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Juvenile delinquency in a developing country: A province example in Turkey

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine offence behavior, socio-demographic characteristics and some features of the juvenile offenders' families in a selected region, and compare with developed countries.

A total of 165 juvenile offenders were included. Information was obtained by individually interviewing all children.

Of a total of 165 juveniles, 162 (98%) were boys. The most frequently committed crimes were theft (52%) and wounding (20%). Of these juveniles, 33% were 14 years old when they committed offence, 21% had a history of an offence behavior, 14.5% had an offender sibling, 36% had smoking habits, 21% had a history of running away from home, and 28% had a history of internal migration. Mild psychiatric disorders were detected in 9 (5.4%) and 51% of them were not student at the time of offence behavior. Most of the families were crowded and had rather low economical and educational levels.

Some features such as low income and low family educational levels, insufficient parental control, crowded family, migration, repetition of offences, and cigarette smoking were found to be risk factors for offensive behavior. These risk factors can be taken into consideration for the prevention of future crimes.

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1. Introduction

1.1. *Child and crime*

Although it is unpleasant to express the terms “child” and “crime” together, juvenile delinquency is still one of the major problems in many countries (Pellegrini, Roundtree, Camagna, & Queirolo, 2000). Recent studies revealed that childhood delinquency has tended to increase not only in developing countries but also in many developed countries. Theft, purse-snatching, violent behavior, sexual crimes, drug abuse and truancy come out as being the top delinquencies (Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Madsen, Jacoby, & Kramp, 2001a, 2001b; Taylor et al., 2001).

Childhood delinquency is expressed as “juvenile delinquency” in Western literature. As laws and regulations of different countries are shaped according to their own social, cultural and political experiences, the age of criminal responsibility varies in each country. For example, it is 8 in Scotland, 10 in England, 12 in Canada and Turkey, 14 in Germany and Japan, 15 in Scandinavian countries, 16 in Spain, and 18 in Belgium (Rutter, Giller, & Hagel, 1998). There are also differing levels of responsibility at different ages for each country. Turkish law system (Criminal Code, Articles 53, 54 and 55) evaluates juvenile delinquency according to three different age-group categories:

- (a) If the child is younger than 11 years old at the time of the committed crime, he/she is not considered as being responsible for his/her act.
- (b) If the child is between 12 and 15 years old, the child is examined by an expert for his/her psychological status for the responsibility of the crime.
- (c) If the child is between 16 and 18 years old, punishments are applied with some reductions (Oto, 1998).

1.2. *Crime etiological factors*

The positive behavior of the child or youth is mainly dependent on the success of the socialization process. In this process the community, values, norms, behavioral patterns, social relations and public institutions such as school, the media, etc. are assimilated or adopted for children by the influence of the family (Paetsch & Bertrant, 1997; Romero, Sobral, Luengo, & Marzoa, 2001; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2000). There is no doubt that the most important and influencing one among these factors is the family itself. Hence, the structure of the family should be examined in detail while evaluating juvenile delinquency. Indeed, this is important for both understanding and prevention of juvenile delinquency (Robbins, Alexander, & Turner, 2000).

Some etiological factors causing juvenile delinquency are blamed as triggering factors. These include some characteristic features or indicators of the family such as crowded siblings, large family, child abuse, poorly educated parents, single parenthood, and other similar offence behaviors within the family. Also, low socio-economical status, unemployment, poor parental supervision, not being properly interested in rearing children due to the migration and adaptation problems, weak regulatory role of the family due to the weakness of the public regulatory system and the traditional structure of families are other risk factors for juvenile delinquency (Lynam et al., 2000; Slomkowski, Rende, Conger, Simons, & Conger, 2001).

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