

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY THROUGH MODERN THEORIES OF CRIME AND THE DYNAMICS OF MOST COMMITTED CRIMES BY JUVENILES IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA.

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Abstract

Juvenile delinquency is one of the most complex social and criminological phenomena with a set of psychological, social, and structural determinants. The paper examines the nature of youth offending in the Republic of North Macedonia through the prism of modern criminological theories. Based on core theoretical perspectives, more specifically Social Learning Theory, Strain Theory, Social Control Theory, and Labeling Theory, the paper aims to explain the juvenile delinquency emphasizing these theories. They provide insight into the mechanisms through which social, environmental, and personal conditions intersect to excite or suppress offending behavior, providing a logical basis for an explanation of why some adolescents offend and others do not. Official statistics from the State statistical office are reviewed to identify the most common offenses by young people, including theft, property offenses, and violence. By bridging theoretical accounts and empirical patterns of child offending, the article demonstrates how modern theories account for the underlying processes, such as the reinforcement of antisocial behavior in peer groups, the pressures created by socio-economic strain, and the consequences of social labeling and rejection. It is only through an understanding of these dynamics on a theoretical plane that a more aware reading of juvenile offending and the risk factors therein can be discerned, which may not be overtly apparent at an empirical level. The paper ends with an emphasis on the urgent call for complex, theory-based strategies that strengthen family, enhance community engagement, and promote restorative justice values in delinquency prevention, and the successful reintegration of child offenders into society.

Key words: *juvenile crime, juvenile delinquency, labeling theory, social control, dynamic of crime*

Introduction

Crime should be viewed from a broad perspective. Many theories explore different factors when explaining crime, demonstrating its multifaceted nature. In this context, if we consider crime within the context of the modern age, innovations brought about by the modern age, including digitalization and artificial intelligence, also impact crime.

Juvenile delinquency is a complex phenomenon because children are affected by many factors, the most important of which are family dynamics, peer influence, school factors, socioeconomic status, and the community environment. Other factors that should be emphasized include individual differences, cultural and social variation, developmental factors, and policy influences. In the context of individual differences, those factors are important for shaping the delinquent's personality, such as impulsivity, low self-control, aggression, mental health issues like depression, or trauma.

Defined broadly, juvenile delinquency represents more than a legal problem. It is a social, psychological, and moral issue that reflects inequality, socialization, and control conditions within a given society. In recent decades, modern criminological theories, together with sociological, penal, psychological, and genetic causality theories, have become crucial to understanding why some juveniles engage in deviant behavior while others in similar environments do not.

What separates delinquency from crime is, first, that the word delinquency is mostly used for minors. Second, delinquency is more complex than crime because it also includes crime, along with misdemeanors and socio-pathological phenomena.

Rapid urbanization, migration, and the transformation of traditional social institutions have significantly altered patterns of social control and socialization. As a result, juveniles today are exposed to a wider range of influences than in previous generations, including digital environments that may normalize deviant behavior or facilitate new forms of delinquency.

The reason we decided to combine modern theories that explain juvenile delinquency with the dynamics, or movement, of crime is that it is of great importance to explain the essence of this phenomenon, taking into account some of its causes as well as the situation of juvenile criminality in North Macedonia. Therefore, within the scope of this paper, we will emphasize the social environment theory, reference group theory, differential association theory, cultural conflict theory, labeling theory, and secondary deviance, as well as the statistical data for 2024 regarding reported, accused, and convicted juveniles in conflict with law.

Juvenile delinquency also reflects broader structural inequalities present in transitional and post-socialist societies. In countries undergoing political, economic, and institutional transformation, such as the Republic of North Macedonia, juveniles often face uncertainty, limited opportunities, and conflicting value systems. Such factors might contribute to increasing feelings of frustration, social isolation, and identification conflicts, which are known to be risk factors for delinquent behavior. As such, understanding youth delinquency in this particular societal context offers insight into how societal-level shifts impact individual-level actions.

The current situation of societal change tends to give room for gaps in supervision and guidance, thus increasing the propensity for risky behavior on the part of the juveniles. On the other hand, the current social structure cannot overlook the significance of the justice system as it tends to influence the behavior of the juveniles in a very significant way.

1. Juvenile delinquency through modern theories of crime

Modern theories emphasize that juvenile delinquency is not solely the result of individual moral shortcomings but is shaped by social, economic, and cultural factors. More precisely, modern theories do not rely solely on a single factor when explaining juvenile delinquency; they consider all internal and external factors within the context of a multifactorial concept. In today's social landscape, digitalization, widespread use of social media, and changing family structures have reshaped the forms and causes of juvenile delinquency. Modern risks such as cyberbullying, hate speech, hate crime, and social exclusion necessitate a reinterpretation of classical crime theories. Theories that explain juvenile delinquency in general also provide information about criminal etiology. Etiology deals with the causes of crime, and the theories we will discuss in this article explain why juveniles become delinquent.

Some of the important theories that explain juvenile delinquency are: social environment theory, reference group theory, differential association theory, cultural conflict theory and labeling theory and secondary deviance

1.1 Social environment theory : One of the most important representatives of this theory is Alexandre Lacassagne, a student of the famous Italian criminologist, Cesare Lombroso. Lacassagne rejects Lombroso's thesis of a born criminal because he believes some people possess the same physical anomalies but cannot be defined as criminals. According to Lacassagne, personality is formed under the strong influence of social factors. Given the stated thesis, the social environment is strong enough to create criminals. This thesis is complemented by the view that economic factors significantly influence the emergence and development of crime. (Arnaudovski, 2007)

Lacassagne believed that crime is not the expression of an innate faculty, but is the result of an interaction between the individual and his social environment: (Clark, 2007)

Suppose we were to imply the views of prominent thinkers in the field of sociological theories on the issue of juvenile delinquency, in that case, the question could be asked: "Should we be guided by Lombroso's theory of a born criminal when determining the causes of juvenile crime?" The concept of a born criminal is one of the older theories, which, in our opinion, could not be maintained as a criterion for determining which person is a criminal in today's conditions.

Today, there are various modern sociological theories, which, within the framework of the theory of social environment, include the theory of imitation, which is closely related to juvenile crime. The theory of imitation creates a connection between the child and his parents (as a microgroup) or other adults in his environment that he can imitate. If one of the parents commits criminal acts, the child, imitating the parent, can get involved in delinquency.

Regarding the theory of the social environment, it is important to note the enormous contribution of Emile Durkheim, who described several characteristics of criminality. He believes that the roots of criminality are found in society; it springs from the mutual cooperation of society and people, as well as that it arises from the social structure. Taking into account the above characteristics, Durkheim creates the "theory of anomie" or known as a state of lawlessness.

1.2 Reference group theory: The reference group theory, together with the theory of differential association; the theory of cultural conflict; the theory of social disorganization; the theory of anomie; the theory of social interactionism and stigmatization and radical criminology are among the modern theories of crime that explain juvenile delinquency. Analyzing the theories, it can be concluded that there are several different views on the conceptual definition of criminality.

The first group of authors believe that criminality is a social mass phenomenon, meaning that the causes of a crime can be found in society and not in the individual.

The second group of authors, in contrast to the first group, believe that criminality is an individual phenomenon and the causes should be sought in the characteristics of the individual. Criminogenic factors most often influence this, especially the phenomenon becomes even more complex when it comes to children, because they are in a developmental phase.

The third group of authors (we could include American criminologists in this group) link criminality with socio-pathological phenomena such as prostitution, vagrancy, alcoholism, drug addiction, etc. In order to address the issue of "reference group", it is important to explain what we mean by the same term. The term reference group was first used by Herbert Hyman in 1942.

Reference groups are groups that an individual takes as an example, becomes a part of them for various reasons.

A general example for children and the connection of delinquency with reference groups is when a child wants to become part of problematic groups (gangs, ghettos), because they are influential in a certain environment in order to attract attention, and then the next step is building a delinquent profile. The USA is a typical country for reference groups, because there are a large number of nations, different cultures, traditions, values, etc. We can conclude that reference groups are more noticeable in multicultural countries. The reason is that the heterogeneity of reference groups and especially the influence of the most massive group on other smaller groups in a certain environment is the best example to determine the meaning of a reference group.

Reference groups can be divided into positive and negative. Positive ones are those that the child chooses on his own, agrees with their values, attitudes, understandings and belongs to them. (Arnaudovski, 2007) Negative groups are influential in delinquent behavior, because a

juvenile who is rejected by a certain environment seeks a reference group that is more influential (these are most often criminal associations, street groups, gangs) in order to feel powerful and strong in front of other groups in society. Negative groups are antisocial and most often lead to the formation of professional delinquents from an early age.

1.3 Differential Association Theory : The founder of the differential association theory (also known as the “differential association theory”) is the American sociologist Edwin Sutherland, in his work “Principles of Criminology” in 1924. The basis of the differential association theory is that criminal behavior is learned from those people with whom the criminal is in close and direct contact, while the basis of criminal behavior is social disorganization.

The concept of social disorganization is replaced by the concept of differential (different) social organization, hence criminal behavior is the result of learning in the process of socialization (interaction) with offenders and groups dominated by criminal examples. If the immediate environment of the individual is dominated by criminal behavior, such behavior decisively influences him and forms him as a delinquent. (Sulejmanov, 2003)

Sutherland believes that the roots of crime stem from social organization, and crime in a society is an expression of that organization. A child becomes a delinquent when the relationships (contacts) with criminal behavior are stronger than the relationships with law-abiding individuals.

During criminal activities, the child learns the basics and main techniques of crime, different relationships with people, disrespect for the law, a new lifestyle and new criminal habits. The listed characteristics are sufficient to conclude that a new criminal background is being built.

There are certain criticisms of Sutherland's theory, some critics say that the theory does not explain the typologies of crime; it does not explain why some people who study crime do not engage in criminal acts and it does not explain how the first offender became a criminal.

There are 9 postulates of differential association theory.

- a) Criminal behavior is learned
- b) It is learned through interaction and conversation with others
- c) The most important part of criminal behavior is that it is learned within a certain circle of people. This implies that the contacts have an immediate and primary character;
- d) Learning delinquent behavior implies learning techniques for committing crimes;
- e) The specific orientation of motives is formed by the provisions and definitions of legal norms as favorable and unfavorable;
- f) A person becomes a delinquent due to the prevalence of the utility of violating the law, rather than refraining from it. It is this postulate that very clearly explains the principle of differential association;
- g) Differential associations differ in their frequency, duration, priority and intensity. These characteristics indicate that delinquent behavior and anti-delinquent behavior differ from each other;
- h) The process of learning criminal behavior includes all mechanisms that operate within the limits of what is wanted to be learned;
- i) Crime and delinquent behavior appear as expressions of general needs and values.

1.4 Cultural conflict theory: The theory of cultural conflict was first discussed by Swedish criminologist Johan Throsten Sellin in his work “Culture Conflict and Crime”. The theory of cultural conflict is also known as the “theory of cultural deviance”. According to this theory, crime occurs due to the clash of values that occur in different groups and have different ways of behaving.

The heterogeneity of social groups leads to different values, beliefs and ideas. When a clash occurs between the listed values, a conflict occurs, and the conflict can also result in criminal behavior. According to Johan Throsten Sellin, there are two types of conflict: Primary and secondary conflict.

Primary conflict occurs when there is a clash of different cultural values, while secondary conflict implies the development of a single culture within different cultures with its own set of norms, values and behavior. Within the framework of this theory, we will also emphasize a disharmony of cultures and the influence of subculture on children's gangs.

A subculture or subculture is a culture of different groups that are characterized as closed, rigid, narrow and subcultural groups are in conflict with the dominant culture in a certain society that has different traditions and values. Subcultural groups have recently been characterized by sectarianism. The theory of subculture stems from the research of the Chicago School. Research from the school claims that certain groups in society have characteristic negative values and attitudes that are conducive to crime.

As an example, we can take the subculture that is formed in criminal associations of minors, which includes different age groups of minors, with an interest in committing crimes. One of the more important goals of criminal subcultural groups is to include as many minors as possible, the reason being that minors, considering their age, are not mature enough to assess whether the subcultural group can have a negative impact on their upbringing.

1.5 Labeling Theory and Secondary Deviance: To explain labeling theory and the process of secondary deviance, it is first necessary to define and distinguish between primary and secondary deviance. The labeling theory first appeared in Germany by Fritz Sack. The main representatives of this theory are: Edwin Lemert, John Kitsuse, Kai Ericson and Howard S. Becker. The theory became popular with the work "Crime and the Community" created by Frank Tannenbanum. (Demirbaş, 2001)

According to Tannenbanum and Becker: individuals who commit a crime for the first time are negatively criticized, that is, labeled by other individuals in society, after the crime is committed, about their way of life, character, etc., and therefore, as a reaction, they commit a crime again, so labeling affects the re-committing of crimes regardless of whether they are the same, hence the problem of recidivism. Howard S. Becker, when explaining the labeling theory, focuses his research on three parts: The concept of deviance as a collective action; rediscovery of deviance; moral conception of deviance. (Rock, 1974) In 1950, Edwin Lemert also worked on the theory of labeling, more precisely, he analyzed the negative consequences of labeling on delinquents.

In his research, he distinguishes between primary and secondary deviance. The theory of labeling, or known as "Labeling Theory", is the most criticized because many authors who deal with this issue believe that this theory does not provide explanations for the etiology of crime, therefore the causes of deviance cannot be discovered.

Primary deviance appears as a general deviance before the individual is labeled, within this deviation there is the act of violating certain norms by individuals. *Secondary deviance* is a continuation of primary deviation and can be characterized as a set of actions that occur after primary deviation, that is, within the framework of primary deviation, an individual can commit a crime, while in secondary deviation, a significant role is played by the punishment, which after being pronounced automatically labels the person as a criminal by society.

In order to understand the connection between primary and secondary deviation, we will give a typical example of juvenile criminal offenses: if a juvenile gang engages in acts of violence, alcoholism, vagrancy, etc. this is characterized as primary deviation, after the criminal career develops into committing crimes such as murder, in that case secondary deviation occurs,

along with the development of the criminal profile, while the labeling process occurs after the sanction is pronounced.

Primary deviations are common and more frequent, and therefore are not usually considered crimes (such as socio-pathological phenomena). Labeling is a product of secondary deviation, that is, it shows the social reaction to deviance. The prison system is one of the typical examples of this theory, because individuals who have served a sentence for a crime (theft, murder, etc.), after leaving prison, are labeled by other people in society as "criminals", this process is called the "labeling process" because the individual, although he has served a sentence, becomes known for the crime he has committed.

2. Dynamics of crime among children in conflict with the law in North Macedonia

The dynamics or movement of crime refers to the changes in the volume of crime over a period of time and in a certain area. In general, the dynamics provide an explanation for the decrease or increase of the crime rate in a certain period of time. The totality of juvenile crime can be determined for each year or for longer and shorter periods of time, for the whole country or for one region, etc. The totality of juvenile crime, but also the totality of general crime can be determined by: (Ibish, 2022)

- criminal reports against children (reported children in conflict with the law),
- indictments against children (accused children in conflict with the law) and
- convicted children in conflict with the law.

Crime and delinquency are dynamic and variable, they show a constant change in scope, structure, and prevalence. The dynamics of crime are influenced by the following factors: social, economic, political, social, cultural, etc., so, for example, if we take into account the transition period and post-war periods of the countries, it can be clearly seen that the dynamics of crime and delinquency are different. Within the framework of the listed factors it is important to add migrations, which in the last few years have proven to be a serious factor in the movement of juvenile delinquency.

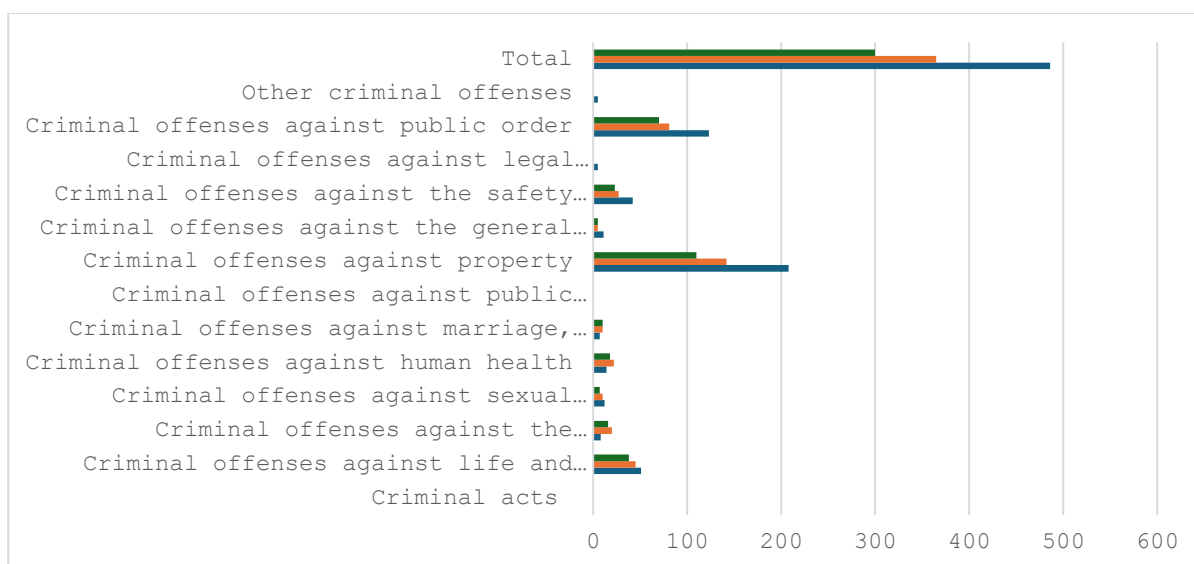
Specifically, in Macedonia, the collapse of the socialist system and the onset of the transition period brought about significant changes in the structure, scope, and dynamics of crime and delinquency. These developments also contributed to the emergence of new forms of criminal behavior, including juvenile delinquency. The historical dimension of juvenile delinquency dynamics is therefore of particular importance for the proper analysis of statistical data, especially with regard to trends in juvenile delinquency over time.

Table 1: Reported, accused and convicted children by criminal offense groups

Criminal acts	Reported	Accused	Convicted
Criminal offenses against life and body	51	45	38
Criminal offenses against the freedoms and rights of man and citizen	8	20	16
Criminal offenses against sexual freedom and sexual morality	12	10	7
Criminal offenses against human health	14	22	18
Criminal offenses against marriage, family and youth	7	10	10
Criminal offenses against public finances and the economy	-	1	1
Criminal offenses against property	208	142	110
Criminal offenses against the general safety of people and property	11	5	5

Criminal offenses against the safety of public traffic	42	27	23
Criminal offenses against legal traffic	5	1	1
Criminal offenses against public order	123	81	70
Other criminal offenses	5	1	1
Total	486	365	300

(Source: State Statistical Office of Republic of North Macedonia)



Graph 1: Reported, accused and convicted children by criminal offense groups

In the context of this paper, in order to provide a comprehensive explanation of juvenile delinquency, it was necessary to utilize the theories that offer significant insight into explaining juvenile delinquency on the one hand, and the statistical indicators on the other hand, which provide us with a picture of the perpetrators of criminal offences and the situation regarding criminal offences committed by juveniles across different categories.

According to the data regarding juvenile crime in 2024, as well as previous years, especially in the last decade, it shows that *crimes related to property* make up the biggest group of crimes committed by juveniles, with 208 recorded offenses, 142 suspects, and 110 juveniles convicted.

Crimes of public order are the second most frequent type of crime (123 reports, 70 convicted). Such crimes encompass a series of behaviors that represent disturbances in public order, often linked to adolescence, with ineffective social control mechanisms.

Of criminal offenses related to *life and body*, there are 51 reports, with 38 of them causing convictions. Though not as common as property crimes, the number of convictions is significant, establishing that violent crimes among juveniles are given severe treatment by the judicial system.

Crimes related to *sexual freedom, sexual morality*, even if small in number (12 cases reported, 7 convicted), constitute serious forms of juvenile delinquency that require special attention for prevention and rehabilitation.

Crimes related to the *security of public traffic* totaled 42, with 23 convicted, and the security of people and property in general numbered 11, with 5 convicted, pointing out dangerous and heedless behavior, such as that related to young drivers or to the lack of understanding of legal sanctions.

Crimes that affect *human health, as well as human freedom and citizen rights*, show a marked procedural characteristic, with the number of suspects being higher than the number of criminal cases filed.

Crimes related to *marriage, family, and youth* record an equal number of suspects and convicted persons (10), ensuring that there is sufficient legal evidence for an incident to be taken to court.

Conclusion

Juvenile delinquency represents a complex and multidimensional social phenomenon which should not be examined from the point of view of only one theoretical, methodological position. In the frame of this paper, it is clear how criminology has developed an adequate methodology of juvenile delinquency research, considering it from various “sociological, psychological, cultural” aspects, emphasizing once again how juvenile delinquency cannot be attributed simply to individual volition” but is an “expression of social environments at once intra-structural, inter-structural, and intra-culture-conflict situations.

The social environment theory highlights the decisive role of family, community, and socioeconomic conditions in shaping juvenile behavior, rejecting biological determinism in favor of social causality. Reference group theory and differential association theory further explain how peer groups and social interactions contribute to the learning and normalization of delinquent behavior, particularly during the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence. Cultural conflict theory provides insight into delinquency arising from value clashes between dominant social norms and subcultural groups, while labeling theory and the concept of secondary deviance underscore the potentially harmful effects of stigmatization and punitive responses on juveniles, often reinforcing criminal identities rather than preventing future offending.

The statistics of juvenile crime in North Macedonia for 2024 shows many of the assumptions of modern criminological theories. Property crimes and offenses against public order dominate juvenile criminal activity, reflecting economic pressures, weakened social control mechanisms, and the influence of peer groups. Although violent and sexual offenses occur less frequently, their presence remains a serious concern due to their gravity and long-term social consequences. The discrepancy between reported, accused, and convicted juveniles also points to procedural, evidentiary, and institutional factors that shape the official crime statistics.

Overall, the findings indicate that juvenile delinquency in North Macedonia is influenced by ongoing social transformation, economic instability and changes community structures. Based on the theoretical analysis and statistical findings presented in this paper, several key recommendations can be made to improve the prevention and treatment of juvenile delinquency in North Macedonia: Strengthening preventive social policies; creating safe and inclusive environments for socialization; prioritize diversion measures, restorative justice practices, and educational sanctions over punitive responses; improving coordination between institutions and Adapting policies to modern social challenges

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