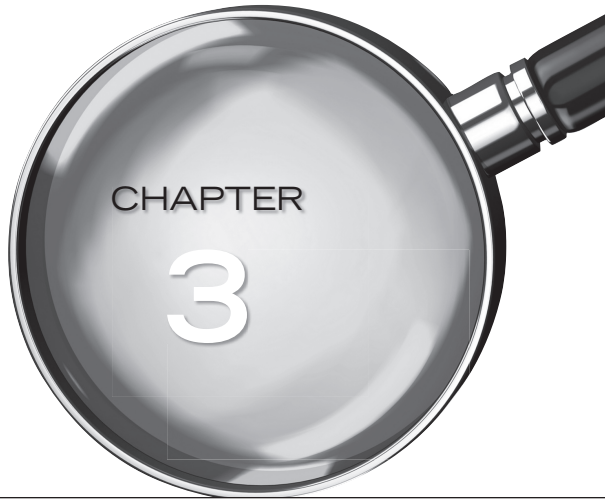
# Theory and Research: The Social Context of Juvenile Delinquency and Juvenile Justice




## CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

*After studying this chapter, you should be able to*

- Explain how the political economy of the United States influences delinquency
- Describe the key role that the family plays in the socialization of children and the relationship between child socialization and delinquency
- Describe the importance of parental economic or workplace power, parental criminality, and family conflict, and explain how each of these factors may influence delinquency
- Explain the connection between parental abuse, neglect of children, and delinquency
- Explain the connection between school performance and delinquency
- Describe how schools and societal factors contribute to student failure
- Describe the phenomenon of "social disorganization" and how it can encourage the creation of a delinquent "culture" in neighborhoods or urban areas
- Explain how youth peer groups and gangs differ from one another and how youths' peer associations encourage or discourage delinquency
- Describe how the development, management, and distribution of political and economic resources influence both youths and the operation of the social institutions that make up the juvenile justice process

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

## Introduction

Delinquency and the practice of juvenile justice occur, not in a vacuum, but in a social context. This does not mean that individual factors, such as biological makeup and psychological functioning, do not play a role in delinquency or the operation of juvenile justice. Nor does it imply that individuals do not make choices, often conscious choices, to engage in delinquent behaviors. However, it recognizes that individuals, and the choices they make, cannot be adequately understood without considering the social contexts within which they live and act.

As noted in Chapter 1, the social context helps shape our views of juvenile crime and the operation of juvenile justice through the portrayal of delinquency and juvenile justice in the media. In fact, much of what most people (including the makers of juvenile crime policy) know about juvenile crime and juvenile justice comes from the media. However, the social context of juvenile delinquency and juvenile justice comprises more than the media. In the United States, juvenile delinquency and juvenile justice are influenced by a variety of factors found within the political economy of the United States and within communities, families, schools, peer groups, and other important socializing institutions. How political and economic arrangements and socializing institutions, such as families, communities, and schools, influence delinquency is a primary focus of theory and research within the field of criminology. Indeed, courses in criminology, juvenile delinquency, and criminological theory focus attention on how factors such as economic inequality, school failure, residence in a high-crime neighborhood, child discipline practices, child abuse, association with criminally involved peers, and many other factors are related to delinquency. Explanations of criminal behavior that refer to such factors comprise a significant body of criminological theory. Moreover, theories are important, as Stephen Pfohl has noted, because they "provide us with an image of what something is and how we might best act toward it."[1] The development of good theories of delinquency, then, could be used to develop policies that reduce delinquency.

Although the purpose of this text is not to examine the many theoretical explanations of delinquency, it should be kept in mind that delinquency is the product of a complex set of factors and that juvenile justice exists within a complex social context that has real and profound effects on the practice of juvenile justice. Importantly, juvenile justice practitioners often spend considerable energy attempting to help their clients develop more law-abiding responses to the social context within which their clients live. Many practitioners also spend considerable energy attempting to manipulate or alter various aspects of the social context in ways that will lessen the likelihood of continued delinquent behavior.[2]

This chapter discusses some of the important components of the overall social context that influence juvenile crime and the operation of juvenile justice. It begins by considering the effects of economic and political factors on delinquency. Next, it explores a variety of important social institutions, such as families, neighborhoods, schools, and peer associations, and their relationship to youths' delinquent behavior. It then examines how the social context influences the development of delinquency theory. It closes by looking at the ways in which the social context influences the practice of juvenile justice.

## The Political and Economic Context of Juvenile Delinquency and Juvenile Justice

The term **political economy** refers to the basic economic and political organization of society. The political economy determines the ways in which economic and political resources are developed, managed, and distributed. The development, management, and distribution of these resources are important because they directly affect the ability of basic socializing institutions, such as families and schools, to meet people's needs. For example, the distribution of job opportunities and the pay earned by workers influence the amount of economic resources possessed by families and the quality of life experienced by family members. As the National Commission on Children noted in a 1993 report, "Economic security is fundamental to children's well-being. Children need material support to have a better chance to grow up healthy, succeed in school, and become capable and caring adults."[3] Furthermore, decisions regarding the development, management, and distribution of economic resources do not occur in a social vacuum; rather, they are products of a political process in which different groups with conflicting concerns and varying degrees of power try to protect and further their interests.

**political economy** The basic political and economic organization of society, including the setting of political priorities and the management and distribution of economic resources. People's economic status largely determines the opportunities that are available to them, their feeling of political empowerment, their ability to access the political system, and their ability to influence political and economic decision making.

### The Political Context

The forms of political organization found in most modern societies can be separated into two main categories: democratic forms and authoritarian forms. The United States, although relatively democratic, is not a pure democracy in which every person has an equal voice in decision making and not every political decision is intended to maximize the common good. Instead, governmental decision making is regularly influenced by powerful special interests that seek to maximize benefits for themselves at the expense of others. These **special interest groups** consist of individuals, families, corporations, unions, and various other organizations, and they use a variety of means to obtain tax breaks, favors, subsidies, and favorable rulings from congressional committees, regulatory agencies, and executive agencies.[4]

**special interest group** An organization consisting of persons, corporations, unions, and so on, that have common political, and often economic, purposes and goals. These individuals or groups come together to use their influence, monetarily and politically, to persuade politicians and other persons in power to act favorably toward them.

Although the government can and does act in ways that benefit the majority of Americans, it is not always neutral.[5] When government entities decide to regulate certain activities and not others, when they enforce certain laws and not others, when they select which resources to develop and how to manage and distribute these resources, their decisions and actions invariably favor some groups and interests over others. Whether to provide or withdraw government support for abortion, whether to increase or reduce regulations concerning gun ownership, whether to reduce or eliminate support for summer jobs programs for youths, or whether to make it more difficult for low-income youths to receive loans for higher education while providing a range of tax breaks and subsidies to large corporations are hardly neutral decisions. In determining what should be done, government is generally biased toward policies that benefit the wealthy, especially the big business community.[6]

**power** The ability to influence political and economic decisions and actions; the ability to force, coerce, or influence a person's actions or thoughts.

The ability to influence political decision making is a form of power. **Power** is the "capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others."[7] However, power is not equally distributed across individuals and groups in our society. Instead, it is concentrated among those who possess substantial economic resources—resources that can be used to directly and indirectly influence government decision making. The expenditure of those resources to influence government decision making is seen as a reasonable cost because the decisions reached partially determine the development, management, and distribution of resources within society and typically benefit those who possess substantial economic resources.

From a juvenile delinquency and juvenile justice standpoint, the question we must ask ourselves is this: To what extent do present political arrangements contribute to the well-being of children and to the healthy functioning of other socializing institutions, such as families and communities, that have an important impact on children's lives? We also must ask, to what extent do present political arrangements encourage delinquency, either directly or indirectly?

Decisions to invest our resources in ways that encourage the healthy development of communities, schools, families, and children are political decisions. This does not mean that families, communities, schools, and other organizations do not share responsibility for the welfare of children and for the problem of delinquency. Community decision making and school decision making are inherently political activities. However, it must be kept in mind that government decision making does have important ramifications for the quality of life experienced by many Americans and for the level of delinquency that exists in our society. The following section examines one important outcome of decision making in the United States, namely, economic inequality, as well as the relationship of economic inequality to delinquency.

**capitalism** An economic system based upon three fundamental principles: (1) private ownership of property, (2) competition between economic interests, and (3) personal profit as a reward for economic risk and effort.

**socialism** A political and economic system that is based on democratic decision making, equality of opportunity for all, collective decision making designed to further the interests of the entire community, public ownership of the means of production, and economic and social planning.

### The Economic Context

There are two primary forms of economic organization in the modern world: **capitalism** and **socialism**. Although pure capitalism and pure socialism do not exist, the economic organization of each country tends toward one form or the other. In the United States, the predominant form of economic organization is capitalism. This form of economic organization is characterized by three basic principles: private ownership of personal property, personal profit, and competition. In addition, according to those who favor pure capitalism, government interference in economic life should be kept to a minimum. The basic view of capitalism's supporters is that "the profit motive, private ownership, and competition will achieve the greatest good for the greatest number in the form of individual self-fulfillment and the general material progress of society."[8]

Clearly, many people in the United States are able to achieve considerable prosperity. Yet, it is also true that many others have relatively few material resources. In 2006, it was estimated that 12.3% of the U.S. population (36.5 million people) were officially poor. Most of these poor people were white, and the greatest concentrations of poverty were found in central cities. Furthermore, 2.9 million of those persons classified as poor worked full time and another 6.3 million worked at least part time.[9] However, other estimates of the number of poor persons—estimates not based on the official poverty line—suggest that the number of people who lack an adequate income to meet their basic needs may be as high as 80 million persons.[10] Even using official data, the number of persons considered *near* poverty was estimated to be 49.7 million in 2006.[11]

## FYI

**Official Poverty**

The poverty line is defined as three times the amount of income necessary for a minimally nutritional diet. In 2006, the official poverty line for a family of four with two children younger than 18 years was $20,444.[12] Many economists and others argue that the official poverty line underestimates the number of poor persons because those earning slightly above the poverty line still lack access to adequate shelter, diet, housing, clothing, and medical care, but they are not considered officially poor. Moreover, researchers indicate that families in some places would need double the poverty rate to meet their basic needs.[13]

It is important to note that poverty is not equally distributed within the population. Minorities, children, and families headed by women are disproportionately represented among the impoverished in the United States. In 2006, approximately 8% of whites had an income below the official poverty level, compared with approximately 24% of African Americans and 21% of Hispanics. Although most officially poor people in the United States are White, African Americans and Hispanics are disproportionately represented in poverty statistics. Similarly, 17% of persons younger than 18 years and 28% of families headed by women were below the poverty line in 2006.[14]

The gap between the wealthiest Americans and the poorest Americans has widened in recent years. Research that has examined trends in income inequality indicates that it has increased since the 1970s. The increase in income inequality appears to be related to six factors: (1) the shift from better-paid manufacturing jobs to less well-paid service jobs; (2) technological advances that have increased the demand for highly skilled workers at the expense of less skilled workers; (3) globalization, which forces American workers to compete with foreign workers, driving down American wages; (4) immigration, which drives down wages among less skilled workers; (5) a decline in unionization that decreases the ability of workers to bargain for higher wages; and (6) the segregation of poorer people into areas where their opportunities for economic well-being are lessened.[16]

For most Americans, the economic resources of the families they are born into play a critical role in their future economic status. A person born into a poor family will likely remain poor or close to the poverty level, and a person born into a wealthy family will likely remain wealthy.[19] This does not mean, however, that everyone's economic circumstances remain static over time. Even individuals from middle-class families experience some unexpected changes in their economic circumstances at some point in their

## MYTH VS REALITY

**Comparative Focus on Income Inequality**

**Myth**—The United States has less income inequality than other countries.

**Reality**—The United States has greater income inequality than many other Western or industrialized countries. For example, countries such as Italy, Britain, Japan, Australia, Germany, France, Switzerland, Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark have considerably less income inequality than the United States.[15] To view an interesting video on income inequality in the United States, see the PBS presentation *Income Inequality* at http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/332/index.html.

## MYTH VS REALITY

**Comparative Focus on the Quality of Life Experienced by Americans**

**Myth**—The quality of life experienced by Americans is greater than the quality of life in any other country.

**Reality**—Although many Americans live in much better conditions than many other people in the world, some Americans are not as fortunate. On the 2007/2008 Human Development Index, which is based on life expectancy, educational attainment, and real income, the United States ranked 12th, behind Finland, France, the Netherlands, Japan, Switzerland, Sweden, Ireland, Canada, Australia, Norway, and Iceland.[17] While the United States ranks first in military spending, gross domestic product, and the numbers of millionaires and billionaires, it ranks 18th in the income gap between rich and poor children, and 22nd in infant mortality.[18]

lives, and most will experience periodic, though predictable, changes in their standard of living during their lifetimes. Divorce or separation, the death of a spouse or parent, becoming a family head or spouse, unemployment, work loss because of retirement, and a reduction in the work hours of individuals and family members can lead to financial hardship. Thus, it is not only the poor who are likely to suffer economic hardship during their lifetimes; they are merely more likely to suffer longer and more acutely because of their economic situation.

An important key to economic well-being is the ability to find and hold a job that pays a decent wage. Yet, many Americans have a hard time locating such jobs. Periodic economic recessions in the 1980s, 1990s, and the 2000s; decisions by U.S. companies to move their production operations to other countries; reductions in the workforce as a result of automation; efforts to make businesses more efficient; and a shift away from the production of goods to the provision of services not only have reduced job opportunities for the traditionally unemployed, but also have affected the wages and the future employment prospects of those who are working and those who will soon enter the workforce. Although these trends have influenced people of all racial groups and ages, they have had a profound influence on people living in urban areas, many of whom are minorities, and children.

The shift from manufacturing jobs to service jobs; the movement of entry-level jobs in manufacturing, retail sales, and customer services from urban areas to the urban periphery or overseas; and the relocation of high-tech jobs to cities have resulted in fewer job opportunities for low-skilled urban residents. Moreover, a lack of affordable rental housing in the urban periphery, coupled with racial residential segregation, prevents many poor and low-skilled workers from relocating to areas that are closer to these jobs.

## FYI

**Children's Health Outcomes are Directly Affected by their Parents' Economic Status**

For example, compared to non-poor children, poor children are 1.6 times more likely to die in infancy, 1.9 times more likely to suffer from low birth weight, 2.7 times more likely to have no regular health care, and 8 times more likely to live in a family that has too little food a least some of the time.[20]

Further, low levels of automobile ownership and poor public transportation mean that poor low-skilled urban residents find it difficult to commute to jobs.[21] Indeed, research indicates that distance from home is a major factor that influences workforce participation for both men and women, but it is particularly strong for women, who are often hesitant to take jobs that are far from home because they do not want to be too far away from their children's caregivers.[22] Simultaneously, many new jobs that have been created in urban areas require a high degree of skill and are not well matched to the skills of many urban residents. The result has been a high degree of economic segregation characterized by concentrated pockets of poverty, particularly in urban areas,[23] at one extreme and areas of affluence at the other.

Economic resources are important because of the material goods and opportunities that such resources can procure. For those living in affluent areas, it means having a range of public services and private resources. It means well-funded schools, recreational and cultural facilities, programs for youths, and access to a range of private resources that can be used to support and respond to family and individual problems. In poor communities, it often means a lack of quality public or private resources for youths and families. It means that those who are disproportionately exposed to the stress of life have the fewest resources to help them deal with the problems that they encounter.

Adverse economic conditions, such as unemployment and declining wages, place a strain on many families. For example, research on unemployed men has found them to feel less satisfied with themselves and with their lives in general. They also tend to feel more victimized, anxious, depressed, and hostile toward others than men who are employed.[24] Financial loss appears to be related to changes in men's attitudes and parenting practices, and many fathers whose earnings decline become more tense, irritable, explosive, arbitrary, and punitive in responding to their children.[25]

Of course, women are also affected by financial hardship, and financial hardship is particularly acute for families headed by single women. In 2006, 28.3% of all female-headed families lived in poverty.[26] Moreover, life for single women who head families is often complicated by the many responsibilities that these women have. Indeed, females who head families have multiple responsibilities and demands that go beyond their own immediate needs. They are responsible for providing food, shelter, and clothing for their children; seeing that they get to school; keeping them healthy; supervising and monitoring their behavior; meeting their emotional and psychological needs; managing family finances; and meeting a wide variety of other demands that emanate from employers, relatives, and others. In addition, they must deal with issues of gender discrimination, poor labor market prospects, and welfare policies and programs that provide minimal relief and are often seen as humiliating.[27]

Economic hardship also affects the young. Poor infants are much more likely to suffer low birth weight, to die during the first year of life, and to suffer hunger or abuse while growing up. They are less likely to receive immunizations or adequate medical care, and they are less likely to undergo the type of cognitive development that will allow them to do well in school.[28] Moreover, negative psychological and social effects are associated with poverty. Long-term exposure to poverty is related to increased levels of anxiety and unhappiness among children, and current exposure to poverty is associated with behaviors such as disobedience and aggression.[29]

Economic resources clearly influence the ability of people to obtain those things that are necessary for survival and that are desired in our society. Such resources influence an

## MYTH VS REALITY

**Comparative Focus on the Well-Being of Children**
**Myth**—Children in the United States enjoy a greater level of well-being than in any other country.
**Reality**—Out of the 21 nations in the industrialized world, the average ranking of the United States on child well-being is 20, just ahead of the United Kingdom. The countries that have the highest rankings in terms of material well-being, health and safety, education, family and peer relationships, behaviors and risks, and subjective well-being are the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark.[30]

individual's life chances. As Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills noted, life chances involve "everything from the chance to stay alive during the first year after birth to the chance to view fine art, the chance to remain healthy and grow tall, and if sick to get well again quickly, the chance to avoid becoming a juvenile delinquent—and very crucially, the chance to complete an intermediary or higher educational grade."[31]

Furthermore, economic status is an important factor from a juvenile justice perspective, because it appears to be strongly related to delinquent behavior. Indeed, many theories of crime and delinquency stress the role of economic inequality in the production of crime, and these theories have received some support in the research literature. For example, ethnographic studies of low income neighborhoods,[32] large-scale self-report studies of the link between **social class** and delinquency, and research on the relationship between persistent childhood poverty and delinquency have found that poverty appears to have an effect on delinquent behavior. In a large-scale study of social class differences in delinquency, Delbert Elliott and David Huizinga found that, although class differences were almost nonexistent when minor types of delinquency were examined, lower class youths reported significantly more involvement in serious forms of delinquency.[33] In a more recent study of the relationship between persistent poverty and delinquency, Roger Jarjoura, Ruth Triplett, and Gregory Brinker found that exposure to persistent poverty is associated with delinquency. Moreover, they also found that exposure to persistent poverty during early childhood is related to an increased likelihood of delinquency later in life.[34]

**social class** A person's or family's economic, social, and political standing in the community. Social class can be directly related to type of employment, neighborhood, circle of contacts, and friends.

Political and economic arrangements in our society that foster inequality among Americans clearly influence the types of lives that many people, including children, experience. As noted, there is evidence that political and economic arrangements have an important effect on delinquent behavior. In addition, they provide a context that influences the operation of other important socializing institutions, such as families, schools, communities, and peer groups, that are related to delinquency. The remaining sections of this chapter examine the role of these socializing institutions in the lives of children and the research that has looked at the relationship between these socializing institutions and delinquency.

**family** A collective body of any two or more persons living together in a common place under one head or management; a household; those persons who have a common ancestor or are from the same lineage; people who live together and who have mutual duties to support and care for one another.

## The Family and Delinquency

There appears to be widespread agreement among both social scientists and the general public that the **family** plays a key role in child development and socialization. The family can be a place where members love each other, care for one another, and provide a mutually beneficial environment for healthy human growth. On the other hand, the

family can be characterized by conflict, a lack of mutual support and nurturance, and violence. Like other major socializing institutions, families are profoundly influenced by the political and economic context within which they operate. As D. Stanley Eitzen, Maxine Baca Zinn, and Kelly Eitzen Smith note, a family's placement in the class system is the most important factor in determining family outcomes.[35] For example, a family's placement in the political and economic structure shapes the family's access to and interconnection with other institutions, such as work establishments, schools, churches, and voluntary associations. These institutions can function as resources for the family and can facilitate access to other resources.[36] Thus, children from wealthy families will have a definite advantage in life while children from poor families will face a variety of obstacles in their efforts to achieve the American dream.

Not only does the family determine the economic conditions within which children live, but it also plays a primary role in shaping a child's values, personality, and behavior. Not surprisingly, a variety of criminological theories suggest that the family plays a significant role in the production or prevention of delinquent behavior, and much research has been devoted to examining various aspects of the family that appear to be associated with delinquency. As Walter Gove and Robert Crutchfield note, "the evidence that the family plays a critical role in juvenile delinquency is one of the strongest and most frequently replicated findings among studies of deviance."[37] Essentially, this research has focused on two broad areas—family structure and family relations—which are felt to have a strong influence on juvenile delinquency and later criminality. Indeed, one important conclusion that can be drawn from this research to date is that the individual's experiences during infancy and early childhood influence behavior over the life course.[38]

### Family Structure and Delinquency

*Family structure* refers to the ways in which families are constituted. For instance, are both natural parents present, is a stepparent present, is the family headed by a single parent, and how large is the family? One element appears clear: The structure of the American family has changed dramatically overtime.

#### The Impact of the Single-Parent Home on Delinquency

One important fact is that children today are more likely to live in single-parent households than in the past. For example, in 1970 about 12% of all children lived with one parent, typically their mother;[39] but, by 2002, the percentage of children living in single-parent homes had risen to approximately 28%, and another 4% lived in households where neither parent was present.[40] There are two primary reasons for the increase in the number of children who live in single-parent homes. First, the divorce rate has been rising over the past 20 years. The United States has the highest divorce rate in the world, with about half of all marriages ending in divorce. Moreover, the majority of all divorces involve children. A second reason why more children are living in single-parent homes is that more children are being born out of wedlock. The number of out-of-wedlock births has increased significantly since the 1960s, especially among teenagers, and the rise has contributed to the increasing number and proportion of children in single-parent homes.[41]

Of course, the high rate of marital dissolution and the growing number of out-of-wedlock births have not occurred in a social and economic vacuum. Rather, they are influenced by a complex set of social and economic factors. Although most Americans indicate they value marriage, there is considerable evidence that the importance given

***FYI***

**Broken Homes and Delinquency**

One problem with examining the relationship between broken homes and delinquency is the vagueness of the concept of a "broken home." According to the standard definition, a broken home is a home in which at least one natural (biological) parent is absent. However, this definition ignores the potential differences in types of broken homes and variations in parental absence. For instance, a number of events might cause the absence of a parent, including divorce, separation, disability, military service, and job responsibilities. The length of parental absence can vary as well. Unfortunately, the effects of different types of parental absence on youths and their relationship to delinquency are not known.

to marriage and two-parent families has eroded in recent years. The result has been a relaxation of social constraints on divorce, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and single parenthood.[42] At the same time, the economic prospects of many young men, particularly those who are minorities, have worsened. This has not only led to joblessness, but also influenced marital dissolution and made them less attractive as marriage partners who can support a family.[43]

**broken home** A home or family in which at least one natural (biological) parent is absent.

The relationship between single-parent families, which are sometimes referred to as **broken homes**, and juvenile delinquency has been the focus of considerable debate within the fields of criminology and juvenile justice. Indeed, some research has discovered statistically significant relationships between single-parent homes and delinquency.[44] However, research also suggests that the effects of coming from a single-parent home may not be the same for all youths. For instance, some research has indicated that coming from a single-parent home is associated, not with serious delinquency, but with status offenses like running away from home and truancy.[45] Also, some research has found that White youths, young females,[46] and youths from high-income families[47] are more likely to be affected in more adverse ways by parental absence.

Although there does appear to be a relationship between living in a single-parent home and involvement in delinquent behavior, the relationship is not very strong. Furthermore, the research uncovering such a relationship often has been based on official data. A potential problem with using official data is that authorities may treat youths from single-parent homes differently than youths from intact homes.[48] For example, police may be more inclined to formally process youths from single-parent homes than youths from two-parent homes. The existence of such a bias is suggested by the fact that studies relying on self-report data often have failed to find a strong relationship between single-parent homes and delinquency.[49]

***FYI***

**Multiple Family Transitions and Delinquency**

Many children experience family breakups several times during their lives. Research indicates that children who experience multiple family transitions during their lives are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior.[50]

Research that has not discovered a relationship between single-parent homes and delinquency suggests that what is most important is not whether youths come from a single-parent family or a two-parent family, but the quality of the relationship that exists between those parents that are present and their children.[51]

**The Effect of Family Size on Delinquency**

Another aspect of family structure that may influence delinquency is family size. In his classic study of delinquency, Travis Hirschi found that, even when controlling for academic performance, parental supervision, and attachment between youths and their parents, family size was related to delinquency.[52] This finding is supported by research conducted in England, although the relationship discovered was much weaker for middle-class families than for lower-class families,[53] which suggests that it may be economic resources rather than family size that is most important. Perhaps parents of larger families who have substantial economic resources may be better able to meet their children's needs in ways that reduce the probability of delinquency. Some researchers have questioned the relationship between family size and delinquency, arguing that a more important variable is having a delinquent sibling. Their line of reasoning is that having a delinquent sibling is related to delinquency and that in larger families youths are more likely to have a delinquent sibling.[54]

### Family Relations and Delinquency

The term *family relations* refers to the quantity and quality of interactions and relationships among family members. Like family structure, however, family relations are also influenced by the larger social context within which families reside as well as the economic condition of the family itself. As noted earlier, families have changed in a variety of ways in recent years in response to political and economic developments. This section begins by examining how changes in the family may have influenced family socialization. It then discusses different aspects of family socialization that have been linked to delinquency.

**The Influence of Women's Employment on Family Relations and Delinquency**

In 1960, less than 7% of married women with children participated in the paid labor force.[55] In 2002, 67% of married women with children were employed.[56] Indeed, one of the most important changes in the American family has been the growing number of women, including mothers, who are entering the workforce. The effects of mothers' employment on children are not entirely clear, however. By working outside the home, mothers are able to improve the economic well-being of their families. Indeed, in poor families and many middle-income families, the mother must work if the children are to receive adequate care.[57] A working mother can make a significant contribution to the economic well-being of the family; however, it also means that the mother has less time to spend interacting with her children. This is a problem that single working mothers share with parents in dual-earner families, when both husband and wife work outside

***FYI***

**Latchkey Children**

In 1999, it was estimated that about 3.3 million youths, age 6 to 12 years, regularly spent time unsupervised or in the care of a young sibling.[59]

**latchkey children**
Children who care for themselves at least part of the day due to parental unavailability because of employment.

the home. In response, many families have come to rely increasingly on child-care or leave children to care for themselves for at least part of the day.[58] Children who care for themselves for part of the day are often referred to as **latchkey children**

Although many people feel that a decline in the amount of parent–child interaction can obstruct child development, the extent of the impact is far from apparent. Some research indicates that there is virtually no developmental difference among toddlers who attend day-care programs and children taken care of at home, although there may be some negative health outcomes for infants.[60] Moreover, quality child-care programs can facilitate children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, particularly for disadvantaged children.[61] Even self-care does not always result in poor outcomes. Many children who are left unsupervised become more independent and learn to become more responsible for themselves over time. In contrast, however, other children who care for themselves experience loneliness and isolation and may be significantly disadvantaged by a lack of adult supervision.[62] According to criminologist Travis Hirschi, a lack of parental supervision is related to an increase in the likelihood of delinquent behavior.[63] Furthermore, research has shown that when children are not involved with their parents, they are more likely to report involvement in delinquency.[64] However, it appears that parental employment is not the most significant factor in determining youths' involvement in delinquency. For example, research by Thomas Vander Ven and his colleagues found that the mothers' employment had very little effect on children's delinquent behavior when they were adequately supervised.[65] Consequently, the mothers' employment may have little impact on delinquency. What appears to be more important is whether children receive appropriate supervision and the quality of parent–child relations.

Researchers also have examined the ways in which parents' roles and experiences in the workplace influence their relationship with their children. Criminologists Mark Colvin and John Pauly argue that parents tend to reproduce at home the authority relations they experience in the workplace. The problem is that the differences in power characteristic of a capitalist economy result in workplace experiences that are authoritarian and coercive. In turn, these experiences engender coercive and authoritarian relationships within many homes—relationships that are not conducive to the establishment of intimate bonds between family members and increase the likelihood of delinquency.[66]

The relationship between the economic sphere and the family is also the focus of John Hagan's power control theory. According to Hagan, "Work relations structure family relations, particularly relations between fathers and mothers and in turn relations between parents and their children, especially mothers and their daughters."[67] Data collected by Hagan and his colleagues in Canada tend to support this hypothesis. From Hagan's perspective, the power that parents have within the workplace is typically reproduced within the family. Hagan argues that when both parents are in positions of power in the workplace, the parents share power and the family structure is egalitarian. In such families, male and female children are socialized in similar ways, which results in comparable levels of delinquency among male and female children. However, in traditional patriarchal families, in which the mother remains at home, as well as in single-parent families, daughters are more likely to become the objects of control by mothers, who socialize their daughters to avoid risk. One outcome is that in such families males tend to engage in more delinquency than females.[68]

The broader political and economic environment within which people live appears to exert important influences on the types of relationships found within families.

Moreover, a wealth of information exists indicating that various types of family relations are associated with delinquency.

**Family Socialization and Delinquency**

An important process through which family relations are developed is socialization. Socialization refers to the ways that a child is taught cultural roles and normal adult responsibilities, and it involves a variety of interactions, such as touching, holding, hugging, kissing, and talking to the child; listening to the child; feeding and clothing the child; and taking care of the child's need for safety, security, and love. All of these interactions convey important messages to children.

One important aspect of socialization—one that is associated with delinquent behavior—is the process by which social control is developed and implemented in the family. One form of social control consists of the bonds that children develop to the family and family members. Indeed, research indicates that youths who lack closeness to parents or caregivers, or who feel there is little family cohesiveness, are more likely to engage in delinquency.[69] In addition, some researchers have uncovered a relationship between family conflict, hostility, a lack of warmth and affection among family members, and delinquency.[70] Others have found a relationship between parental criminality and delinquency (the children of parents who are involved in criminal behavior are more likely to engage in delinquency than youths whose parents are not involved in criminality).[71]

Family crises and changes also have an effect on family relations and appear to be related to delinquency. There is some evidence that disruptions in family life, such as moving to a new residence, separation or divorce of parents, and family conflict, can produce pressures that push youths toward acting out behaviors.[72] Overall, these studies suggest that when the quality of parent–child relations is poor, and when there are significant disruptions in family life, delinquency is more likely. They also suggest the converse: Positive parent–child relations act to control delinquent behavior.

Of course, parents exert other forms of social control, including the imposition of discipline. There is considerable evidence that inconsistent discipline, as well as overly harsh or lax discipline, is related to delinquent behavior.[734] Unfortunately, some parents' responses to their children's objectionable behavior are not simply lax or overly harsh; they are neglectful or abusive.

**Child abuse** consists of acts of commission—things done to children. Types of child abuse include physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional abuse. **Neglect** consists of acts of omission; in other words, a parent or guardian fails to meet the needs of his or her child (e.g., the need for food, shelter, medical care, clothing, education, or affection). Neglect can be physical, emotional, or psychological. However, although child abuse and neglect consist of different forms of behavior, they often occur simultaneously. That is, children who are abused are often neglected as well, and children who are neglected are often abused.

**child abuse** Nonaccidental acts directed against children that result in physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional harm.

**neglect** The nonaccidental failure of a caregiver to meet the physical, psychological, or emotional needs of a minor or another person in the charge of the caregiver.

***FYI***

**Actual Level of Child Maltreatment is Unknown**

In 2007, an estimated 3.5 million children were the subjects of an investigation for child abuse.[74] However, because many incidents of abuse and neglect are not reported to the authorities, the actual level of child maltreatment is unknown.

***FYI***

A national survey of intimate partner violence conducted in the mid-1990s found that 1.3 million women and 835,000 men are assaulted each year by their partners.[77]

The sad fact is that many children are subjected to abuse and neglect by their parents. Moreover, abuse and neglect have been found to be related to a variety of health, cognitive, educational, and social difficulties, including brain injuries, mental disorders, poor school performance, fear, anger, and antisocial behavior.[75] In one of the most comprehensive studies done on the relationship among child abuse, neglect, and criminality, Cathy Spatz Widom and Michael Maxfield found that youths who were abused or neglected were more likely to engage in delinquent and adult criminal behaviors than youths who were not subjected to such treatment. Youths who were abused or neglected were 59% more likely to be arrested as a juvenile and 28% more likely to be arrested as an adult than youths with no abuse or neglect history. Moreover, youths who had been abused or neglected were 30% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime.[76] These findings support the idea of a cycle of violence (a cycle in which those who experience violence as children are more likely to engage in violence as adults).

Aside from child abuse and neglect, another indicator of the quality of family life is conflict between parents. Such conflict sometimes takes the form of domestic violence, which usually, although not always, involves males abusing their female companions. Like child abuse, the actual extent of domestic violence is not known because much of this behavior is not reported to the police. Nevertheless, domestic violence is a significant problem.

Like child abuse, domestic violence rarely occurs as an isolated incident, possibly because each act of violence tends to reduce the inhibition against violence.[78] Also like child abuse, domestic violence has negative effects on children. Research indicates that children who observe domestic violence tend to be more withdrawn and anxious; they are more likely to perform well below their peers in school performance, organized sports, and social activities; and they are more likely to exhibit aggressive and delinquent behaviors.[79] In addition, research suggests that domestic violence and child abuse are related. For example, research on the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment indicates that there is a 30 to 60% overlap between violence directed at women and violence directed at children in the same families.[80]

There is an undeniable connection between violence in families and violent children. Parents who physically abuse their children teach them that it is okay to physically confront other people when angry and that physical violence is an acceptable form of interaction between people. Men who abuse their wives or girlfriends teach their male

***FYI***

A significant number of persons in the U. S. are victimized before age 18 years. Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey indicated that 43.4% of women and 54.3% of men were the victims of rape, physical assault by a caretaker, or stalking by the time they reached age 18 years.[81]

children that it is acceptable to hit women. By their behavior, they also teach female children that it is acceptable for women to be hit by men and that women should expect and accept physical abuse by men.

In a similar manner, children who have been sexually abused, especially those victimized by a close family member or a person who has authority over them, often become perpetrators themselves. The inappropriate form of social and sexual contact inherent in sexual abuse teaches the child victim all of the wrong lessons about appropriate sexuality and, just as importantly, breaks down natural or societal taboos regarding sexual behavior.

## Schools and Delinquency

School is another institution that has a profound influence on the lives of young people. Today, a much larger percentage of the youth population attends school than was true in the past. For example, in 1890 only 7% of the school-age population attended school. However, owing to the development of compulsory education laws, today over 95% of school-age youths are enrolled in school.[82] Moreover, the amount of time that youths spend in school has been increasing. For example, in 1940 only 38% of persons in the United States between the ages of 25 and 29 years had completed high school. By 2007, the percentage of persons between the ages of 25 and 29 years who had completed high school rose to 87%.[83]

Clearly, school is an important institution because it gives young people the academic skills that are critical for effective participation in today's society. Yet school is important for other reasons as well. It has become the primary socializing institution "through which … community and adult influences enter into the lives of adolescents."[84] It is in school that youths learn values, attitudes, and skills, such as punctuality and deference to authority, that are necessary for participation in economic and social life. For many families, a substantial amount of the interaction between parents and children revolves around school–related issues.[85] Indeed, school is generally acknowledged to affect "the lives of youth in ways which transcend the more obvious influences of academic knowledge acquisition."[86] It is, among other things, the place where youths develop a better sense of who they are and how they stand in relationship to others, both peers and adults.

Aside from its role as a major socializing institution, school is important because it is a primary determinant of both economic status and social status. It is, for many people, the primary avenue to economic and social success because it confers the credentials necessary for entry into well-paying jobs. Consequently, persons who complete high school, in general, earn significantly more than those who do not graduate.[87]

### *MYTH VS REALITY*

**Overall, the Benefits of Education Vary by Gender and Race**

**Myth**—Education is a path to social and economic equality for all Americans.

**Reality**—Arguably, there are many benefits to receiving an education, because income tends to improve with educational attainment. However, not everyone with the same amount of education does equally well. For example, men with professional degrees can expect to earn almost $2 million more than women with equivalent degrees over the course of their lives. Also, non-Hispanic Whites, on average, earn substantially more than African Americans or Hispanics during the course of their lives at every level of educational attainment.[88]

Although clear benefits are tied to educational attainment, many youths experience both academic and social problems at school. Consider some of the following statistics cited by Richard Lerner in his book, *America's Youth in Crisis*:

- About 25% of the approximately 40 million children and adolescents enrolled in America's 82,000 public elementary and secondary schools are at risk for school failure.
- About 4.5 million children ages 10–14 years are one or more years behind in their modal grade level.
- Each year about 700,000 youths drop out of school.
- Unemployment rates for dropouts are more than double those of high school graduates.
- At any point in time, about 18% of all adults between age 18 and 24 years and 30% of dropouts between age 23 and 25 years are under the supervision of the criminal justice system. Among African Americans, the corresponding percentages are about 50% and 75%.[89]

Unfortunately, as these statistics demonstrate, school is an unpleasant experience characterized by failure and dropout for many youths. Furthermore, there is considerable evidence that failure in school and other school-related factors are related to delinquent behavior. The remainder of this section examines some of the school-related factors found to be associated with delinquency.

### School Failure and Delinquency

As Gary Jensen and Dean Rojek note, "One of the most persistent findings concerning the school and delinquency is that students who are not doing well in school have higher rates of delinquency than those who are faring better."[90] After reviewing a number of studies, John Phillips and Delos Kelly found a strong relationship between school failure and delinquency. They also discovered that, opposite to the view held by some, school failure precedes delinquency and not the reverse.[91] Moreover, a review of the research in this area by Eugene Maguin and Rolf Loeber found that children who were not doing well academically were almost twice as likely to engage in delinquency as youths earning good grades.[92]

Considerable research has been done on a number of other factors found to be related to school failure and delinquency. For example, research on students' feelings of belonging, attachment, and commitment to school reveal that these factors are related to school violence, vandalism, and delinquency. Studies also have found that students who do not like their teachers or school are more likely to report involvement in delinquency than those who claim to have a strong attachment to their teachers or school.[93] Similarly, in the 1978 *Safe School Study Report* that was produced by the National Institute of Education and delivered to the U.S. Congress, student alienation was found to be an important factor linked to school violence and property loss.[94]

It is hardly surprising to find that students who are less committed to school, who are less attached to their teachers and schools, and who feel alienated are more likely to engage in disruptive or delinquent behaviors in and out of school.[95] However, a lack of attachment and commitment to school should not be seen simply as a product of individual failure, but as a product of the position students occupy in relation to others in school and as a product of the differences in opportunity available to students in the

educational environment. One factor that determines the position that students occupy and the opportunities they may be exposed to is social class.

**Social Class, School Performance, and Delinquency**

The importance of social class to the school failure–delinquency relationship was first made explicit by Albert Cohen in his 1955 book, *Delinquent Boys*.[96] According to Cohen, school is the one place youths of all social classes come together and compete for status. However, working-class youths are at a disadvantage in this competition because they lack the necessary skills to be successful and because success is defined in middle-class terms. One tempting response available to working-class youths is to form a delinquent subculture (with its own status system) that adheres to nonconventional values and encourages delinquent behavior.

Although Cohen claims that the social class position of working-class youths acts as a stumbling block, other evidence indicates that school practices constitute the main barrier to achievement for many students.[97] Indeed, various practices make it difficult for some students to succeed academically or socially within the school environment. Moreover, a number of these practices have been found to encourage delinquent behavior.

**Tracking, School Performance, and Delinquency**

Tracking, the sorting of students according to ability or achievement, is one practice that fosters inequality among students and has been found to be associated with delinquent behavior. Common in American schools, tracking typically begins early in students' educational careers. Once assigned to a particular track, students tend to stay in that track.

Although tracking is common, a variety of negative consequences are associated with this practice, including delinquency. Research has found that students in college preparatory tracks get much higher grades than those in noncollege tracks.[98] Also, being placed in a noncollege track has been found to be related to a lack of participation in school activities, lowered self-esteem, school misbehavior, dropping out, and delinquency.[99]

**Irrelevant Curricula, School Performance, and Delinquency**

Today, school curricula are designed primarily for students who are planning to attend college, while noncollege and technical programs are frequently of inferior quality. As a result, many students have difficulty understanding how much of what they are taught will help them in the future roles they will occupy.[100] This appears to be particularly true of low-income, noncollege-track students, who often feel that school is a waste of time. Research indicates that when students feel that school is not relevant to their future job prospects, rebelliousness, school violence, property loss, and delinquency tend to increase.[101]

**School Dropouts and Delinquency**

For many students, dropping out is seen as a solution to the problems they face in school. Yet, dropping out has substantial negative consequences for the individual. Because of continuing technological sophistication, the skills that people need to function effectively in society have increased. Consequently, dropouts are often woefully unprepared to compete for and maintain positions requiring even basic skills. As a result, they face diminished job prospects and often experience difficulty meeting subsistence income needs.

In addition to the economic consequences of dropping out of school, there are psychological and social consequences associated with leaving school before graduation.

Research indicates that dropouts usually regret their decision to drop out,[102] and dropping out appears to be associated with further dissatisfaction with themselves and their environment.[103] In addition, dropouts typically have lower occupational aspirations than those who graduate, and they also have lower educational aspirations for their children.[104]

Not surprisingly, there appear to be important differences between youths who remain in school and those who drop out. Compared with students who stay in school, those who drop out tend to be from low socioeconomic status groups, to be members of minority groups, and to come from homes with fewer study aids and fewer opportunities for nonschool-related learning. Dropouts also are more likely to come from single-parent homes, to have mothers who work, and to receive less parental supervision. In addition, compared to those who stay in school, future dropouts are more likely to receive poor grades and low scores on achievement tests in school, are less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities, and are more likely to have school discipline problems.[105]

As noted earlier, dropping out of school clearly makes it more difficult for the individual to obtain a well-paying job in an economy that requires increasing technological sophistication on the part of workers. Not surprisingly, many people assume that there is a direct relationship between dropping out and involvement in delinquency. However, research on the relationship between dropping out and delinquency has produced conflicting results. For example, research conducted by Delbert Elliott and Harwin Voss found that youths who drop out of school engage in more delinquency than those youths who remain in school. Yet, their research also found that the level of delinquency among youths who drop out was greatest right *before* they dropped out rather than after. Also, the reasons youths gave for dropping out were directly tied to their negative schooling experience. Specifically, dropouts tended to find school alienating, they were not successful academically, and they associated with peers who were involved in delinquency.[106] The finding that delinquency tends to decrease after youths drop out suggests that negative school experiences encourage youth to engage in delinquency and leave school. After the condition for these negative experiences is eliminated, however, the motivation to engage in delinquency tends to decrease.

On the other hand, other studies have uncovered evidence that when youths drop out of school, their involvement in criminal activities tends to immediately *increase*. For instance, research conducted by Terrence Thornberry and his colleagues found that dropouts, compared with students who stayed in school, were more likely to engage in crime soon after leaving school. Furthermore, they found consistently higher arrest rates for dropouts until the two groups reached their mid-twenties.[107] Thornberry and his colleagues argue that delinquency immediately increases for school dropouts because leaving school severs ties with an important conventional socializing institution, namely school. Similar results have been noted in a more recent study by Marvin Krohn and

***FYI***

According to data compiled by the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2006, 9.3% of persons between the ages of 16 and 24 years were school dropouts. However, among persons between the ages of 16 and 24 years, the dropout rate was 10.7% for Blacks and 22.1% for Hispanics.[109]

his associates, who analyzed data from the Rochester Youth Development Study. Their analysis revealed that school dropouts tended to engage in more delinquency and reported more drug use than youths who remained in school.[108]

The literature on school dropouts clearly has policy implications. Some have suggested that compulsory education laws be relaxed, based on research findings that dropping out leads to a decrease in delinquent behavior.[110] However, others are strongly opposed to such a policy. They argue that the research is not clear on the relationship between dropping out and delinquency. Their position is based on the research that indicates that dropping out of school is associated with a variety of negative outcomes, such as increased involvement in delinquency. Consequently, they maintain that the focus of policy should be on reducing the dropout rate by improving the ability and willingness of schools to meet the educational needs of *all* students.

## The Community and Delinquency

As Robert Bursik and Harold Grasmick note in their book, *Neighborhoods and Crime: The Dimensions of Effective Community Control*, concern about the influence of the neighborhood on delinquency and crime is hardly new.[110] Indeed, since the development of cities in the United States, considerable emphasis has been placed on the negative influences found within some areas of the urban environment—influences believed to be related to delinquency, adult crime, and a host of other social problems, such as poverty and drunkenness.[112] However, particular attention began to be devoted to some of the more negative aspects of the urban environment around the turn of the century, and it was then that sociologists, such as Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, started their pioneering work designed to understand the influence of the community on delinquency.

As part of their efforts, Shaw and McKay mapped areas of Chicago where official delinquents lived. The maps indicated that the highest rates of delinquency were located in deteriorating inner-city areas characterized by decreasing population, a high percentage of foreign-born persons and African American households, low levels of home ownership, low rental values, close proximity to industrial and commercial establishments, and an absence of agencies designed to promote community well-being.[113] Also, they discovered that, despite changes in the ethnic composition of these high delinquency areas over time, the delinquency rates remained relatively constant.[114] This convinced Shaw and McKay that the high delinquency rates in certain areas could not be attributed to residents' individual pathologies, but resulted from a set of conditions that added up to, in their terminology, "**social disorganization**." They believed that these transitional neighborhoods typically suffered a breakdown in social control characterized by a lack of community cohesiveness, common values, and institutions that prevented delinquency.[115] They also thought that, in these neighborhoods, gangs and delinquent groups formed in which delinquent traditions were passed from one generation to the next (i.e., through "cultural transmission"). According to Shaw and McKay, cultural transmission accounted for high rates of delinquency in these areas, despite changes in their ethnic composition over time.[116]

**social disorganization** The state of a neighborhood in which it is unable to exert control over its members. Social disorganization can result from a decrease in population, a large transient population, the existence of groups with differing values, little home ownership, low property values, proximity to industrial and commercial establishments, and a lack of agencies designed to promote a sense of community.

A number of more recent research efforts have documented the importance of community influences on delinquency. Ora Simcha-Fagan and Joseph Schwartz examined the effects of both community and individual factors on delinquency in a study of 12 New York City neighborhoods and found that communities characterized by low organizational participation by residents and the existence of a criminal subculture are likely

***FYI***

**The Chicago Area Project Attempted to Turn Theory into Practice**

Not only did Shaw and McKay want to understand the ways in which conditions in communities influence levels of delinquency, they also were interested in creating programs designed to help disorganized communities respond to delinquency. In 1932, Clifford Shaw initiated the Chicago Area Project in three high-delinquency neighborhoods; the project eventually grew to include more neighborhoods and lasted for approximately 30 years. The intent of the project was to get local residents to respond to local problems, including delinquency, by developing social programs, such as sports and recreation, gang intervention, counseling, discussion groups, and community improvement campaigns.[117] Unfortunately, however, no systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of the Chicago Area Project was conducted. Although some researchers claim that the project likely had little real impact on delinquency because it failed to address the underlying causes of community disorganization,[118] others have suggested that it may have increased community cohesion and led to reductions in delinquency in some areas.[119]

to experience high levels of delinquency.[120] Robert Bursik examined delinquency rates, and a variety of other variables, for 74 communities in Chicago from 1930 to 1970.[121] In many of the communities studied, the results were similar to those found by Shaw and McKay: Delinquency rates remained high even though the racial and ethnic composition of the communities changed. Some communities did not exhibit this pattern, however. In one community, an increase in delinquency rates appeared to be influenced by rapid changes in adjacent neighborhoods. This finding suggests the importance of examining the ways in which communities are linked together as well as possible causal factors outside the community. Still other research has found that neighborhoods go though cycles of change.[122] Although some of the changes, such as neighborhood deterioration, have been found to be related to increases in delinquency, other changes, such as neighborhood revitalization, may be associated with decreases.[123]

Research on the relationship between community characteristics and delinquency has found that communities play an important role in the encouragement of delinquent behavior. Communities that are economically deprived appear to be particularly susceptible to high levels of criminality. Indeed, economic deprivation appears to interact with a variety of other community and family characteristics that produce increased levels of delinquency, and this appears to be true regardless of the racial makeup of community members.[124] Poor, physically deteriorating communities, where drugs are readily available to youths, where residents avoid involvement in community organizations, and where criminal subcultures exist are likely to experience high rates of delinquent behavior.[125] In such communities, there appears to be a lack of close personal ties between residents and a variety of criminal role models that result in a lessening of restraints on illegal behavior.

## ■ Peer Associations and Delinquency

Concern about delinquency as a group phenomenon is hardly new. In fact, concern about youth groups that threatened citizens was a major impetus for the establishment of the first juvenile courts in the United States, which occurred around the beginning of the 20th century. Furthermore, early efforts to study delinquency using a sociological approach typically focused on the group nature of delinquent behavior. The early research

of Shaw and McKay in Chicago, as well as some of the more popular theoretical work on delinquency through the mid-1960s, focused on gangs and other types of delinquent subcultures. There is considerable evidence that youths' peers exert a strong influence on their behavior, and such influence seems apparent when groups engage in delinquent behaviors. There is some evidence that the larger a youth's **accomplice network** (the pool of potential co-offenders a youth associates with), the more likely a youth is to engage in delinquency.[126] Moreover, other research on the relationship between peers and delinquency indicates that many, though not all, youths pass through a progression from no delinquency to more serious delinquency that involves the following steps: (1) youths interact with mildly delinquent peers before the onset of delinquency; (2) minor delinquency results from this association; (3) involvement in minor delinquency leads to interactions with more delinquent peers; (4) this interaction leads to involvement in more serious forms of delinquency.[127] However, peer influence may also be present when an individual commits a lone act of deviance. Conversely, simply because two or more youths in the same location are engaging in delinquent acts does not always mean that their illegal behavior is a product of some group dynamic.[128]

**accomplice network**
The pool of potential co-offenders with whom a youth interacts.

One type of peer group that has received attention in both the research literature and the popular press is the gang. However, there is little agreement among researchers regarding the proper definition of the term *gang*. Sometimes, the term is used to describe any congregation of youths who have joined together to commit a delinquent act. At other times, it is used to refer to more structured ongoing groups that hold or defend a particular territory. Indeed, some communities do have highly structured groups that fit the popular conception of a gang. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that research on gangs has discovered that gangs vary in a number of ways, including their involvement in delinquent behavior.[130]

Other researchers have noted that some groups actually have very little organization and cohesion. Lewis Yablonsky has argued that a more accurate description of many youth groups involved in crime would be "near group."[131] Such groups are characterized by (1) diffuse role definitions, (2) limited cohesion, (3) impermanence, (4) minimal consensus on norms, (5) shifting membership, (6) disturbed leadership, and (7) limited definition of membership expectations. Yablonsky draws our attention to the fact that not all youth groups that engage in delinquent activities are highly organized and cohesive.

## *FYI*

**Most Delinquency Occurs in a Group Context**

Studies that have examined the group context of delinquency suggest that between 62% and 93% of delinquent activity occurs in group settings. A recent study that examined data from a nationally representative sample of youths discovered that 73% of their delinquent offenses were committed in the company of others. This included 91% of all burglaries and alcohol violations, 79% of all drug violations, 71% of all assaults, 60% of all acts of vandalism, and 44% of all thefts.[129] Interestingly, the percentage of delinquency committed in groups is higher in official arrest data than the percentage shown in self-report data. The discrepancy is possibly explained by the **group hazard hypothesis**, which holds that delinquency committed in groups is especially likely to be detected and to result in a formal response. If youths who engage in delinquency in groups are more likely to be arrested than lone delinquents, then official arrest data would overestimate group delinquency rates.

**group hazard hypothesis**
The hypothesis that delinquency committed in groups is more likely to be detected and to result in a formal response by the authorities.

This is not to say that organized gangs are not a significant problem in many communities around the country. However, although gang membership appears to be common in some areas, only a minority of youths belong to gangs at any point in time, even in neighborhoods where gangs exist.[132] Nevertheless, gang membership is linked to drug dealing, vandalism, violent crime, and a variety of other illegal activities, although different gangs may favor different types of criminal activities. Moreover, illegal gang activity is a significant problem in many large cities and even in some smaller cities and rural counties, despite the fact that more gang members are being arrested, prosecuted, and incarcerated than ever before.[133] There is also considerable evidence that many gangs are becoming more oriented toward violence than in the past. Early studies of gangs found that violent activity was not common in these groups. Furthermore, when gangs did engage in violence, they rarely used firearms.[134] Today, gang activity is more likely to be violent and lethal because of the availability and possession of sophisticated weapons by many gang members and the types of violent behaviors they exhibit (e.g., drive-by shootings).[135]

A variety of factors are associated with youth involvement in gangs. Gang formation appears to be facilitated by a social context characterized by poverty, inequality, social disorganization, easy access to drugs, and an absence of well-paying jobs.[137] Many youths who join gangs are marginalized within their community. Such youths face a variety of stressful conditions: They have few legitimate opportunities for earning money, and they have few strong bonds to conventional institutions, such as school and family. In many instances, gang members come from destitute and troubled families where parents exhibit poor parenting practices. Moreover, many gang members have family members who are involved in gangs, and they have few positive educational or vocational role models.[138] Research also indicates that learning disabilities, poor academic performance, having friends who engage in problem behaviors, early use of drugs, and involvement in violence at a young age are strong predictors of gang involvement.[139] For many marginalized youths, gangs hold out the promise of economic and social opportunities.[140] Gangs also provide youths with a sense of belonging and status[141] as well as protection from other gangs and a means for dealing with a socioeconomic environment that fosters aggression and violence.[142]

Youth involvement in gangs appears to be linked to increases in delinquent behavior. For example, several studies have found that, prior to joining gangs, gang members' involvement in delinquency was similar to that of nongang youths. When these youths joined a gang, however, their involvement in delinquency, particularly violent delinquency and drug sales, increased. However, after youths left gangs, with the exceptions of drug sales, their involvement in delinquency decreased.[143]

***FYI***

**Gang Involvement Is Associated with Criminality**

Gang members have higher rates of delinquent involvement than nongang youths. Moreover, in areas where there are gang problems, gang members account for a majority of delinquent acts that are reported; this is particularly true for serious offenses. For example, one study that examined a sample of Denver youths found that 14% were gang members. However, these youths accounted for 79% of serious violent crimes, 71% of serious property offenses, and 87% of drug sales.[136]

Organized gangs are one type of peer group that seems to be related to increased delinquency, but researchers have noted that other peer groups apparently encourage delinquent behavior as well. As noted earlier, Yablonsky argues that many youth groups involved in delinquency lack the type of organization and cohesion often associated with gangs. In studying delinquency in Flint, Michigan, in the 1960s, Martin Gold found that a considerable amount of delinquent behavior occurred spontaneously in rather loosely structured youth groups.[144] Gold concluded that delinquency of this type resembles a "pickup game" in which opportunities for delinquent behavior present themselves to ordinary peer groups, leading to delinquent behavior.

The research of Herman and Julia Schwendinger has done the most to highlight the complexity of peer groups and how various peer groups contribute to delinquency.[145] Their book, *Adolescent Subcultures and Delinquency*, focuses on the complexity of youth culture and the variety of peer groups that exist. The Schwendingers' observational studies of youth culture in southern California communities reveal that youth culture is far more complex than many assume, a finding supported by other researchers.[146] Rather than being a monolithic entity or strictly based on social class, youth culture comprises a variety of subcultures and peer networks that cut across class lines. The various peer formations have their own designations (e.g., "intellectuals," "greasers," "homeboys," "socialites," and "athletes") and have their own distinctive dress and linguistic patterns. They also are accorded differing degrees of status and prestige by their members as well as by other youths and adults.

Although the Schwendingers identified a variety of adolescent subcultures, they noted that there were three persistent types: streetcorner, socialite, and intellectual groups. Moreover, they found that delinquency tended to vary between these types. For example, delinquency is less common among intellectuals, who focus on academic or technical interests (e.g., computers, mathematics, electronics, and physics), have little interest in adolescent fashion, and often spend considerable time doing homework or participating in adult-sponsored activities. In contrast, streetcorner groups are more likely to consist of youths who are economically and politically disadvantaged and who engage in delinquency, including serious delinquency. Falling between intellectual and streetcorner groups, as regards involvement in serious delinquency, are socialite groups, which typically consist of youths from economically and politically advantaged families. Although members of these groups engage in less serious delinquency than members of streetcorner groups, they nevertheless engage in a considerable amount of garden variety delinquency, such as driving violations, vandalism, drinking, petty theft, truancy, gambling, and sexual promiscuity. The Schwendingers' studies not only help us understand the complexity of youth culture, but also indicate the necessity of carefully examining the ways in which youth subcultures encourage or inhibit delinquency among their members.

This chapter has highlighted the contextual nature of delinquent behavior and pointed out some of the ways in which economic, political, family, school, neighborhood, and peer contexts influence juvenile offending. The fact that delinquent behavior is affected by factors that lie outside the individual does not imply, of course, that youths are incapable of exercising some degree of free will. Clearly, youths who engage in delinquent behavior make a choice to act as they do, although the decision-making processes that they use could not always be described as particularly mature or rational from the point of view of those who are not involved in illegal behavior. However, given the social context in which many youths live, delinquent behavior is often seen as normal, even expected, behavior.

Moreover, in order to effectively respond to youths' delinquent behavior, policy makers and juvenile justice practitioners must address the economic, political, and social factors that make delinquency appear to be a viable choice for so many youths.

## The Social Context of Delinquency Theories

**theory** A statement or set of statements that is designed to explain how two or more phenomena are related to one another.

Social, economic, and political contexts affect not only delinquent behavior, but also the explanations, or theories, of delinquency that gain prominence during particular historical periods. A **theory** of delinquency is a statement or a set of statements that is designed to explain how one or more events or factors are related to delinquency.[147] Such theories are important for two primary reasons. First, they help us make sense of delinquency and understand why it occurs. Second, they guide us in our attempts to reduce crime. Importantly, hypotheses about why delinquency occurs suggest actions we might take in order to reduce it.

Theories of delinquency, like other theories, can be in sharp conflict. Some of them are based on the assumption that political and economic conditions play a crucial role in generating delinquency within American society, whereas others treat delinquency as primarily the product of rational choices made by individual youths. Our object here is not to review these theories (an object more fitting for a book on criminological theory or juvenile delinquency) but to emphasize their role in helping us understand how and why particular factors appear to be related to juvenile crime and what their role is in guiding responses to the problem of delinquency.

Theories of delinquency, like delinquency itself, are products of a particular historical context. Most people, including those who study delinquency, have ideas about why youths engage in delinquent behavior, ideas that are influenced by their particular life experiences.[148] For example, people in medieval Europe favored explanations that treated deviant behavior as a product of otherworldly spirits. Such explanations made perfectly good sense to people within that particular historical context. Today, influenced by ideas derived from the social and behavioral sciences and by popular notions about human behavior, people are much less inclined to explain delinquency in ways that would make sense to medieval Europeans.

This does not mean that, at present, there is general agreement over the causes of delinquency. Indeed, the historical context within which we live is conducive to the promulgation of a variety of theoretical perspectives on delinquency and considerable debate over its causes. Moreover, the differing theoretical perspectives on delinquency lead to differing, sometimes opposing, responses to delinquent behavior. A theory based on the idea that delinquency is the product of choices made by rational actors leads to policies that stress punishment as a logical response. In contrast, a theory based on the idea that delinquency is the product of the oppression of youths calls forth a different type of policy response,[149] as would a theory that views delinquency as the product of abnormal thinking patterns. In short, social context influences theoretical explanations of delinquency, which in turn suggest various juvenile justice responses to the delinquency problem.

## The Social Context of Juvenile Justice

The previous sections of this chapter examined the influence of social context on delinquency and on the ways we explain delinquency. Social context also influences the practice of juvenile justice. Indeed, as noted previously, different explanations of

delinquency are associated with different juvenile justice responses. Other aspects of the sociopolitical environment influence the practice of juvenile justice as well, and some of these are examined in the remainder of this chapter.

## The Influence of the Political Economy on the Practice of Juvenile Justice

The development, management, and distribution of political and economic resources not only has an impact on the behavior of young people in our society, but also influences the operation of important social institutions, including those institutions that comprise the so-called juvenile justice system. The economic resources that are available to law enforcement agencies, juvenile courts, and correctional agencies have a profound effect on the level of staffing, the types of programs operated, and the support (both personnel and materiel) provided to the individuals and agencies charged with responding to delinquency. For example, an increase in the funding for a probation department might allow more staff to be hired and additional types of interventions to be developed. In turn, this may lead to better services given to youths and their families and a reduction in juvenile offending. Similarly, reductions in funding levels can result in staff reductions, increased caseloads, additional stress for juvenile services workers, a reduction in services and monitoring of clients, and higher levels of recidivism.

Although the effects of changing levels of funding on the operation of juvenile justice agencies are easy to imagine, it should be kept in mind that such changes take place within a highly political environment. In other words, funding allocation decisions are the result of a political process in which various ideas and interests vie for supremacy. Moreover, this political process is found at the state, local, and agency level. At the state level, legislative as well as executive decisions can have a profound effect on the levels of funding available to juvenile justice agencies for correctional programs, staff salaries, staff hiring and promotions, and staff training. State-level political decision making plays a particularly important role in those states where juvenile courts and correctional agencies are state operated. However, even when juvenile justice agencies are county or city run, state-level political decisions can affect their operation. For example, political decisions made at the state level can determine the level of monetary and human resources, as well as the types of institutions and programs (and their operation) available to local courts for the treatment of youths.

Local political decision making also can have a profound impact on the operation of juvenile justice agencies. For example, when juvenile justice agencies are county run, political decisions made by county governments play a major role in determining the level of monetary and human resources available to the courts as well as the types of programs operated at the local level. Similarly, political decisions made within juvenile justice agencies also can affect the allocation of monetary and human resources, the amount and types of training given to staff, as well as the types of programs that are operated by those agencies.

Political decision making at the state, local, or agency level is often characterized by considerable conflict between groups possessing different ideologies and interests. State legislatures, county and city governments, executive agencies at the state and local level, and local juvenile justice agencies typically encompass groups and individuals that have conflicting views about delinquency and juvenile justice. As a result, conflict is a common element of juvenile justice practice.

## The Influence of the Local Community and the Media on the Practice of Juvenile Justice

The local community and the media play a substantial role in determining juvenile justice practice. Many communities possess at least one group that seeks to influence the local response to juvenile delinquency. Indeed, the practice of juvenile justice, like the practice of criminal justice in general, is often a highly political endeavor. In addition, if juvenile justice decision makers, such as prosecuting attorneys and judges, are elected officials, they can be quite sensitive to public perceptions of their performance. As a result, support for various juvenile justice programs and practices can be extended or withdrawn depending on perceptions of "what the public wants."

The decisions made by prosecuting attorneys and judges also can influence the actions of other important decision makers. For example, in some states, court personnel (e.g., court administrators) and corrections staff (e.g., detention unit, probation, and other casework personnel) are, in effect, employees of the judge. As a result, a judge in one of these states can have tremendous influence over the allocation of juvenile justice resources. Even in jurisdictions where judges do not directly control probation and other juvenile justice staff, they are often able to exert considerable influence over other components of the juvenile justice process.

Courts that deal with juveniles are also political entities. Most juvenile court judges are elected officials who not only are accountable to the electorate, but also must contend with other elected officials for coveted tax dollars. Competition for local dollars among local officials and law enforcement or law-related agencies, such as prosecutors, sheriffs, and the courts, can force courts to make decisions about juvenile services based on economic considerations rather than the best interests of youths.

When juvenile courts are faced with budget limits restricting the number of probation staff or the amount of money available for out-of-home placements, certain actions by those courts are predictable. First, judges will limit out-of-home placements by increasing their tolerance for delinquent behavior and/or probation violations before removal. Second, many courts will try to develop dispositional alternatives, such as day treatment programs, expanded use of local detention facilities, and an increase in the number of foster home or group home beds. Although these strategies are fiscally responsible, they may allow more serious delinquents to remain in the community. As a result, courts can be caught between the public outcry to get dangerous delinquents off the streets and budgetary restraints that prevent them from heeding the public's demand for protection.

**media-controlled perceptions** People's perceptions of some phenomenon (or area of interest) that are substantially shaped by the media's coverage of that phenomenon. The public's perceptions of juvenile justice are determined largely by the media because the public lacks information from other sources about the daily operation of juvenile justice agencies.

The public influences nonelected juvenile justice decision makers as well as elected ones. Court administrators, middle management personnel such as chief probation officers, and other juvenile justice personnel are often sensitive to public perceptions and demands. For example, complaints made by organized community groups or perceptions held by local political leaders, including judges and prosecuting attorneys, that juvenile justice practices are at odds with community preferences can produce changes in these practices. Within the community, the media often play an important role in framing public perceptions of delinquency and the operation of juvenile justice. Indeed, much of what the public knows about juvenile justice practices is a reflection of **media-controlled perceptions**. This is not surprising, because the juvenile justice process has historically been a closed process intended to prevent the stigmatization of children who come before

the court. However, the media may not present the most balanced view of juvenile justice practices to the public, preferring instead to focus on the most sensational cases and the most obvious failings. Whether media coverage is balanced or not, the public relies on the media for information about juvenile justice practices, and the information received by the public can be used by organized groups in their efforts to influence juvenile justice practices.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the context of juvenile justice, including juvenile justice theory and juvenile justice practice. More specifically, it looked at the political, economic, and social contexts within which delinquency occurs and described the ways that a variety of political, economic, and social factors (e.g., community conditions; family structure, relations, and socialization; school experiences; and peer relations) influence youths' involvement in illegal behavior. In addition, the chapter noted that the political, economic, and social contexts within which we live shape our ideas about why youths engage in delinquency and influence the ways in which we respond to delinquent behavior. Thus, these contexts exert considerable influence on the operation of juvenile justice. Consequently, recognizing and understanding their impact on delinquency, theory development, and juvenile justice practice is a requisite for developing more effective juvenile justice practices.

## Key Concepts

**accomplice network:** The pool of potential co-offenders with whom a youth interacts.

**broken home:** A home or family in which at least one natural (biological) parent is absent.

**capitalism:** An economic system based upon three fundamental principles: (1) private ownership of property, (2) competition between economic interests, and (3) personal profit as a reward for economic risk and effort.

**child abuse:** Nonaccidental acts directed against children that result in physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional harm.

**family:** A collective body of any two or more persons living together in a common place under one head or management; a household; those persons who have a common ancestor or are from the same lineage; people who live together and who have mutual duties to support and care for one another.

**group hazard hypothesis:** The hypothesis that delinquency committed in groups is more likely to be detected and to result in a formal response by the authorities.

**latchkey children:** Children who care for themselves at least part of the day due to parental unavailability because of employment.

**media-controlled perceptions:** People's perceptions of some phenomenon (or area of interest) that are substantially shaped by the media's coverage of that phenomenon. The public's perceptions of juvenile justice are determined largely by the media because the public lacks information from other sources about the daily operation of juvenile justice agencies.

**neglect:** The nonaccidental failure of a caregiver to meet the physical, psychological, or emotional needs of a minor or another person in the charge of the caregiver.

**political economy:** The basic political and economic organization of society, including the setting of political priorities and the management and distribution of economic resources. People's economic status largely determines the opportunities that are available to them, their feeling of political empowerment, their ability to access the political system, and their ability to influence political and economic decision making.

**power:** The ability to influence political and economic decisions and actions; the ability to force, coerce, or influence a person's actions or thoughts.

**social class:** A person's or family's economic, social, and political standing in the community. Social class can be directly related to type of employment, neighborhood, circle of contacts, and friends.

**social disorganization:** The state of a neighborhood in which it is unable to exert control over its members. Social disorganization can result from a decrease in population, a large transient population, the existence of groups with differing values, little home ownership, low property values, proximity to industrial and commercial establishments, and a lack of agencies designed to promote a sense of community.

**socialism:** A political and economic system that is based on democratic decision making, equality of opportunity for all, collective decision making designed to further the interests of the entire community, public ownership of the means of production, and economic and social planning.

**special interest group:** An organization consisting of persons, corporations, unions, and so on, that have common political, and often economic, purposes and goals. These individuals or groups come together to use their influence, monetarily and politically, to persuade politicians and other persons in power to act favorably toward them.

**theory:** A statement or set of statements that is designed to explain how two or more phenomena are related to one another.

## Review Questions

1. Why is delinquency theory important in juvenile justice?
2. How does the political economy of the United States affect children?
3. What are the essential elements of a capitalist economy?
4. How do the economic circumstances of adults and children affect the quality of their lives?
5. How is family structure related to delinquent behavior?
6. What types of family relationships are related to delinquency?
7. What kinds of violence are found in American families and how are they related to delinquent behavior?
8. What are the characteristics of school that encourage both school failure and delinquency?
9. What community characteristics are related to high levels of delinquent behavior?
10. What are the different types of youth peer groups that exist, and how do these groups encourage delinquency?
11. How do economic conditions influence the operation of juvenile justice agencies?
12. How do politics affect the operation of juvenile justice?

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