

The Lifestyle of Young Offenders before Rehabilitation

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Abstract. The research looks into the social activities and the lifestyles of 10 respondents who are currently doing their time in a Juvenile Rehabilitation Center. The researcher interviewed the respondents of their average daily activities before arrests and see if their lifestyle matches to what has been proposed by literature. The questionnaire was self-developed and piloted before administration. The questionnaire is qualitative. The setting for the interview was provided by the rehabilitation center and the interview was conducted one-on-one and recorded. Research findings showed that the majority respondents spent a large amount of time in day with their friends, including at nights, the time where opportunities to commit crimes are supposedly abundant. They also reported to be involved in various activities that basically would require them to be away from home such as hanging out at the mall, riding bike with friends, and simply being at friend's house. The respondents, however, had more balanced times spent between family and outside or friends on the weekends.

Keywords: Young Offender, Lifestyle, Social Activities, Peers, Parenting, Malaysian Young Offenders.

1. Introduction

There are many attempts to explain why some adolescents are more at risk of delinquency. This is partly due to the worrying statistics of adolescents that are involved in criminal activities. According to statistics from the Department of Social Welfare, Malaysia, above 5000 cases have been reported since 2004 until 2007 (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, 2008). Despite the many efforts to reduce the number of crimes, they seem to be a persistent phenomenon in Malaysia.

It is shown in studies that peers have a strong relationship to delinquency (Chung & Steinberg, 2006; Galbavy, 2003). Not just that, association with deviant peers is also found to be related to poor parenting skill (Henry, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 2011). Opportunity to commit a crime is fostered by a lifestyle that is rather free and unbound from family or other guardian supervision, thus making association with delinquent peers more likely to occur (Riley, 1987; Newman, Fox, Flynn, & Christeson, 2000; Warr, 2005). Such a lifestyles can be the one where the adolescents are rarely at home, with less time spent for sports or other healthy social activities (Barnes, Hoffman, Welte, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2007; Yu, Ziviani, Baxter, & Haynes, 2010), and frequent involvement in social loafing. The latter actually is one of the major problems among youth in Malaysia.

The reason why this kind of lifestyles puts adolescents at risk is because it is unhealthy and unstructured (Osgood & Anderson, 2004), which is why one of the important measures in preventing an adolescent from committing a crime is to exert a healthy level of parental supervision. Not just parental supervision, a second-degree supervision offered by school authority is also a significant element in prevention (Wong, 2005). According to Fauth, Roth, and Brooks-Gunn(2007), adolescents who are involved in school-related activities are less likely to be involved in offensive activities than adolescents who spend time doing other seemingly healthy activities but still can be adverse to healthy development like playing

Some of Malaysian adolescents, just like youths everywhere in the world, are more at risk of being potential offenders. As stressed above, what they need is an opportunity resulting from an interplay between lack of parental supervision, unsupervised time, and association with delinquent peers. That is what the literature from abroad has documented, but does the same thing happen to Malaysian adolescents?

Although there are studies that support the notion that parents and friends have a role in juvenile delinquency, but research that is specified on lifestyle is limited in Malaysia; yet, it is an important contributor

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that can help us understand why certain adolescents commit crime. However, the implication on lifestyle is indirect. One research conducted to understand the involvement of youth in illegal racing activity on the road showed how powerful peers can be in influencing our adolescents into committing that illegal activity (Ismail & Ibrahim, 2007). This association with delinquent peers, of course, requires the adolescents to actually go out for substantial periods of time in order to stay away from parental supervision.

It is important, therefore, to also consider the parental factors when it comes to delinquency. Yahaya, AbGhaffar, and Baharom (2010) found that parents' antisocial behaviors have a high influence on an adolescent's delinquency. Others, on the other hand, made an argument that juvenile delinquents usually come from parents who have an authoritarian and permissive parenting style (Yahaya & Bahari, 2010). Authoritarian parenting style produces children that are rebellious and when they are rebellious, they will slowly detach from home. While permissive parenting style basically just lack controls on children, giving them freedom to do activities, legal or illegal, without healthy supervision. Detachment from home, then, means being closer to peers and when the peers happen to be delinquent, there is a chance the children will also pick up the delinquent behaviors (Yahaya, Yahaya, & Juriah, 2010).

We have been incessantly reported by the parents, friends of our youth, and also the welfare officer at the Department of Social Welfare, Malaysia that the adolescents who commit a crime always have a pattern of lifestyle that puts them at risk of delinquency. It is noteworthy that this kind of lifestyle is very much a part of the development of many adolescents in today's world. To the people who watch these adolescents grow, judgment and approval or disapproval might ensue. But this kind of lifestyle might be a platform of learning and development that serves as a basis for personality growth for their adult lives. By understanding their lifestyle and social activities, it can be ascertained how much of this lifestyle might be beneficial for the adolescents' own development and growth. This research also can determine if these adolescents have the awareness of how these issues relate to their delinquency.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample, Research Procedures and Materials

The sample for this research is the adolescents housed at a juvenile rehabilitation centre in Malaysia. The residents' lifestyle in relation to their parents and their peers before rehabilitation will be operationalized by looking at the elaborate activities of the adolescents from 7.00 a.m. until 12.00 a.m. of the same day. The Government of Malaysia defines adolescence as youths who are below 18 years old. All of the residents in this rehabilitation centre were male. A total of 10 respondents (All were Malay and above 14 years old) participated in the research. The respondents were selected using convenience sampling.

This research employed qualitative design in its interview. This research was exploratory as the purpose was to lay out the general and common patterns of lifestyles of adolescents who were involved in delinquency before arrest. Apparatus important for interviewing such as a recorder and basic stationery were utilized. The center provided an interviewing room with chairs and tables. Consent from the respondents was acquired before interview.

The questions were prepared. However, employing a semi-structured interview, some additional questions were asked if there arose any need of more information. However, the standardized questions were on the basis of the variables in this research. After a pilot interview with two other residents to see if there was a need for adjustment, the final questions were updated and presented as follow:

- How many hours were spent for school?
- What activities did you usually do after school?
- How many hours did you spend outside of your home?
- With whom did you usually spend time with?
- What were your usual activities in the weekend?

3. Results

The Figures below will describe the divisions of time spent on either with family, outside, and either family or outside. By spending time with family, it means that the respondents will be at home, and not with

their friends. By spending time outside, the respondents either spent their time outside alone or with peers. Spending time either outside or with family means that the respondents reported that the time is averagely equally spent for both.

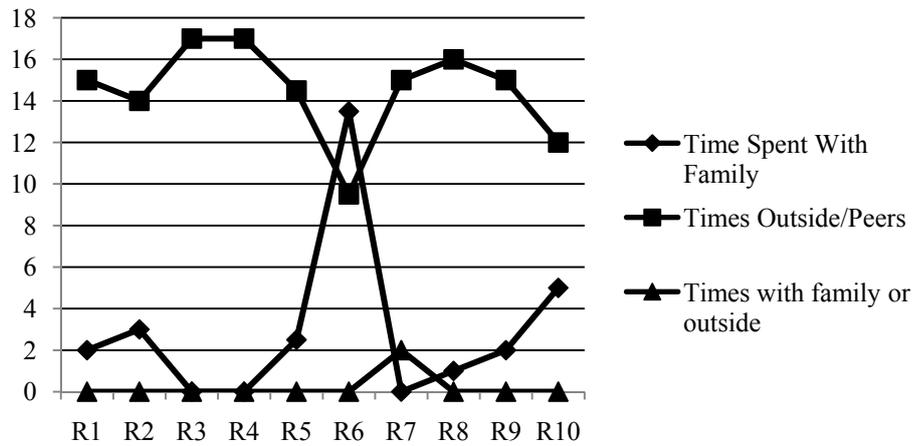


Fig. 1: Average times self-reported by the respondents on the weekdays.

Figure 1 shows the average self-reported daily activities that are divided between activities with family, outside, and either family or outside on the weekdays. Since each respondent reported to have similar average schedules everyday on the weekday, therefore, the calculation only includes the total time spent for a day (which means, the observation is not for five days, but the average of those five days). The interview only asked about their activities from 7.00 a.m. (the time they were usually getting ready to go to school) until 12.a.m. midnight, that makes the maximum calculated times to be 17 hours.

In the Figure, it can be seen that of all the 10 respondents, nine had a lifestyle spent mostly outside. Two of the respondents also reported that most of the days, they did not spend time at all with the family. They would go out after school, or skip school altogether and be with their friends. It can also be seen that only one respondent had an average time spent at home than outside.

The respondents spent an average of 14.5 hours per day outside, which was more than half a day. According to their reports on what they did at night, nine out of 10 respondents spent majority of night time with peers, thus only one respondent reported to have spent the nights at home (this was the respondent who had the more average time with family than outside or with friends). This explains only one respondent is to be seen in the graph who had more times with family than outside or with friends.

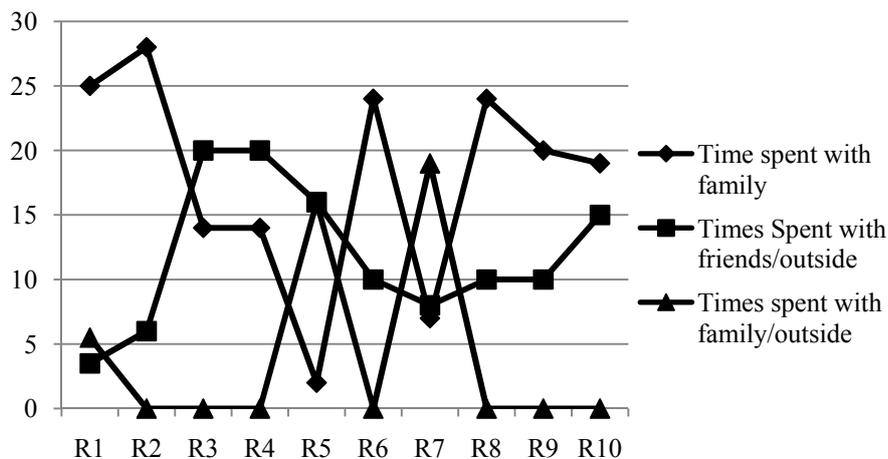


Fig. 2: Average times self-reported by the respondents on the weekends

While Figure 2 shows the average times spent with family and outside or with friends on the weekends. The respondents reported to have different schedules on the weekends. Therefore the Graph calculated the total times spent for the two days. This means there is a total of 34 hours for two days (17 hours per day as the

calculation only includes the time from 7.00 a.m. until 12.00 a.m. midnight). The Graph shows that the times spent with family and outside of home were a bit more balanced. Only three of the respondents reported to spend more times outside or with friends. Two respondents reported to spend less than 10 hours in the weekends with the family, while only three respondents spent less than 10 hours in the weekends with peers.

All in all, it can be observed from the respondents' reports that averagely, the respondents spent more time outside or with their friends than at home. Although in the weekends the time spending division between family and outside is more balanced, but the "time spent with family or outside" is higher, implying that the time spent outside or with friends might be higher than the average. The implication of the results is discussed in the next section.

According to the reports from the respondents, they did various activities when they were with their friends or outside of home. The different types of activities that were reported in order of frequency are presented as below:

- All of the respondents reported to commit a crime with their friends. The crimes committed include drug abuse, theft, burglary, and violent conducts. One respondent claimed that he spent nights surveying houses to break in. Only one respondent reported to sometimes commit a crime alone. Another one reported to commit theft with his brother-in-law.
- All respondents also reported of just simply hanging out with friends. This was either in a friend's house or at a café. When at the friend's house, they usually watched television, or just chatted.
- Seven respondents reported to be with their friends to do some other leisure activities. This included going to the town, hanging out by the waterfall, or biking.
- Shopping malls or shopping complex was another favorite place reported by five respondents. They reported to usually hang out with friends and did some activities such as watching cinema, having a karaoke session and just eating out.
- Three respondents reported that sometimes they spent time outside working to get some money. Most of the time, they searched for a temporary job with friends, and sometimes, they did it alone.
- Football was reported to be a usual before-night activity by two respondents.
- One respondent reported to get involved in underage drinking.
- Another respondent was involved in an illegal racing session.

4. Discussion

The study confirms what is suggested by the literature. Nine of all respondents reported to have spent majority of nights outside with their outside or with friends and not at home. Riley (1987), Newman et al. (2000), and Warr (2005) asserted that night activities can make a lifestyle more vulnerable to committing a crime because there would be more time for them to spend with their peers. The respondents also reported that their offences such as using drug, robbing a house and other activities usually occurred at nights. In addition to the vulnerability, night activities were normally not monitored by the parents, and according to the respondents, even if the parents asked their whereabouts, it would be just a simple question over the phone, consistent with Yahaya et al.'s (2010) argument that children will still be vulnerable to delinquency if the parental supervision is superficial.

Although Wong (2005) stated in his paper that school can act as one of the authorities in which adolescents' behaviors can be monitored, from the reports of respondents in current research, the school was actually one of the places where the residents and their peers met. However, from their reports, schools were not the place where they committed crimes, unless if they illegally skipped classes on that day, or if they quit (two of the respondents quit school). It can be hypothesized that when these adolescents met their peers at school, it was when they planned about their schedules of the day.

Large portion of these adolescents' lifestyle were spent with their peers and according to studies (e.g. Galbavy, 2003; Chung & Steinberg, 2006; Abu Bakar, 2007), peers were one of the "sources" to learn about committing crime. It can be hypothesized that their delinquency was influenced by their friends from the times they spent together. Added by the lack of parental supervision which could help hinder any potential to commit crime which has been shown to be an important element in prevention of juvenile behaviors

(Newman et al., 2000; Warr, 2005; Henry et al., 2011), these adolescents had a free lifestyle where the only ones that could stop them from committing crime was themselves.

Therefore, this study supports once again the notion that parental supervision and peer influence have an interrelated role in driving an adolescent into delinquency – observed through their lifestyle and time spent in their life. Although when some adolescents associate with peers who are delinquent, it is shown that when parents do not monitor their children, or monitor superficially, this gives the adolescents an unbound lifestyle that can make them more vulnerable to the delinquency of their peers. If parents exert a healthy control and consistently monitor their children's activities and whereabouts, then it can be theorized here that the adolescents' dynamic of lifestyle will be less susceptible to delinquent behaviors.

This research calls for parents to be more aware of the choice of friends made by children and the time they spend with their friends in a day. Education about this measure can be provided by the welfare officers in the Department. They should be taught that supervision, especially adequate parental supervision can hinder opportunities for their children to engage in crime. Even in a broken home where the children have divorced or single parents, wiser and smarter ways of supervising at difficult times can discourage the adolescent from succumbing to the temptation to commit crime.

Although one might argue that even without peers, an adolescent might "try out" an offence by him- or herself, just as reported by one respondent in this study, this would still require the adolescents to be free from their parents' supervision. However, if one argues that if family members, especially parents, commit an offence, then this might require a different level of intervention. One respondent reported to have committed a crime with his brother-in-law. The parents of this respondent might still exert a healthy parental supervision, but still they might not suspect that it would be their son's brother-in-law who would influence the adolescent to commit an offence. Therefore, this area should be investigated further in future research.

This study serves as a preliminary research to more advance investigations to be carried out in terms of understanding the lifestyle of Malaysian adolescents and their vulnerability to juvenile delinquency. It is suggested that in future research, a wider range of respondents from different backgrounds such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status can be selected. A limitation is that this research only selected respondents who already committed crime without any comparison with non-juvenile adolescents. Comparing between adolescents who are more at risk and who are not can give a richer understanding in relation to this area.

One ethical consideration that should be observed in any future research, as observed in the current research, is absolute confidentiality with respect to the reports or findings. Juveniles belong to a very socially-sensitive group of subjects. Some are embarrassed about what they did, and any leaking of a respondent's responses can be harmful to the adolescent. It is recommended that in future research, the settings of interview and means of recording can be done securely to avoid any accidental leaking.

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