

## **Predicting Youth Delinquency**

### **A Semi-Structured Interview Study Exploring the Experiential Frame of Juveniles and Investigating Variables that Predict the Engagement in Delinquency**

**Bachelor Thesis – University of Twente**

Kennispunt Twente

Judith Roever (2774593)

1<sup>st</sup> Supervisor: Dr. Peter de Vries

2<sup>nd</sup> Supervisor: Dr. Jiska Jonas

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### **Abstract**

Youth delinquency poses a constant concern to societal safety and presents a significant risk to the healthy development of young people. A complex interplay of individual, environmental, and social factors influences youth's likelihood of engaging in delinquent behaviour. This article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiential frame of delinquent juveniles and those at risk and investigates factors that predict engagement in delinquency. The variables of analysis are attitudes and beliefs regarding social norms, quality and stability of interpersonal relationships, parental supervision and monitoring, and coping with negative experiences and stressors. Further, effective strategies and approaches that can counteract certain behavioural patterns and internalized beliefs are examined, concerning aspects that are of value and should be regarded in potential intervention designs. Within semi-structured interviews, perspectives and experiences of a diverse group of people were gathered and analysed. The final sample consisted of five participants who work closely together with juveniles, including a researcher, psychologist, youth probation officers and intensive pedagogical teachers. The results indicate that a dysfunctional familial environment as well as peer groups and individual aspects including low self-regulation skills and high levels of impulsivity are the predominant predictors of delinquency. Thus, engagement in delinquency is an expression of compounded experiences and dispositions, reflecting the deficiencies and needs of young people.

## Introduction

Juvenile criminal offences present a multifaceted issue that goes beyond legal proceedings and the disruption of established societal structures, grasping fundamental aspects of an individual's life and environment (Creemers et al., 2022). An alarming rise in armed and severe assaults of young offenders has gained the attention of both society and policymakers (Pascoe, 2022). As youth prosecutor Rianne de Back stated in an interview with NOS Radio 1, the growing use of weapons among juveniles, such as knives, guns or machetes, is concerning (Darroch, 2021). Recent news reports about the increasing propensity for violence. Police have arrested an 18-year-old offender after he stabbed two victims; one of them died due to the injuries (112Twente.nl, 2022). According to Dutch News, police in Rotterdam are noticing an alarming increase of underaged youths within drug gangs, waiting to facilitate the unloading of drug shipments (NL Times, 2023). The complexity of youth delinquency requires a thorough study of the experiential frame of delinquent youths, exploring their societal structures and emotional nature that influence their behaviour. Influences that facilitate delinquency are well-researched. However, the current study attempts to grasp the internal processes and motivations of juveniles who show deviant behaviours. By this, the needs of emerging adults can be better targeted and implemented in potential intervention programs.

The term 'youth delinquency' (or 'juvenile delinquency') refers to criminal behaviour committed by individuals categorized as youths, typically between the ages of 15 and 24 years (United Nations, 2014). Three different categories can be assigned to youth delinquency: delinquency, criminal behaviour, and status offences (Siegel & Welsh, 2005). Delinquency encompasses crimes committed by minors that predominately violate social norms including vandalism and assault. Criminal behaviours such as stealing violate the law and are dealt with by the criminal justice system. Lastly, status offences are noncriminal offenses committed by minors, which are usually not classified as criminal, but constitute violations of age-appropriate behaviour, such as truancy or the consumption of substances (Garg, 2023).

The consequences and effects of youth delinquency are wide-ranging. Juvenile offenders have a significantly higher prevalence of severe mental disorders, compared to the overall juvenile population, indicating their complex needs (Church et al., 2017). Involved families are confronted with emotional and psychological stress, financial burdens, social stigmas, and/or disruptions of family dynamics (Singh, 2023). With increased crime rates and economic costs, communities sense feelings of insecurity and the economic burden of increased law enforcement (Chen et al., 2020). Given its significant consequences not only for

the victim(s) but also for other individuals, families and communities, juvenile delinquency generates public outcry and is a concern for public safety (Creemers et al., 2022).

While the Netherlands do report an increase in armed and more severe assaults by young offenders, (e.g., Rotterdam), the overall numbers of youth delinquency seem to be decreasing (Darroch, 2021; Van der Laan, 2019). This is intriguing and hints towards societal development including an increase in security, educational qualifications, and welfare (Van der Laan, 2019). Nevertheless, Church and colleagues (2017) note that criminal offences have become more serious and complex, and the willingness to practice acts of violence has grown significantly. According to the Annual Report, the majority of young, registered suspects commit property crimes. This statistic includes both male and female suspects (Joosten, 2022). When it comes to crimes that fall into this category, theft is the most prevalent. The number of underaged offenders who were convicted in the Netherlands for theft rose by 13% compared to 2016 to a number of 604 in year 2019 (Joosten, 2022).

As young people navigate the path to adulthood it is of significant importance to recognize the diverse needs of youth and further, to provide them with support and resources. However, this path is faced with multiple influences and challenges, leading vulnerable young people to be susceptible to deviant behaviours or even engaging in criminal offences. Thus, the focus of the current study is on the experiential frame of juveniles and investigates variables that predict youth delinquency. However, the engagement in predecessors such as status offences indicates tendencies toward criminal behaviours and thus will be regarded as well (Barrett et al., 2006). Further, effective approaches and strategies are identified that aid the positive development of young people and counteract behavioural patterns and internalized beliefs. Therefore, the main research question investigated in this study is as follows: *What are common factors that predict the engagement in delinquency and what are effective approaches that facilitate healthy juvenile development?*

### **Theoretical Framework**

Researchers have identified a diverse range of factors and events in someone's life that serve as a predictor for later criminal behaviour, encompassing environmental factors, social aspects and individual circumstances. According to the cumulative risk model (Evans & Whipple, 2013), youth delinquency is predicted by the number and influences of risk factors present in an individual's life. The exposure to multiple risk factors, such as socioeconomic influences (e.g., poverty) and social impairments (e.g., dysfunctional relationships), significantly contributes to detrimental consequences in the individual's development (Evans & Whipple, 2013). Social factors, including social bonds and peer influences, as well as

individual factors including age, gender, ethnicity, family dynamics, and educational attainment, play a significant role in shaping susceptibility to delinquency (Van der Laan, 2019). For example, Joosten (2022) found that the highest proportion of suspected offenders is among 15-year-old girls and 19-20-year-old males. Additionally, Junger and colleagues (2013) found that males are four times more likely to engage in offensive behaviours compared to females. Within the individual's immediate context, numerous risk and protective factors determine the development of youth. Maladaptive parenting, substance abuse, and peer delinquency are among the risk factors associated with youth delinquency, while social skills, parental supervision, and attachment serve as strong protective factors (Van der Laan, 2019).

Overall, researchers identify social interactions as the dominant predictor of delinquent behaviour (Beaver & Boccio, 2022). Osgood (2023) concluded that unstructured socializing acts as a bridge between social factors and crime. Recognising the Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), Osgood and colleagues (1996) investigated how time spent in unstructured socializing is linked to deviant behaviours and crime. This theory emphasises how everyday activities provide opportunities for delinquent behaviour, influenced by the presence of peers, lack of supervision, and unstructured activities. Consequently, involvement in unstructured socializing and exposure to peer delinquency can explain changes in deviant behaviours and the inclination to commit criminal acts (Hoeben et al., 2016). The presence of delinquent peers not only reduces the inhibition to act upon criminal impulses but also serves as an appreciative audience making criminal behaviour rewarding (Osgood, 2023).

### **Social Norms**

Social norms are defined as the “perceived informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable and appropriate actions within a group or community [...]” (UNICEF, 2021). Thereby, they represent fundamental aspects of social dynamics and guide behavioural interactions across various human collectives (Cialdini et al., 1990). The violation of social norms is closely connected with youth delinquency, as in clinical terms it is referred to as repeated conduct of antisocial behaviours and committing aggressive acts (Farrington & Loeber, 2000). Thus, it becomes clear that youth delinquency is characterised by the persistent manner of disrespecting established norms and disrupting societal structures. To understand the engagement in unstructured socializing and deviant behaviours it is of importance to investigate the attitudes and beliefs regarding social norms youths hold. A substantial amount of literature emphasises the pivotal role of the social environment on norm formation (Cohen

et al., 2014; Boccio et al., 2022).

Investigating the source of norm formation helps to understand internalised behaviours and beliefs. The Theory of Normative Social Behaviour posits that individuals internalize norms through exposure to social behaviour. Specifically, the perceptions of others' actions (descriptive norms) and the perceptions of other people's expectations (injunctive norms) shape the individuals' attitudes and behaviour (Real & Rimal, 2005). In situations where delinquent behaviour is performed by peers and perceived as acceptable, an individual may be more inclined to conform to these norms (Cohen et al., 2014). According to this theory, the individual is motivated to adjust their behaviour and attitudes to the perceived social norms due to the desire to gain social approval and avoid social rejection (Cohen et al., 2014). Despite extensive research on social norms, the sources of norm formation remain unclear. Therefore, apart from my overall research inquiry stated above, attention is paid to social norms upheld by delinquent youths, with an examination of the source of norm formation.

***Social Norms:*** What is the source of norm formation in youths and how do internalized social norms influence the engagement in delinquency?

### **Quality and Stability of Interpersonal Relationships**

The importance of meaningful interpersonal relationships for the development of young people is well established and can be related to the emergence of youth delinquency. Positive and nourishing relationships equip the individual with cognitive, emotional, and social skills (Hartup & Steven, 1997). Through interaction with family members, friends, and teachers the individual is provided with conflict resolution skills, the ability to regulate emotions, and essential social skills including empathy and communication (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). This environment enriches the developing individual with the ability to form and maintain meaningful and deep connections with others. According to the Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1996), strong social bonds with family members, teachers or others can prevent delinquent behaviour as these connections provide the individual with fundamental social skills and a trustful connection.

Nevertheless, disruptions in these interpersonal connections, whether with friends, family members, or even teachers, may cause difficulties in establishing and sustaining meaningful bonds, leading to impairments in their social, emotional, and psychological well-being (Chang & Yu, 2021). The absence of supportive relationships can impede the acquisition of essential social skills, including as empathy, communication, and conflict resolution (Ashworth et al., 2022). Moreover, unstable and unhealthy connections exacerbate

stress and mental health issues, placing the individual at a heightened risk of engaging in deviant and delinquent behaviours, as they seek alternative sources of connection and ways of coping with the situation (Bellis et al., 2016). Overall, re-experiencing terminations and breakdowns of interpersonal relationships have detrimental effects on the healthy development of youths, emphasising the importance of fostering and nurturing connections throughout their formative years. To gain a deeper understanding of the significance and impact of interpersonal connections among delinquent youths, the quality and stability of their relationships will be assessed. Moreover, the effect of experiencing relationship breakdowns on the behaviour of juveniles will be investigated.

***Interpersonal Relationships:*** How does the quality and stability of interpersonal relationships influence the likelihood of engaging in delinquency and what role can be attributed to relationship breakdowns?

### **The Role of Parental Monitoring and Supervision**

Closely related to interpersonal relationships is the role of parental involvement. Liu and Miller (2020) highlighted the importance of parental supervision, which accounts for one of the strongest protective factors against youth delinquency. Stable family dynamics increase the likelihood of positive youth development and thus decrease the likelihood of engaging in unstructured socializing with peers (Liu & Miller, 2020). Within a secure family environment, the individual is provided with a positive and supportive relationship, with an emphasis on healthy conflict resolutions and emotion regulation, parental monitoring and supervision (Thomeer & Umberson, 2020). Previous studies have argued that parental supervision, in combination with positive involvement in their children's lives significantly lowers the probability of engaging in delinquency (Donges, 2015). Such an environment shapes a youth's behaviour and provides them with a secure foundation for maturation, where established social norms and morals are transferred.

According to the Family System Theory (Bowen, 1978), an individual's functioning is determined by its family system. Families are networks of interdependent and connected individuals, none of which could be understood without taking the system as a whole into account. Bowen's theory suggests that delinquent behaviours of youths are a reflection of the dynamics and the quality of relationships within the family (Anderson, 2002). In this regard, parental involvement and supervision are significant aspects. Effective communication and emotional adaptation skills, learned in stable family dynamics, reduce the likelihood of delinquent behaviours. Therefore, family dynamics and stable systems determine the

development of juveniles.

Unstable dynamics, such as poor parental monitoring, inconsistent discipline, authoritarian parenting style, family conflicts and dysfunction dynamics, and substance abuse within the family serve as disruptive factors for positive youth development (Bolland et al, 2020). Joosten (2022) stated that the majority of youth suspects live in unstable family structures and predominately in single-parent households, often without a father figure present. Individuals within unstable family dynamics display behaviours such as increased irritability, aggression, rebelliousness, decline in school performance, substance abuse, risk behaviours, maladaptive coping mechanisms, and lack of trust and emotional distance (Cherlin & Fomby, 2007). Moreover, the “absence of capable guardianship” (Cohen & Felson, 1979), such as parental figures, decreases the level of self-control an individual inhibits, leading a situation to be more conducive to deviant behaviour and negative responses (Osgood, 2023; Eisner et al., 2019).

While there is a substantial amount of research on parental involvement, this study aims to take a focus that comes as close to the perspective of delinquent juveniles as possible and how parental involvement is perceived. This experiential focus can provide a more narrow understanding of how individuals are affected by the parent’s actions and presence, which existing literature may not fully capture. The current research considers a qualitative multifaceted perspective, emphasizing not only parental supervision and monitoring but also the quality, revealing more nuanced aspects.

***Parental Involvement:*** What is the role of parental involvement in influencing and mitigating the youth’s likelihood of engaging in delinquency?

### **Coping With Stressors and Negative Experiences**

A positive correlation between psychopathologies and acts of violation is emphasised by multiple researchers. Studies found that a majority of delinquent youths deal with mental illnesses (Beck et al., 2018; Blair et al., 2011; Vermeiren, 2003). In particular trauma-related psychopathologies such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Adverse Childhood Experiences, and Dissociative Disorder are expansively documented (Blair et al., 2011). In this regard, Adverse Childhood Experiences generate profound disadvantages and impairments and refer to experiences including emotional and physical abuse and neglect, domestic violence, exposure to substance abuse and mental illness within the household, parental separation or divorce, and criminal histories of family members (Baglivio et al., 2016). Anda and colleagues (2010) additionally considered the role of peers and siblings and added



experiences of bullying, peer violence, and physical and emotional abuse of siblings as important factors. Exposure to these events is closely linked to a substantial amount of stress during an individual's development and increases the susceptibility to delinquency.

Stressful life events (SLE) including the increased exposure to violence, psychopathologies, and instable family and peer relationships are associated with risk-taking behaviours and thus with delinquency (Chen & Dariotis, 2020). Following the General Strain Theory (GST) proposed by Agnew (1992), experiencing strains and stressors across various domains significantly impacts young people, leading to the emergence of negative emotions, such as anger or depression, which in turn foster deviant behaviour. This theory suggests that engagement in delinquency can be seen as a coping mechanism in order to alleviate negative emotions (Blurton et al., 2009). Another theory that supports the link between coping mechanisms and delinquency is the General Theory of Crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). It suggests that the predominant factor leading to the engagement in delinquency is the lack of self-control. Thus, individuals with low self-control have a higher risk of engaging in criminal activities or other forms of deviant behaviours, as they do not have the capacity to resist impulses and temptations.

Multiple researchers have found that the majority of delinquent juveniles or those at risk inhibit maladaptive coping mechanisms and thus are not capable of regulating their emotions (Pfefferbaum & Wood, 1994). In this paper, psychological stressors affecting these individuals are identified and how their coping with negative experiences influences their engagement in delinquent behaviours.

***Coping Mechanisms:*** How do delinquent youths cope with different stressors and negative experiences and how does their coping influence the likelihood of engaging in delinquency?

The number of youngsters is expected to increase over the next years, it is thus of importance to early detect risk factors for delinquency and to provide sufficient support in order to minimize the rate of delinquency and to protect youths and society (Simpson, 2024). The above exploration of potential youth delinquency determinants informed the interviews with experts and laid the ground for further investigation into potential predictor variables. Within this research, the focus is on the experiential frame of juveniles, encompassing personal characteristics, social influences, cognitive and emotional abilities, and environmental aspects. It draws on the expertise of professionals from the social sectors to gain a deeper understanding of influences, beliefs, and motives that contribute to the engagement in specific behaviours. With an emphasize on detecting deviant developments as early as possible, precursors of delinquency are also paid attention to and considered.

Furthermore, potential approaches and strategies are collected that could be effective in supporting juveniles, which could be valuable in designing intervention or treatment programs.

## **Methods**

### **Design**

A qualitative approach was used in designing the study about predicting variables of youth delinquency. A semi-structured interview schedule was applied to explore the factors and circumstances associated with the engagement in delinquency (Appendix 2). This qualitative method was identified as most appropriate as it allows for flexibility whilst also enabling the researcher to focus the discussion on relevant subtopics. Semi-structured interviews consist of predefined key questions, which help to explore the topic of interest, but also allow the interviewer to adjust and modifications to the structure in an effort to explore the richness of the topic (Chadwick et al., 2008). Open-ended questions enabled the participants to freely describe their experiences and perspectives. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of the experiential frame was achieved, and the underlying structures and influences within the individual's environment were examined. In this qualitative study, data was collected through face-to-face interviews with adolescents who work closely with delinquent youth. The interviews were performed either in person or in an online environment (zoom or teams).

### **Participants**

The sample studied consisted of five participants, who took part in the interview individually ( $n = 5$ ). The participants for this study were selected with the use of purposeful sampling. This sampling technique is recommended when subjects are intentionally chosen based on a variety of criteria resulting in information-rich cases where one can learn about the issues and central importance to the purpose of the research (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The question of data saturation and thus of an appropriate sample size is of smaller relevance in qualitative research. Yin (2009) argues that the sample size depends on the depth and certainty of information the researcher aims to achieve.

After receiving ethical approval, potential participants were contacted. Stakeholders of interest were people above the age of 18 years, who work closely together with delinquent youths or youths at risk of becoming delinquent. Further, sufficient insights into the personal environment and behaviours of the juveniles were required in order to answer the in-depth

questions. The final sample included participants with the below-listed professions (Table 1). No additional personal information was collected as this was not of interest nor influence for this study.

**Table 1**

*Presentation of the Professions of the Included Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Profession</b>
1	Researcher – at a University in Applied Sciences with an interest in cyber criminality
2	Psychologist – at a youth probation institution
3	Juvenile Probation Officer – works with youth during criminal proceedings.
4	Teacher in an intensive pedagogy field
5	Teacher in an intensive pedagogy field

**Procedure**

The variables of interest were assessed with the help of a semi-structured interview schedule, which the researcher of this study designed. The research questions guiding the current study were designed further to understand the experiences and situations of juvenile offenders. Variables of interest were selected based on existing literature and reports of employee experiences out of the social sector. It was important to focus on the individuals themselves and their experiential frame. Therefore, variables within the individual's immediate environment were chosen, which could provide the reader and other researchers with an in-depth understanding of their imprints, leading to deviant developments. First, social norms and the source of norm formation in delinquent youths are assessed with questions such as “In your experience working with youths, what are some common attitudes and beliefs among them regarding delinquent behaviour?” or “How do you perceive the influence of peer groups on the development and reinforcement of delinquent norms among the youth you work with?”. Next, the value of stable relationships and the impact of

relationship conflicts and relationship cut-offs is investigated with questions like “How do the quality and stability of interpersonal relationships impacts youth’s likelihood of engaging in delinquent behaviour?” and “What is the role of relationship conflicts and/or breakdowns on an individual’s likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour?”. Parental monitoring and supervision serve as protective factors against deviant developments in behaviour. In order to address its importance and its value in interventions, the level of parental involvement is examined with questions like “What do you think is the role of parental monitoring when it comes to increasing or decreasing the likelihood of engaging in delinquency?” and “What are some challenges or barriers that parents of delinquent youths face in effectively monitoring and supervising their children’s activities?”. Lastly, the following questions address different negative experiences and coping abilities of a delinquent youth: “What are common stressors or negative experiences, which influence these youths in their acting?”, or “What maladaptive or negative coping behaviours have you noticed in delinquent youths as ways of dealing with stress or even trauma?”. In order to collect ideas for future intervention programs, the participants are asked what they think is important to incorporate and regard when it comes to designing such possible intervention “What do you think could be done to prevent or reduce delinquent behaviours among young people? Can you name concrete examples of what should be implemented into an intervention/monitor?”.

Prior to the interview, the participants were provided with a participant information sheet, which included information about the project, the project purpose, the procedure, the participants' rights, what to do in case of discomfort or distress, potential benefits, confidentiality, how the results of the study will be used, and contact opportunities for questions or other concerns (Appendix 1). Before the interview started, the participants had to give informed consent that they had read the information sheet and were aware that the interview would be audio-recorded. With consent, the interview started by asking the participants about their general perspective on the influences and circumstances within an individual’s environment that facilitate the engagement in delinquency. The participants were interviewed after one another, and the interviewees chose the place of conduct in order to ensure privacy and comfort.

The interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes and were held either in the institution the participant worked in or in an online environment (zoom or Teams). Once the data was collected, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed. In case the interview was held in German, the transcript was translated into English using word. The transcription was proofread by listening to the recordings and rereading the transcript as the

audio played. Any grammatical or spelling mistakes were corrected, and doubled words were deleted.

### **Data analysis**

The interviews were audio-recorded and afterwards transcribed. The final transcript then was imported into the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti. This program was utilised to analyse qualitative data from interviews and extract factors influencing youth engagement in delinquency. First, the data was observed to get a feeling of the experiences reported. Simultaneously, meaningful information was assigned to the different codes and other valuable insights were noted. Conducting the analysis consisted of both, deductive and inductive aspects. The research questions and the variables of interest guided the analysis of the transcripts. Thus, the main part of the data was analysed in a deductive manner. Within deductive coding, a set of predefined codes is applied to the data. Based on my research questions, four codes were generated for deductive coding that were in line with the variables I sought to investigate. The defined codes are ‘Social Norms and Norm Formation’, ‘Quality and Stability of Interpersonal Relationships’, ‘Role of Parental Monitoring and Supervision’, and ‘Coping with Stressors and Negative Experiences’. Part of the analysis was also to explore additional factors and perspectives on the topic studied. This is in line with the inductive approach. Meaningful features of the inductive analysis were assigned to either the category ‘Additional factors’ or ‘Intervention Essentials’. Below, all codes are discussed and explained in detail.

### **Coding Scheme**

Coding ensures the validity and reliability of the findings and describes the process of labelling and organising qualitative data to abstract different themes and their interconnectivity. The coding scheme consists of 4 codes designed based on the research questions. The codes are mutually exclusive in their meaning, as described below. The order of the codes was determined based on the order of the research and interview questions. Additionally, two categories were designed to assign the participants’ perspectives regarding the most common factors and circumstances leading to delinquent behaviour (‘Prevalent Influences’) and ideas and essentials for interventions (‘Intervention Essentials’).

### **Social Norms and Norm Formation**

This code captures all units of analysis, in which attitudes and beliefs of youths are described regarding what behaviour is considered acceptable, expected and is typically

observed in their social environment. This code reflects how social norms and values influence individual and group behaviour. Further, it includes how these norms are formed and by whom the norm formation is influenced. An example that expresses how youths perceive their behaviour is “others behave worse” and “the victim deserved it” (P. 2, P. 4, P. 5).

### **The Quality and Stability of Interpersonal Relationships**

This code covers all units of analysis in which the richness (quality) and enduring (stability) of interpersonal relationships are referenced. Interpersonal relationships refer to any form of connection with other people, such as family, friends, peers, mentors or authority figures. This code encompasses descriptions of the quality, in the form of support and acceptance, but also the level of social skills. The stability of relationships is assessed with regard to consistency and the capability to overcome conflicts, but it also focuses on the effects of relationship breakdowns. An example from an interviewee that highlights the relationship dynamics most of these juveniles encounter is “the majority of these juveniles do not have the abilities to maintain meaningful relationships” (P. 4). Another reference out of one transcript is “relationship breakdown is a common experience of juveniles” (P. 2). These statements express the level of skills to form and maintain relationships and that re-experiencing relationship breakdowns is part of most juveniles’ life.

### **Role of Parental Monitoring and Supervision**

This code encompasses all units of analysis about the extent and manner in which parents are involved and acknowledged in the activities of their children. This encompasses the child’s activities, behaviours, environments, and friends they surround themselves with. This code covers direct supervision and indirect monitoring. Direct supervision involves, for example, parental presence, rules, expectations, and communication, whilst indirect monitoring addresses the level of parental awareness and influence of peer relationships or activities. To give an example, participants 4 and 5 indicated that “parents often fail to implement any form of rules or restrictions”.

### **Coping with Stressors and Negative Experiences**

This code includes all units of analysis, encompassing references to strategies and behaviours that individuals apply to overcome stress and negative experiences. The focus here is on maladaptive or unhealthy coping mechanisms. Further, experienced stressors and negative experiences are assessed, which influence the individual's behaviour. Everyday

stressors that a delinquent youth experience have been extracted from the transcript: “performance pressure,” “social expectations,” or “adhering to social norms.”

## Results

In the following, the results of the interview study are discussed. All participants have a common ground that family dynamics (e.g., “attachment”, “divorced parents”, “physical and emotional neglect by parents”) and the social environment (e.g., “peer groups”) exert the strongest influences on an individual with regards to a delinquent development. Additionally, the majority of interviewees have stated that a lack of self-regulation skills (e.g., “impulsivity”, “aggression”) significantly determines engagement in delinquent behaviours. The table below (Table 2) displays common factors influencing the engagement in delinquency as reported by the participants, categorised into three main domains.

**Table 2**

*Participants on Common Influences Leading to Engagement in Delinquency*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Risk Factors</b>
Individual Circumstances	Cognitive developmental impairments; low impulse control; ADHD; neurological impairments; traumatic experiences; issues with adaptive skills; marginalisation from society; discrimination due to cultural background; weak self-regulation skills; inability to self-reflect
Social Aspects	Peer groups; delinquent peers; social media; time spend online;
Environmental Influences	Family circumstances; divorced parents; physically and emotionally unavailable parents; insufficient familial attachment; parental neglect; criminal history of the family; online environment; poverty; exposure to violence; unsafe neighbourhoods; general developmental phases (e.g., puberty)

## Presentation of Codes

The table below displays the frequency codes applied to analyse the transcripts. Additionally, a selected list of indicators provides examples of which information was paid attention to regarding the codes. Lastly, the relative frequency indicates the frequency at which a code was applied in the document divided by the number of documents.

**Table 3**

*Presentation of Factors that Exert Influence on the Engagement in Delinquency per Code*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Example Indicators</b>	<b>Relative Frequency</b>
Social Norms and Norm Formation	Adapt behaviours of peers; trivialization; rationalisation; justification of behaviour;	20%
Quality and Stability of Interpersonal Relationships	Abilities to form and maintain relationships; social skills; relationship conflicts and breakdowns	27.27%
Role of Parental Monitoring and Supervision	Parental involvement; rules; restrictions; behavioural guidelines; parental behaviour;	32.12%
Coping with Stressors and Negative Experiences	Maladaptive coping strategies, abilities to self-regulate; impulsivity; aggression;	20.61%

## Social Norms

Starting with the first variable of the investigation, ‘Social Norms and Norm Formation’, most participants have indicated that delinquent juveniles seem to have a distorted perception of acceptable behaviours, values, and norms. For instance, an interviewee with interest in cyber criminality noted that these individuals “lack a moral compass” (P. 1). Reported by all participants, delinquent youths “trivialise”, “rationalise”, and “justify” their



actions. They downplay the seriousness of their behaviour, devise excuses that make their behaviour seem acceptable, and defend their actions as necessary and reasonable to demonstrate that what they did was appropriate. Hereby, they display defensive behaviours and rather blame someone else (P. 3). Participant 4 has observed attitudes of youths encompassing “nobody can help me anyways”, “nothing matters”, or “this is how I have always done it (P. 4). Further, attitudes of indifference (“I do not care”, “it is not as bad”, or “I would not amount to anything anyway”) have been noticed by most participants (P. 2, P. 3, P. 4, P. 5).

The influence of peer groups plays a significant role in increasing the likelihood of engaging in delinquency. All participants rated the negative influence of peers on norm formation as the most dominant. The youths’ desire to belong, gain recognition and achieve status fosters deviant behaviours that conform to the norms of their peer group (P. 4, P. 5). Within these dynamics, the individuals are pushed and encouraged to act upon offences they would normally not do on their own (“They often commit crimes only when someone else is present”, “bodily harm and assault most often occur in the presence of peers” (P. 5)). Contributing to the normalisation of delinquent behaviours, youths often receive no response or show insight that they behave in a wrong manner because they are surrounded by people who model similar behavioural patterns (P. 4). It can be summarised that the attitudes and beliefs youths hold towards socially acceptable behaviours is shaped by the peers they surround themselves with. However, for the influence of peers to be as strong, there must have been a lack of norm transmission within the family environment (P. 3). In such a case, the individual seeks guidance in peer groups (P. 3).

Analysing the influence of the family household on the normalisation or rejection of delinquent behaviour, all participants reported that the family environment plays a crucial role in shaping an individuals’ norm perception. The behaviour of the parents provides the child with a moral compass and imparts a sense of what is appropriate and what is not (P. 1, P. 2). The behaviours learned and imitated by juveniles is often displayed by the parents themselves (P. 4, P. 5). Factors that facilitate the normalization of delinquent behaviours include a family with a criminal background, frequent substance abuse by parents, and physical and emotional absence of parental figures (P. 2, P. 5). Within these families the perception of norms and values is different (“it is all not as bad”, “other kids behave much worse”, “as long as there is no report or legal proceedings we do not care” (P. 2, P. 4, P. 5)). As observed by participants 4 and 5, parents often resign, show no interest in the child’s activities and do not respond to contact attempts (P. 4, P. 5). When a child is raised with no boundaries, restrictions or rules, or

in other words with no guidance, the child seeks behavioural orientation in other social dynamics (P. 3). Additionally, residing in a neighbourhood where delinquency is prevalent makes deviant behaviours more acceptable. (P. 4, P. 5). Delinquent behaviour is typically rejected in families where parents do not have a delinquent history or live in a neighbourhood where deviant behaviour is rare and disapproved. It is important that the family environment models a positive self and positive behaviour (P. 3). The larger the influence of the parents, the less negative influence of peers. (P. 3). However, parents are often greatly overwhelmed by their child's behaviour, in particular during the developmental phases of puberty, making it difficult for parents to exert influence (P. 1, P. 3, P. 4, P. 5).

Behavioural patterns that have commonly been observed within delinquent juveniles are the justification and relativisation of their behaviour, which all participants reported. However, behavioural patterns are often offence-specific and dependent on the social group juveniles surround themselves with. This is why defensive behaviour can be frequently observed in violent assaults and trivialised behaviour in theft offences (P. 3). Substance abuse in the context of delinquency is reported by 2 out of 5 participants. This can be explained as the use of drugs and alcohol is context specific. Increased drug consumption can be observed in the dynamics of acquisition criminality and drug-related crime. However, as stated by Participants 1, 4, and 5, it cannot be generalised and brought into connection with delinquency. Rather, it reflects typical teenage experiences without necessarily being connected to other forms of criminal behaviour. General trends that have been noticeable over the past years are the shift to cyber criminality, filming the offences and uploading them on social media and an increase in armed offences (for example, with knives and machetes) (P. 1, P. 2, P. 4, P.5). Further, the second interviewee reported that criminal acts are getting more organised and calculated. Underaged juveniles are recruited to execute those chores for which adults would receive high sentencing (P. 2).

Strategies and approaches that could be effective in promoting positive social norms and reducing delinquent behaviour are positive role models and a positive social environment in which curiosity, abilities and talents can be explored (P. 1, P. 3). To transmit acceptable social norms and values a close supervision by primary and secondary caregivers with a positive influence is needed. In the attempt to establish a sustainable relationship, certain aspects are of significant importance, namely, transparency, consistency, and authenticity (P. 2, P. 3, P. 4, P. 5). Of significant value are the abilities of caregivers to admit and communicate mistakes, to apologise and to make up for the mistake if necessary (P. 4, P. 5). In order to reduce delinquency, the entire system is needed ("the parents, the peers, the social

environment, the workplace, and sports”) to provide young people with adequate support and enhance a positive development (P. 2). Participants 1, 4, and 5 further highlighted the importance of programs besides school (P. 4, P. 5). This includes after-school care, youth centres or sport programs. As stated by Participant 5, “Every hour that is supervised is a good hour”. Strategies that aid the youth in resisting and avoiding delinquency are to display to them the possible consequences of their actions, including the legal proceedings and consequences for victims. Moreover, providing them with alternative courses of action and coping strategies helps them handling emotions effectively (P. 4, P. 5). Probably the most important factor for effective development is generating perspectives that keep the juvenile motivated. This can be graduating from school, finishing an apprenticeship, finding a job, or getting sober. (P. 5).

### **Quality and Stability of Interpersonal Relationships**

The next variable investigated was the ‘Quality and Stability of Interpersonal Relationships’ and its influence on the likelihood of engagement in delinquency. Additionally, the role of relationship breakdown was assessed. All participants emphasised the value of healthy and supportive relationships and stated that it is maybe the most important one (P. 1, P. 2, P. 3, P. 4, P. 5). As indicated, stable and nourishing relationships are the basis for a positive and successful development. The tools to build and maintain healthy relationships should be provided by primary caregivers, such as the parents. Thus, if a child is securely attached to the parents, it is equipped with great resilience. Within supportive and stable relationships, the individual has a feeling of belonging, is provided with social skills and can build positive self-esteem (P. 2, P. 4, P. 5). It is a safe environment for the individual to explore, learn and grow. The role of parents is to be a role model, providing the child with effective coping strategies and the ability to self-regulate and to offer perspectives (P. 2, P. 4, P. 5). In case such a relationship with primary caregivers is not given, stable relationships to secondary caregivers or other reference persons, for example, teachers or social workers, can mitigate delinquent behaviour and support youths in the form of being a role model. Often, these people are the first to teach juveniles alternative courses of action and coping strategies and generate a perspective that motivates their positive development (P. 5). In the process of establishing a form of relationship with juveniles, intensive support with a focus on structure and continuity are the key factors to effectively work with youths (P. 3, P. 4, P. 5). Within this close supervision, teachers to early detect signs of distress and overwhelm within the pupils and to quickly intervene and regulate the emotions (P. 4, P 5).

Disruption or traumatic experiences in the relationship with parents are predictive for

later deviant behaviours and a deficiency in social skills (P. 2). Relationship conflicts and breakdowns are common experiences in the histories of all juveniles who have engaged in delinquent behaviour. Participant 2 explained that relationship conflicts are part of everybody's life; however, these are not the issue. Moreover, the ability to effectively resolve these conflicts is what most youngsters lack (P. 2). Conflicts often occur in family dynamics where parents are divorced and only one parent is present. As explained by Participant 1, switching from one household to another poses an increased likelihood of emotional and psychological challenges for the child. Often, these children face periods of irregular contact or experience heavy conflicts between the parents, making it difficult for them to feel they belong and maintain long-term relationships (P. 2). It was reported by all participants that, in particular, relationship breakdowns have a profound impact on the youth's development and behaviour. The most influential are relationship breakdowns with primary caregivers, followed by secondary caregivers. Thus, they serve as a strong indicator of deviant behaviours and strongly increase the likelihood of engaging in delinquency. The majority of delinquent juveniles have unstable relationship dynamics or lack any connection to an authority figure, leading them to be heavily dependent on themselves.

Reexperiencing relationship breakdown greatly affects the way in which juveniles trust and interact with other people. As explained by Participant 5, these juveniles challenge new connections and test their stability and resilience. Additionally, they tend to maintain a distance and avoid relying heavily on new relationships, assuming that these connections will eventually break down (P. 5). This protective measure leads to conflicts in building new relationships. As reported by participants 4 and 5, it is tough and exhausting to establish relationships with these youth due to their distant and provoking behaviour. This behaviour becomes detrimental for young people living in residential groups or youth residential care. Often, the employees in such an accommodation cannot endure these tests, or juveniles disrupt the climate in these groups in such a way that they are referred to the next accommodation. In many cases, this is an ongoing process, going from one accommodation to the next, learning that they can only rely on themselves (P. 5).

The biggest challenge that people face in fostering healthy relationships with delinquent youths is gaining their trust. Participants working in youth care reported that it takes time for juveniles to understand that the staff's primary interest is to help them and improve their situation rather than to judge or punish them for their actions (P. 3, P. 4). Often, they perceive social sector employees as part of the system with which they are in continuous conflict. Additionally, their "window of tolerance" is quite narrow, making it challenging to

maintain constructive conversations due to deep-seated perceptions of how the world views them (P. 2). Delinquent youth, particularly those involved in cyber criminality, often struggle to integrate into the social system (P. 1). Further it was indicated that many individuals with advanced cyber skills are frequently on the autism spectrum or exhibit other social skill deficits. Thus, the general lack of social skills further impedes their ability to conform to society's expectations. One of the biggest challenges for delinquent youths is to overcome ingrained behavioural patterns and to resist triggers, which is closely linked to their lack of impulse control (P. 4, P. 5).

The question about how to address these challenges, all participants stated that it takes time and patience to gain the trust of these youths. You have to be continuous and reliable in order to build some form of relationship. Moreover, being empathetic and authentic are of important value (“you have to let them see who you are; you have to be predictable; be safe for them; say what you do, do what you say” (P. 2); “the first step is that they understand that you want to help them and then it is possible to gain their trust”, “transparency is the most important factor” (P. 3)). Additionally, approaching them in a non-judgemental manner and offering them new chances allows them to adapt to new structures. It is crucial to provide them with clear rules and guidelines of what is accepted and tolerated and what is not. Furthermore, giving them insights into possible consequences of inappropriate behaviour is essential (P. 3, P. 4, P. 5).

The first key factor that contributes to the resilience and ability of delinquent youths to form and maintain positive relationships despite their circumstances is pedagogical or therapeutical support and supervision as explained by participant 4. It is important to understand that every individual is different in nature and comes with different experiences and needs (“we have dandelions that grow everywhere and then we have orchids who need the right sun and watering and the special place” (P. 2)). Therefore, structure, transparency, and consistency are key ingredients for juveniles to trust someone and to maintain a relationship (P. 3). In a positive and supportive environment, these individuals are able to learn social skills and the ability to effectively regulate their emotions, which prepares them for forming and maintaining relationships (P. 2, P. 4, P. 5).

### **The Role of Parental Monitoring and Supervision**

Coming to the Role of Parental Monitoring and Supervision, ‘the level of parental involvement typically observed among families with delinquent youth’ is, as reported by all participants, low and often not provided at all. A lack of parental supervision is observed in most of the cases (P. 1, P. 2, P. 3, P. 4, P. 5). Particular when parents are divorced and only one

parent is present, they do not fulfil the obligations and responsibilities of primary caregivers (P. 1, P. 2, P. 3). In the dynamics of single-parent households, the child often feels unseen and not belonging, finding its place and the attention needed in other social dynamics, for example in peer groups (P. 1). Developmental phases such as puberty often leave parents feeling increasingly overwhelmed and unable to exercise authority over their children (P. 2). All participants have observed that most parents fail to implement rules and restrictions and are unable to model positive norms. A key explanation is that these parents have not learnt and internalized these values themselves, nor have they not had positive role models (P. 1, P. 2, P. 3, P. 4). Consequently, implementing structures and rules they have not learned themselves present a difficult challenge (P. 3).

Parental involvement in the child's activities, along with the establishment of structures, rules and restrictions is one of the most significant contributing to resilience (P. 1, P. 2, P. 3, P. 4, P. 5). It is crucial for parents to be present and maintain a supportive relationship with their child, as this environment fosters a sense of belonging, safety and the ability to form meaningful connections (P. 4, P. 5). Conversely, a family household lacking rules and restrictions grants the child with excessive freedom, making it more vulnerable to risk factors and behavioural impairments (P. 2). In particular during puberty, it is of importance that parents understand the different developmental phases and the behaviour of the child. As noted by the second participant, while these young adolescents may appear highly independent, they still require support and boundaries (P. 2). The third participant stated that also the other extreme had been observed whilst working with youths: overly involved and controlling parents often drive juvenile runs away or displays rebellious behaviour as a form of protest, potentially leading to delinquency (P. 3). Therefore, parental supervision and involvement should be applied in a balanced amount, tailored to the age of the juvenile (P. 3, P. 4, P. 5). It is of great value to elucidate juveniles of their responsibilities and what is expected of them (P. 3).

Parent often face significant challenges or barriers in effectively monitoring and supervising their children's activities. Many parents feel greatly overwhelmed by establishing authority and implementing rules and restrictions. Often, they are clueless what to do, approaching the child in an ineffective manner leaving, which leaves them feeling helpless or scared, ultimately leading to the neglect of the problem (P. 1). Participant 2 noted that in particular during puberty, parents encounter numerous difficulties and conflicts, due to a strong drive for autonomy of young adolescents (P. 2). Once this autonomy is learned and established, it becomes very challenging for young people to accept and adapt to a different

form of parental guidance and supervision (P. 2). Challenges that the parents experience in that case are to incorporate rules and boundaries that were previously absent, which can lead to additional conflicts as the child faces restrictions it is not accustomed to (P. 3). Many parents are greatly overwhelmed with incorporating new strategies and to display an authoritative figure, whilst balancing the child's responsibilities (P. 3, P. 4). The high status of peer group further complicates and hinders parental influence. Additional factors that make it difficult for parents to supervise their child's activities are the vast online environment and the increased mobility of young people. Most juveniles possess superior technical skills compared to their parents, leaving these clueless and feeling helpless (P. 2, P. 5). The expansive online environment challenges caregivers with monitoring the activities and environments youth engage with (P. 2, P. 4, P. 5). Quick communication and connecting through social media make it nearly impossible for parents to hinder and control unsupervised activities (P. 1, P. 3, P. 5). Moreover, the increased mobility allows young people to meet with other peer groups in other districts, facilitated by e-scooters and improved public transport (P. 5).

Key factors contributing to the effectiveness of parental monitoring and supervision in preventing delinquency among youths include positive attention, such as displaying interest and curiosity, and the active involvement in the child's activities, as reported by the majority of participants. Establishing rituals and structure provides the young adolescent with a clear daily routine, and having an ongoing conversation with children and asking about their activities reinforces this structure (P. 1, P. 2, P. 4, P. 5). This approach helps to form a relationship in which the child feels acknowledged and safe (P. 3, P. 4). Additionally, consistency with implemented rules and boundaries is crucial (P. 4).

### **Coping With Stressors and Negative Experiences**

An analysis of coping mechanisms among delinquent youths reveals that 4 out of 5 participants perceive a relationship between coping with stressors and engagement in delinquency (P. 2, P. 3, P. 4, P. 5). This relationship arises due to the lack of impulse control and effective coping strategies and when confronted with stressors or triggers (P. 4). In general, a lot of dysfunctional coping pattern have been observed within delinquent youths (P. 2, P. 3, P. 4, P. 5). A common strategy is avoidance, which includes avoiding contact with specific people, but more prevalent appears avoiding emotions and withdrawing from the source of conflict (P. 1, P. 2). Further, verbal and physical aggressions such as insults, assault and destruction of objects, are prominent behaviours displayed by these juveniles (P. 3, P. 4, P. 5). Participant 2 noted gender differences, with girls exhibiting self-harm, eating disorder, and suicidal tendencies, whereas boys tend to express their aggression outwardly (P. 2). Youths

who lack social skills and social connections often escape into the online world, in which they can forget their real-life problems (P. 1). Furthermore, participant 3 stated that coping patterns are offense-specific; individuals who commit violent assaults often require social-emotional support and are more prone to display aggressive behaviours or to react in a defensive manner (P. 3). Someone who has committed a narcotics or drug offense would be conspicuous through substance use (P. 3).

The majority of problems that juveniles face are emotionally related and closely connected to their lack of coping strategies and self-regulation skills (P. 2, P. 3, P. 4, P. 5). A common theme reported by all participants is the juvenile's drive to belong. If primary attachment networks do not provide the feeling of belonging, young people seek acceptance and status within other social dynamics. Stressors experienced by youths include perceived pressure to perform, adherence to certain rules and norms and to meet expectation from teachers and society in general (P.5). In particular in the school environment, young people feel overwhelmed by the workload and the need to display social adaptive skills to belong to social groups (P. 4, P. 5). Additionally, social media exacerbates these pressures by presenting unrealistic lifestyles and unachievable standards (P.1, P. 2, P. 5). Other stressors are social conflicts, feeling misunderstood, or experiencing discrimination due to different cultural backgrounds (P. 2, P. 3, P. 4., P. 5). Another strong factor is a lack of perspective (P. 4, P. 5). Many juveniles do not have clear goals or motivations, leading to a general lack of intrinsic motivation (P. 4, P. 5). Stigmatization and being blamed further compound these issues as juveniles internalize negative labels and fall into corresponding behavioural patterns (P. 3, P. 4). Negative experiences such as adverse childhood experiences, traumatic events, and parental substance abuse, including prenatal exposure to drugs and/or alcohol resulting in Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FADS), are also significant influences (P. 4).

Key factors that aid youths in effective dealing with stressor and negative experiences are the ability to self-regulate and learning to reflect on events (P. 1, P. 2, P. 3, P. 4, P. 5). The ability to self-reflect is of crucial importance as it help juveniles to understand the consequences of their actions and the motivations behind their delinquent behaviour (P. 3). Through recognizing the different aspects and influences they might be able to differentiate the situations and seek support in the future (P.3). Positive role models and pedagogical or therapeutical support can facilitate this learning process (P. 2, P. 4, P. 5). Participant 4 provided an example of teaching self-reflection and perspective-taking by role-modelling adult conversations, allowing juveniles to observe and listen to constructive discussions and compromises (P. 4). The initial step towards positive development is that juveniles can accept



their situation and have the desire to improve it (P. 3). Finding activities or approaches that effectively regulate their emotions is also of great value (P. 2). Participant 5 noted that once juveniles develop alternative courses of action, they exhibit significantly less delinquent behaviour and are better able to resist opportunities and peer pressure. However, it is noteworthy to mention that self-regulation skills are less effective when the influence of peers is too strong (P. 3).

### **Intervention**

The interview ended with the question about what could be done to prevent or reduce delinquent behaviours. All participants agreed that the whole system (e.g., government, school, community, etc.) is needed to prevent delinquency. Further, self-regulation is an important skill for resisting negative influences and coping with strong emotions. Nonetheless, youth delinquency is a phenomenon that has been in society for many years and probably will always be present. In some respects, it can be seen as a typical behavioural pattern of puberty, in which youth explore and test boundaries and rules. On the other hand, it is crucial that young people are equipped with effective coping strategies, social and emotional skills and have a network where they belong and feel accepted. Thus, the role of parents and their involvement and supervision is of significant value in providing the child with a positive role model and opportunities to explore talents and abilities safely. Additionally, places where young people could meet, for example, youth centres or other supervised environments, must be promoted and supported to decrease the likelihood of engaging in unstructured socialising. Something that could be changed in the general perception of delinquent juveniles is the stigmatisation and prejudices towards them. Even though their behaviour is of societal concern, the complex needs of youths need to be recognised and supported with appropriate care. Often, they are victims themselves, growing up with traumatic experiences, being neglected and not belonging anywhere. Although they are outsiders of society, their reintegration into the social system is of vital importance. As stated by Participant 3, their behaviour reflects how society treats the potential of the future.

### **Discussion**

This research aimed to deepen the understanding of the experiential frame of delinquent youths and how different factors influence the engagement in delinquency. As youth delinquency remains a societal concern and leads to the stagnation of individual development, it is of value to unravel the complex interplay of multiple influences and dispositions. This study investigated the influence of internalised beliefs and attitudes, stability of relationships,

parental involvement and coping mechanisms as risk factors for youth delinquency. To answer the overall research question ‘What are common factors that predict the engagement in delinquency and what are effective strategies and approaches that facilitate healthy juvenile development?’ it can be concluded that a dysfunctional familial household and the engagement in delinquent peer groups in combination with individual dispositions account as the strongest predictors. For strategies and approaches to be effective, the following essential components should be considered: generating trust through transparency and reliability, building a relationship, and equipping these juveniles with self-regulation skills and adaptive coping strategies.

### **Social norms**

The present study was designed to determine, among others, the attitudes and beliefs of youths regarding delinquent behaviour. Referring back to the first ancillary research question about internalised social norms, the findings of the current study indicated that peer groups are the most influential source of norm formation among delinquent youths. Further, the outcomes showed that the desire to belong and the acquisition of social status drive these juveniles to act upon deviant behaviours. This is in line with findings from Dishion and colleagues (2005), who noted that people who internalise deviant behaviours from their peers are more likely to engage in delinquent acts. Within social dynamics, where deviant behaviour is accepted, and youngsters are encouraged to engage, the threshold for exhibiting immoral behaviour is decreased (Megens & Weerman, 2010). This aligns with the Theory of Normative Social Behaviour (Rimal & Real, 2005), which argues that individuals acquire norms and values through exposure to behaviour displayed in social dynamics.

To deepen the understanding of juvenile behaviours and the way they perceive delinquency, it is pivotal to examine the attitudes and beliefs that these youngsters hold. As the current study indicated, the majority of delinquent juveniles display an attitude of indifference. Taking a step back and considering delinquency in psychodynamic terms, researchers see the fundamental concern in accountability and honesty about oneself and others (Gabbard, 2014). Following this, the essence of delinquent behaviour lies in the inability and unwillingness to adhere to moral and legal standards that are established in society. Thus, delinquency does not refer to behaviour associated with a criminal minority but rather represents a tendency inherent in forming all social relationships and the failure and reluctance to regard social norms and values (Moffitt, 1993; Matza, 1964).

Additionally, the outcome of this study highlighted the significance of household norms, where a criminal background, substance abuse, and parental neglect increase the risk

of youth delinquency. This aligns with Rossano (2012), who emphasised the importance of family routines and ritualised behaviours in reinforcing social norms. An additional factor revealed by the current study that facilitates the normalisation of deviant behaviours is residing in neighbourhoods where delinquency is prevalent. This is in line with research by Dustmann and colleagues (2023), which stated that exposure to crime and violence increases the likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviours. The influence of cultural backgrounds on juvenile behaviour was noted within this study. However, this study refrained from exploring this further due to the substantial amount of research dedicated to these influences.

Regarding deviant social norms, this research examined strategies and approaches to instilling healthy morals and values in youths. Positive role models were identified as pivotal in teaching acceptable behaviours and respectful social interactions. Close supervision by mentors or therapists for youth in care can foster self-reflection and critical thinking about the consequences of their norms in society. (Re)-Integrating delinquent youths into the community and larger society is one approach in the rehabilitation process. Studies have shown that a positive social environment provides a support system for juveniles to foster personal growth and development (Berglund et al., 2004). Referring to the Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1997), integrating delinquent youths into a positive social environment, the community can reduce motivation to act upon criminal behaviour and engage the individual in structured and supervised activities that reduce the opportunity for crime.

### **Quality and Stability of interpersonal relationships**

The second supplementary research question investigated the value of stable interpersonal relationships and examined the effects of relationship conflicts and breakdowns. The findings of this study highlighted that experiencing traumatic events and disruptions in relationships account for significant predictors of deviant behaviours and a deficiency in social skills. Moreover, the current outcomes revealed that relationship conflicts are common experiences among all delinquent juveniles. One of the earliest relationship conflicts they encounter is between their parents. Often, the parents of delinquent youths are separated or divorced, and thus, the majority of them reside in single-parent households, often in fatherless families. Further, Maginnis (1997) found that single parenthood inevitably diminishes the time a child spends with someone attentive and sensitive to their needs, including the resource of moral guidelines and discipline.

A substantial amount of research underscores the importance of secure attachment and positive relationships promoting a healthy development during childhood. The current

research has revealed that healthy and supportive relationships are not only essential for sufficient social skills but also facilitate positive self-esteem and self-regulation abilities. Considering the Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969), it is argued that individuals naturally tend to be prone to and able to commit deviances but that social bonds prevent acting upon criminal behaviour. Further research has stated that social support and enduring relationships are key factors for mental health and preventing further delinquent behaviour (Hirschfield, 2014). Thus, attachment, commitment, and involvement facilitate the capacity to conform to social norms and decrease the likelihood compared to those with less strong social bonds (Nickerson, 2024). Suppose the individual is not equipped with a healthy and nourishing connection to primary caregivers the relationship with other reference people becomes increasingly important. The role of the relationship with secondary caregivers, and other people will be further evaluated later.

Closely linked with relationship conflicts is the experience of relationship breakdowns. The detrimental effects of breakdowns are explained by the current research findings, noting that re-experiencing these events significantly impacts young people's ability to trust and interact with others. Moreover, people faced with unstable and deficient relationship dynamics tend to maintain a distance and not let their guard down, as they fear that this connection will eventually fail. This learned protective measure results from repeated and ongoing relationship breakdowns during their formative years, manifesting defensive mechanisms. This results in additional conflicts and further cut-offs, which illustrates the destructive cycle of breakdowns and the incapacity of forming new connections. It can be argued whether this emotional distress causes the psychological trauma that primarily leads to the engagement in deviant behaviours and later delinquency.

Research falls short in providing insights into the experiential frame of young people who have repeatedly faced relationship breakdowns and how these will further affect their connection to others. The deep-rooted effects of these experiences lack focus, in particular when it comes to the rehabilitation and treatment of delinquent youths. This study found that the learned behavioural patterns constitute significant challenges for youth workers, pedagogical teachers, and others who work with these juveniles. Here, it becomes increasingly difficult to withstand the ongoing testing of the stability and endurance of the connection, affecting the success of support and interventions. They approach these relationships with a disrespectful attitude and defensive manner, displaying irritated and aggressive behaviour. Particularly in youth accommodations, negative connotations based on past experiences disrupt the safety of the living environment and display a risk for others.

Therefore, these youths are relocated from one youth's home to the next, resulting in a long list of residences, of which none of them feel like a home.

In terms of how these behavioural patterns and experiences can be tackled and which approaches turn out helpful in establishing a stable connection with these youths, the outcomes of this study revealed that the role of secondary caregivers, teachers, or therapists is of vital importance. Key factors identified by this study are transparency, authenticity, and reliability. Transparency involves communicating treatment procedures and progress and providing clear rules and guidelines. An authentic caregiver demonstrates honesty and openly admits mistakes and bad moods, maintaining a genuine personality. Reliability is of pivotal importance as many individuals have not experienced any form of security and stability before.

### **Role of parental supervision and monitoring**

Despite a diverse range of research gone into investigating the relationship between parental involvement and the likelihood of engaging in delinquency, this study examines the effects of parental behaviours and emphasises the importance of including the parents in the developmental process. It can be concluded that the level of parental involvement, in form of supervision and monitoring, accounts for one of the strongest predictors for youth delinquency. As found by the current study, the level of parental involvement typically observed in delinquent juveniles is very low to absent. This involves supervising the child's activities, monitoring a positive development, and being attentive to their needs. Parents who are not involved in the child's life and do not restrict the child's activities significantly increase the chances that the individual engages in unstructured socializing, which is also supported by Donges (2015). In that case, the individual seeks guidance in other social dynamics, and peer groups become the primary source of orientation. To grasp the risk that comes with the engagement in unsupervised social interactions, Osgood (2023) highlighted that unstructured socializing with peers accounts for the most important factor in predicting delinquent behaviour.

This study noted that the level of parental involvement and supervision is further reduced in single-parent households, which aligns with the findings of Joosten (2022). Not receiving parental care and attention makes the child feel unseen and not belonging. The majority of parents addressed in the current study neglect their obligations as primary caregivers and, therefore, fail to model positive norms and values. Considering the Family System Theory (Bowen, 1978), the individuals' functioning is determined by the resources provided by the family. Thus, the deterioration of juvenile behaviour is a clear illustration of

the familial circumstances associated with it.

Since the harmful effects and underlying mechanisms of neglectful and insecure parental environments have been studied within a wide scope of research, the following emphasises the importance of parental involvement in effectively generating change towards a positive development of the juvenile. As noted by the current study, parental involvement, alongside structure, rules, and positive attention, is argued to be the most important factor in creating resilience in juveniles. Resilience is one's ability and capacity to withstand negative experiences and stressful events and encompasses effective coping and adaptation to adversity (Konaszewski et al., 2021). It is the personal resource that provides the individual with positive self-esteem and confidence, which promotes general well-being and increases mental health.

One explanation that could have been abstracted within this study for the lack of parental authority and a deficient role model is that they often do not know better and have not learned the expected behaviour themselves. Thus, it is of importance to educate parents and to provide them with positive strategies and approaches that enable an effective engagement with children.

### **Coping with stressors and negative experiences**

Common coping strategies identified within the current study are defensive and avoiding behaviours, withdrawing from the source of conflict, and aggression. It can be further differentiated between males and females; males tend to outward their overload of emotions in form of physical and verbal aggressions, whereas females tend to cope with negative emotions more internally, including self-harm and suicidal tendencies. This study found that the inability to cope with stressful situations and strong emotions, leading to maladaptive coping strategies, significantly increases the risk of engaging in delinquency. These findings align with a study by Pfefferbaum & Wood (1994), proposing that delinquent behaviour results from insufficient impulse control; thus, lacking self-control exerts the most influence on the engagement in delinquent behaviours.

Research falls short in investigating the relationship between coping mechanisms and the engagement in delinquency. This study confirms a strong correlation between coping mechanisms and the likelihood of engaging in delinquency, as these juveniles lack impulse control and display a deficiency in effective coping mechanisms. These findings align with the General Theory of Crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), which indicates that the individual's ability to self-control determines the propensity for criminal behaviours. Most challenges juveniles face are emotion-related and closely linked to their lack of self-regulation

skills.

Identifying key stressors and adverse experiences that affect young people is a first step in deepening the understanding of juvenile behaviour. The outcomes of this research showed that stressors and negative events that these juveniles face and influence their behaviour are performance pressure, expectations to adhere to social norms and rules, social conflicts, and incompatible lifestyles presented in social media. Moreover, adverse childhood experiences, traumatic events, parental neglect and exposure to substance abuse by primary caregivers account as strong negative influences. Referring back to the General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992), pressure or strain caused by multiple negative experiences and the inability to apply adaptive coping strategies significantly influences the likelihood of acting upon delinquent behaviour. Thus, my findings are in line with both theories.

Developing adaptive coping mechanisms is crucial when dealing with negative events, providing the individual with resilience and the ability to overcome stress. Effective Strategies and helpful approaches in equipping these juveniles with adaptive coping mechanisms and the ability to regulate one's emotions have been extracted by the current study. These are positive role models, providing the individual with alternative courses of action and guiding them through the potential consequences of their behaviour. Studies have shown that by strengthening the personal resources of resilience, psycho-emotional and behavioural issues are alleviated (Ali et al., 2010).

### **Limitations**

Although the present research makes an important contribution to the understanding of juvenile delinquency, it is not without limitations. To start with, the variables of interest often were overlapping in its analysis. Therefore, the codes generated during the qualitative analysis were not mutually exclusive. This indicates that some parts of the data have been classified under more than one topic, which could potentially represent a challenge in distinguishing between the themes and impact the clarity of the findings. Within qualitative research, assessing the complexity of human experiences results in a rich and multifaceted report, leading to overlaps in coding (Jackson & St. Pierre, 2014). To give an example, sometimes it is difficult to categorize a single statement into a single code as it may represent both familial influences and peer influences, creating ambiguity in the analysis. This limitation impacted the study in a way as overlapping codes may have affected the interpretation and conclusions made based on the data. Further, certain aspects and influences may have been put a strong focus on whilst other aspects may have been underestimated. However, this method was chosen to capture the complexity and depths of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

The ambiguity of codes reflects the complex interconnectivity of the variables that predict youth delinquency and undermines that factors alone do not lead to the engagement in delinquent behaviours; rather, factors combined result in a strong vulnerability for delinquency. Future research could pay closer attention to the interconnectivity of different variables and further refine the codes, enabling a more detailed distinction.

Further, part of this qualitative analysis was a deductive approach in which codes were generated based on the variables of investigation. A limitation of deductive coding is the bias towards expected outcomes. The focus may be put on specific aspects, whereas others may have lacked focus, confirming pre-existing assumptions. This limitation was paid attention to when designing the interview schedule. Open questions and a semi-structured schedule were applied to capture an unbiased dimension of information. Attention was paid to not formulating the question in a leading way, with the aim to gather as much unbiased information and individual perspectives as possible. Future researchers should keep in mind the personal bias towards expecting outcomes, which can be mitigated by posing broad and open questions and applying reflexivity in the analysing process. An additional limitation with regard to the interview questions is that answers to one question also answered another question about another variable of investigation. Often, whilst answering one question about, for example, peer influences, another question about familial influences was already answered. Thus, it was difficult to abstract one clear answer that focused on the variable without including another variable. However, this is a reflection of the complex interplay of multiple variables and that origins of juvenile delinquency cannot be assigned to one factor without considering other aspects.

The last limitation to be discussed relates to the generalizability of the results. Instead of including as many subjects as possible in the study, the aim was to find an economical approach, so instead of the "usual" variable-centered approach, a person-specific approach was used. Although this made it possible to record and map very context-rich data in a holistic system, no generalized statements can be made about an entire population, which is why the results of this study cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the results offer initial clues and can encourage researchers to replicate the results in a variable-centered and person-centered context.

### **Future research**

Knowing the contribution made by the rich amount of research analysing youth delinquency and the insights of the current study, the underlying mechanism of youth delinquency is well-researched. The most valuable extension of this research would be to



interview young vulnerable people themselves about their experiences. Nonetheless, an aspect that increasingly plays a role in the engagement of delinquent behaviour and places an increased risk is time spent online and the general online environment a young person engages in. As indicated by the researcher in cyber criminality who was interviewed for this study, the aspect of anonymity is a crucial factor that further decreases the inhibition threshold of acting upon cyber criminality. Moreover, peer groups, which, as shown here, have a great influence on young people, do much of their socializing online, and thus, social interactions take place in a different manner. Therefore, future researchers are advised to investigate the interplay between time spent online and engaging in delinquency.

Besides the substantial amount of research analysing underlying mechanisms and influences that lead to delinquency, a new focus can be set on effective approaches and strategies that could be helpful in interventions and treatment programs. While this was not the primary focus of the current study, insights have been generated that could be helpful in designing interventions and monitors. Future researchers could consider existing treatment programs and investigate their effectiveness and long-term success. By this, components of the treatment program concerning the needs and deficiencies of these juveniles can be examined. Independent of the research focus, it is advised to research with a larger population in order to make generalisable conclusions.

## **Conclusion**

A substantial amount of research has gone into investigating the phenomenon of youth delinquency and the various factors influencing the propensity of young people. Nonetheless, research falls short when it comes to understanding the individuals themselves and the internal processes and motivations that guide their behaviour. The aim of this study was to gain as much insight as possible into the experiential frame of (delinquent) youths, understanding their internal processes and grasping their personal point of view. A widespread perception of youth delinquency is that it endangers established societal structures and depicts a risk to general safety. Often, delinquents are perceived as incapable and unwilling to adhere to social norms. The current study emphasized that society is not the only identifiable victim of delinquency, but rather the offenders themselves. Their behaviour is a reflection of unmet needs during childhood, unfulfilled obligations by primary caregivers, and a deficiency in self-regulation skills. Thus, it becomes clear that there is a deficiency in resources that inhibit the positive and healthy development of young people.

Throughout this research, the pivotal role of parental involvement has been emphasised. This is not only important for preventing the engagement in delinquency but is

also a crucial aspect when it comes to generating long-lasting intervention effects. Healthy and stable bonds with primary caregivers and peers foster a sense of belonging, convey positive social norms and values, and equip the individual with adaptive coping skills, facilitating healthy development. Parental involvement, in particular positive attention and the implementation of structure and rules, account as key factors in determining the success of treatment.

The aspect of preventing juvenile delinquency, in form of eliminating the phenomenon, is based on the findings of this study not possible. It can be argued that the majority of young people have violated social norms and engaged in deviant behaviours at one point in their lives. To a certain extent, these behaviours are part of normal peer risk-taking behaviours and seeking their place in society (Curcio et al., 2017). Nonetheless, it is of importance to early detect deviant behaviour that can potentially lead to delinquency in order to prevent the engagement in more serious acts. Indicators that should be paid attention to are aggressive behaviours, maladaptive coping mechanisms, lack of social skills, heightened impulsivity and the engagement in status offenses. Their environment, especially those who see these individuals more often (e.g., parents and teachers), should be alert to these above-mentioned behaviours as they have the ability to react and intervene, preventing a progression towards criminality. If more research is conducted on effective interventions for delinquency, recognizing the unmet needs and deficiencies of these juveniles, societal safety, and healthy individual development can be enhanced.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Participant information sheet**

#### **Project Title:**

What are circumstances within the immediate context (micro-level) that lead to the engagement in delinquent behaviours?

#### **Researcher:**

Judith Roever (B.Sc. student)

#### **Purpose:**

This study aims to explore the circumstances within the micro-level that leads to the engagement in delinquent behaviours.

You are being asked to participate in this study because I am interested in the experiences of people who work with delinquent youths. I am seeking individuals who are above the age of 18 years and who are in contact/work with youths that display deviant behaviour or have been in contact with the police.

#### **Procedure:**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer questions concerning your perception of the different factors that influence an individual to act upon delinquent behaviours. The questions will cover topics such as social norms, quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships, parental supervision and monitoring, and coping strategies of youths. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure the accurate transcription and analysis of the data.

Your participation will take approximately 20-40 minutes; sufficient English language skills are required.

#### **Participants rights:**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to decline from participating in this study, refuse to answer questions, or withdraw from the study at any given moment without the need to give any reason.

#### **Discomfort or distress during or after the interviews:**

There is no significant risks anticipates with participating in this study. However, discussing experiences related to youth delinquency may bring up sensitive or distressing topics. In case of discomfort or distress during or after participating in this research, please approach support services or seek professional help provided by your institution.

**Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study, but your contribution will provide valuable insights that may inform future practices and policies aimed at reducing youth delinquency.

**Confidentiality:**

All information collected in this study will be kept strictly confidential. Your identity will be anonymised in any reports or publications resulting from this research. Data will be stored securely and only accessible to the researcher. Audio recording will be transcribed and then deleted to ensure privacy.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

The results of this study will be used for academic research purposes and may be published in academic journals or presented in presentations. No identifying information will be included in any publication or presentation.

**Questions:**

For further information about this study, you can contact:

Judith Roever: [j.roever@student.utwente.nl](mailto:j.roever@student.utwente.nl)

Dr. Peter de Vries: [p.m.devries@utwente.nl](mailto:p.m.devries@utwente.nl)

**Consent to Participate:**

By participating in this interview, you are consenting to be part of this study.

**Participant Consent Form**

**Title of the study:** Exploring the different influences within the immediate context (micro-level) that lead to the engagement in delinquency.

**Participant:**

I have read and understood the information provided in the participation information sheet. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

I consent to the interview being audio-recorded and understand that the recording will be used solely for research purposes and will be destroyed after transcription.

I understand that all information provided will be kept confidential and that my identity will remain anonymous in any reports or publications resulting from this study.

I agree to take part in the above study.

**Name of participant:**

**Signature:**

**Date**

## **Appendix 2**

### **Interview Questions:**

#### ***Broad questions:***

1. What do you think are common circumstances in which a young individual might engage in delinquent behaviour?

#### ***Social norms***

1. In your experience working with youths, what are some common attitudes or beliefs among them regarding delinquent behaviour?
2. How do you perceive the influence of peer groups on the development and reinforcement of delinquent norms among the youth you work with?
3. Can you describe any trends or patterns you have observed in the social norms surrounding delinquency within the communities you serve?
4. From your interaction with families, what are some factors that contribute to the normalization or rejection of delinquent behaviours within the household?
5. From your perspective, what are some strategies or approaches that could be effective in promoting positive social norms and reducing delinquent behaviour within communities?

#### ***Quality and Stability of Interpersonal relationships***

1. In your experience, how do the quality and stability of interpersonal relationships (family, friends, peers, etc.) impact youth's likelihood of engaging in delinquent behaviours?
2. Can you provide examples of how supportive or stable relationships with authority figures, such as teachers or social workers, can mitigate delinquent behaviours in youths?
3. In your experience, what is the role of relationship conflicts and/or breakdowns on an individual's likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour?
4. Can you describe any challenges you have encountered in fostering healthy relationships with delinquent youths, and how you have addressed them?

5. In your opinion, what are some key factors that contribute to the resilience and ability of delinquent youths to form and maintain positive interpersonal relationships despite their circumstances?

### ***Parental monitoring/supervision***

1. Can you describe the level of parental involvement and supervision you typically observe among families with delinquent youths?
2. What do you think is the role of parental monitoring when it comes to increasing or decreasing the likelihood of engaging in delinquency? What are examples of situations/circumstances that you have observed?
3. What are some common challenges or barriers that parents of delinquent youths face in effectively monitoring and supervising their children's activities?
4. In your opinion, what are some key factors that contribute to the effectiveness of parental monitoring/supervision in preventing delinquency among youths?

### ***Coping strategies/ stressors/conflicts***

1. Do you think there is a relationship between coping with stressors (coping strategies) and the engagement in delinquency? What have you observed?
2. What coping patterns could have been observed when working with delinquent youths?
3. What are common stressors or negative experiences that you have observed, which influence these youths in their acting?
4. What maladaptive or negative coping behaviours (e.g., substance abuse, aggression, etc.) have you noticed in delinquent youths as ways of dealing with stress or even trauma? Please explain with examples.
5. How can developing strong self-regulation skills aid youths in avoiding delinquency when faced with stressors or negative influences?

### ***Closing question***

1. What do you think could be done to prevent or reduce delinquent behaviours among young people in your community?

Could you name concrete examples of what should be implemented into an intervention/monitor?



**AI Statement**

During the preparation of this work, the author used 'ChatGPT' to find synonyms in academic jargon. Additionally, the tool 'quillbot' was applied in case a sentence structure needed to be rephrased. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of work.