



## Review Paper

# Risk factors in family: a study on delinquent children

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## Abstract

*Studies conducted on juvenile delinquents have found that family factors plays a significant role in development of delinquency in the children. It is usually evident from the studies that children who are from broken home or are homeless commit more crime in comparison to their counterparts. But, it is seen not to be true in case of India. In India family members share an unseen bond of cooperation, harmony and interdependence. But what causes the concern in India is that children living with parents commit more crime than those children who are homeless and children living with guardians as per the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB). In the report published by NCRB for the year 2014, it is seen that 38,693 juveniles who are apprehended under various crimes were staying with their parents whereas only 7905 and 1632 juveniles apprehended are found to be living with guardians and are homeless respectively. Thus, the paper will try to explain about various aspects of family which may lead to the development of criminal behaviour in a child.*

**Keywords:** Children, family, juvenile delinquent, parents, delinquency.

## Introduction

Commission of crimes by children can be attributed to various risk factors. These risk factors may be sociological, psychological and biological in nature. These sociological, psychological and biological risk factors play a predominant role towards the development of deviant behavior in children and are interlinked with each other. The linkage between these three risk factors is better explained by nature-nurture debate. This debate includes the viewpoints of both nature and nurture theorists. The nature theorists explain that most of our behavior are inherited from parents through genes whereas nurture theorists are of the opinion that all of our behaviors and actions are direct result of the environment and conditions that an individual is subjected to in past and present<sup>1</sup>. The role of gene and social environment are crucial for the development of deviancy in a child. In case of genes, if either of the parents has any kind of criminality traits or genetic makeup, those traits or genes can be transmitted to the child. The child then in later period of his life can develop certain criminal behavior and activity. Similarly, in case of social environment, a child sees and learns criminal behavior from family members; first, then from peers and neighbors. Therefore nature and nurture debate lays emphasis on parents and family environment for a child's behavioural development as nature of a child is the by-product of the kind of nurture received.

From the very first day of a child's life, parents are the main source of socialization<sup>2</sup>. Family is the first and foremost social institution with which a child comes in contact. It is considered as the first agency of social control. It guides and nurtures a

child's personal and social development. Family has tremendous impact on a child's producing and expressing anti-social behavior<sup>3</sup> because a child lives and learns from family from the beginning. Family, when thought about, presents an image of loving, caring, sharing, friendly and happy people living together. But, sadly this image of family is not true for every child. Throughout the world in every society, there are two kinds of family: first, a happy, loving, stable and wholesome family and second, a sad, unstable, deprived and disturbed family. Thus, children who are brought up in family that are sad, disturbed, violence prone, conflicted are the ones who are more prone to develop deviant behavior or negative personality characteristics<sup>4,5</sup>. The behaviour of a child happens to be good and pleasant when a child is brought up in a good family environment but a child brought up in a poor, deprived and depraved family environment develops bad and anti-social behaviour<sup>6</sup>.

## Influence of Familial Risk Factors on Juvenile Offenders

Researchers have shown that family environment plays a significant role in the development of deviant behavior in a child. In a family, parents have maximum influence and impact on the children. A child imitates the behaviour learned from the parents. Therefore, in order to have a healthy, happy and crime free childhood, parents need to be supportive and affectionate. There are several family factors studied in criminological research which may act as potential risk factors leading to development of criminality in the children.

Such familial risk factors maybe the impact of maternal deprivation, criminality of parents, the brutality of discipline directed to a child, parental neglect and abuse, lack of parental supervision, domestic violence in family, age of parents at time of child's birth, parental attitudes toward violence, drug use by parents, history of mental illness in parent, birth order of the child, size of the family, education and socioeconomic status of the parents, and parent/child separation<sup>7</sup>.

Several studies have shown that parent's marital instability can be a cause towards development of delinquent behavior in a child. The quality and stability of marriage have an effect on every member of the family as well as on the children of the family<sup>8</sup>. Marital stability among parents leads to steadiness and cohesiveness of the family. Thereby, creating a stable and happy family environment for the children. Whereas, unstable marriage between parents can lead to bad behavior and violence towards each other and sometimes towards the children too. Excessive alcoholism by parents, improper upbringing of the child, unstable marriage, bad and poverty ridden living conditions are some of the other risk factors that lead to the development of delinquent behavior<sup>9</sup>. Gorman-smith and Tolan<sup>10</sup> explained that conflict and aggression between parents leads to violent crime, whereas, lack of maternal love and criminality of father leads to involvement in property crime. Apart from marital instability, children belonging to divorced parents, broken homes and criminal parents and siblings are at greater risk of getting involved in criminal activity<sup>11</sup>.

Delinquent behavior is always better explained in terms of socio-economic status of an individual<sup>12,13</sup>. Many literature have explained poverty and low socio-economic status during childhood as potential risk factors that has strong association with substance abuse, crime and delinquency<sup>12,14,15</sup>. It is universally true that that lack of economic resources is one of the main reasons why some people turn to illegal activity for economic benefit. Economic hardship faced by individuals often leads to emotional and material deprivation, all of which could lead to development of antisocial behaviour among children<sup>16</sup>. The influence of poverty (low income) is better explained by R.K. Merton<sup>17</sup> in his Strain theory. In this theory he states that it is the strain that certain individuals feel in society (especially lower income group) that leads to development of crime. He further explains that not every individual is able to achieve the set goals (example-money) as there is lack of available means (example- education) to achieve these set goals. Such explanation is especially true for people belonging to lower income group. But due to absence of proper means these individuals feel a lot of strain and stress thus finally turning to crime, which seems to be the easiest way to achieve their goals. Low income causes stress and depression in parents who have children dependent on them. This leads to lack of tolerance and patience in parents' towards children which sometimes leads to physical, verbal and emotional abuse.

This experience of neglect and abuse faced by the children can lead to significantly high chance of involvement in criminal activity and getting arrested<sup>18</sup>.

Punitive ways of disciplining the children usually by corporal punishment used by authoritative parents<sup>19</sup> and cold behavior and rejection of the children by the parents increases the likelihood of the children getting involved in delinquent activity<sup>18</sup>. Intra-family stressors, family conflicts among members of the family, anemic interpersonal relationship and lack communication among its members are some other causal risk factors of juvenile delinquency<sup>9</sup>. The role of family towards development of delinquency in children is better explained by various social, psychological and criminological theories. One such theory is Bandura<sup>20</sup> in social learning theory. He explains in his theory that children learn by modelling and copying others. For example a child learns aggressive and violent behaviour from others or by experience like seeing abuse and violence in family, watching friends fight etc. Cultural transmission theories also explain that delinquency is a behaviour which is learned and it points out the norms, beliefs, values and behavioural nature of the people with whom the delinquent is in contact with<sup>21</sup>. Children develop low self-esteem when they are subjected to rejection by their family members or due to excessive abuse (mental and physical) faced by them from the family. Low self -esteem in a child can also lead to development of deviant behaviour in a child. Kelly et.al.<sup>22</sup> has explained that there exists a direct correlation between self-esteem and delinquent behavior. This view is also supported by Gottfredson and Hirschi<sup>23</sup> in their general theory of crime. In their theory they argue that low esteem developed in an early age by children can explain the inclination of a child in committing crime in the face of criminal opportunity. Children with low self-esteem usually try to prove themselves. In the process of proving themselves they usually develop friendship with anti-social peers. These anti-social peers boost the low self-esteem of the child by immediate gratification i.e.by compelling the child to do some anti-social work by false praising. Another theory called coercion theory explains that family environment has a great influence on an adolescent's interpersonal style, which act as determinant for peer group selection<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, children with low self-esteem and family troubles join various gangs to feel a sense a belonging.

The risk factors within the family especially, involving the parents have a great likelihood to influence the children to get involved in criminal and anti-social activities. These familial risk factors may or may not be the same for all children. These familial risk factors may not be same for children residing in various countries throughout the globe. Studies conducted in Western countries have shown that children belonging to broken families, divorced and single parents have more propensity towards committing crime but no such evidence is found among juvenile offenders in India.

## Crime by Children Based on Living Status with Family: India

Family has been a dominant aspect of individual and community life in India<sup>25</sup>. Family members each share an unseen bond of cooperation, harmony and interdependence. Families in India still hold all its traditional features (like joint family, caring for children till they are economically stable). These features of Indian family differentiate between Indian and Western social and value system<sup>26</sup>. Children in India are mostly dependent on their parents and elders and are obedient and submissiveness towards family members. Therefore, it is essential that family members especially parents need to love, care, guide and discipline the children.

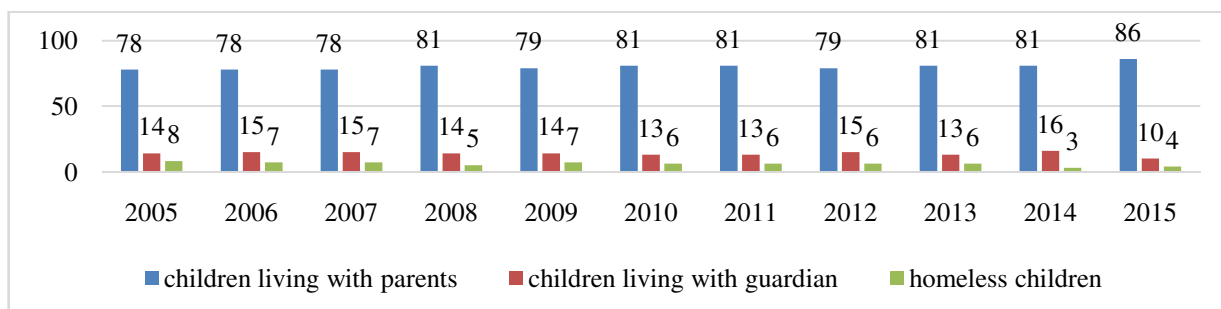
Children who are homeless, belonging to broken families and having no proper guidance from family especially parents, do deviate from the path of righteousness and turn into deviants. Daron<sup>27</sup> states that in a study done on homeless youths in four U.S cities in 2010 it has been found that the longer a youth stays homeless, it becomes highly possible for the youth to engage in crime and to become involved in the justice system. It is not so in case of India. National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB)<sup>28</sup> in its annual publication titled Crime in India (2014) states that the number of IPC (Indian Penal Code) and SLL (Special and Local Law) cases registered against juveniles for various crime has increased by 5.7% and 21.8% in 2014 in comparison to 2013 respectively. National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) year after year reports that children living with parents commit more crime in India than those children who live with their guardians or are homeless. Children living with parents form around 80% of the total number of children apprehended under various crimes. Whereas, a continuous decrease in the percentage of crime committed by homeless juveniles is seen from 2005-2015. Homeless children apprehended under various crime form just 4-5% of the total number of children apprehended under various crime. Remaining 14-15% of the total number of children apprehended under various crime committed by juveniles are living with guardians. NCRB data relating to juvenile delinquents for a decade is taken into consideration it is still seen that every year children living with parents commit more crime in comparison to homeless children in India (Figure-1).

Based on the data published by NCRB, children despite having family to depend on and to be cared for have turned to deviant activity and developed antisocial behaviour. The development of deviant behaviour in the children despite staying with their parents can be attributed to the problems faced by children in their family. The problems can be marital discord between the parents, abuse between the parents, lack of interactions and attention of the parents to the children, working parents, violence and abuse faced by children in the hands of parents or relatives, family size, economic hardship faced, continuous conflict in the family, lack of proper guidance etc. All these factors can influence an adolescent mind leading to development of behavioural changes. These risk factors present in the family are discussed below in details:

### Problems in Parental Relation

Research has shown that children who have seen marital discord are generally at a greater risk of becoming delinquent. Thornberry et.al<sup>29</sup> stated that the child who lives with single parent or has witnessed divorce and separation in the marital relation of their parents usually shows a range of behavioral problem in his/her life, which may include delinquent and deviant behavior. Thus marital instability and broken home as a result of problem between parents can be explained as a cause of delinquency in a child.

**Martial Instability:** The link between deviant behavior in a child and parents' marital instability is self-explanatory, as the child is socialized first at home. So if any dysfunction occurs in the family structure, it creates a negative impact on the child<sup>30</sup> as such instability affects the relationship/ bond between parents and children as well as leads to breakdown in parent's monitoring and supervision of their children behavior and activities<sup>31</sup>. Due to marital instability between parents, they decide to get divorced. Such divorces do not happen immediately but take a long time to happen. During this time a child mostly faces absence of one or the other parent in his/her life. One such is the absence of the father. Absence of father's influence in a child usually leads to development of conduct disorder and if the absence of father is long in the life of a child, the chances of the child to develop a more evident conduct disorder also increases<sup>30</sup>. Marital instability can be related to the concept of "broken home" in one way.



Source: Crime in India: National Crime Record Bureau (2005-15).

**Figure-1:** Juvenile Delinquents Living Status from 2005-15 (in %)

**Broken home:** Broken home is defined as a home in which one or both the natural parents are absent for long or permanent time period, either due to divorce, separation or death<sup>32</sup>. As home is not only a place but also a space that is inhabited by family and people as well as things and belongings that are familiar. It can also be called as a repository of memories lived by a person. Therefore, the link between broken home and delinquency in developing countries like India and Philippines is less because their family and community structure is very strong<sup>33-35</sup>.

**Role of family members:** In a family the role of father and mother is very crucial. Family acts as the first socialization agency for a child. Any disturbance or change in behavior among the family members, basically between father and mother acts as an ideal form of behavior to be learnt by the child. The behavior of father towards the mother and vice versa influence the child's behavior<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, it can be said that negative behavior and attitude of various family members like father, mother and siblings have negative impact on the child leading to development of deviant antisocial behavior.

**Relation and interaction pattern in family:** Adolescence is that phase of life when there is need for strong parent-child attachment for the normal development of adolescents, both biological and psychological, but it can also be a period that is disruptive for family socialization<sup>37,38,2</sup>. Relationship among family members represent a large assemblage of interactions and discipline and supervision patterns. Therefore, impact of family relation and interaction is one of the strongest aspect to establish a link between the family relation and delinquency<sup>34</sup>. If a youth's relational needs are not satisfied by family members and appropriate control is not exerted by parents in order to control the behavior of the youth, then the youth is more likely to join groups which are anti-social in nature<sup>31</sup> to fulfil the needs.

**Role of father:** In a family set up the role of father is that of an ideal person and also most important. The children usually use to imitate and follow the path set by the parents. Deviant behavior in the family especially by father is seen to have a great influence on a child to develop deviant behavior and do antisocial work<sup>30</sup>. Farrington<sup>39</sup> stated that parents especially father when does not spend enough leisure time with the children especially in case of sons, the children (son/s) start showing a greater degree of violent behavior and get more often convicted in cases of violent offences than children whose fathers are involved with them.

**Role of mother:** In a family, when there is absence of fathers due to work, divorce or separation, the burden of the family completely falls on the mother. Due to absence of father, the mother faces a lot of stress to provide the child with adequate attention, support, to fulfil the emotional need of the child to have a father and to provide economic stability. As single parent, a mother gets less time to interact with the child, and be attentive to all the needs of the child. Even proper socialization

and good morals and discipline to be given by the mother gets hampered. Due to this the child's behavior gets affected. In India, being a single mother is a great challenge. The child of single mother in India is always questioned by one and all in the society. This behavior of the people makes the child feel stressed and in due course of time develop low self-esteem and in later period can lead to development of behavioral problem and association with anti-social peers, gang, start using drugs and commit certain kind of crimes<sup>40</sup> to show the importance and power which the child has always lacked in the society due to absence of father in his life.

**Influence of siblings:** Apart from parents, siblings too have an influential role in development of antisocial behavior in a child. Studies have shown that if any sibling in the family is involved in delinquent activities, there is more likelihood of other siblings following in the same path. The result of such influence may be because the siblings share same genetic traits, shared interests and they come from same social environment<sup>30</sup>. Apart from shared genes and environment, the positive outcome (i.e. money) received by the deviant siblings can influence his other siblings to follow in the path of deviancy to receive similar monetary benefits.

**Family violence and abuse:** Many interdisciplinary studies have stated that, when a child experiences violence in the family, it becomes a major risk factor which may lead to commission of violent crime specifically and antisocial behavior in general. Family violence includes various kind of violence and abuse faced or witnesses by the child from various family members like that of sibling, parents, elders and intimate partners<sup>41</sup>.

### **Violence and abuse: family members**

Little difference in behavior disorder can be marked among children who have seen violence in their family than those who are victims of abuse themselves<sup>31</sup>. Behavior disorder and development of violent behavior is usually seen in case of such children who have seen abuse of parent especially mother<sup>30</sup>. Therefore, children who are brought up in poor functioning families and child unfriendly environment tend to develop violent behavior<sup>42</sup>. It is found in various researches that parents who are abusive and have been abused themselves, generally tends to abuse and become violent with their children<sup>30</sup>, leading to development of stress in the child. This act of abused becoming abuser in later life is termed as "cycle of violence". Due to the stress and lack of love and care from parents, the child finds it difficult to socialize and make friends easily. This paves the way for the child's chances of becoming friends with such people who are antisocial by nature because such antisocial peers make the child feel important and cared for. Harsh parental discipline and poor parental control are the main causes behind the development of violent behavior in adolescent stage<sup>39</sup>. Apart from these, parents with antisocial behavior and activities are not very good parents themselves thereby, lack proper supervision capacity<sup>43</sup>.

**Violence and abuse: gene impact:** Other than family environment and parental behavior, impact of gene also plays a crucial role in development of criminal behavior in children. When children are subjected to neglect, abuse, inappropriate parenting style, domestic violence in family and antisocial behavior of parents, they are more likely to realize their genetic potential for violence<sup>44</sup>. When children with such violent genetic predisposition are brought up in adverse environment<sup>42</sup>, they generally develop antisocial behavior and especially commit violent crimes.

**Family Size:** The larger the size of the family (a large number of children in a family) the greater is the chances of delinquency among children<sup>45</sup>. In a large family the attention and affection of the parents given towards each child is divided which leads to decreased supervision and monitoring of the parents. In large family it also difficult to provide equally to all the children as there will be always inadequacy of resources<sup>30</sup>. Therefore, the chances of indulging in antisocial activities to fulfill their needs, by the children increases. Apart from monetary problem, parents face difficulty in providing proper education, do not get time to spend quality interactive time with children or help them in school activities; thereby creating a distance between parents and children which leads development of behavioral disorder in them. Studies conducted on birth order influence on development of criminality in children have stated that the children who are in the middle suffer the most. The middle born children face a lot of stress and problem because of resource scarcity and thus engage in delinquent activities to fulfil their needs<sup>31</sup>. Robins et al.<sup>46</sup> formed a 'contagion' hypothesis in which he explained that larger the family size most likely there is the chance of one sibling being delinquent and it will be more likely for other siblings to 'catch' delinquency<sup>47</sup>.

**Economic Hardship:** Low income coupled with large family size and adverse living conditions are some major risk factors that lead to development of stress in parents. These risk factors in return affect the ability of the parents to provide their children with attention, care, affection and love. Lack of parental love, care and attention develop a feeling of dejection in the children<sup>48</sup>. Therefore, in order to grab the parents' attention children commits negative or deviant activity. Many surveys on abuse and violence have shown that abuse and neglect of children are generally seen in the families of low economic conditions, thus leading to development of abusive behavior and conduct disorder in the children<sup>30</sup>. Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD)<sup>49</sup>, in 2007 published a report on child abuse in which it is found that 66.8% of the children who live in streets with their family and in extreme poverty are abused by their family members and others. Due to this kind of abuse and absolute poverty faced by them they generally turn towards antisocial activities like drug selling, prostitution, pick pocketing, organ trade etc.<sup>50</sup> which provide them with some economic advantage for some period of time.

**Conflict in family:** In 1958, F Ivan Nye had established a relation between a child's perception of parents' marital

happiness and development of deviant behavior in the child fifty years ago<sup>30</sup>. Intra-family conflict thus becomes a major cause for development of conduct disorder and behavioral problem in a child. Conflict happening in the home due to economic instability or due to marital discord when gets publicly highlighted, creates a difficult situation for the children in the school with the teachers and peers. This makes the children avoid any kind of responsibilities and do things as they wish. Due to this, the child faces problem at school, leading to development of bad relationships with teachers and friends which further leads to academic difficulties and failure. In such a situation it becomes more complex and complicated for a child to apprehend and take care of the problems happening inside and outside the home<sup>51</sup>. This lack of understanding of the problem pushes the child into seeking advice from anti-social peers because they provide affirmation to the child. Negative parental aspects like inadequate and inefficient parental supervision of children is often found as a risk factor for development of future delinquency. Children who come from homes with such negative family characteristics are believed to be at greater risk of committing crime or are more likely to commit offences than their counterparts<sup>52</sup>.

## Conclusion

Children always look up to their parents for economic security, love and affection. Parents along with other family members always act as a strong foundation on which a child's childhood flourishes. Various aspects of family like family members, family size, economic status of the family, behavior of the parents and other family members towards each other and the child act as some determinants towards development of any kind of personality disorder in a child. When such aspects of the family do not function properly and dysfunction occurs in them, it can lead to development of negative behavior or antisocial tendency in the child. Therefore, it can be stated that for the proper development and growth of a child, parental supervision, love and care are very much necessary. There are more than 500,000 children living in streets of India. Even though some of these children have families, they are still homeless as they have run away from their homes because of the economic depravity or due to any other kind of dysfunction occurring in the family. It is generally, understood that such children who are homeless commit more crime than their counterparts as the latter get more love and affection from their parents. But it is found that children living with parents have committed various kinds of crime too. Parents and family are the key players leading to development of as well as curbing down the criminal behavior of a child. Living with parents, alone cannot solve the problem. Butterflies, a NGO, has conducted an independent study about the profile of juvenile criminals in Observation and Specials homes of four states. They found in their study that most of the juvenile delinquents belong to economically and socially backward sections of the society and majority of children have their parents working as laborer or in service oriented sectors like carpentry, tailoring etc. and 63.2% of the children

themselves were engaged in some kind of work and other<sup>53</sup>. This study clearly shows that due to economic backwardness, both the parents have to work. Due to this children do not get to spend more time with their parents and parents do not get enough time to supervise and monitor their children. The economic hardship faced by the family sometimes forces a child to commit crime like theft to fulfil their needs which their family members and parents cannot fulfil. So, finally it can be concluded that various risk factors present in a family can lead to development of positive or negative behavior in a child.

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