FAQ: Contributing Factors of Delinquency

**Question 1:** Why are there so many different theories regarding juvenile delinquency?

**Answer 1:** So many theories regarding juvenile delinquency exist because no one really knows why delinquents commit these acts. Theories are possible explanations regarding behavior.

Different researchers approach explaining delinquent behavior in a variety of ways. Classical researchers, such as Beccaria and Lombroso, focused on individual will and pleasure-seeking while sociological theorists—Shaw, McKay, and Hirschi—focused on the environment and surroundings in which the juvenile resides in order to explain behavior. Theorists such as Sutherland and Merton believed children learn delinquent behavior the same way they learn socially appropriate behavior while Merton believed that juveniles resort to delinquent behavior because they were trying to achieve the American Dream. Yet, other theorists believe that juveniles are biologically predisposed to antisocial or delinquent behavior.

Many different theories exist because juveniles' circumstances are different and no one theory is all-encompassing. Theories must be adjusted or new ones created to address societal changes. Some researchers believe the answers lie in different aspects of the juvenile's life, and a theory exists to address each aspect.

**Question 2:** What is the impact of family structure on juvenile crime?

**Answer 2:** Do you remember the popular television shows of the 1950s and 1960s? One of the most popular impressions of the nuclear family come from Leave It To Beaver, the show about a mother, a father, two sons, and the various events of their lives. Dad comes in from work everyday to find dinner cooked, and the family sits around the table talking about their day. The sons play baseball, participate in scouting, and generally behave as middle class, normal people. However, society has changed, and these episodes do not depict normal life for juveniles involved in crime.

In the real world of law enforcement, most juveniles who are involved in crime come from single parent homes and have little supervision. After-school activities are non-existent and the role models in the neighborhood are often those who have, themselves, been involved in criminal activity. For children with short attention spans and a desire to be active, criminal activity, largely the drug culture, presents an opportunity for excitement.

Even if the children are in a home where both parents are present, there is very often a lack of supervision. On many occasions, parents are completely unaware of the location of a child, and this presents a situation where the juvenile can be involved in undesirable activity without any knowledge of the parents.
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**Question 3:** What is the impact of class structure on juvenile crime?

**Answer 3:** While not strictly confined to inner city or lower economic neighborhoods, it is absolutely those neighborhoods that are often habitats for the growth of juvenile crime. High unemployment, lack of supervision, and lack of community involvement by residents create an atmosphere of acceptable criminal activity. It closely, but not absolutely, is tied to economic power and opportunity.

In many of the areas most impacted by juvenile crime, unemployment is high, and economic despair reigns. Juveniles see criminal activity, whether property crimes or drugs, as an avenue to obtain those things that cannot be obtained by legitimate means. The most profitable employment in many of these neighborhoods is most often in gangs and drug activity.

The lack of economic power also contributes to the lack of options for children after school, or during other times such as summer vacations and weekends. It is no coincidence that juvenile crimes happen mostly between the hours of 3 p.m. and 8 p.m.

**Question 4:** What is the impact of education on juvenile crime?

**Answer 4:** Most often, the priority for a child's education rises from the education of the parent. Many of the parents in the homes of juvenile offenders are, themselves, uneducated and do not make education a top priority. Most juvenile offenders are either performing poorly in school, have poor attendance rates, or have dropped out.

After school activities are also limited in areas most affected by juvenile crime. Juvenile crime most often occurs between after-school hours and prime time television hours.

Officers should be especially attentive to juveniles who are seen during school hours. These children present the most likely offenders, and the officer has an excellent chance to intervene and provide some oversight to the child.

For a law enforcement officer who is assigned to a regular patrol district, these factors will play into daily activities. The knowledge of juveniles and their situations will enable an officer to have a greater impact on the overall activity of his beat.

**Question 5:** Why do some children become delinquents?

**Answer 5:** Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to this question, but a brief examination of child development is necessary. Our juvenile system is based on the British
system of parens patriae and child laws. America went one step further to incorporate "child saving" into the premise of the juvenile system. A child's initial world only includes parents, siblings, and family. From these people, children gain a sense of morality, right and wrong, and what is acceptable behavior. Children, as a result, behave in ways that will gain the approval and acceptance of family members.

Children's morality base increases as they age and as they begin to receive norms, morals, and learn acceptable behaviors from teachers, peers, and religious and community leaders. Children are now faced with a choice between behaviors taught at home and those taught by the community. If these behaviors differ, the child may choose the behaviors of peers and others in the community.

These behaviors can and often do cause the juvenile to behave in ways that are against the law and cause the juvenile to become a part of the juvenile justice system. The juvenile may receive personal and family counseling as well as some type of in-custody juvenile detention once in this system. Further, the juvenile may receive probation, or may be removed from the care and custody of the family if it is deemed that they are not properly caring for the child.

**Question 6:** Is the Uniform Crime Report a valid source of juvenile delinquency data? If not, what provides a more accurate data representation?

**Answer 6:** There is no source for completely accurate data. The Uniform Crime Report (UCR), however, compiled yearly by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, does not provide an accurate representation of juvenile delinquency because this body of data addresses adult offenses and adult offenders. This report provides statistics for juveniles who were arrested, emancipated, and remanded into the adult system. Further, in either adult or juvenile crimes, the UCR only provides data about crimes reported to police. Many theorists have discussed the "dark figure of crime." This "figure" is the number of crimes that go unreported to police. The Federal Bureau of Investigation gathers data from law enforcement agencies across the nation. These data are the number of crimes reported to police and statistics for the number of crimes cleared by arrests. From these statistics, crime rates and clearance rates are calculated. These data are accepted in the academic world of criminal justice, but the drawbacks of the data are known.

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and self-report studies, however, tend to be better representations of juvenile delinquency. The National Crime Victimization Survey is conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice every six months to two years. The bureau chooses a representative sample of the population and questions them about whether or not that person, or someone living in the home, has been a victim of a crime. This information is compiled into a report that is released biannually.
Self-report studies are probably the most favored in determining the amount of juvenile delinquency. These studies are usually administered in a school setting during school hours. The surveys are anonymous, and the students are asked about their roles in delinquent activities or status offenses. Based on the history of these surveys, they tend to provide the best representation of actual statistics.

The NCVS and self-report surveys have their flaws. In both surveys, the researcher must rely on the honesty of the respondent and believe that the respondent understood the question and answered it correctly. In all instances, one party or another may embellish or lie on the survey for personal reasons or simply because they mistrust the survey itself.

Visit the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports website and the National Crime Victimization Survey website to view reports and surveys from previous years.

**Question 7:** Do juveniles tend to commit more crimes as they age?

**Answer 7:** Typically, no. Most juveniles tend to age out of delinquent or criminal activity. A negative correlation exists between age and crime, meaning that the younger a person is, the more delinquent acts or crimes they commit, but the older the person gets, the fewer crimes he/she tends to commit. Some researchers have named this process "aging out of crime."

Studies have shown that younger offenders commit more violent crimes than older offenders, and these youthful offenders tend to commit more personal crimes. Also, the younger an offender begins committing delinquent acts, the longer he or she tends to continue this illegal behavior. Juvenile delinquents tend to live for the moment and see their future as uncertain. Consequently, they are more likely to commit delinquent acts than those who have families to consider.

Theorists believe that juveniles age out of delinquent acts or crimes when they gain other responsibilities. Some may marry young or have children while still in their teenage years while others mature and move into legitimate ways to earn a living. Those who do not mature out of delinquent acts may become chronic offenders or recidivists. Recidivists are repeat offenders—those who continue to commit delinquent acts or crimes and are caught. There is no formula or program to determine which offenders will age out or discontinue illegal behavior.