
Scope, Nature and Causes of Juvenile Delinquency

Boro Merdović¹, Biljana Jovanović²

¹ Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia,
Belgrade Police Directorate

² Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade

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Author Note

Boro Merdović  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6619-5934>

Biljana Jovanović  <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0952-8978>

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Corresponding author: Boro Merdović

E-mail: boro.merdovic@gmail.com

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Abstract

Juvenile delinquency is a specific social phenomenon studied by various scientific disciplines. The goal of every society is to establish order and protect general social values. Juvenile delinquency is a serious behavioral problem manifested through actions that deviate from social and legal norms, and as such, it should be taken seriously in society, given the significance, dangers, and long-term consequences it can cause. The aim of this research is to examine the etiological factors of juvenile delinquency, as well as the scope and phenomenological aspects that can be categorized under this concept. The conceptual confusion present in this field often complicates the creation of adequate and effective prevention programs. Using descriptive research methods, document analysis, comparative methods, as well as quantitative and qualitative analysis, we have distinguished various types of behavior, grading them from asocial behaviors to juvenile delinquency as behaviors that violate legal norms. The research results have shown that juvenile delinquency is a broad term encompassing various behaviors that breach social, moral, customary, and legal norms. We have also demonstrated that youth delinquency is a multi-causal phenomenon requiring a multidisciplinary approach for clarification. The conclusion is that juvenile delinquency is a complex phenomenon that demands an integrated and multidisciplinary approach in prevention. Investment in educational programs, family support, and health education, as well as the creation of a positive social environment, can significantly reduce the risk of delinquent behavior and mitigate its consequences. The contribution of this work is to assist professionals from different fields in the early detection of delinquent behavior in youth and the profiling of juvenile offenders, as the most dangerous form of delinquency.

Key words: juvenile delinquency, delinquency, antisocial behavior, etiology, profiling

Scope, Nature and Causes of Juvenile Delinquency

Introduction

In criminological theory, there is an inconsistent approach to the term “juvenile delinquency.” On one hand, some professionals consider that juvenile delinquency includes not only behavior contrary to legal regulations, which is therefore punishable, but also behavior that opposes the dominant perception of morality within a community, customs, as well as antisocial behavior, social neglect, hooliganism, etc. (Nikolić-Ristanović & Konstantinović-Vilić, 2018, p. 217). All these terms can be encompassed under a single concept: juvenile delinquency. Delinquency is the broadest term that encompasses all forms of behavior by minors that violate customary, moral, social, and legal norms. This latter understanding represents the most commonly used concept of juvenile delinquency, which is often equated with juvenile criminality in the literature. Given the degree of danger and the consequences it causes, juvenile delinquency is the most commonly studied form of youth misconduct. Research on juvenile delinquency represents a key aspect of modern science, particularly because of the influence that social and media narratives have on the perception of this phenomenon. The politicization of juvenile delinquency often leads to the creation of moral panic, where real or potential threats are exaggerated, which can have serious consequences for the development of crime prevention policies and strategies for juvenile crime prevention.

Juvenile delinquency is a sensitive and delicate phenomenon for several reasons. Minors, who still do not fully understand or assess their actions, are presented as actors of delinquent behavior, making them more likely to frequently encounter conflict situations. When juvenile delinquency is addressed as a problem and efforts are made to resolve it in the most efficient and effective way, it is essential to consider many other factors that play a dominant role. It emerges as a chain of problems, where each link in that chain has numerous factors that require explanation. In the classical discourse, juvenile delinquency is often examined through sociological and psychological frameworks,

analyzing the causes and consequences of young people's behavior. Research focuses on factors such as the social environment, family, peer relationships, and education. On the other hand, contemporary approaches also include analyzing the impact of technology, social networks, and globalization, which can shape delinquent behavior. The etiology of juvenile delinquency is complex and cannot be explained by isolating a single factor. There is almost a general scientific consensus that juvenile delinquency is caused by a combination of factors that operate within society, school, family, and the individual personality of the minor, along with various other indirect factors (socio-political, economic conditions, characteristics of the social environment) (Krneta & Šević, 2015).

When discussing the phenomenology, or manifestations, of juvenile delinquency, we also encounter a wide range of different forms of behavior. The degree of social danger associated with these behaviors varies, and it often influences the response of society and the social environment. Certain types of delinquent behavior, such as running away from home and school, graffiti writing, disrespect for authority, petty thefts, and fights without serious consequences, are often mistakenly attributed to hyperactivity, mischief, or behavior that is considered "normal" for children and adolescents in their developmental phase. These forms of behavior, however, represent a prelude to juvenile delinquency, which manifests in violations of criminal norms.

Speaking of some basic characteristics of juvenile delinquency, it is essential to note that there are no precise statistical data on all forms of delinquent behavior. Some types of behavior considered antisocial are not recorded in official statistics, and their exact number cannot be determined. The situation is somewhat different with juvenile delinquency, specifically the number of criminal offenses committed by minors. According to statistical data, the participation of minors as offenders in overall crime varies across countries, ranging from 12-20% (Nikolić-Ristanović & Konstantinović-Vilić, 2018). In Serbia, this percentage hovers around 4%, which is somewhat higher than the percentage recorded in the early 21st century (around 2.5% at that time). According to the data from the Republic Statistical Office, in

2023, a total of 2,598 criminal charges were filed against minors (ages 14-18), representing 5.4% of all criminal offenses committed. Therefore, the participation of minors in the population of reported offenders has been increasing in recent years, and this fact should certainly be taken into account. This is particularly important considering that the percentage of minors within the population of Serbia was 3.2% in 2012, suggesting that minors are more represented in the population of reported offenders than in the general population of Serbia. In the structure of committed crimes, property crimes dominate, accounting for over 67% until 2006 (Ignjatović, 2015, p. 21). In the period from 2019 to 2023 (RZZS), property crimes comprised 43%, drug-related offenses 18%, crimes against life and body 13%, and public order offenses 11%. According to statistical data from Western countries, the prevalence of behavioral problems among young people aged 5 to 15 is 5-10% (Loeber & Farrington, 2001) and continues to increase, although it is unclear whether this rise reflects an actual increase or improved detection (Gatti, Grattagliano & Rocca, 2019, p. 171). When committing crimes, minors tend to exhibit violent behavior and aggression. Children and minors most frequently commit violent crimes, such as violent behavior and fights with serious or minor bodily injuries, using various objects (knives, wooden or metal sticks, brass knuckles, or any item within reach, even firearms). Another characteristic of juvenile delinquency is the commission of crimes in groups (as accomplices or accessories) or as part of a group (skinheads, fan groups, etc.). The literature offers various explanations for this phenomenon, most commonly citing the need of minors for proving themselves and belonging to a group, solidarity with other group members, and fear of rejection by peers or other group members. In recent years, violent offenses committed by minors as members of fan groups have become dominant. According to data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, the youngest registered hooligan is ten years old. In Belgrade, there are 11 fan groups, nearly half of whose members are minors, which likely contributes to peer violence (Otašević, 2015, p. 77). There has also been a noticeable increase in drug-related offenses among minors, including the illegal

production, possession, and sale of drugs. Particularly concerning is the fact that the number of minors who reoffend, whether in terms of criminological or criminal recidivism, is continuously rising. One of the constant characteristics of juvenile delinquency is the gender structure of offenders, indicating that boys are the offenders in 90% of cases.

In Europe, the last decade has seen an increase in the number of juvenile delinquents and a decrease in the age of young people committing delinquent acts. This requires preventive and intervention measures to be implemented as early as possible. Prevention can only be achieved when risks are detected early. The main focus of research should be on children who have committed criminal acts but are not criminally responsible, primarily problematic children rather than criminals with established behavioral patterns. Accordingly, social and educational systems, rather than the judicial system, should bear responsibility for this target group. From this perspective, it is essential that social, educational, and therapeutic activities focus on the various individual problems of each child and family (Marcu & Hulea, 2013).

The aim of this paper is to remove certain ambiguities and clarify the conceptual diversity related to juvenile delinquency, as well as to highlight the most common causes of delinquent behavior in children and juveniles. The ultimate goal would be the easier detection of certain forms of delinquency, early identification, and profiling of juvenile delinquents.

Terminological definition of the concept

Behavioral disorders are a current topic in domestic and professional literature, receiving increasing attention due to their frequency and the potential serious consequences for the psychophysical and social development of children. These disorders can have a significant impact not only on the children themselves but also on their families, local communities, and society as a whole. The current lack of precise data on the prevalence of this type of problem is largely attributed to varying diagnostic criteria and difficulties in distinguishing them from transient, normative problematic behaviors that appear in early childhood (Žunić-Pavlović & Kovačević-Lepojević, 2011, p. 736).

Defining the term "behavioral disorder" sparks numerous discussions and disagreements among professionals, to the extent that there are as many definitions as there are authors addressing this topic. According to DSM-5, Conduct Disorder (CD) is a set of behaviors characterized by persistent misbehavior, including bullying, fighting, use or threat of weapons, physical cruelty to people and animals, property destruction, deceit, and serious rule violations (APA, 2013). Although disruptive behavior is observed to varying degrees throughout the development of most young people, it becomes clinically relevant when it is frequent, severe, persistent, rather than isolated, and causes distress and functional impairment (Steiner, 1997).

There is a noticeable discrepancy between the term itself and its meaning. Depending on the scientific discipline approaching the issue, different terms are used, such as: maladjusted children, atypical children, unadapted children, educationally neglected, unsocialized, neglected children, children at risk, children with asocial and antisocial behavior, children in conflict with the law, deviant, delinquent behavior, etc.

The category of children and young people is characterized by a specific bio-psycho-social development. This is a life period most sensitive to external influences, both positive and negative. Adolescence is the phase of life in which a person is formed and is accompanied by numerous physiological and psychological changes. Minors, as an integral part of society, represent a relatively distinct world, with unique ways and specific reactions to external stimuli. Developmental problems in children and youth have become a common occurrence, not requiring serious educational or psychological treatment unless these developmental issues accumulate and start to endanger and hinder the functioning and development of young people. In such cases, they are termed disorders and require appropriate professional, socio-pedagogical, and therapeutic intervention (Stakić, 2016, p. 37). Some of the terms most frequently encountered in the literature are asocial, antisocial, and delinquent behavior. In the following text, we will clarify certain terms according to the level of social danger they represent, from the lowest to the highest, from risky behaviors to juvenile delinquency.

Risky behaviors encompass all behaviors that may negatively impact the normal development of children and cause adverse consequences for other individuals in the child's environment. Numerous situations to which children are continuously exposed, within the family and outside it (unfavorable environmental influences, psychosocial factors), can turn young people into individuals with risky lifestyles (e.g., alcohol consumption, drug use, skipping school, risky sexual behaviors). Such behaviors represent developmental risks for children and youth, as well as for other individuals in their environment. Risky behaviors resulting from insufficient knowledge, lack of awareness, individual social immaturity, presence of prejudices or stereotypes, youthful activities, and curiosity can lead to various forms of deviant behaviors. Thus, risky behaviors do not deterministically represent a "path to deviance," but they are a warning sign of a tendency and significant probability of engaging in some form of deviant behavior (Jugović, 2004). The most common forms of risky behavior among children and adolescents are smoking, alcohol and drug use, frequent changes of sexual partners, and involvement in minor offenses, hooliganism, vandalism, violent behavior, running away from home and school, etc. (Merdović, 2019, p. 193).

According to Videnović, *asocial behaviors* are all behaviors directed against the environment, social norms, and customs, which significantly hinder or prevent normal growth and development, resulting in the engagement of various social welfare services in prevention, detection, investigation, and treatment (Videnović, 2006). *Antisocial behavior* is a term widely used in criminology and psychology. It refers to behavior directed against society and social norms. It serves as an umbrella term for all types of behaviors against social, legal, and moral laws, norms, and rules, authority, and social order. The emphasis with this term is placed on the fact that it is the behavior, not the entire person, that is antisocial; for this reason, it is preferred over the usual terms like delinquency or misconduct in more recent literature. It differs from asocial behavior in that asocial behavior does not oppose, but rather deviates from, typical social standards and values, representing a departure from those standards (Merdović, 2019, p. 25). An antisocial

personality is characterized by an individual's inability to establish strong social relationships, unwillingness to adhere to accepted norms, low loyalty to others, unwillingness to meet obligations, and lack of guilt for their behavior (Godfrey, 2012). An asocial person views others as sources of danger or pleasure, disregarding their safety, comfort, or satisfaction. Such a person experiences their impulses as urgent, with delay or substitution being unacceptable. The antisocial person differs radically from others in their attitude toward themselves, others, and the meaning of life. An asocial person tends to evade responsibility for unacceptable behavior through rationalization and shifting blame to others. Prolonged interaction with such a person always begins to provoke dissatisfaction, tension, and irritation (Monahan, Steinberg & Cauffman, 2009). One of the most frequently cited definitions of antisocial behavior in our literature, given by Milosavljević, is that antisocial behavior among minors is generally understood as more severe forms of deviant behavior, consisting of violations of legally sanctioned norms (Milosavljević, 2003).

According to some authors, antisocial behavior is divided into deviant and delinquent behavior. Deviant behavior is a system of actions or individual acts by a person that reflect a disagreement with accepted legal and moral norms in society (Huzik, 2021). Deviance represents characteristics, behaviors, or thoughts that significantly differ from the behavior of the rest of the population. Therefore, to determine deviance, it is essential to outline the boundaries of "acceptable" behavior. However, anything that goes beyond these boundaries is considered deviance. Deviance can be fixed or variable in terms of time and content. Deviance is usually determined based on what society does not recognize as deviant (Levesque, 2011). The term deviant behavior refers to all forms of behavior that significantly deviate from generally accepted values, norms, and rules of behavior, which can be both positive and negative. Proponents of using this term also introduce the criterion of social reaction, emphasizing that it involves behaviors that elicit societal disapproval (Milosavljević, 2003).

Delinquency, in contrast to deviance, always has socially dangerous consequences, causes changes in how society perceives the

offender, leads to the minor's self-recognition as an offender, and thus opposition to the society that rejects them (Međedović, 2021). When discussing juvenile delinquency, it is essential to note that there are multiple approaches to explaining this phenomenon. As previously mentioned, according to the criminological-sociological approach, the term juvenile delinquency represents behavior that is contrary to legal regulations, legally incriminated, but also violations of moral and customary norms (Nikolić-Ristanović & Konstantinović-Vilić, 2018). The formal-legal approach views juvenile delinquency somewhat more narrowly than the criminological-sociological approach. This approach explains juvenile delinquency solely as behavior that is, first and foremost, against the law, specifically as an offense or a criminal act. An even narrower approach suggests that juvenile delinquency is exclusively the violation of criminal legal norms, representing criminal behavior (Kostić & Mirić, 2015, p. 48). Juvenile delinquency is commonly understood as the commission of criminal acts by minors. Due to their age (14-18 years) and limited access to certain social spheres, minors cannot commit certain types of crimes (such as corruption, crimes against the economy, etc.). On the other hand, they dominate in statistical parameters indicating the frequency of violent crimes. Juvenile delinquency is a complex term in its content, consisting of various types of behaviors and actions by children and minors that differ in type, severity, and consequences.

These characteristics and specifics require a more detailed study of the causes and consequences of delinquent behavior, as well as the prospects and risks for juvenile offenders, to determine effective ways to correct their behavior and further resocialize them, which will be discussed in the next section.

Risk and protective factors

Crime as a social phenomenon requires detailed and multidimensional analysis. It is often emphasized that it is important to distinguish between individual causes of criminal behavior and broader social factors that influence crime as a whole. This differentiation helps us understand the complexity of the causes that

lead to offenses. Personal traits of an individual, such as temperament, character, psychological characteristics, and mental health, can significantly influence the decision to commit a crime. However, the social context, including family, economic conditions, and cultural norms, plays a key role in this process. A lack of balance between these factors often leads to an insufficient understanding of specific forms of criminal behavior. Comparisons and analyses of various criminological theories indicate that no single factor alone can explain crime, including juvenile delinquency, which is a part of juvenile crime. Instead, an integrated approach is needed that considers many aspects of an individual's life and society as a whole.

A range of factors at the individual, family, and community levels either put youth at risk of delinquent behavior or act as protective factors that inhibit such behavior. Various factors have been identified that potentially influence pathways to crime, such as attachment and aspirations for school, parental supervision, discipline, abuse or neglect, delinquent peer groups, as well as factors within the immediate social environment related to low income, overcrowded households, and residential mobility (Loeber & Farrington, 2001). Therefore, the theory of risk and protective factors is often discussed. The same factor (e.g., family) can significantly influence the manifestation of delinquent behavior but can also be a crucial protective factor that deters youth from offending. Risk and protective factors that influence the occurrence of behavioral problems include all influences and conditions associated with a child's personality and environment, which can increase or decrease the likelihood of developing behavioral issues in an individual. Risk factors contribute to a higher probability of behavioral problems, while protective factors reduce that probability and encourage the development of positive patterns and behavior in children.

The factors that determine each individual's behavior can be endogenous (related to the individual's personality) and exogenous (external influences). This is one of the most frequently cited classifications in both domestic and foreign literature.

When discussing *endogenous factors*, opinions are divided and varied. Numerous studies confirm that personality factors influence the

manifestation of certain forms of behavior in each person. Research shows that genetic factors have a strong impact on aggressive behavior (Burt, 2009), which is a form of delinquent behavior. Modern biological theories focus on endocrine, physiological aspects, disorders of the endocrine system, and central nervous system diseases (Milić, 2008, p. 16). In the United States, 15-20% of juvenile delinquents have serious mental illnesses. Most chronic delinquents are characterized by hyperactivity, low tolerance levels, impulsivity, speech and language development disorders, and intellectual deficits. For delinquents whose antisocial behavior is limited to adolescence, there is an improvement as they take on adult roles (Igrački & Ilijić, 2016). A low level of intelligence has been considered a factor in delinquent behavior. A study of inmates in Texas who entered the prison system in 2002 found that approximately 23% scored below 80 on IQ tests, nearly 69% scored between 80 and 109, and only 9.6% scored above 110 (Ellis & Walsh, 2003). Although some studies have shown lower intelligence levels among delinquent compared to non-delinquent populations, this cannot be considered a decisive or fundamental cause of delinquent behavior (Kostić & Dimovski, 2015, p. 318). Aggressive behavior in youth is predominantly mediated by genetic factors, while non-aggressive behavior is mediated by both genetic and environmental factors (Eley et al., 2003). Psychophysiological factors can also shape an individual's behavior, including delinquent behavior. Low levels of certain hormones secreted in stressful situations or elevated hormone levels (e.g., testosterone) secreted in reward-seeking and dominant behavior situations influence criminal behavior (Merdović & Kovačević Lepojević, 2021). Some authors suggest that a reduced level of cortisol secretion indicates a constant search for sensations, entering risky situations, habituation to stressful situations, absence of fear, aggressive behavior towards peers and teachers, as well as criminal behavior (Platje et al., 2013). Temperament, a relatively stable and mostly innate tendency by which an individual experiences and regulates their response to the social environment, is a construct recognizable early in development, giving it significant potential in determining and correcting human behavior, including criminal behavior. In many respects, temperament

is a key biosocial construct. For instance, determining temperament characteristics at age 3 reveals behavioral outcomes in later stages of life development (Horner et al., 2015). Temperament, as a relatively stable and primarily hereditary trait that determines how an individual perceives and reacts to their social environment, is identifiable in the early stages of development. This aspect of personality has a potentially significant impact on the formation and correction of various behaviors, including tendencies toward delinquent behavior. According to research, children with behavioral disorders exhibit vengeful emotions, a strong propensity for impulsive behavior, anxiety, and depression, limited capacity for expressing and verbalizing emotions and feelings, and an inability to establish emotional relationships, which may later limit their ability to manage actions and adequately resolve interpersonal conflicts (Caspi & Moffitt, 1995; Behan & Carr, 2013).

Exogenous factors are external influences that determine behavior. Paradigms seeking to explain delinquent and criminal behavior highlight numerous social environment factors as dominant in determining each individual's behavior. Exogenous factors of youth delinquent behavior refer to external influences and environmental factors that can increase the risk of deviant behavior in young people. These exogenous factors can be political, economic, and social, and each is connected to the functioning of the family, school system, peer groups, immediate and broader social environment, media, internet, social networks, and so forth. There is a scientific consensus that the economic situation in a given society affects the increase in the number of criminal offenses. Socio-political events within a society are drivers of many negative phenomena, including juvenile delinquency. Specific circumstances in our country, such as wars and international sanctions leading to inflation, had a devastating effect on the economy. The rise in unemployment and the growing number of people living on the edge of survival impacted the collapse of the family and educational systems, from which we have not yet fully recovered. Population migrations, political crises, transitions, globalization of society, advancements in science and technology, and the erasure of borders between states are factors that have particularly impacted the child and youth population.

The family is the basic and most important unit of society, playing a key role in the upbringing and socialization of children. The primary functions of the family include biological-reproductive, kinship relations, economic function, and socio-cultural function (Marjanović, 2016, p. 99). It is the first environment where children encounter values, norms, and behavior patterns that shape them as individuals. In the family, children acquire their first habits, attitudes, and perceptions of themselves and the world around them, which directly affects their later development and functioning in society. Regardless of differences in class, religious, economic, and social affiliations, the family is a universal institution present in all cultures with a similar function – to provide the basic emotional and physical needs of its members, transmit social values and norms, and prepare new generations for active and responsible life in the community.

A family marked by understanding, love, empathy, and emotional stability represents a healthy environment for the development of all its members, especially children. In such a family, children feel secure, supported, and loved, allowing them to develop self-confidence, self-respect, and healthy social skills. Harmonious family relationships enable children to naturally socialize and adopt positive values and behavior patterns, influencing their future relationships and social behavior. On the other hand, in modern society, there is an increasing number of families facing various problems and challenges, such as economic difficulties, lack of time for family relationships, conflicts, or the presence of violence and other social-pathological problems. Families where relationships are not harmonious and lack empathy and support can negatively impact the development of children. Children from dysfunctional families are often at a higher risk of emotional difficulties, low self-esteem, and problematic behavior.

Dysfunctionality is one of the most frequently cited family-related risk factors. These are families characterized by disrupted relationships, frequent conflicts, violence, the presence of parents' social-pathological behavior patterns, neglect, abuse, and a history of criminal behavior in the family. All these factors influence the behavior of children and adolescents from such families. The need for security

and care, feelings of helplessness and dependence in children, create a fertile ground for various forms of victimization (Bjelajac & Merdović, 2019, p. 192). Insufficient care for children leads to an increase in uncontrolled and unstructured free time, which can provide opportunities for experimenting with antisocial and delinquent forms of behavior (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). Recently, especially after the mass killing at Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade in 2023, there has been a growing focus on parental control as an important factor in structuring children's behavior. When discussing parental control, we often encounter a dichotomy between psychological control and behavioral control. Psychological control is a parenting style that manipulates children's thoughts, emotions, and behavior, often suppressing their autonomy through tactics like inducing guilt and ignoring emotions. This approach is considered harmful to psychological development and is criticized as a form of abuse. In contrast, parental control that sets reasonable boundaries and enables supervision helps children adopt social norms and prevents future behavioral problems (Merdović, Počuča & Dragojlović, 2024). The way young people spend their free time, if not filled with positive activities and supervised by parents and teachers, can be a significant risk factor for various forms of delinquent behavior.

The manifestation of physical aggression and violence among parents is an especially severe form of family conflict, which serves as a strong risk factor for the development of aggression and antisocial behavior in children (Popović-Čitić, 2007). Disruptions in family structure and other unfavorable elements within it negatively impact the entire family system and its functioning. Such elements, either directly or through weakening family functions, generally have a detrimental effect on the development and socialization of young individuals (Merdović, 2019, p. 158). Socially pathological behaviors in parents, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, criminal and aggressive behavior, abuse, aggression, and violence, are significant predictors of negative behaviors in children.

In addition to these negative family factors, the family is also a significant protective factor against youth delinquency. Today's families

need support from all relevant societal factors more than ever to fulfill their role. Five protective factors form the foundation of the approach to strengthening families (Ozer et al., 2017):

- *Parental resilience* – finding ways to solve problems, build and maintain trust-based relationships, including with their child, and recognizing when it's necessary to seek help.
- *Social connections* – providing emotional support, help in solving problems, parenting advice, and practical support to parents from friends, relatives, and the social environment.
- *Concrete support in times of need* – assistance in meeting basic existential and economic needs, support and services from social actors when the family is in crisis (e.g., family member illness, domestic violence, etc.).
- *Knowledge of parenting and child development* – information about child development and appropriate expectations for children's behavior at each age helps parents view their children in a positive light and promotes healthy development. This information is most effective when provided when parents need it to understand their children better.
- *Social and emotional competence of children* – the ability of a child or adolescent to communicate positively with others, self-regulate their behavior, and effectively express their feelings positively impacts their relationships with family, other adults, and peers.

The school is one of the primary groups in which personality is positively shaped. Certainly, considering how the school fulfills its role and its influence on the social environment towards the individual, the impact of school can also be viewed from the standpoint of criminal etiology. Research shows that failure in school education significantly contributes to the occurrence of delinquent behavior (Kovačević, 2007). Reasons include overly extensive and unengaging curriculum content, inadequate school conditions, teacher incompetence, and student disinterest in learning. These factors often lead to skipping classes,

spending time outside school (in cafes, betting shops, parks), and engaging in alcohol and drug use. Poor academic performance and grade repetition can result in conflicts, rejection of authority, and a sense of discrimination, which encourages various forms of delinquent behavior. Difficulties in school can produce feelings of disappointment, inferiority, anger, and aggression, which, together with other risk factors, can lead to behavioral problems.

When discussing school as a risk factor for youth delinquent behavior, we must mention the *influence of peers*. Young people typically spend most of their school time with their peers and often continue to spend time with them after school. During adolescence, peer pressure is intense and significant. The desire for independence from family and an increasing need for inclusion in peer groups can be a significant risk factor, especially if there is a desire to belong to groups inclined towards delinquent behavior (such as fan clubs, delinquent groups, or other informal groups). If a peer group rejects an individual, they may experience frustration, potentially leading them to express aggression and other delinquent acts. On the other hand, belonging to a delinquent group often requires minors to commit certain offenses to be accepted by the group. One of the most notable characteristics of juvenile delinquency is complicity and committing crimes in groups. The initiation of drug use is also often driven by peer pressure and the influence of the group the minor belongs to or wants to join (Bjelajac, Matijašević & Počuča, 2012).

Media and the internet have a significant educational, cultural, and informative impact, helping people stay informed and gain new knowledge. While they can have a positive influence, particularly on young people, there is also potential for a negative impact. This influence depends on the quality of programs and the psychosocial state of young people. Negative content, such as that promoting violence, crime, and amoral values, can especially harm youth by encouraging undesirable behaviors and attitudes. In contemporary literature, research is focused on the internet and child safety online due to the expansion of internet and social media use. Protecting children online involves socially responsible organizing of the physical, psychological, and moral safety

of minors during their daily online activities (browsing, chatting, using social networks, online gaming). The goal is to protect children from harmful content, mitigate the negative effects of internet use, and raise awareness and knowledge about how virtual reality affects children (Bjelajac & Filipović, 2020, p. 261). A specific aspect of the negative influence on young people's behavior is the impact of video games. Initially, these games substitute for parental care and supervision, providing parents a "break" as children are occupied with playing. Later, this shifts to concern over excessive time spent on computers, in gaming centers, poor academic performance, loss of work habits, alienation from peers and society, the creation of a gamer subculture, and other consequences affecting children's real-life behavior. The most severe consequence of frequent video gaming is the development of addiction, which is gaining significance in modern society and requires serious intervention from professionals of various profiles (Bjelajac & Merdović, 2019a, p. 57). *Cyberbullying* and electronic violence are forms of child abuse that, alongside psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, represent serious issues that receive particular attention from science and professionals (Merdović, 2019a). As one of the most severe forms of criminal acts, mass killings are often associated with the influence of the internet and violent video games. Research following school shootings has shown that perpetrators spend considerable time on the internet, with interests in previous mass killings or shootings, violent video games, weapons, and other violent content. It is common for killers to post content on social media before or after the act, sometimes hinting at upcoming events or sharing recordings of the crime itself with messages. According to the perpetrators, the reason for such publicity is often to gain fame and ensure that everyone will know about them, regardless of the consequences. Fascination with violent acts and aggression, fame, a desire for recognition, imitation, and identification, readily accessible on the internet and through media, are factors contributing to the decision of unstable individuals to commit violent acts (Schildkraut & McHale, 2018), as we have seen, potentially fueled by indoctrination within the context of religious-psychological phenomena, religious fanaticism, and extremism (Zirojević, Bjelajac, 2013). The

media spectacle created by journalists around such events intrigues young people and contributes to the spread of sensational news and spectacle. Sensationalist reporting on criminal events leads to increased viewership or readership of a media outlet, better ratings, and profits but also to exaggerations about the nature and extent of crimes, resulting in affective reactions from the public, unsettling citizens, and increasing fear of crime (Bjelajac & Merdović 2018, p. 293).

Understanding endogenous and exogenous factors is essential for the prevention of juvenile delinquency, as it allows social institutions to focus on providing support to individuals, families, schools, and communities to reduce negative impacts on young people.

Profiling juvenile offenders

If we consider the research findings presented so far, we can conclude that identifying the risk factors children are exposed to is a fundamental parameter for successful preventive action. In criminology and other behavioral sciences (psychology, sociology), screening plays a central role. Identifying potential offenders involves more than simply pointing to a specific individual; it requires a carefully designed strategy and appropriate tools for detecting individuals or groups at risk of engaging in criminal activities. Such strategies may range from simple and quick interventions to complex, multi-step processes that include multiple stages. The instruments used in this process can vary from simple risk assessment scales to advanced systems that combine various methods and settings for deeper analysis. Screening should target children who display risk factors shown to characterize juvenile offenders, as well as children and adolescents who engage in various antisocial behaviors that precede criminal behavior (Le Blanc et al., 1997). This is particularly important for practitioners who work with juvenile delinquency and engage with children in institutions and organizations. Based on etiological factors and the identified risk factors, it is crucial to detect certain forms of delinquent behavior as early as possible to prevent escalation into criminal acts. It is not necessary to screen only specific high-risk groups or individuals; any form of primary prevention is desirable to mitigate the influence of risk

factors and minimize the manifestation of delinquent behavior as much as possible.

Conclusion

Juvenile delinquent behavior requires the attention of professionals across various fields who deal with behavioral issues. A wide range of behaviors that deviate from socially acceptable patterns can serve as an introduction to more serious behavioral problems. It is essential to identify such behaviors as early as possible, as they may lead to criminality, the most severe form of delinquent behavior. The earlier these behaviors are noticed and detected, the greater the chances for preventive action or later resocialization.

Juvenile delinquency is not the result of a single factor but rather a complex interaction of various circumstances and influences. In this process, multiple factors combine and interact, potentially leading a young person to display behaviors that may not initially appear as criminal acts. Although these behaviors emerge during their psychological and social development stages, they can lay the foundation for later delinquent behavior, and in some cases, lead a child or adolescent to become involved in more serious criminal activities. Through a comprehensive approach, involving research and analysis of factors affecting juvenile delinquent behavior, an effective social response can be built. Such a response involves collaboration between various sectors – education, social protection, healthcare, and the justice system – creating an environment that can support at-risk youth and reduce the likelihood of their involvement in criminal activities. By developing these preventive and intervention measures, society can significantly reduce the number of juvenile offenders and contribute to creating a safer and more just environment.

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Obim, priroda i uzrok maloletničkog prestupništva

Boro Merdović¹ i Biljana Jovanović²

¹Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova Republike Srbije, Beograd

²Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije, Beograd

Sažetak

Maloletničko prestupništvo je specifična društvena pojava koja je predmet izučavanja različitih naučnih disciplina. Težnja svakog društva je uspostavljanje reda i zaštita opštih društvenih vrednosti. Maloletnička delinkvencija je ozbiljan problem ponašanja, koji se manifestuje kroz ponašanja koja odstupaju od društvenih i pravnih normi i kao takva treba da bude ozbiljno shvaćena u društvu s obzirom na značaj, opasnost i dugoročne posledice koje može prouzrokovati. Cilj ovog istraživanja je da se ispituju etiološki činioci maloletničkog prestupništva kao i obim rasprostranjenosti i fenomenološke pojave koje se mogu podvesti pod ovaj pojam. Pojemovna zbrka koja je prisutna u ovoj oblasti često otežava kreiranje adekvatnih i efikasnih preventivnih programa. Metodom deskriptivnog istraživanja, analizom dokumentacije, uporednog metoda kao i metodom kvantitativne i kvalitativne analize razgraničili smo pojedine oblike ponašanja gradirajući ih od asocijalnih oblika do maloletničke delinkvencije kao oblik ponašanja kojim se krše zakonske norme. Rezultati istraživanja su pokazali da je maloletničko prestupništvo širok pojam koji sublimira različite oblike ponašanja kojim se krše društvene, moralne, običajne, zakonske norme. Takođe smo pokazali da je prestupništvo mladih multikauzalna pojava koja iziskuje multidisciplinarn pristup u njenom razjašnjenju. Zaključak je da je maloletnička delinkvencija složen fenomen koji zahteva integrisan i multidisciplinarni pristup u prevenciji. Ulaganje u obrazovne programe, porodičnu podršku i zdravstvenu edukaciju, kao i stvaranje pozitivnog društvenog okruženja, može značajno doprineti smanjenju rizika od prestupničkog ponašanja i umanjiti njegove posledice. Doprinos ovog rada je pomoć stručnjacima iz različitih oblasti u ranoj detekciji prestupničkog ponašanja mladih i profilisanja maloletnih učinilaca krivičnih dela kao najopsanijeg oblika prestupništva.

Ključne reči: maloletničko prestupništvo, delinkvencija, antisocijalno ponašanje, etiologija, profilisanje.