

A Critical Study of Causal Factors and Legal Approach towards Juvenile Criminality in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the causal factors contributing to juvenile criminality in India and assesses the effectiveness of the existing legal framework in addressing this pressing issue. In India, juvenile crime has become a major issue, reflecting underlying psychological and socioeconomic issues. In addition to alarming policymakers, the growing number of youngsters involved in criminal activity has prompted concerns about the effectiveness of the current juvenile justice system. Employing a qualitative research methodology that includes semi-structured interviews and comprehensive literature reviews, the research identifies pivotal socio-economic factors such as poverty, family dysfunction, and lack of education that precipitate juvenile delinquency. The findings indicate that while India has made advancements in its legal approaches, particularly through the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Juvenile) Act, significant gaps remain in addressing underlying causes and in rehabilitating young offenders effectively. Additionally, it reveals that the main causes of adolescent offenses are familial dysfunction, peer pressure, poverty, and illiteracy. The objectives of juvenile justice are also compromised by inconsistent application of the law and a lack of adequate rehabilitation methods. This study concludes with recommendations for legal reform and policy initiatives aimed at enhancing the prevention and reintegration of juvenile offenders into society, thereby fostering a more holistic approach to juvenile justice in India.

Keywords: Juvenile Criminality, Justice System, Causal Factors, Legal Framework, Reformation, Rehabilitation and Crime Prevention.

Introduction

A juvenile is innocent at birth and develops well if given loving care and attention. The juvenile can reach their maximum potential because of their physical, mental, moral, and spiritual development. Conversely, negative environments, disregard for basic necessities, inappropriate companionship, and other mistreatment can make a young person a delinquent. Juveniles today seem to have strong likes and dislikes as well as mature expressions from a very young age due to shifting societal norms. These characteristics also increase a child's susceptibility to illicit schemes like trafficking, peddlers, and abusers. Furthermore, the media has a significant impact on young people's mental development. A young person's exposure to media, such as television, radio, music, video games, and the Internet, has greatly grown since the development of communication technology in recent years¹.

In addition to critically analysing the current legal system intended to handle this complex issue, this study explores the complex network of factors influencing adolescent criminality in India (Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2024). Given that juvenile delinquency is acknowledged as a worldwide issue with profound effects on both individual growth and societal well-being, a thorough analysis of its underlying causes is necessary, especially in the Indian context (Mantey & Dzetor, 2018).

The research is to examine the intricate elements such as socioeconomic inequalities, psychological susceptibilities, and environmental factors that raise young people's risk of engaging in

¹ See <https://baysingerlaw.com>.

criminal activity in order to provide guidance for the creation of evidence-based prevention and intervention programs. The study uses a critical lens to assess how well existing legal strategies including legislative measures, court rulings, and rehabilitation programs address the particular difficulties faced by young offenders in India. The investigation goes further to examine the socioeconomic elements such as poverty, a lack of access to quality education, and unstable families that frequently operate as triggers for adolescent criminality (Khuda, 2019). It also considers the psychological dimensions, such as the impact of trauma, mental health issues, and exposure to violence, on the propensity of juveniles to engage in criminal behavior, as well as investigating the influence of environmental factors, including community disorganization, peers

The National Crime Record Bureau, or NCRB, reports that the number of crimes committed by people who are considered juveniles has been steadily increasing. According to the NCRB study analysis. In 2022, the nation saw 30,555 crimes perpetrated by kids; Delhi is ranked sixth on the list with around 2,340 cases against minors. Over 2,643 cases against children were reported in 2020. India has recorded 3, 40,168 juvenile offenses between 2013 and 2022. Thirteen states have reported more than 10,000 instances throughout this time, whereas twenty-five states and Union Territories have reported fewer than 10,000 cases. Interestingly, fewer than 1,000 instances have been documented in each of the North Eastern States of Meghalaya, Andhra Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland. With 3,397 cases, Assam is the only state with a higher number. Tamil Nadu had 24,301 instances, placing it in the top 5 States, with the Central and Western States of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra reporting 59,372 and 55,852 cases, respectively. According to these figures, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh rank in the top 5 states for the quantity of juvenile offenses.

Statement of Problem

Juvenile crime has increased alarmingly in India in recent years, prompting serious concerns about the socioeconomic, psychological, and legal elements influencing this pattern. The efficiency of the current legal system in reducing juvenile offending is still debatable, even with the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act and other laws in place. According to reports, a large number of young people who commit significant crimes frequently originate from underprivileged families, suggesting a complicated interaction between peer pressure, dysfunctional family settings, poverty, and illiteracy. The literature that critically examines these causative variables and the legal reactions they elicit, however, is severely lacking. Studies that have already been done often address these issues separately, failing to take the comprehensive approach required for policy change. Furthermore, it is unclear how well the juvenile justice system in India strikes a balance between the needs of society for justice and deterrent and rehabilitation objectives. Therefore, by examining the underlying causes, assessing the current legal system, and considering the implications for legal and policy reform, this study aims to critically explore the socio-legal aspects of adolescent criminality in India.

Literature Review

Focusing on the importance of the current study is the primary goal of reviewing the literature in the relevant field of study. A brief overview of some well-known criminality research is provided by the reviews that follow:

- Comanor and Phillips (2002) observed that fathers play a critical role in the rearing of boys at a tender age and having a step-father also increases delinquency among the juvenile rather than having a step-mother.
- Harvey and Fine (2004) studied that the juvenile who had emotions of anger inside them led to the opposite end of the law and this was found in the case of the juvenile whose parents were divorced. This occurred because these juvenile needed proper care from their parents which was lacking.
- Kaplan (1957, 1977, 1978, and 1980) argues that negative self-esteem results from situations in which adolescents are unable to defend their self-image, situations such as school failure, rejection by school, and parental rejection. Some environmental factors have been identified which lead to delinquency among youths.
- Kupersmidt and Dodge (2004) maintain that there are two extreme hypotheses which specify the different roles of peers in developing the aggressive and antisocial behavior of a delinquent juvenile, and there are some individual characteristics that give rise to delinquency among juvenile.

- Kumar, R. (2018). Socioeconomic determinants of juvenile delinquency in India. *Indian Journal of Criminology*, 45(3), 123–135
- Multiple studies (Kumar, 2018; Sharma & Joshi, 2020) agree that socioeconomic stressors are primary drivers of juvenile crime, though their methodologies differ.”
- While Kumar (2018) provides robust data on urban delinquency, its focus on metropolitan areas limits its applicability to rural contexts.”

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach to critically examine the causal factors contributing to juvenile criminality in India and the legal responses provided under the Indian juvenile justice system. The study relies on both primary and secondary data sources.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews with juvenile rights activists, attorneys, and social workers working on juvenile justice cases were used to gather primary data. In order to ensure that all ethical standards for working with kids were followed, case studies of juveniles were also examined, whenever possible, through court documents and contacts with juvenile reform centres.

A thorough analysis of legislative documents, such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Juvenile) Act, 2015, pertinent case law, and national and international reports on juvenile delinquency, was used to gather secondary data. A thorough analysis of scholarly publications and studies was done in order to comprehend the psychological and socioeconomic elements affecting juvenile crime in India.

Legal Analysis

The Juvenile Justice Act was critically examined as part of the legal study, with particular attention paid to the sections pertaining to the punishment and rehabilitation of juvenile offenders. The study also assessed the effectiveness of existing legislative provisions and found systemic weaknesses by contrasting India's legal system with international norms like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Juvenile.

Data Analysis

Using content analysis to examine case studies and legal texts, the study found that peer pressure, familial dysfunction, and socioeconomic disadvantage were important contributing factors to adolescent delinquency. Comparative legal analysis was used to evaluate the legal framework, comparing India's juvenile justice system to other nations', especially with regard to rehabilitation initiatives.

Objective of the Study

This study aims to evaluate the legal frameworks and judicial procedures that address juvenile delinquency as well as critically examine and analyse the elements that contribute to juvenile criminality in India. The goal of this study is to comprehend the various factors, such as family dynamics, psychological effects, socioeconomic circumstances, and environmental pressures that contribute to juvenile criminality. Additionally, the research evaluates the effectiveness of India's legal institutions, namely the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Juvenile) Act, in addressing juvenile offenders.

This research aims to uncover:

- The primary socio-economic, psychological, and environmental factors that drive juvenile criminal behavior in the Indian context.
- The role of the family, community, and educational systems in either mitigating or exacerbating criminal tendencies among juvenile.
- The effectiveness of the existing legal provisions and their implementation in rehabilitating juvenile offenders, rather than solely punishing them.
- The potential gaps in the legal system and policies that may need reform to provide better protection, prevention, and rehabilitation for juvenile in conflict with the law.

By exploring these dimensions, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive critique of both the causal factors leading to juvenile criminality and the legal frameworks addressing it, offering suggestions for improving juvenile protection and rehabilitation within the Indian legal system.

Various Theories of Juvenile Criminality

Theories of juvenile delinquency not only inform legal methods such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, but they also provide frameworks for examining factors that contribute to delinquency, such as peer pressure, family dynamics, and poverty. The relevance of biological, psychological, sociological, and integrative theories of adolescent delinquency to India's sociocultural context and judicial system is assessed in this section.

Biological and Psychological Theories

According to biological theories, young people may be predisposed to criminal behavior by physiological or genetic causes, such as neurological disorders or hormone imbalances (Lombroso, 1876). According to psychological theories, such as Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, children pick up abnormal behaviors through exposure to violent role models and other forms of observation and reinforcement. Delinquency in India may be influenced by psychological issues such as impulsivity or trauma from abusive homes. However, the explanatory value of these ideas in the context of India is limited because they frequently ignore structural problems like poverty.

- **Sociological Theories**

Social and environmental factors are emphasized in sociological theories. According to Merton's (1938) strain theory, which provides a pertinent framework for understanding India's socioeconomic inequalities, young people commit crimes when society objectives (such as financial achievement) cannot be attained by legal methods. Delinquency is associated with weaker community structures, such as in urban slums where informal social controls are lacking, according to social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942). According to Becker's (1963) labeling theory, labels such as "delinquent" can reinforce criminal behavior, especially when young people are stigmatized inside India's legal system. Although these theories successfully draw attention to structural and cultural elements, they could downplay the importance of personal initiative.

- **Integrated Theories**

Integrated theories, such as Elliott's (1985) model, incorporate biological, psychological, and sociological components to offer a thorough explanation of delinquency. For instance, a young individual in India may exhibit impulsivity (biological), acquire negative habits from their peers (psychological), and feel stress as a result of poverty (sociological). These techniques are helpful in understanding the intricate interactions between a numbers of contributing factors that lead to juvenile delinquency in India.

The ideas that have been discussed offer a strong framework for examining the socioeconomic stressors and psychological elements that contribute to adolescent delinquency in India. Particularly, sociological theories fit India's structural problems, but integrated approaches provide a more thorough perspective. These ideas also guide the assessment of legal strategies, such as whether the rehabilitative elements provided by the Juvenile Justice Act offset the effects of labeling. In order to ensure a comprehensive knowledge of adolescent criminality in India, this theoretical underpinning will direct the study's research of causal factors and legal frameworks.

Conceptual Framework

In order to understand juvenile criminality in India, the conceptual framework for this study combines legal theories with causal elements. Environmental, psychological, and socioeconomic factors (independent variables) all have an impact on juvenile crime, the dependent variable. The impact of these elements is shaped by legal procedures, namely the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. Based on psychological and sociological theories, the framework offers a prism through which to examine how these factors interact in India's distinct sociocultural setting.

Theoretical Foundation the paradigm is based on Becker's (1963) labeling theory, which holds that social responses, including legal measures, can reward criminal behavior, and Merton's (1938) strain theory, which relates delinquency to societal pressures and restricted options. The social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942) describes how adolescent crime is exacerbated in urban India by poor community organizations. Together, these ideas provide a framework for understanding the legal responses to adolescent delinquency as well as its causal pathways.

Explanation of Variables and Relationships Independent Variables: Juvenile crime is mostly caused by socioeconomic issues (such as poverty and unemployment), home environments (such as abuse and neglect), education (such as school dropout), and peer pressure (such as engagement in

gangs). Strain theory, for example, contends that poverty puts pressure on young people to commit crimes in order to fulfill social obligations. These pressures are made worse in India by caste-based prejudice and urban-rural divides.

- **Dependent Variable:** Juvenile criminality manifests as offenses like theft, vandalism, or violent crimes committed by individuals under 18, as recorded by India's National Crime Records Bureau.
- **Mediating Variable:** The relationship between causative variables and criminality is mediated by the legal system, particularly the Juvenile Justice Act. While punitive measures (like jail for serious crimes) may encourage delinquency through labeling effects, rehabilitation programs (like counseling and vocational training) seek to address underlying factors like poverty or family dysfunction.
- **Relationships:** poverty and illiteracy raise the risk of juvenile delinquency (strain theory). Peer influence (social disorganization) is amplified in urban slums by weak community structures. Legal interventions have the potential to either increase these characteristics through stigmatization (labeling theory) or lessen them through rehabilitation. These dynamics are further shaped by India's traditional emphasis on family and community.

This conceptual framework demonstrates how the judicial system mediates the relationship between socioeconomic, familial, educational, and peer-related factors and juvenile Criminality in India. It offers a strong framework for examining causal causes and assessing the efficacy of the Juvenile Justice Act by combining the ideas of strain, social disorganization, and labeling. In order to ensure a targeted analysis of the causes and legislative responses to juvenile delinquency, the framework will direct the study's methodology.

Various Causal Factors of Juvenile Criminality

A variety of social, economic, psychological, and environmental factors influence juvenile criminality, which is defined as unlawful or antisocial behavior by minors. Developing successful interventions and legislative frameworks to combat adolescent criminality in India requires an understanding of these causative elements. In order to give a thorough foundation, this section examines the main causes of adolescent criminality with an emphasis on the Indian context.

- **Socioeconomic Factors**

Juvenile crime is significantly influenced by socioeconomic circumstances. Juveniles are frequently pushed toward criminal activity by poverty, unemployment, and a lack of resources and education. Economic inequality and poverty a sizable section of the Indian populace is below the poverty line. Youngsters from low-income families may steal, smuggle, or commit other crimes to help support their houses or meet basic requirements. Lack of money restricts opportunities, which leads to dissatisfaction and misbehaviour. Lack of Education in underprivileged neighbourhoods, there is a high percentage of illiteracy and school dropouts. Due to a lack of positive outlets, adolescents who do not have an education are more prone to hang out with criminal friends or commit crimes. Underemployment and unemployment families with little employment options may experience financial strain, child abuse, or neglect, which makes them more susceptible to delinquency.

- **Family Environment**

The primary socializing agent is the family, and there is a substantial correlation between adolescent delinquency and dysfunctional family dynamics. Parental addiction and Neglect in India, problems such as parental substance addiction, spousal violence, or neglect brought on by work-related stress can lead to an unstable home environment. Outside of their families, juveniles may turn to deviant peer groups for approval. Broken Families emotional insecurity and behavioral problems can result from divorce, single-parent households, or the absence of a parent (due to relocation or jail). Children from shattered households are more prone to do delinquent activities, according to studies. Absence of parental supervision parents who work long hours may leave their kids unattended in rural or urban slums, exposing them to more harmful influences.

- **Peer Influence**

Adolescence is a time when people are more vulnerable to peer pressure, which can greatly increase the likelihood of delinquent behavior. Negative Peer Groups being among gangs or other delinquent peers might normalize illegal activity. Young people in India's high-crime cities are frequently lured into gangs in search of safety or a sense of belonging. The widespread use of social media and exposure to violent or illegal content can desensitize young people or glamorize delinquent lives, which can lead to imitation.

▪ **Psychological and Behavioral Factors**

Individual psychological traits and mental health issues can predispose juveniles to delinquency. Mental health disorders: Aggressive or antisocial behavior can be a symptom of conditions like conduct disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or depression if left untreated. These problems are made worse in India by a lack of access to mental health services. Impulsivity and low Self-Esteem children who struggle with impulse control or low self-esteem may act out to get attention or establish their authority, which can result in criminal behavior. Substance Abuse drug or alcohol experimentation, frequently influenced by peers or the availability of substances in the environment, can impede judgment and raise the risk of criminal activity.

▪ **Environmental and Community Factors**

Juvenile behavior and exposure to crime are influenced by the larger social and community context. Urbanization and Slum Conditions India's fast urbanization has resulted in slums that are congested and lack proper infrastructure. Delinquency rates rise as a result of the exposure of juveniles in these areas to crime, violence, and exploitation. Insufficient recreational facilities without community centres, sports facilities, or extracurricular activities, young people have more free time and are more vulnerable to harmful influences. Cultural and social Norms by restricting access to education and encouraging animosity or disobedience, customs such as child labour or early marriage may unintentionally lead to delinquency in some groups.

▪ **Institutional and Legal Factors**

Criminality can also be influenced by how young people interact with the legal and institutional systems. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, which regulates juvenile delinquency in India, is applied inconsistently and harshly. Juveniles may become alienated by harsh punishments or a lack of rehabilitation efforts, which would increase recidivism. Corruption in juvenile homes or law enforcement can expose young people to additional abuse, fostering mistrust of the system and sustaining delinquent conduct.

Prevention Measures

Most juveniles, who are defined as individuals under the age of eighteen who are in legal trouble, originate from underprivileged and marginalized groups, and the state's inability to protect or care for them is frequently reflected in their exposure to crime. The lines separating young people who commit crimes from those who require protection such as homeless people, people with mental illnesses, and young people engaged in sex work are becoming increasingly hazy in many nations. As a result, young people who require assistance from juvenile protection and welfare organizations may discover that their actions are now illegal. States are therefore urged to take into account the growing amount of data showing that punishing young people who are in legal trouble is ineffective and does not lower crime rates.

A juvenile's long-term prospects may be harmed by the stigma associated with being associated with the criminal justice system. While overcrowding and subpar prison conditions endanger the growth, health, and well-being of juveniles, denying them their freedom can result in permanent and expensive psychological and physical harm. Girls are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse and are more likely to experience mental health issues as a result of being detained.

At crucial and formative stages of their lives, removing young people from their family, community, and school or employment networks can exacerbate social and economic marginalization and disadvantage. For the sake of this article, prevention can be described as community-based initiatives that assist young people in avoiding delinquent behavior and, as a result, coming into contact with the juvenile justice system. Schools, social service organizations, mental and public health organizations, and similar organizations are primarily responsible for developing and implementing prevention programs. In this effort, juvenile justice agencies are frequently involved as well. The Juvenile Justice System's approach to officially approved cases is referred to as intervention.

Result and Discussion

Every offender in this study is adolescent, meaning they are between the ages of 15 and 18. The adolescent age range in a community is 14–18 years old, at which time the juvenile has committed crimes like rape, theft, murder, smoking, and drinking. In addition to the undeniable changes and development that adolescents undergo on a biological and psychological level, adolescence is characterized by three key elements: the emergence of self-awareness, identity assertion, and social integration. Teenagers' unstable personalities are reflected in their normative, motivational sense of good and wrong, which is focused on rejecting and denying adult role models.

This study assessed the legal strategies used under the Juvenile Justice Act of 2015 and looked into the elements that contribute to juvenile criminality in India. With 40% mentioning parental neglect and 65% of the juvenile offenders polled indicating low-income family origins, the findings showed that socioeconomic deprivation is the main cause. These results support Sharma's (2018) claim that poverty leads to a vicious cycle of vulnerability that encourages young people to commit crimes. Another important aspect was peer pressure, as 55% of respondents acknowledged committing crimes under peer pressure, especially in urban slums. This runs counter to Kumar's (2020) focus on education, which implies that social networks are more important in urban environments. In terms of legal strategies, rehabilitation and reintegration are required by the Juvenile Justice Act of 2015; nevertheless, execution varies. Sixty percent of juvenile justice boards lack certified counsellors, and only twenty-five percent of observation homes adhere to legal requirements. Gupta (2022), who drew attention to persistent underfunding in India's juvenile justice system, pointed out that these inadequacies compromise the Act's rehabilitative objective. The results indicate that although the legal framework is progressive, bureaucratic inefficiencies and resource limitations hinder its effectiveness. These findings have two implications. First, by addressing the underlying reasons, targeted welfare programs that address socioeconomic concerns may help lower adolescent criminality. Second, more money for training and infrastructure is needed to strengthen the juvenile justice system. Future research should examine rural environments and the long-term effects of rehabilitation programs, as the study's generalizability is limited by its emphasis on three states. All things considered, these results show that in order to effectively combat juvenile crime in India, a comprehensive strategy combining strong legal enforcement with preventive social programs is required.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to assess the legislative framework supporting the Juvenile Justice Act of 2015 and critically analyse the causes of juvenile delinquency in India. With 65% of questioned offenders indicating poverty as a main cause, the results showed that peer pressure, parental neglect, and socioeconomic disadvantage are important factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency. At the same time, just 25% of observation homes meet legislative requirements for rehabilitation, despite the Juvenile Justice Act's progressive framework being hindered by a shortage of skilled staff and poor facilities. These observations emphasize how systemic legal issues and socioeconomic vulnerabilities interact to combat adolescent crime.

This study's importance stems from its careful examination of India's juvenile justice system, which provides a regional viewpoint to support international theories of delinquency. The study emphasizes the necessity of preventive actions that address the underlying causes by pinpointing poverty and peer influence as the two main determinants. This calls on policymakers to implement community-based interventions to improve family support networks and targeted welfare programs to reduce socioeconomic gaps. In the legal sphere, strengthening juvenile justice boards' capabilities and upgrading observation home infrastructure are essential to achieving the Act's rehabilitation objectives. These suggestions are in line with India's duties under international agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its dedication to child welfare. The study's generalizability is limited by its emphasis on three states, despite its merits; future research should look into rural environments and the long-term effects of rehabilitation programs. Comparative studies with different nations may also yield insightful information about effective practices. In the end, combating adolescent crime in India necessitates a comprehensive strategy that combines strong law enforcement with proactive social measures. India can create a system that not only rehabilitates young offenders but also gives them the tools they need to make significant contributions to society by addressing the causes and effects of juvenile delinquency. This would pave the way for a more just and equitable future.

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