

Minors delinquency in Albania: reviewing social and community risk factors through the social control theory

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Abstract:

These last ten years, Albania is experiencing one of most challenging phenomena of the post-communist period, juvenile delinquency. According to the official statistical reports and recent studies related to this phenomena, it seems that the number of minors involved in crimes and is alarmingly growing. Along with the inadequate measures adapted by the responsible state institutions, it reflects the inability of the Albanian family, school and community to act as a network in preventing this problem.

The demographic movements, the economical and political transition, the changing of family roles and functions, the inefficiency of school to adapt to the growing needs of Albanian minors and to the labor market, the weak social sensibility and influence of the community; these all influence in the outgrow of antisocial behaviors of Albanian minors.

The Social Control Theory serves as a filter in analyzing some of the social and community risk factors-within the social contexts of the Albanian society- that are contributing in the increased of juvenile delinquency.

Introduction

Although social scientists disagree on the causes and treatment of antisocial behavior³ of adolescents, they somehow agree on one point: Violations of the law are far more common among minors and young adults than any other age segment of

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³ This term generally refers to actions that deviate significantly from established social norms of the society. It commonly includes skipping school, getting into fights, running away from home, persistently lying, using illegal drugs or alcohol, stealing, vandalizing property, engaging in aggressive or violent behavior towards other individuals, and violating school and home rules or local criminal laws.

the population. Offences, such as drug abuse, theft, assault or murder increase in frequency during adolescence and high school years. Albanian statistics of the last ten years shows that 4 - 6% persons involved in crimes were under 18 years old. Data from Albanian Ministry of Justice⁴ show an increment of minors involved in offensive crimes and contraventions, 407 in 2008 compared to 211 during 2007. According to the Director of the Prison Training Centre⁵, in 2010 the number of Albanian minors involved in crimes and sentenced was 105, plus 150 who are benefiting from the probation services.

The larger proportion of the paper is focused on the roles of family and community relations as the determining factors in the development and organization of delinquent behaviors. It analyses some of the risk factors in the Albanian context that influence in the antisocial behavior of minors by reviewing the Social Control Theory, which emphasizes the importance of people's relationships, commitments, values, norms, and beliefs in respecting the law. This article defines risk factors, explains why they are important, and briefly discusses some of the major non individual risk factors linked to minors delinquency⁶ and violence in Albania.

Brief description of the Social Control Theory

According to the social control theory⁷ (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hawdon, 1996), individuals who do not have solid bonds to society institutions (family, school, workplace) will be likely to deviate and behave unconventionally in a variety of ways. This view suggests that different anti social behaviors of individuals may stem not from a source "inside" the person, such as biological inherited predisposition, but from a weakness in the attachment of youngsters to the society. Thus, if moral codes are internalized and individuals are tied into, and have a stake in their wider community, they will voluntarily limit their propensity to commit deviant acts. This theory is based on the concept that people commit crime because it is the easiest, most efficient, most gratifying way to satisfy one's needs and/or wants. Therefore, if children are relatively unattached to elements of their surrounding social institutions,

⁴ Annual Statistical Report, Albanian Ministry of Justice, (Tirane, 2008).

⁵ International Juvenile Justice Observatory Interview - Femi Sufaj. Director of the Prison Training Centre. Albania, September, 2010.

⁶ It refers to the antisocial or criminal activity of the child below 18 years of age and which violates the law. The same activity would have been a crime if it was committed by the adult.

⁷ Social control theory stresses the idea that people in a society commit delinquent or criminal acts because of the weakness or absence of the forces restraining them.

they are more likely to become juvenile offenders. Its principles help to explain why youth delinquency is far more prevalent among the poor, abandoned, or minority youngsters.

What is a risk factor?

Risk factors have been broadly defined as “those characteristics, variables, or hazards (such as age), a situation (such as the severity of a traumatic event), or a person's environment (such as family life and parental education or control) that, if present for a given individual, increase the likelihood that that person will eventually develop a disorder” (Mrazek and Haggerty, 1994:127). Kazdin and colleagues (1997) note that a risk factor predicts an increased probability of later offending, but does not make it a certainty.

Related to the juvenile delinquency issues, risk factors fall under three broad categories: individual, social, and community. Each of these categories includes several subcategories (e.g., family- and peer-related risk factors are grouped under the social category). Reviewing all known risk factors linked to delinquency, goes beyond the scope of this article, so the following discussion analyzes the major social and community risk factors associated with delinquency and violence among minors. In thinking about the risk factors of youth delinquency is important to distinguish between delinquent behavior that is serious and chronic and delinquent behavior that is less worrisome. The causes and consequences of delinquent behavior that begin during pre-adolescence are quite different from those of delinquency that begins- and especially ends – during adolescence and young adulthood. In general, the earlier an adolescent begins a “criminal career”- in particular if it begins before adolescence- the more likely he or she is to become a chronic offender, to commit serious and violent crimes, and to continue committing crimes as an adult (Moffitt, 1993)⁸. In contrast to youngsters who begin their delinquent behaviors before adolescence, those who begin after, do not always show signs of psychological abnormality or severe family pathology. The offences committed by these youngsters do not develop into serious criminality. Much of the antisocial behaviors is encouraged by and occurs in groups, with peers (Nagin, Farrington, & Moffitt, 1995). In general, these

⁸ Terrie Moffitt. (1993) Adolescence-limited and life-course persistent antisocial behavior: A developmental taxonomy. *Psychological Review*, 100, 674.701.

individuals have learned the norms and standards of the society and are far better socialized than life course persistent antisocial individuals.

Social Factors

Family structure and parenting styles. During childhood the family environment constitutes the basic social ecology in which the child's behavior is manifested, learned, encouraged or suppressed. Family risk factors linked to juvenile delinquency include characteristics of parenting, such as poor parenting skills, parent level of education, parent employment, parents incompatibility in how to educate the child, antisocial parents, parental stress, psycho-social problems of parents; as well as other family-related issues such as family economical level, size and structure, family marital discord, family level of adaptation and integration to the changing social and political context, living arrangement, child maltreatment, and delinquency within the family (Derzon and Lipsey, 2000; Wasserman & Seracini, 2001). For example, many adolescents who have had troubles with the law from an early age have siblings who have had similar problems⁹ (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). It is especially the case for children close to each other (age and relationship). Some research has linked being raised in a single-parent family with increased delinquency (McCord, Widom, and Crowell, 2001). Moreover, children from families with four or more children have an increased chance of offending (Wasserman and Seracini, 2001; West and Farrington, 1973).

The Albanian family is undergoing important changes in its structure, economic factors, birth rates, marriages, divorces, lifestyle and the fulfillment of its functions have marked new tendencies. It is threatened not only by traditional factors, like death, illness, physical disability, poverty etc., but also by the "nontraditional" as deviant behaviors, various internal and external conflicts, violence, alcoholism, abusive use of drugs, marital unfaithfulness, neglect, sexually transmitted diseases, prostitution¹⁰, etc. For example, divorce has become a disturbing social problem with grave consequences for the Albanian family and especially for the children wellbeing. The number of children caught in divorces is two time bigger than in 1985. The

⁹ Rolf Loeber & Magda Stouthamer-Loeber. (1986). Family factors as correlates and predictors of juvenile conduct problems and delinquency. *Crime and justice: An annual review of research*, Vol. 7 (pp. 29–149). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰ Hamit Beqja & Lekë Sokoli. (2000). *Parathënie e "Divorci - vrojtme e refleksione"*. Tiranë: Dudaj & Rinia, fq. 5-6.

increase of divorces number, the poverty of a great number of Albanian families, the emigration of at least one parent and the internal movements, families with parents having serious individual psycho-social problems, have all caused a great risk for the education and the wellbeing of children and adolescents. There is a tendency of increased family problems and number of minors coming to court, that is influenced by the lack of quick and timely interference of the society. Several studies indicate that youngsters who have had problems with the law before adolescence are psychologically troubled. Most of them are male, poor and many come from homes in which divorce and parental death occurred¹¹ (UNICEF, 2006).

During the last ten years in Albania is increased the number of families of partners who are diverse ethnically and culturally. In particular, the number of single parent families, mixed families created by remarriage, etc is growing. For the families with temporary one parent, due to the internal movements or emigration, it is noticed that children left behind (the older ones more than the young) manifest emotional problems, anxiety and depression in greater level than in families with both parents. The low level of remittances, the low level of communication with the parent away and the small number of visits of the emigrant parent, affect negatively the emotional status of children.

Even though it is experiencing slight modern features in its structure and functions, the Albanian family is still under the strong influence of the tradition, according to which, the authority of taking important decisions, such as economical issues and education of the children belongs to the male, the head of the family. Albanians still live in a patriarchal social and family structure that heavily influences determinants of family relations and communication among family members.

Gorman-Smith et al¹² (2000) analyzed the link between family functioning patterns and offending trajectories and found that struggling families (low in discipline, monitoring, structure, cohesion and beliefs) which may be comparable to the neglectful style, were found to be an increased risk for each type of offending, whereas exceptionally functioning families (high levels of positive parenting, adequate discipline, structure, and cohesion) were less likely to be involved in each of the offending patterns. Task-oriented families (high levels of structure, but low levels of warmth and beliefs about the family), which may be relatively similar to the

¹¹ UNICEF, 2006.

¹² Deborah Gorman-Smith, Patrick H. Tolan, & David B. Henry. (2000). A developmental-ecological model of the relation of family functioning to patterns of delinquency. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 16,169-198.

authoritarian parenting style, appeared more likely to be involved in the serious chronic pattern of minors offending.

Chronic young delinquents typically come from disorganized families with hostile, inept or neglectful parents who have mistreated their children and failed to instill in them proper standards of behavior or foundations of self-control (Coughlin & Vuchinich, 1996; McCord, 1996). McCord's (1979) study of 250 boys found that among those at age 10, the strongest predictors of later convictions for violent offenses (up to age 45) were poor parental supervision, parental conflict, and parental aggression, including harsh, punitive discipline.

And because antisocial behavior in the child typically provokes further parental ineffectiveness and association with other antisocial children, aggressive minors often get caught up in a vicious cycle. As a consequence early involvement in antisocial activity tends to escalate and become self-perpetuating over time.

Peer influences. Several studies have found a consistent relationship between involvement in a delinquent peer group and delinquent behavior. Lipsey and Derzon (1998) noted that for youth ages 12–14, a key predictor variable for delinquency is the presence of antisocial peers. According to McCord and colleagues (2001), "Factors such as peer delinquent behavior, peer approval of delinquent behavior, attachment or allegiance to peers, time spent with peers, and peer pressure for deviance have all been associated with adolescent antisocial behavior." Zimring (1998) shows that delinquent activity occurs in group situations in which adolescents are pressured by their friends to go along with their group. Conversely, Elliot (1994) reported that spending time with peers who disapprove of delinquent behavior may curb later violence. The influence of peers and their acceptance of delinquent behavior is significant, and this relationship is magnified when youth have little interaction with their parents and siblings (Steinberg, 1987).

A number of studies suggest that problematic groups attract and encourage individuals without prior criminal history towards criminal behavior (UNICEF, 2006). For those already involved in antisocial activities, the group tends to accentuate slightly the already existing problematic behavior. Juveniles under the influence of those groups are more likely to end up in prison than those free from this influence. The numbers from the above report show an increasing tendency of juveniles to get

involved in organized crime. In 2004 they were responsible for 30 percent of acts in association whereas in 2005 the figure was 50 percent.

Another factor responsible for criminal behavior among minors is rejection by others. It undermines the child's self-esteem and leads to antisocial behavior. Rejected children and adolescents are thus pushed towards problematic groups and 'gangs' that can offer immediate support and prestige, while encouraging deviant social behavior. Studies tend to show that children are nowadays more likely to identify themselves with problematic groups at an earlier stage in their life. They are therefore more inclined to get involved early in serious criminal activities. Association with problematic groups has thus a strong influence on minors behavior, especially if combined with poverty lack of entertaining or social activities, poor parental care, a lack of interest in school, sad events in life and a previous criminal experience.

Community Factors

Neighborhood. Only in the 1990's have the researchers begun to pay sufficient attention to neighborhood and community factors, and there is still a great need for them to investigate immediate situational influences on offending.

The social context in which youth are reared can influence the likelihood of delinquency. Much of the characteristics of the community can be turned into promoting factors of criminal behavior or otherwise as powerful inhibitors and preventive means for delinquency.

Two dimensions of community characteristics are important to understanding youth risk:

(1) Community structural characteristics, such as the percent of the population below poverty, percent of the population working, ethnic heterogeneity and cultural diversity, residential mobility, home ownership, violence and dropping out of high school affect minor's risk to crimes (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Crane, 1991; Sampson, Castellano, & Laub, 1981; Shaw & McKay, 1942). There exists a powerful correlation between residing in an adverse environment and participating in criminal acts (McCord, Widom, and Crowell, 2001). As Sampson and colleagues¹³ (1997) have shown, there is substantial variation among urban to suburban populations, poor neighborhoods in the levels of violent crime and youth antisocial behavior. Violence and crime among

¹³ Robert J. Sampson, Stephen W. Raudenbush, Felton Earls. (1997). *Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy*.

youth are strongly linked to poverty for some reasons. First, when families live in poor neighborhood, parents are less effective in taking care and controlling their children, and this leads to increased antisocial behaviors among minors. Secondly, poverty reduces the social cohesion and sensibility of a community, making it more difficult for the institutions or individuals to provide the guidance and support the adolescents need (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Finally, repeated exposure to violence- whether in the home, in school or neighborhood, becomes a reinforcing model for the adolescents and produces violence itself.

(2) Neighborhood social organization or the social processes occurring within the neighborhood (Sampson et al., 1997; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 1999). Social organization is reflected in perceived social support and cohesion among neighbors, respect of social norms and sense of belonging to the community, supervision and control of children and adolescents by other adults in the community, shared community activities and participation in formal and voluntary organizations. Both structural characteristics and neighborhood social organization, as well as the relation between them, appear to be important in understanding youth risk (Sampson et al., 1997; Tolan et al., 1999).

Social control theory hypothesizes that disorganized communities with low level of social control and organization networks, resulting from isolation among residents and high residential turnover, allow criminal activity to go unmonitored” (Herrenkohl et al., 2001:221). These communities can indeed leave criminal activities undetected and unmonitored, thereby increasing a potential escalation. In some extreme cases, communities become themselves instigators and promoters of juvenile delinquency. With their high crime rate, they expose juveniles to a social environment that gives the impression of supporting such values as delinquency and criminality.

Considering the geographic/territorial distribution of the population in Albania, juvenile delinquency seems to be more frequent when individuals live in heterogeneous environments (UNICEF, 2006).

During the transition period¹⁴, a significant number of families have moved from deep zones and rural regions to main urban centers. Inner movement of population was mainly driven from the lack of resources in their hometowns. Extreme poverty, high unemployment rate, lack of public services and impossibility of

¹⁴ According to INSTAT, Albania the internal movement began in the early 90' and reached its peak between 1997-2000.

performing social life activities were the main feed of this phenomenon. The newcomers in urban areas found a new and difficult reality. A considerable part of this settlement area was totally unprepared to support these newcomers. There was no investment and no elementary preparation for new living areas. As for the newcomers themselves, they did not have enough qualification to find employment and were unprepared to survive in these new conditions. A lot found living in a big city even harder. Life costs were higher and unemployment was constant. Discrimination and social rejection was evident. Furthermore, cultural differences were an obstacle for normal communication between inner city and newly suburb communities. Situation became even worse when newcomers occupied land properties of local population. Tendencies for rejection became stronger. Such a difficult environment fed illicit activities. According to a national study conducted by CRCA and UNICEF¹⁵ (2007) there is discrimination in tackling juvenile delinquency, and a disproportionately large number of juveniles apprehended are of Roma, Egyptian, or other ethnic minority origin¹⁶. A higher rate of juvenile delinquency is concentrated primarily in main urban centers like Tirana, Korça, Durrës, Elbasan, Gjirokastër, Vlorë and Berat. This feature can be interpreted in various ways. These cities have the highest concentration of young population in the country and have recently turned into residential areas for newcomers from rural areas. Many of newcomers brought criminal behavior, previously expressed or acquired because of their difficult living conditions. In these areas aggression and violence is used and reinforced by young males to demonstrate power and standing within a heterogeneous population.

School policies. Many researchers of juvenile delinquency point out to the positive impact education can have. It is considered as the main factor for fighting poverty and family instability. The school is where children are educated, formed and brought up. It is the place where role models attitudes and behaviors are shaped and preserved.

Researchers reviewed the impact of school policies concerning grade retention¹⁷, suspension and expulsion, and school tracking of juvenile delinquency. Such policies, which disproportionately affect minorities, have negative consequences for at-risk

¹⁵ Juvenile delinquency in Albania. Analysis of factors and causes of juvenile delinquency in Albania. (2007) Children's Human Rights Centre of Albania – CRCA.

¹⁶ *Defence for Children International – Albania section*, Universal Periodic Review, April 2009.

¹⁷ Grade retention occurs when teachers hold students in back a grade level at the end of the school year.

youth (McCord, Widom, and Crowell, 2001). For example, suspension and expulsion do not appear to reduce undesirable behavior, and both are linked to increased delinquent behavior.

The present system of education in Albania is suffering the “drop out” of the pupils at the low levels of education. Nowadays, a lot of Albanian juveniles both in suburban of big cities and in rural areas do not have the possibility to reach fulfillment through education. Poverty, lack of transport, lack of dorms, lack of security etc. undermine completely such a prospect. On the other hand, school curriculum is not practically based. Children do not get essential knowledge, which could be used to change their lives. Under these conditions, it is often easier for them to drop out of school and to get involved in activities that contribute to the family income. In this context they are more likely to get involved in criminal activities. This is the only way that can explain the increasing number of juveniles that drop out of school without completing their basic education. Teachers and educators are often unmotivated to identify and help resolve problems with which their students are confronted. By examining the link between school and antisocial behavior, studies demonstrate that low marks in school evaluations are intimately linked with early expression of delinquency. No interest and lack of motivation put children in a risky situation when it comes to criminal involvement. Scarce resources can be responsible for the lack of discipline in the classroom and a limited number of teachers means a higher number of pupils in each class. As a result, the lack of supervision increases probabilities for children and adolescents to develop antisocial behaviors.

Discussion and Conclusion

Juvenile delinquency is a complex social problem that significantly impacts all members of a society and processes of a social structure. Delinquency refers to a set of behaviors that are not in line with the collective practices and/or ethics of the dominant social group. Essentially, these behaviors deviate from societal norms and more specifically they violate established criminal codes and laws. Juvenile delinquency incorporates not only general criminal activity but conduct that is only unlawful for youths such as running away from home and skipping school. Current research into this difficult and pressing issue reflects a vast range of theories about and predictors of delinquency.

The number of Albanian minors involved in criminal activities is increasing. Furthermore, they tend to do so in areas very much similar to those of adults. Although cultural stereotypes associate minor offenders with serious crimes, in fact most juvenile delinquents are arrested for crimes against property (i.e. petty theft). Such offenders are often motivated by poverty, as recent movements from rural regions to urban centers in Albania have augmented challenges such as unemployment, high costs of living, inadequate social services, and discrimination. Main population centers, heterogeneous population centers, peripheral migrant areas with shortages of living sources are places where juvenile delinquency is blooming. On the other hand, small cities with homogenous population and strong and traditional ties are characterized by low rates of juvenile delinquency.

Some social and community risk factors have been identified in the article as indicators or predictors of juvenile delinquency and these factors represent dysfunction at several levels, specifically within the structure of the offender's family. Family size, deficient parenting and anti social parents can have deep and lasting effect on the child's development. Some of these factors include conflict within the family, dramatic changes in the family, separation or divorce, precarious financial situations, a lack of adequate supervision and/or rules, a distinct lack of parent-child attachment, lack of communication, instability, sickness, alcoholism, poor home life quality, parental expectations, out-of-home placements and inconsistent discipline.

Growing delinquency in young ages during the last decade is directly associated with the crisis that the Albanian family has suffered over the years of political transition. Juvenile delinquency is frequently associated with individuals who are from families with history of divorce, violence, single parent or immigrant parent (Children's Human Rights Centre of Albania – CRCA, 2007¹⁸). In such environments, with considerable lack of emotional and material support, children and adolescents don't have a proper model for their development. It is either absent or deformed and problematic. Children feel unsupported and not backed up, neglected and not respected. Furthermore, environment offers them stressing, difficult and often unbearable situations.

Research conducted on the role of schools in the development of problematic behavior show that a number of features found in learning institutions are

¹⁸ This study was supported by UNICEF, in partnership with European Commission and Sida, in the framework of the Juvenile Justice Reform programme in Albania.

problematic: lack of moral support and satisfaction for pupils work; teachers are not motivated for their work; lack of cooperation between teachers, family and community actors; class order and 'hierarchy' that supports anti social behavior; un-determined rules about behavior and lack of compliance.

It is clear that delinquency among minors in Albania, like in other similar countries, does not exist in a vacuum and therefore solutions to this problem must take into account all of the contextual and situational elements surrounding the youth at risk. Further research is necessary in order to attain a more complete understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of juvenile crime, its potentially causal factors and how Albanian society can combat its detrimental effects.

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