

The Socio-economic Factors Impacting Juvenile Delinquency: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract:

Juvenile delinquency presents an escalating challenge in Bangladesh, where rapid urbanization and profound socio-economic disparities are creating fertile ground for youth crime. However, a clear understanding of the specific socio-economic drivers within this context remains limited, hindering the development of targeted and effective intervention strategies. This paper examines the socio-economic predictors of juvenile delinquency in Bangladesh in the context of juveniles who are reported to the police in Dhaka. A mixed methods design was used, which consisted of structured quantitative surveys of 100 juveniles placed in Juvenile Development Centers and in-depth interviews of law enforcement officers and psychologists and social workers, as well as case study analysis of police records. Results show that 81% of offenders belonged to the 16–18 age group, with 70% being male and 30% female. Educational deprivation was widespread, with 82% having no or only primary-level education. Household income data revealed that 83% came from low to lower-middle-income families, while 76% of parents lacked formal education. Peer influence emerged as a decisive factor, with 83% of juveniles admitting involvement in delinquent activities under the influence of friends. Regression and correlation analyses confirmed significant associations between family structure, income, peer networks, and drug use, while case studies revealed organized recruitment of youth by criminal gangs and political exploitation. The practical significance of this study is that it could help to enhance family welfare services, increase vocational training, enhance implementation of the Children Act 2013, and create post-integrated rehabilitation systems that would help to decrease recidivism and safer communities.

Keywords: Juvenile Delinquency, Socio-economic factors, Peer influence, Family instability

INTRODUCTION

Juvenile can be defined as those individuals who are still in the process of becoming adults. It is the period of development associated with substantial changes in the body, mind, emotions, and social life that influence how individuals shape their identities and act (Blum et al., 2014). At this age, adolescents acquire more advanced cognitive abilities, such as the ability to think abstractly, consider someone else's reasoning, and resolve challenging issues (Kleibeuker et al., 2016). However, it is also a period when they can be more vulnerable to factors such as their family life, their friends, and their social and economic position, which impact him or her significantly (Povey et al., 2022).

Juvenile delinquency is the term which is used to refer to a variety of illegal acts committed by juveniles. This is often explained not by an internal tendency to a criminal way of life but by social, economic, and personal problems (Ronad, 2017). These criminal actions, carried out by people who are not yet 18 years old, are the result of the intricate combination of personal, familial, communal, and social risks (Azka Murtaza et al., 2021). Being a complex issue, among its contributing factors, it

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is possible to single out a plethora of different behaviors, including violence, substance abuse, and school absenteeism (Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2024). It is a universal problem which has many implications at the family, community, and institutional levels. Researchers and practitioners have known for many decades that socioeconomic factors are among the most powerful correlates of juvenile delinquency. These factors include poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, as well as migration between houses that tend to form the atmosphere for the emergence of delinquent tendencies (Hasan & Khatun, 2020; Khuda, 2019).

The family is the primary social sub-system through which children acquire values, limits and behavioral expectations (Alghzali et al., 2023). However, this base can be weak when youngsters face traumatic events like the breakdown of family, parental separation or neglect, as it creates emotional vacuum in their hearts and absence of care and support makes them susceptible (Maringa et al., 2024). Several investigations of children in unstable and one-parent homes have concluded that such children are more likely to become delinquent. That's not only due to the absence of a mother or father but because children are likely to suffer emotional turmoil and financial hardship that can be part of a shattered family. In addition, the relationship between family structures with delinquent behaviors is further elaborated by research works by L Abella (2016) and Mwangangi (2019) as they further argue that family structure especially broken homes can increase the tendency for delinquent behaviours. In Bangladesh, Suha & Shah (2023) and Hoque (2023) also found that familial instability plays a significant role in children moving into urban centres and becoming involved in precarious activities such as child labour and street life, which can turn into delinquency. In a study from Finland, Itäpuisto (2014) showed that adolescents from dysfunctional families had a shortage of basic emotional support and supervision which were strongly correlated with higher rates of substance consumption and criminal activity.

In addition to financial constraints, poverty erodes opportunities and limits social mobility, meaning that young people are often trapped with fewer chances out of poverty. Robert Merton's strain theory (1938) offers a helpful perspective that can be used to interpret the role that blocked aspirations may play in motivating youths to pursue other, sometimes illegal, means of achieving goals (Merton, 1938). In the Bangladeshi context, Islam et al., (2024) say that poverty and financial hardship diminish parental ability to exert adequate supervision, education and actually increases the risk factors for delinquency. It was found that more than 96% of the adolescents surveyed experienced deprivation in their childhood which led to the activation of criminal behavior. This is consistent with findings from other studies conducted around the world that demonstrate the relationship of poverty with elevated rates of theft, drug involvement, and violent acts among youth (Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2024; Islam et al., 2024; Sarker, 2023).

Peer pressure has significant impact on the socialization of youths. According to Differential Association Theory by Sutherland (1939), delinquent behaviors are learned through interactions with peers who endorse and model antisocial conduct. Delinquent peer groups increase the risk, in that they offer acceptance and serve to reinforce deviant norms. This phenomenon can be seen in Bangladesh as documented by Atkinson (2016) who found that the rate of criminal offences was significantly higher for juveniles involved in street gang activities. A study performed by Sigfusdottir et al., (2016) discovered that a person experiencing stress during childhood and adolescence can have a harmful effect on the young person's development. Indeed, their studies have found that exposure to such early life stress typically results in a range of problematic behaviours in later life, including elevated risks for developing substance use dependence, self-harm and engagement in criminal activity.

Bangladesh is a developing country with terrible socio-economic disparities, and these are strange problematic causes of juvenile delinquency (Omoniyi, 2011). Some of the reasons why many youths in the country are getting themselves involved in crime activities are the poverty condition in the country, lack of education, and social securities (Chen, 2024). Bangladesh is not falling behind this case since the percentage of young criminals born in poor families on average are extremely high; the average father and mother of the child born in the lower-class income earning had to find out how poverty and crime could be directly correlated to each other (Ahmed & John, 2023). Moreover, high juvenile crime rates are also positively correlated with high rates of adult unemployment, slums and domestic violence (Hazra, 2021).

The multifaceted nature of juvenile delinquency requires an in-depth analysis of the factors involved, especially the socio-economic factors that tend to instigate such actions (Syarifuddin et al., 2021). Therefore, for developing intervention and prevention strategies, it is important to understand the complex interaction between economic conditions and juvenile delinquency, especially in countries like Bangladesh where informal justice mechanisms are often influential (“Restorative Justice for Juvenile Delinquents in Bangladesh,” 2024). This study, therefore, conducted an in-depth exploration of these socio-economic determinants. The study examined how familial, economic, and communal conditions contribute to such behavior; investigated the associated psychological and emotional effects on juveniles; and synthesized professional insights from the field. The findings presented in this paper offer concrete, evidence-based recommendations for enhancing policy and intervention strategies in the Bangladeshi context.

METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic backgrounds of juvenile delinquency. The study was conducted at two Juvenile Development Centers (JDCs) in Gazipur District namely, the Tongi JDC for males and the Konabari JDC for females. These government-operated centers house juveniles aged between 12 and 18 years who are officially registered as offenders under judicial proceedings, in accordance with the Children Act of 2013, Bangladesh. Both centers operate under the Department of Social Services and act as institutional settings for juveniles that have been adjudicated or awaiting trial through the juvenile justice system. These centers offer structured rehabilitation programs for the juveniles, which includes basic education, vocational training, psychological assistance, and behavioral modification. We chose to analyze both centers because they allow us to take a gender inclusive and comparative view of juvenile delinquency; there are significant differences in the challenges and social situations experienced by male versus female juveniles.

We surveyed a total of 100 juvenile offenders, consisting of both male (70) and female (30) participants from each of the respective development centers. The sample was allocated proportionately based upon the institutional population size at the time of data collection to ensure fairness in the representation of both centers. The number of subjects was thought to be appropriate and feasible for an in-depth exploratory analysis, given the time frame of the study and the researcher's access to the centers. The proportion of males to females is not reflective of any pre-determined ratio but rather the proportions found in the populations of the two youth development centers; males far exceed females. A non-probability sampling technique (purposive sampling) was used for this study to select the participants based on specified characteristics and the purposes of the study.

The quantitative component of this research was conducted via administration of a twenty-question survey instrument. The survey instrument was designed to elicit detailed information about participants' socio-economic factors, such as family structure, parental influence, neighborhood conditions, peer pressure, and social disorganization can influence commitment to delinquent activities. The survey study began with questions to measure the demographic information of the participants. It then progressed to questions about the analysis of their socio-economic factors in influencing delinquency.

Two types of qualitative research methodologies were also employed for the second phase of the study. The first type consisted of in-depth interviews with seven key informant professionals. The seven professionals were selected due to their knowledge of juvenile delinquency in Bangladesh. The professionals included two police officers, two psychologists, two social workers, and one professional who worked for an organization that protected children. The second type of qualitative methodology was a narrative analysis of three case studies representing three different pathways into crime. The case studies were obtained from the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, Bangladesh.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the sample characteristics of the data. Pearson's correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship between pairs of variables. The correlation coefficient (r) and p -value were used to interpret the results of Pearson's correlation analysis. To

compare mean values on a continuous dependent variable among different categories of an independent variable, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. Additionally, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict the likelihood of a key outcome (drug use) by assessing the impact of multiple independent variables on the outcome. The beta (β) coefficient for each predictor in the multiple regression analysis indicated both the magnitude and direction of the predictor's effect.

For the qualitative data from expert interviews and case studies, we carried out thematic analysis in line with Braun and Clarke's framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis process for this study involved manual reading and coding of the interview transcripts and case studies. Through systematic coding, we identified recurrent themes such as family neglect, peer pressure, political exploitation, and systemic gaps in rehabilitation services. This interpretive process helped us uncover the underlying social dynamics that quantitative methods alone cannot fully capture.

Prior to collecting any data, an Institutional Review Board approved the study. All participants signed an informed consent form and/or their guardians signed the forms on behalf of them. The anonymity of all the data collected during the study was maintained to protect the identities of all participants.

RESULTS

Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile

The findings regarding the demographic and socio-economic profile of the surveyed juveniles present a compelling image of the multifaceted vulnerabilities that intersect to influence delinquent behavior in Bangladesh. Table 1 summarizes the demographic and socio-economic background of 100 juveniles surveyed from two Juvenile Development Centers in Gazipur, Bangladesh.

Table 1. Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Age group (Years)	10–12	3	3.0
	13–15	16	16.0
	16–18	81	81.0
Gender	Male	70	70.0
	Female	30	30.0
Educational attainment	No formal education	41	41.0
	Primary education	41	41.0
	Secondary education	14	14.0
	Higher secondary	4	4.0
Parental education	No education	76	76.0
	Primary	12	12.0
	Secondary	8	8.0
	Higher secondary	4	4.0
Household income (BDT)	<10,000	3	3.0
	10,000–20,000	63	63.0

Employment status	20,000–30,000	20	20.0
	>30,000	14	14.0
	Unemployed	71	71.0
	Full-time employed	24	24.0
	Part-time employed	5	5.0
Residence	Urban	75	75.0
	Rural	21	21.0
	Semi-urban	4	4.0
Drug use	Yes	21	21.0
	No	79	79.0

As shown in Table 1, most juveniles were 16–18 years (81%) and male (70%). Education levels were low, with 82% having no or only primary schooling and parental illiteracy was widespread (76% uneducated). The majority belonged to low-income families (<20,000 BDT, 66%) and 71% were unemployed. Most resided in urban areas (75%), and 21% reported drug use. These findings highlight poverty, illiteracy, and weak socio-economic conditions as dominant correlates of delinquency.

Family, Social, and Neighborhood Factors

The study also examined the familial and social environments of the respondents. Table 2 summarizes the family, social, and neighborhood factors.

Table 2. Family, Social, and Neighborhood Factors of Respondents (N=100)

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Family structure	Both parents	52	52.0
	Single parent	32	32.0
	Guardians/relatives	13	13.0
	Orphan	3	3.0
Basic necessities	Always	16	16.0
	Sometimes	33	33.0
	Rarely	46	46.0
	Never	5	5.0
Peer group	Friends	76	76.0
	Family	13	13.0
	Colleagues	11	11.0
Peer influence	Negative	83	83.0
	Positive	16	16.0
	Neutral	1	1.0

Neighborhood safety	Unsafe	61	61.0
	Safe	30	30.0
	Very safe	8	8.0
	Very unsafe	1	1.0
Political activity	Yes	21	21.0
	No	79	79.0

Table 2 revealed that nearly half of respondents did not live with both parents (48%), and deprivation of basic necessities was common (84%). Most spent time with friends (76%), and a vast majority experienced negative peer influence (83%). A significant proportion viewed their neighborhoods as unsafe (61%), and 21% had participated in political activities. Together, these findings underscore the influence of family instability, peer groups, and unsafe environments in shaping delinquent behavior.

Statistical Analysis of Factors Influencing Drug Use

To deepen the understanding of these interrelationships, inferential statistics were employed. The ANOVA results testing for group differences in socio-educational factors associated with drug use are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. ANOVA Results of Socio-Educational Factors Associated with Juvenile Drug Use

Factor	F-value	Significance (p)
Number of friends	6.00	0.016
Educational attainment	9.59	0.003
Peer influence	5.53	0.021
School attendance regularity	5.15	0.025
Participation in political events	10.93	0.001

The ANOVA results show that peer relations, education, school attendance, and political participation are all significantly linked to juvenile drug use. The strongest predictor was participation in political events ($F=10.93$, $p=0.001$), followed by low education ($F=9.59$, $p=0.003$), highlighting the critical role of social and educational factors in influencing delinquent behavior.

The relationships between key family, educational, and behavioral variables were further explored through correlation analysis, as displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlation Analysis of Family, Education, and Behavioral Factors

Variable	Educational Attainment	Parental Education	Household Income	Peer Influence	Drug Use
Family structure	-0.250 ($p = 0.012$)	-0.093 ($p = 0.241$)	-0.262 ($p = 0.008$)	-0.262 ($p = 0.008$)	0.161 ($p = 0.105$)
Educational attainment	—	0.117 ($p = 0.198$)	0.248 ($p = 0.015$)	0.152 ($p = 0.118$)	-0.299 ($p = 0.003$)
Parental education	—	—	0.245 ($p = 0.017$)	0.048 ($p = 0.605$)	-0.077 ($p = 0.325$)

Household income	—	—	—	0.116 (p = 0.207)	−0.087 (p = 0.286)
Peer influence	—	—	—	—	−0.231 (p = 0.021)

The correlation analysis shows that unstable family structure, low income, and negative peer influence significantly reduce education and increase delinquency risk. Lower educational attainment strongly predicted drug use ($r = -0.299$, $p = 0.003$), while negative peer influence also correlated with substance abuse ($r = -0.231$, $p = 0.021$).

A regression analysis was conducted to identify the strongest predictors of drug use. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Regression Analysis of Social and Economic Factors Influencing Drug Use

Predictor Variable	Beta (β)	Significance (p)
School attendance regularity	−0.156	0.102
Employment status	−0.194	0.055
Participation in political events	0.329	0.001
Peer influence	−0.241	0.015

Regression results confirmed that political event participation was the strongest predictor of drug use ($\beta = 0.329$, $p = 0.001$). Peer influence was also significant ($\beta = -0.241$, $p = 0.015$), while employment status showed a marginal effect ($\beta = -0.194$, $p = 0.055$). School attendance regularity was not statistically significant.

Qualitative Findings

The thematic analysis of in-depth interviews and case studies added context to the quantitative results, and helped explain the lived experience and social processes that support the statistical trends identified. Four major themes appeared, and each describes the pathway through which socioeconomic factors contribute to the development of delinquency among adolescents.

Family Disruption Creates Vulnerable Youth

Family disruption is repeatedly shown in qualitative data to be a fundamental source of vulnerability. Respondents described their homes as being characterized by both conflict and absence; and lacking sufficient adult supervision. Many respondents attributed involvement with delinquent peers to the fact that there was no one available to provide guidance when they returned home from school. For example, "When my parents fight, no one watches me, so I go out with friends who tell me how to earn money on the street," stated a 15-year-old male. The above quote exemplifies how the quantitative evidence of the relationship between family instability, negative peer influence and poor education manifests itself as a direct outcome of the qualitative findings that illustrate the presence of an emotional void that is replaced by involvement with delinquent peers.

Peer Groups Are Responsible for Both Learning Deviant Behavior and Coercion

The need to conform to delinquent peer group norms was seen as an important mechanism through which young people may initiate criminal behavior. The qualitative data indicated that peer groups are not simply groups of associates; rather, they represent active sites for the development of deviant behaviors and provide a sense of belonging that is missing at home. The following quote illustrates this coercive process: "If you refuse to do something that your group wants you to do, they will ignore you. However, if you comply with what the group wants you to do, they will defend you. In this manner, I began to steal," said a respondent. The above theme provides an explanation of why the

strong statistical correlation exists between negative peer association and drug use. It shows that young people engage in delinquent behavior as a trade-off for protection and a sense of belonging.

Young People Are Politically Exploited for Their Economic Needs

Another significant finding of the qualitative data is the exploitation of young people by politicians that can explain the regression result indicating that political participation is the most reliable predictor of drug use. The respondents did not view political activism as a matter of ideology, but as a way to meet their economic needs. A 16-year-old respondent stated, "My family cannot always afford to buy food for us. Therefore, when some individual offers me payment to attend a political event, I have little option but to take it." The quotes demonstrate a disturbing connection between poverty and a situation where young people have limited options for making money other than taking risks that increase exposure to and possibly even financial rewards for drug use. Thus, "political participation" represents a high-risk economic strategy.

Drug Use Is Used as a Means of Cope and to Solidify Bonds among Peers

The qualitative data illustrate the functionally related nature of drug use among the young people interviewed and help move beyond viewing drug use as a mere behavior to understand the purpose that drugs serve in the lives of these adolescents. Drugs were used as a way to alleviate psychological distress and to reinforce bonding within the peer group. A participant expressed his views regarding Yaba as follows: "Yaba makes me forget about hunger and fear. All of my friends in our group use Yaba, therefore I use it as well." The fourth theme humanizes the correlations and regression findings and demonstrates that drug use serves two functions simultaneously: it represents a method of self-medication for trauma and poverty and it serves as a ritual to indicate that individuals belong to the same group, thereby reinforcing the importance of peer relationships.

DISCUSSION

This research provides a holistic and humanistic interpretation of the socio-economic causations of juvenile delinquency in Bangladesh and demonstrates how poverty, family breakdown, lack of education, negative peer culture, and political manipulation interact in influencing the lives and behaviors of vulnerable youth. The results are consistent with and build on recent empirical and systematic research in the Bangladeshi context.

The quantitative findings show that the majority of juvenile offenders are from low-income families with 82% having no or primary education and 76% of parents with no formal education. The high levels of educational deficits of the juveniles and their parents also support the long-standing relationship between education and delinquency as promoted by Sampson & Laub (1993), and also corroborated with the latest findings from South Asia (Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2024; Malviya & Yadav, 2024; Md. Zahidul Islam et al., 2024; Suha & Shah, 2023). This intergenerational cycle of disadvantage highlights the contribution that low parental education makes to limited effective supervision of the young and lower access to the developmental resources necessary for effective youth development (Kirk & Sampson, 2013). The majority of juveniles in the 16-18 year age group and the overrepresentation of males mirrors trends in juvenile justice research globally (Loeber & Farrington, 2014; Rovner, 2024).

Family Composition as a key factor in the development of delinquent behavior was evidenced as almost half of juveniles of non-traditional households were delinquent, agreeing with Agnew's General Strain Theory which stressed that instability of the family leads to psychological stress and lower social control, increasing the likelihood of delinquency (Agnew, 2001; Hoeve et al., 2012). Further, the increasing use of drugs by adolescents from single parent families further supports the role of intact family structures as protective factors against risky behaviors (El-Shiekh et al., 2024). This is consistent with social control theories that include parental attachment as an important mechanism for regulating youth antisocial behavior (Xu et al., 2023).

Economically, the majority of juveniles were from low or lower middle income families, substantiating Merton's Strain Theory, which says that economic deprivation restricts the legitimate

means to success, forcing youth into criminal behavior (Merton, 1938). It is already well known that poverty causes juvenile crime, especially in urban slums where the degree of social disorganization makes them more vulnerable to crime ((Manjur Hossain Patoari, 2020). The high concentration of offenders within the urban area of this study is congruent with Shaw and McKay's (1942) Social Disorganization Theory where neighborhood instability, lack of informal social control, and high residential turnover lead to delinquency (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003).

Peer influence emerged as the strongest behavioral determinant as the large majority reported negative peer associations. This finding provides support for the Social Learning Theory of Akers (1973) and Farrington's (2018) explanation that peer networks are very important pathways through which individuals learn and reaffirm delinquent norms. Furthermore, the correlation and regression analysis identifying political participation as the strongest predictor for drug use points to a worrying dimension of exploited and marginalized youths being manipulated for political motives or for destructive acts (Didamson, 2024; Itskovich et al., 2024; Yaakub et al., 2023). This represents a confluence between socio-political exploitation and juvenile delinquency, which is important for policy.

Employment status had a marginal protective effect which is consistent with Cohen and Felson's Routine Activity Theory which argues that regular and worthwhile activities limit the time available for idling and offending (Miró, 2014). This stresses the vital importance of vocational training and job creation programs in rehabilitation (Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2023).

Emphasizing the human dimensions of the complex factors leading young people into gang life, drug trade, and violence, sometimes in the context of adult or political exploitation, the qualitative case studies support research worldwide that identifies coercion and manipulation as routes into delinquency (Havard et al., 2023). Other factors that have been reported to be responsible for the problem of juvenile crime include: family disintegration, political patronage by the police, traumatic experiences and personality disorders according to psychologists, and inadequacy of enforcement of the rehabilitative provisions of Children Act 2013 (Abdullah & Nahid Ferdousi, 2024; Kerig, 2012).

The studies maintain the fact that juvenile delinquency in Bangladesh is manifestation of multiple overlapping risks arising out of instability in family life, neglect of education, poverty, unsafe social environment, peer pressure and institutional failure. This fits well with integrated criminological models of delinquency, which position delinquency as being most prevalent at the nexus between structural disadvantage and social disorganization (Swearer, 2016; Warr, 2008). The results are compelling and call for a holistic and multifaceted approach that includes family support programs, access to education, community policing, mental health services, vocational training, and the strict enforcement of child-friendly laws. Comprehensive approaches such as these are critical to break the cycle of disadvantage and help create rehabilitative pathways for vulnerable youth, further leading to safer communities and more equitable social outcomes in Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

This mixed methods study highlights the complex interactions of socio-economic, familial, and community factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency in Bangladesh. The findings indicate that poverty, family breakdown, low levels of education, negative peer group influence and political manipulation are inextricably linked and have established a cycle of vulnerability for vulnerable youth. Quantitative and qualitative data also show that financial distress, parental absence, and exposure to unsafe environments are important risk factors for delinquent behavior. The findings of this study underscore that breaking the cycle of disadvantage requires addressing these deep-rooted socio-economic causes. However, a key limitation of this research is that it identifies risk factors but does not evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions. Therefore, the policy implications drawn such as strengthening family support, expanding vocational training, and enforcing child protection laws should be considered proposed pathways for action. Future research should prioritize intervention-based and longitudinal studies to rigorously test the efficacy of such policies, ensuring that commitments at the policy and community level are not only well-intentioned but are evidence-based and truly effective in securing the well-being of Bangladesh's young generation

Conflict of Interest

All the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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