



SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC AND RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CHILDHOOD DELINQUENCY

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In India, juveniles accused of crime are kept in child observation homes until further steps are taken either to send them to a juvenile home or back to their families, as required by the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act. The country data show that there has been a rise in both new and old juvenile cases accused of crime in the last four years. **Objective:** This study aimed to find out the socio-demographic profile and risk factors associated with juveniles accused of crime kept in a child observation home and offer suggestions to help plan preventive and after care services at the community level. **Materials and Methods:** Cross-sectional descriptive study on juveniles accused of crime kept in the child observation home (COH) in northern India. A cross-sectional study was conducted on juveniles accused of crime and kept in a COH in northern India. All children and service providers were interviewed by using an interview schedule. Percentages and frequencies of responses were calculated. **Results:** Majority of children in the observation home were in the age group of 15-17 years (60%), educated up to primary classes (68%), belonging to nuclear families (76%) and overcrowded homes, and households with fathers indulging into some kind of substance abuse. All the children indulged in at least one substance abuse and almost half of them had sexual contacts with one or more partners. **Conclusions:** Delinquent children need to be provided focused rehabilitative, restorative and drug de-addiction services, counselling services, psycho-social care, career counselling, and more practical vocational training.

Keywords Child Observation Home, Delinquency, Juvenile Justice Act, Rehabilitation, Restoration, Psycho-social care

1. Introduction

In India, juveniles accused of crime are kept in child observation homes (COH) until further steps are taken either to send them to a juvenile home or back to their families, as required by the Juvenile Justice Act. Children in such Homes should not be made to stay long and as long as they are there, they should be kept engaged with occupation which is congenial and intended to not only bring about adaptability in life but also help in enhancing self-confidence and picking of humane virtues. According to National Crime Record Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 39,361 and 4,145 were the total new and old juvenile cases in conflict with law respectively in 2013. ^[1] There has been a rise in both new and old juvenile cases in conflict with law in the last four years. ^[2]

2. Objectives

This study aimed to find out the socio-demographic profile and risk factors associated with juveniles accused of crime kept in observation home and offer suggestions to help plan preventive and after-care services at the community level.

3. Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted in a COH in northern India over a period of two months. The identity of the COH has not been disclosed intentionally to maintain confidentiality. A total of 25 delinquent children admitted during the two months of data collection and the concerned service providers working in the COH including Superintendent, Medical Doctor, House Father, House Mother, Welfare Officer, Probation Officer, Education Teacher and Computer Teacher, Vocational Instructor, Counsellor, Nurse, Caretakers, Helper, were included in the study. All those service providers and children who were not willing to participate or give a written consent or not available at the time of data collection were excluded from the study.

Separate interview schedules were prepared for the juveniles and the service providers. The interview schedule for the juveniles included semi-structured questions focusing on collecting information about the socio-demographic profile and risk factors associated with delinquency. The interview schedule for the service providers included open ended questions to gather information regarding the existing services for after care and to obtain suggestions

for planning preventive and rehabilitative services for such children. Both the interview schedules were pretested and expert judgement was taken before data collection.

Proper approvals were obtained from appropriate authorities prior to conduction of this study and collection of data. The participants were explained the purpose of the study and written informed consent was obtained from all the participants. Data were analyzed using MS-Excel.

4. Results

Nature of offenses for which these children had been admitted in the COH included Stealing (11), Murder (10), attempt to murder (3), drug abuse (3), rape (2), street fight (2), gang rape (1), passport fraud (1), sexual assault (1), sodomy (1). The responses are not mutually exclusive and the children were involved in one or more crime.

Majority of these children were in the age group of 15-17 years (60%). There were no children in the age group of 7-9 years. Most of them were from the State of Uttar Pradesh (36%) followed by Bihar (32%). Table 1 below shows the socio-demographic profile of juveniles accused of crime. Majority were educated up to primary class (44%) and almost one-fourth were illiterate. Although 72% of the children had been staying in pucca houses, most of them had only one room with no separate kitchen. Their homes were overcrowded since most of them had four or more siblings.

All the children indulged into at least one substance abuse: smoking was the commonest form being present in 44% of children, followed by tobacco chewing in 32% of children, and alcohol in 24% of children. Although all the children had heard about the various drugs available like charas, ganja, bhang and intravenous drug use, only 8% had history of drug use. Almost half of the children had been exposed to sexual contact. Almost all were heterosexual in nature, mostly with multiple sex partners. One of them practised sodomy as the active partner. Most of the cases with history of sexual contact were in the age group of 15-17 years.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Profile of Juveniles Accused of Crime (n=25)

Variable	Number (Percentage)
Age group (in years)	
7-9	0 (0%)
9-11	1 (4%)
11-13	2 (8%)
13-15	7 (28%)
15-17	15 (60%)
Educational status	
Illiterate	6 (24%)
Primary	11 (44%)
Middle	7 (28%)
Secondary	1 (4%)
Intermediate	0 (0%)
Graduate or Higher	0 (0%)
Substance abuse by child*	
Smoking	11 (44%)
Alcohol	6 (24%)
Tobacco Chewing	8 (32%)
Drugs (like Charas, Ganja etc)	2 (8%)
Sexual Contact*	
Girlfriends	9 (36%)
Commercial Sex Workers	7 (28%)
Rape	2 (8%)

NOTE: *Responses are not mutually exclusive

Table 2 shows the profile of families of juveniles accused of crime. Majority of children had both the biological parents alive and living together (84%). More than half of them had illiterate fathers (60%) and illiterate mothers (84%). Both parents were working in 36% of children and in 20% cases the earning member was only the mother. Although only 16% reported that there was violence to mothers by the family members almost 28% reported that they were physically abused at home by family. Fathers of almost all the children had at least one substance abuse: smoking was the commonest being in 60% of fathers, followed by alcohol (36%), and chewing tobacco (20%). Only 4% fathers abused other drugs like charas, ganja, bhang etc. Mothers of 16% children indulged in tobacco chewing.

Table 2: Family Profile of Juveniles Accused of Crime (n=25)

Variable	Number (Percentage)
Type of Family	
Joint	6 (24%)
Nuclear	19 (76%)
Extended Joint	0 (0%)
Living status of biological parents	
Both alive and Living together	21 (84%)
Only father alive	0 (0%)
Only mother alive	4 (16%)
None alive	0 (0%)
Working parents	
Mother only	5 (20%)
Father only	11 (44%)
Both mother and father	9 (36%)
Substance abuse by father**	
Smoking	15 (60%)
Alcohol	9 (36%)
Tobacco chewing	5 (20%)
Drugs (like charas, ganja etc)	2 (8%)
Physical Abuse to child by family	
Yes	7 (28%)
No	18 (72%)
Type of housing	
Kutchha	7 (28%)
Pucca	18 (72%)
Overcrowding	
Yes	19 (76%)
No	6 (24%)

NOTE: **Responses are not mutually exclusive

The after-care services provided by the COH included the following:

- 1) During the stay in the COH, education is imparted to the children and they are eligible to appear for the exams through an open school. The COH has partnered with National Institute of Open School (NIOS) for continuation of education of the marginalized youth. The education fees and the books are funded by COH. Once the child leaves the institute, the child is still eligible to appear for the exams for that standard through NIOS.
- 2) The children after leaving the COH are also counselled once a month for three years and a quarterly report is prepared for the same.
- 3) If at the time of relieving an orphan child, he is sent to the Child Welfare Committee for their rehabilitation, restoration and social re-integration.

5. Discussion

In our study majority of them belonged to either Uttar Pradesh (36%) or Bihar (32%) whereas in the country data, more juvenile were from Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. ^[1] The country data represents data from across the country whereas the data in the study is only from one COH of northern India. Therefore, the study findings may not be representative for the whole country.

More than half of children in our study were either illiterate or had primary education, belonged to the age group of 15-17 years which is similar to the country data wherein 51% of the total cases for 2013 were either illiterate or educated up to primary level. Another study by Zerena et al also showed that males in the age group of 16-18 years, attending school and suffering from substance abuse disorder were involved in thefts and physical assaults. ^[3]

Most of these children in our study belonged to nuclear families; their homes were overcrowded since majority of them had four or more siblings. Although, it is observed that children of single-parent families are more likely to delinquent than those living with both parents, ^[4] however, results in our study showed that most of the children were living with both parents (84%). This figure is almost similar to the figure (81%) of the country data for 2013. ^[1]

In our study, overall, 64% of children had a history of sexual contact (in some cases with multiple partners). It is probable that the actual proportion of children involved in sexual contact might be higher as many would have hidden such information despite persistent questioning.

All the children in our study indulged into at least one or more substance abuse. According to a study by U.S. Department of Justice, more than 80% of the residents of state operated juvenile institutions reported the prior use of illegal drug. Almost 40% of those who had previously used drugs began using drugs before the age of 12. ^[5]

Many children in this study had illiterate parents; it is possible that due to lack of supportive supervision and motivation towards educational values at home, children were lacking moral fiber. Some of them had fathers who indulged into substance abuse and almost all the children in the study had fathers who physically abused them. Aggressive parents may prove

to be a bad influence on the child. Physical abuse to the child has a direct impact on the child's propensity toward antisocial problems, including delinquency. This is further supported by a 20 year follow-up study that showed that the children who were abused or neglected were more likely to be arrested as juveniles and as adults than were the controls and they were more likely to be arrested for juvenile violence.^[6] West et al in his study suggested that poor parental supervision was one link in the chain between criminal fathers and delinquent sons.^[7] Also in another study by Smith et al, authoritarian parenting and parental conflict were mediating variables between parental antisocial behavior and child conduct issues.^[8]

Below is a case study of a juvenile accused of crime kept in the observsation home.

Case Study

A 16-year-old illiterate boy native of Bihar with no consistent occupation had been staying with his parents and seven siblings. His parents were illiterate - father being a laborer and mother a caretaker in a hospital. He ran away from home at the age of eleven. He had a history of being beaten by his paternal uncle occasionally. Out of anger he fractured his uncle's hand in return. He had been put in an Observation Home several times.

At present he was put in the observation home because he was accused of stabbing the guard with a tube light since the guard caught him stealing. The boy was beaten up by the public and was sent to Jail from where he was sent to the child observation home since he was only 15 years old.

In 2004, he was caught on account of being accused of robbery of eleven lakh rupees along with five other children and put in the different observation homes in the city. He stayed in the Observation Home for six months and then was set free.

He was then caught stealing jewelry and made to stay in the observation home for one and a half years and then was set free again. Next he was caught stealing Rs. 16 lakh in cash, one kilogram of gold, two video cameras and 200 dollars but he could manage to run away. He also has a history of stealing ever since eight years of age and at least two to three times a week. He has had sexual exposure with two girlfriends and with commercial sex workers. He also indulged in alcohol intake, smoking and tobacco chewing.

6. Conclusions

From the above discussion, it is indicative that socio-demographic profile and risk factors that could lead to childhood delinquency is found to be common in nuclear families with

overcrowded homes, illiterate children or children educated up to primary education, households with fathers indulging into substance abuse (smoking, alcohol, tobacco chewing etc), homes with an abusive parent or elder, or homes where there is lack of supportive supervision. However, the limitation of the study was that only one COH was included in the study due to time and scope constraints and a study at a larger scale may be conducted to extrapolate the results at the national level.

Since these children are currently counseled by the counselors of the COH every month only for a period of three years Juvenile guidance clinics should be established since they need right guidance and continuous follow-up at all times. Local community, Panchayati Raj Institutions and schools should be sensitized so that they can play a vital role to ensure that these children are not stigmatised in their village of stay and also assist with mentoring these children, providing sponsorship support and arranging trainings and job placement at the community level. Adolescent friendly clinics should be roped in to provide psycho-social counselling and impart sex education. Conclusively, these interventions will act synergistically with the aftercare provided by the Observation Home to help rehabilitate these children in a more effective way.

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