



Individual and relationship factors associated with delinquency among throwaway adolescents

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 November 2010
Received in revised form 1 February 2011
Accepted 2 February 2011
Available online 8 March 2011

Keywords:

Throwaway
Delinquency
Runaway
At-risk youth
Adolescent

ABSTRACT

An estimated 2.18 million juveniles were arrested in 2007 for delinquent acts in the United States. Many studies have investigated delinquency in relation to specific groups, such as runaway adolescents. However, little is known concerning factors associated with delinquency among throwaway youth. Throwaway youth are those who have been forced to leave parental homes without alternative care arranged or those who are prevented from returning home. Informed by general strain theory that suggests individuals choose delinquency as a result of various levels of strain, it is hypothesized that individual and relationship strains would increase levels of delinquency among throwaway youth. Youth recruited for participation in the study were admitted to a county detention center due to family court mandate as a result of parents voluntarily relinquishing guardianship rights. One-hundred and seventy adolescents completed questionnaires that included several standardized self-report measures. The results of this study indicate that throwaway youth have higher levels of delinquency than the general population and appear to have both individual and relational strains that impact delinquency. Factors related to individual characteristics and relationships with peers and family may suggest future directions for practice, policy, and research of this particularly vulnerable population of delinquent, throwaway youth.

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1. Introduction

Juvenile delinquency is a broad term identifying behaviors that range from engaging in status offenses (e.g. running away, curfew violations, school truancy, and drinking alcohol) to criminal and violent acts (e.g. use/distribution of illegal substances, breaking and entering, burglary, and assault). An estimated 2.18 million juveniles were arrested for delinquent acts in the United States during 2007 (Puzzanchera, 2009). Juvenile offenders experience a variety of challenges, such as substance abuse (Tripodi & Springer, 2007), mental health and/or learning disabilities (Mann & Reynolds, 2006), family violence, victimization (Dembo, Schmeidler, & Childs, 2007), and gang involvement (Gatti, Tremblay, Vitaro, & McDuff, 2005). While much is known about factors associated with delinquency, limited research has been conducted concerning delinquency among specific types of high-risk adolescents. One such group includes those identified as “throwaway” youth.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) defines throwaway youth as adolescents who: 1) have

been prevented from returning home or have been asked/told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, 2) have no adequate alternative care arranged for them, and 3) stay away from home at least overnight (NISMART-2, 2002). Many throwaway youth reside in single-parent homes where high levels of conflict, abuse, and neglect are present (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1990). These youth are often forced out of their homes after a physically violent episode (Cheng & Myers, 2005; Finley, 2007; Metchell, 2003). Although one in five youth labeled as runaways are in fact throwaway adolescents (Finkelhor et al., 1990; NISMART-2, 2002), limited research offers insight in examining delinquent behaviors among this unique group of youth. Individual characteristics and relationship issues with peers and family may suggest future directions for practice and research of this particularly vulnerable population. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study is to identify specific individual and relationship factors associated with delinquency among a group of throwaway youth.

2. Background literature review

2.1. General strain theory

The basic premise of general strain theory (GST) asserts that strain generates emotional distress that may create the motivation to engage in criminal behaviors as a means of coping or relieving stress.

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Strains often result in negative affect which pressures the individual to take corrective, even aberrant, action to reduce negative emotions. According to Agnew (1992, 2006), the greater the distress, the more likely the individual will engage in criminal acts. Delinquency is often the product of attempts to take action to correct or minimize adverse situations. Agnew (2006) argues that crime may be a mechanism used to reduce a particular strain (e.g., stealing food to meet a basic need), seek revenge (e.g., assaulting someone for revenge), or to reduce negative emotions (e.g., using drugs or alcohol). However, strain does not necessarily lead directly to criminal behaviors as numerous key intervening mechanisms may play a role in the relationship between strain and crime. These intervening variables range from individual characteristics and emotions to factors concerning relationships with others that energizes the individual or lowers inhibitions (Agnew, 1992). Drawing upon general strain theory, this study seeks to identify specific individual and relationship strains that may be associated with delinquency among an especially vulnerable group of adolescents.

2.2. Individual strains

Various individual factors or strains have been associated with delinquency, including premature disengagement from family, psychological challenges, and poor academic performance (Kim, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Huang, 2009; Thompson, Maccio, Desselle, & Zittel-Palamar, 2007; Xiaojin, Thrane, Whitbeck, Johnson, & Hoyt, 2007). General strain theory suggests that adolescents often cope with these types of strains through engaging in illicit strategies (Agnew, 2006), such as substance use. Substance use is one of the most widely cited problems related to both juvenile delinquency (Rivoux, Springer, Bohman, Wagner, & Gil, 2006; Williams, Ayers, Abbott, Hawkins, & Catalano, 1999) and early departure from home (Thompson, 2004). Adolescents in the juvenile justice system are three times more likely to use substances than the general youth population (Office of Applied Studies, 2003), similar to rates among those who run away or are forced out of their homes (Thompson, Barczyk, Gomez, Dreyer, & Popham, 2010).

Another prominent strain associated with juvenile delinquency is the presence of mental health conditions. Among juvenile offenders, it is estimated that approximately 52–73% have a diagnosable mental illness (Abrantes, Hoffman, & Anton, 2005; Garland et al., 2001); with nearly two-thirds of boys and three-quarters of girls in juvenile detention having at least one psychiatric disorder (Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002). For youth who have been forced to leave their homes, these rates continue to rise as the length of time away from the family increases (Kennedy, 1991). Depressive symptoms are frequently cited among high-risk adolescents and are suggested as a condition mediating the relationship between strain and delinquency (Agnew, 1992, 2006). Depressive symptoms, inadequate skills to manage distress, increased potential for self-harm and suicidal ideation are more common among runaways than their non-runaway peers (Thompson, Bender, & Kim, 2011).

Youth who have been forced from their homes often feel socially isolated and disconnected from peers who remain engaged in traditional and prosocial institutions, such as school (Dove, 2001). Poor attitudes and performance concerning education are highly associated with delinquent behavior (Shader, 2004) and are considered to be strains likely to lead youth to engage in criminal behaviors (Agnew, 2006). Christle, Jolivet, and Nelson (2005) found that low academic achievement, high suspension and dropout rates were significantly associated with higher levels of juvenile delinquency. Additionally, youth who have lower IQ, poor vocabulary or verbal reasoning skills, and limited educational achievement are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors (Mann & Reynolds, 2006).

2.3. Relationship strains

Relationship factors or strains, such as compromised peer and familial interactions, are known to have a substantial influence on adolescent behavior (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). It is clear that exposure to peers who engage in delinquent and antisocial behaviors can condition the adolescent to deal with his/her perceived strain by imitating similar deviant behaviors (e.g. Agnew, 1992; Hawkins et al., 1992; Matsueda & Anderson, 1998). Youth involved in a gang or associate with peers who use substances and engage in other high-risk behaviors increases the likelihood of delinquency (Shader, 2004). For example, one study found that adolescents involved in a gang were four times more likely to engage in various delinquent behaviors, four times more likely to sell drugs, and twice as likely to use drugs as were peers not involved in gang activity (Gatti et al., 2005).

Family relationships also expose adolescents to experiences that either promote or negate their ability to positively cope with stress. In general, family dysfunction can leave young people without the guidance needed during a critical time in their life and parental characteristics play a substantial role in the development of youths' delinquent behaviors and ultimately their throwaway status (Dove, 2001). Poor family functioning has been linked to a host of youth behavior problems. Parents are often responsible for forcing their child out of the home (Dove, 2001) and conflict between family members, poor parenting, and parental behaviors such as criminal activity, psychological disorders, and substance use increase adolescents' delinquent behaviors (Shader, 2004). General strain theorists assert that poor parenting, familial conflict, and child abuse and neglect are strains most likely to cause delinquency and crime (Agnew, 2006; Agnew & White, 1992).

Physical, sexual, and psychological abuse have been identified as strains and antecedents to youth leaving home prematurely and engaging in more delinquent acts (Kim et al., 2009). Prevalence rates for physical or sexual abuse are approximately 45% among detained youth (Dembo et al., 2007) and up to 75% among runaway youth (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997). Adolescents who experience abuse within the family are nearly four times more likely to become a persistent and serious juvenile offender than are peers who have not been abused (Stouthamer-Loeber, Wei, Homish, & Loeber, 2002). As throwaway youth have more conflict and violence in their family homes than other runaway youth (Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998), their risk for engaging in delinquent acts may be heightened.

The complexity and variation in strains leading to delinquency creates immense difficulties for parents, service providers, and researchers who aim to understand adolescent delinquency. Due to the amount of variation in offenses and behaviors associated with juvenile delinquency, youth service professionals require extensive understanding of the factors associated with delinquency, especially for unique populations such as throwaway youth. To address the limited knowledge in this area, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are the levels of delinquency among throwaway youth?
2. What individual and relationship factors are associated with delinquency among throwaway youth?
3. To what extent are individual and relationship factors associated with greater delinquency among throwaway youth?

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and procedures

Consecutive entrants to a juvenile detention center in a mid-sized urban city in Western New York were recruited for participation in the study. Detention centers provide temporary residential care for

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