factors can lead to juvenile delinquency. Risk factors do not function in isolation and usually have cumulative and interactive effect. The more risk factors are present in young people's lives, the more likely they are to exhibit delinquent behavior. In certain situations, the existence of one risk factor influences the development and appearance of another risk factor(s). Longitudinal and cross-sectional research studies have helped to understand criminal risk factors and how they vary throughout life [5]. Risk factors are individual, social and environmental elements whose presence increases the probability of criminal behavior [6,7,8,9].

#### **3.1. Individual Factors**

One of the reasons for criminal behaviour are the individual factors, the analysis of the data show (Table 1) that all of the juveniles serving prison sentences in Republic of North Macedonia have not developed adequate social skills and skills for reacting in stressful situations. Also, they are impulsive, with lack of self-control and lack of adequate system of values.

**Table 1:** Individual Risk Factors among Juveniles Serving Prison Sentence in Republic North Macedoni.

	<b>Individual risk factors</b>
<b>1.</b>	Lack of social skills
<b>2.</b>	Lack of skills for reacting in stressful situations
<b>3.</b>	Impulsiveness
<b>4.</b>	Lack of self-control
<b>5.</b>	Lack of adequate system of values

Individual factors refer to several aspects of the juvenile's personality and these factors are related and in some situations conditioned by other factors. Impulsiveness and poor social skills are in the group of the individual factors.

The analysis of the juvenile's history shows that for half of the juveniles serving prison sentences, proceedings (processes) are being conducted for other criminal acts as well. This shows that they have committed several crimes before starting to serve current prison sentence. Also, from the analysis of the data it can be seen that half of the juveniles serving prison sentences have previously been punished by the court with other lenient measures.

Individual risk factors may include personal propensities, habits, cognitions, attitudes and emotions [10]. Some individual variables have been especially associated with juvenile delinquency, including high impulsivity or lack of self-control [11,12], anti-social beliefs [13], and addiction to alcohol and other toxic substances [14,15,16,17].

A variety of individual and contextual factors have been shown to be related to delinquent behaviors in adolescence. With regard to individual variables, personality traits such as sensation seeking and impulsivity (e.g., [18,19,20]) have been found to be robust predictors of antisocial and criminal behavior [21].

Substance abuse in a home or by the child is a very common cause for delinquency. Children who are exposed to substance abuse often do not have the necessities they need to thrive and are forced to find these necessities in other ways. Others, who become dependent on a substance may also need to commit crimes to sustain their habit.

Opposite to risk factors, the individual-level protective factors focus on the personal characteristics that affect risk and engagement in delinquency, violence, and other problem behaviors. Sociability, positive moods, low irritability, low impulsivity, and child IQ are examples of individual-level protective factors. Child IQ is one of most widely researched and validated protective factors. Children with high intelligence levels are able to effectively use information-processing and problem-solving skills, which can help them to contend with the challenges they may encounter [22].

### 3.2. Family Factors

The analysis of the family situation shows that the most of the juveniles are from families characterized by dysfunctional relationships, with lack of emotional support among family members and presence of poor parenting skills. All of these families have one or more family members with criminal history (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Family Risk Factors among Juveniles Serving Prison Sentence in Republic North Macedonia.

	<b>Family risk factors</b>
1.	Dysfunctional relationships
2.	Lack of emotional support among family members
3.	Poor parenting skills
4.	Family members with criminal history
5.	Poor housing conditions
6.	Financial problems

Moreover, the analysis of the family conditions, shows that 6 out of 10 juveniles live in poor housing conditions and their families are facing serious financial problems. The adult family members are unemployed and lack regular income (Table 2).

The role of family is considered a key factor in the process of growth and child development. The family environment can be a protective factor i.e. to influence, support and orient the child to successfully deal with crises in different developmental stages, or it can be a risk factor, i.e., to have a negative impact by generating various problems. Current literature stresses out the need and indisputable fact that in order to successfully deal with the problem of juvenile delinquency, more attention should be focused toward the family and family relationships. The later factors should be taken into account and analyzed in the process of detecting the reasons. They have to be considered not only for detection of risk factors, but also when looking for better and more appropriate solutions.

The family is the environment where most of the child development processes happen. It is the primary resource of socialization and plays a crucial role in the personality formation, in particular during the early childhood. The foundations of moral, intellectual, labour, aesthetic and physical education and development are laid within the family.

In addition, the family is the window through which the child enters into the world of adults. On behalf of the socialization processes through the family children come into contact with the rest of the society, adopting or rejecting its values, norms and influences. The family performs a kind of transmission, i.e. interconnection between the family environment and the outside society and vice versa. The family serves as the introduction scene for embracing the positive values from the society. What the child's attitude and behavior will be towards the wider environment, largely depends on the attitude of his family and the way it functions in the narrower and wider social environment.

Families characterized by warm interpersonal relationships and effective parenting are less likely to engage in socially inappropriate behavior and juvenile delinquency. On the other hand, in families where there is a high degree of marital and family conflicts, inappropriate parenting and violence, children are much more likely to manifest negative behavior or become perpetrators of crimes. The positive emotional climate in the family affects the appearance of emotional stability and high self-esteem in the juvenile, in contrast, the absence of a pleasant family atmosphere leads to poor emotional adjustment and the appearance of emotional instability.

Families that have not exerted a positive influence and families in which children have not acquired the basics of moral education, have not adopted positive value systems and habits, create a favorable ground for the development of socially maladapted behavior from the simplest to the most serious manifestations. Nevertheless, the development of children also depends on the adaptation of the family to society, when the family functions in conform to the society, the juvenile develops into a person who does not enter into conflicts with society and its norms.

While explaining the influence of the family, it should be emphasized that children do not form their personality

only through the conscious action of the parents, but also through the perception of their actions and the daily family life, while accepting and rejecting many of these influences. The actions of the parents, i.e. their behavior has a much greater impact, compared to their words and advices. The best option is to have a balance between advices and the way parents behave by practicing positive role models and promoting positive values in their children.

Children need encouragement, support and protection from their parents. In this context, without proper information about what is happening to children, parents are not able to give appropriate advice and guidance to their children. Thus, children in a number of situations are deprived of adequate support and information that they need in order to successfully and properly cope with the challenges. However, in performing this function, parents must be very careful not to put their children under pressure, instead they should show genuine interest in their children and motivate them to talk openly and honestly with each other.

Families are a living organism in which a number of processes take place, and in its growth and development the family faces various challenges. Many families have built their own mechanisms and invest energy to deal with the challenges, but some families need help and support. Given the importance of the family in the occurrence of juvenile delinquency, it is necessary to provide mechanisms to support families in properly dealing with the challenges they face. The family and the relationships in it should be seriously taken into account when creating both preventive and intervention programs and activities aimed at dealing with the problem of juvenile delinquency.

The family is a system in which the members are interconnected and influence each other, the change in one member can cause certain changes in another member or in the whole family system. This is especially evident in situations of crisis or situations that can be described by social risk situations. When we refer to social risks, we have in mind a number of negative situations to which an individual, family or group may be exposed.

The family plays a crucial role either in promoting, reducing, or contextualizing delinquency. An important family connection with delinquency is the nature of the relationships in a family between parent and child as well as among all members of the family. The nature of relationships among family members is consistently related to delinquency, regardless of how delinquency is measured [23].

The poor socio-economic status, indifferent attitude of parents, lack of attention, and many other reasons can lead to various types of psychological issues in children and adolescents, but also lead to antisocial behaviour. The effect of the family stressors can have a significant impact on children's behavior. The family is the primary unit in which children learn the values and attitudes that guide their actions throughout their lives. Family disruption or change can have a long-lasting impact on children. In contrast, effective parenting can help neutralize the effect of both individual (e.g., emotional problems) and social (e.g., delinquent peers) forces, which promote delinquent behaviors [24].

Children raised by parents who lack proper parenting skills are more at risk than those whose parents are supportive and effectively control their children in a noncoercive fashion [25]. The quality of parenting becomes

more acute when kids lack other forms of social support [26].

The importance of the family in understanding delinquent behavior can be seen in the fact that most theories of delinquency rely heavily on the parent–child relationship and parenting practices to explain delinquency [27]. Referring to theories regarding crime and delinquency, once self-control has not been successfully formed in the childhood, it later affects adolescents in the choices they make: peer relations, school conduct and achievement, drug and alcohol use, and delinquent activities.

### **3.3. School Factors**

Early school leaving and non-involvement in the educational process are important factors that can have a negative impact on the juveniles and lead to criminal behavior. The data of the educational status of juveniles shows that, although in the Republic of North Macedonia the primary and secondary education is compulsory, half of the juveniles serving prison at the time of the crime were not involved in the educational process. The other half of the juveniles are part of the educational system, but they have poor academic results and show no interest in learning activities.

School factors play an important role in the understanding of delinquency, from a variety of perspectives [23]. The school should plan its activities in accordance with the abilities of the students and improve their personality. The school should not be a risk factor by placing excessive tasks and responsibilities for the students, which are not in accordance with the level of their intellectual and emotional development. On the contrary, it should support and encourage their growth and development. The school should encourage curiosity, creativity, desire and the search for new knowledge, in accordance with their interests and affinities. The school should not create problems for its students, but support them to solve existing problems.

Given that students face a number of personal, family and social challenges, the school (along with the family) should act as a kind of catalyst that will filter out all the harmful influences, and at the same time enhance the effect of positive factors. The activities in the school must be in accordance with the development needs and capacities of the students, while stimulating their growth and development, but at the same time not to exert pressure by setting excessive demands and expectations. The school should function according to certain principles and rules of behavior that will establish order and discipline, but at the same time will create an atmosphere in which students' creativity will be encouraged. It is especially important that students feel comfortable and safe at school.

In terms of juvenile delinquency, the school is an environment in which it can be noticed if a certain problem arises among juveniles. The school has the opportunity for timely and appropriate detection of risks and problems faced by students. But do schools do that? Unfortunately, the answer to this question is that some schools, for various reasons, fail to adequately respond to this task. This deprives students of timely and appropriate help and support, which increases the possibility of various social risks, including delinquent behavior. Moreover, it seems that some of the schools are mostly or completely focused on the educational function, while neglecting and not fulfilling the following goals: development of the creativity and intellectual



capacities of students, as well as building moral principles and ethical values.

### **3.4. Peer Group**

The analysis shows that the peer group has a relevant role in the lives of juveniles serving prison sentences, but most of their peers are with delinquent behaviour and criminal history. Additionally, the analysis shows that together with peers, these juveniles, spent most of the time in activities like: smoking, drinking alcohol, committing small criminal acts, etc.

The peer groups play important role in shaping many important decisions and actions taken by children and adolescents. The neurobiology researches suggest that brain structure responsible for cognitive control and self-regulation do not fully develop until young adulthood, making youths particularly susceptible to harmful peer influence.

There is a strong association between the behaviour of juvenile delinquents and their peers. Adolescents having delinquent friends are more at risk of developing problematic behavior, than the ones who do not have delinquent friends, also, many juvenile offenders commit their crimes together with their peers.[28,29]. The peer group effects among youths are strong because many youths spend a lot of their time with their peers.

Associating with peers who are perpetrators of crime or have negative behavior, as well as the use of alcohol and/or drugs are serious risk factors that are often directly related to delinquent behavior. Peer pressure is the most significant predictor of delinquent behavior in early adolescence while family environment has a protective effect. If the juvenile is related to a group of peers practicing positive norms and values, it is likely that he will accept them, and vice versa if the group practices negative values there is a risk of accepting them too.

A peer group can encourage antisocial behavior among its members by promoting deviant norms and values according to which deviant behavior is not simply perceived as normal, but also a desirable behavior, and in many cases it is compulsory, if you like to become part of the group and progress in its structure. These negative values lead to frequent occurrence of aggression within and outside the group, severe conflicts, etc.

The unorganized free time that some young people have in abundance, results in boredom which they look for a way to overcome it. The inability to use their free time properly, e.g. with games, entertainment, sports, etc., some young people end up filling their free time with activities that in one way or another are negative and sanctioned by society.

Spending free time in environments where alcohol, drugs and other psychotropic substances are consumed or criminal behavior is practiced, seems attractive to young people, especially in the turbulent period of adolescence. In this kind of environment, young people will much more easily engage in criminal behavior.

## **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

The main aim of this study was to identify the key individual, family, school and peer-group factors influencing

criminal behaviors among juveniles serving prison sentence in Republic of North Macedonia. The results from this study showed that the criminal behavior of the juveniles is affected by a combination of various risk factors. From the analysis of the data can be concluded that most of these juveniles are illiterate and they have abandoned school. These juveniles have committed several crimes and are being prosecuted for other crimes. They have not developed adequate social skills and skills for reacting in stressful situations, they are impulsive, with lack of self-control and without appropriate system of values. Moreover, a worrying fact is that these juveniles were previously imposed to educational and institutional measures, but seems like that these measures did not achieve the expected corrective effect. An additional worrying fact is that most of them originate from dysfunctional families. The analysis of the family situation shows that these juveniles are from families with low socio-cultural status, families in which there are dysfunctional relations between family members and families with poor material and housing conditions.

The significant correlation between low self-control and antisocial behavior is fully consistent with the results of multiple previous studies [11,12]. The results show a significant association between delinquency, and personal, social, and opportunity risk factors [30].

The data from previous studies show that a lack of social skills has been associated with various behavioral and developmental problems in children and adolescents, including delinquency [31]. Specifically, social skill deficits have been related to a higher risk for both offending and criminal offense recidivism [32,33]. Some individual factors have been especially associated with juvenile delinquency, including high impulsivity or lack of self-control [11,12], anti-social beliefs [13], and addiction to alcohol and other toxic substances [14,16].

Family role is important in determining the well-being of the adolescents. The methods that parents used to nurture and educate their children predict their behaviour. This perspective includes the involvement of parents in their children's life, emotional affection, parenting style and supervision of their children [34]. The family plays important role in providing security of its members and development of the values system, cognitive, emotional, and social skills [35].

The family, as learning, and socialization environment, is a key protective factor in the development of children and adolescents. When dysfunctional, it is also regarded as a risk factor for juvenile delinquency. A wide body of criminological research has documented a connection between family structure and delinquency [36].

Adolescents are vulnerable to problematic behaviour if there is something wrong with their family. It is related to dysfunctional family settings which is characterised by conflict and inadequate parental control [37]. Adverse childhood experiences can affect the development of a child in many ways, leading to highly maladaptive behaviors, such as serious, violent, and chronic (SVC) delinquency [38].

The longitudinal Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (ESYTC) identifies seven characteristics of parental conduct and family functioning associated with delinquency in 15 year-olds. The most important are parental supervision, the young person's willingness to communicate with the parents, parent consistency, parent-child conflict and excessive punishment. The results of the study showed that ineffective parenting at age

13 is an important predictor of delinquency at age 15 [39].

Social risk factors combine all possible criminal influences arising from the family, school, friends, and the social environment, especially the affective and educational deficiencies in the family and school [40,41,42]. It is obvious that every effort must be made to strengthen the family, for combating delinquency and creating a more stable environment for children to learn and grow.

Also, among other factors, the school has significant influence on juvenile development, especially in development of positive values, behaviors, social skills, self-control, and self-confidence [43]. Inclusion in educational process and participation in positive school environment decrease involvement in criminal activities [44].

In the process of growth and development, it is especially important to build an appropriate system of values and patterns of behavior among juveniles. Positive or prosocial behaviors include understanding others, empathy, helping, sharing, cooperation, etc., while antisocial behaviors refer to different forms of destructive and aggressive behavior.

It is extremely important for children to develop appropriate self-control mechanisms, especially in highly stressful situations. In situations that are accompanied by a high degree of negative emotional charge, juveniles with a developed self-control mechanism usually use appropriate ways of reacting, unlike juveniles who do not have personal capacity for self-control and they use aggressive, destructive or self-destructive ways.

Improper handling of negative emotions and stress show a high degree of correlation with the occurrence of juvenile delinquency. Therefore, all relevant entities that have an impact on the development of children, need to work towards the development of personal capacities and resources of juveniles, especially supporting young people to develop mechanisms for distinguishing between positive and socially acceptable behaviors and those unacceptable and forbidden ones. Furthermore, it is also necessary to enable young people to develop personal skills that will help them react appropriately in situations when they might get drowned from different entities (family members, peers, authorities, etc.) toward exercising certain negative forms of behavior. This means the ability to distinguish between what is morally and legally permissible from what is forbidden and sanctioned, but also to react in a way that does not bring the juvenile into conflict with those who evaluate him with regards to the manifested behavior. This is especially important given the fact that in certain situations juveniles engage in certain behaviors that they know are wrong but are afraid of condemnation, isolation or sanction by the persons who lead them to these actions.

All children have different individual potential, but also family and social resources that can be used to prevent or successfully deal with juvenile delinquency. Therefore, adults must focus their efforts on identifying, developing and exploiting all the potentials that young people have.

However, although this study provides useful information and explanations for the causes of juvenile delinquency, it still has some limitations that must be considered in interpretation of the results. One of primary limitations refers to the fact that this study concentrates only on juveniles serving prison sentences. Another

important methodological limitation may refer to the size of the sample ( $n = 10$ ) and gender data, given that in the penitentiary institution Juvenile Prison - Ohrid, at the time of this study only 10 juveniles were serving prison sentences and all of them were male, which means that this study does not encompass data referring to female juvenile offenders. Additionally, another limitation is the amount of information contained in the individual files of juveniles, although they contain data that helped us understand some of the reasons for the occurrence of delinquent behavior, still we should be careful when drawing conclusions.

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