

Youth in Conflict with the Law: A Criminological Exploration of the Social Factors Perpetuating Misconduct

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an upsurge in the quantity of transgressions perpetrated by adolescents, signifying that a considerable proportion of the youth populace experiences a great degree of marginalisation within their social milieu. Moreover, many youths have succumbed to challenges related to academic failure, socio-economic adversity, family turmoil, substance abuse and deviant peer affiliation. Consequently, this impedes their transition into adulthood and dissuades them from evolving into meaningful social actors. Based on this premise, the current study was conducted to explore the socio-criminogenic risk factors which manifest in the family, community, school and peer group domain, through gauging the lived experiences of youth regarding the factors which they most closely associate with their offending behaviour. Data were obtained using a sample of 20 males incarcerated at the Kimberley Youth Development Centre in the Northern Cape Province of the Republic of South Africa, and analysed using thematic analysis. Several key factors perpetuating youth misconduct were identified, including antisocial peer-affiliation, gang membership, community disorganisation and illicit substance use. It is thus envisaged that these findings will stimulate further research, contribute to the existing body of knowledge and aid in policy development, with the reduction of conflict as the ultimate aim.

Keywords: adolescence; youth at risk; youth misconduct; socio-criminogenic risk factor; family; community; school; peer group

Introduction¹

Socially maladaptive and unlawful behaviour typically occurs due to a multifaceted interplay between individual genetic and biological factors, together with environmental influences, which start during foetal development and continue throughout one's lifespan (Phillips 2019, 7; Siegel 2016, 310). These factors are commonly referred to as criminogenic risk factors and include characteristics unique to an individual or their social environment, which amplify the propensity for behavioural misconduct and may make individuals more prone to come into conflict with the law (Bezuidenhout 2018, 69; Phillips and Maritz 2015, 54; Siegel 2016, 311). Furthermore, these factors are classified as either individual or socio-criminogenic risks, with each category being further sub-divided. On an individual level, these subcategories comprise biographical, neurophysiological, genetic and psychosocial variables, which include features such as being male, youthfulness, as well as displaying certain personality traits like aggression, risk taking or impulsivity. On a social level, these factors may manifest within the family, community, school and peer group domains and typically include exposure to family conflict, community disorganisation, antisocial peer affiliation, substance abuse and academic failure (Bezuidenhout 2018, 83; Phillips and Maritz 2015, 54; Phillips 2019, 9; Siegel 2016, 311). Despite the broad nature of these factors, exposure to both individual and social-level criminogenic risk factors have the potential to produce maladaptive behaviour, having a more profound influence when exposed to several factors in varying domains, as opposed to one factor from a single domain (Phillips 2019, 11).

This article is thus broadly aimed at exploring the socio-criminogenic risk factors that perpetuate youth misconduct, as a considerable percentage of the South African youth populace remain vulnerable to transgressing the law due to the presence of these factors in their social environment (Bezuidenhout 2018, 83; Phillips and Maritz 2015, 54). Moreover, many youths have already succumbed to challenges associated with academic failure, socioeconomic adversity, restricted access to conventional success, family conflict and deviant peer affiliation, thereby impeding their transition into adulthood and dissuading them from evolving into meaningful social actors (Bezuidenhout 2018, 105; Phillips 2019, 11). More specifically, the current study focuses on identifying key socio-criminogenic risk factors and exploring their influence in relation to unlawful behaviour, based on the unique experiences and narratives of youth in the sample.

These individuals, who fall into the so-called “youth” category, generally refer to persons between 18 and 22 years (Khan and Singh 2014, 106; Peacock 2006, 4; Peacock

1 I hereby acknowledge that this research article is a synopsis of my Master's dissertation entitled *Youth in Conflict with the Law: An Exploration of Socio-criminogenic Factors*, submitted to the Department of Criminology at the University of the Free State in 2019.

2009, 346) who are particularly vulnerable to criminogenic risk factors that manifest in the social environment; as persons aged between 12 and 22 years form part of a high-risk age cohort for both criminal victimisation as well as offending (Burton, Leoschut and Bonora 2009, xiii; Clark 2012, 77; Khan and Singh 2014, 105; Phillips 2019, 1; Phillips 2020, 4). In addition, youths are more exposed to negative influences and external strain than their adult counterparts are, their character is typically less developed and they possess a greater tendency to engage in immature or irresponsible behaviour, thus placing them at an increased risk for contravening the law (Gallinetti 2009, 18; Phillips 2019, 4). The succeeding section presents an exposition of the research problem, in addition to an overview of the research aims, which guided the current study.

Problem Statement and Research Aims

Youths who are frequently exposed to criminogenic risk factors are often placed on the peripheries of society and experience a great deal of marginalisation within the context of their family, school, community and peer group (Phillips 2019, 80). These youth are typically regarded as being at “high risk” for criminal offending as they face exposure to multiple challenges including, but not limited to, economic adversity, familial conflict and interpersonal violence, illicit substance abuse, as well as academic failure (Bezuidenhout 2018, 83; Phillips 2019, 80). In recent years, the sheer number of transgressions perpetrated by individuals aged between 18 to 22 years also depicts a bleak outlook for the future of many South African youths. This is reflected in statistics obtained from the 2014/2015 *Annual Report of the Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services* in South Africa, which suggest that an estimated 24 656 sentenced inmates fall within the said “youth” category (Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons 2015, 48). The inmate population has remained relatively similar during the 2015/2016 financial year, with a slight increase among both those sentenced and on remand (Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons 2016, 44).

More recent statistics obtained from the 2017/2018 *Annual Report of the Department of Correctional Services (DCS)* reveal that 3 239 male correctional clients fall into the designated juvenile category (18 to 20 years), while 111 545 fall into the youth and young adults (21 years and older) category (Department of Correctional Services 2018, 30). The 2019/2020 *Annual Report of the DCS* indicates a slight decrease in both the juvenile as well as the youth and young-adult inmate population, with 2 005 male correctional clients (18 to 20 years) and 98 237 males (21 years and older) currently serving a sentence (Department of Correctional Services 2020, 46). Moreover, Jules-Macquet (in Phillips 2019, 2), asserts that South African youth between 18 and 25 years generally perpetrate serious offences, with the majority of transgressions being classified as aggressive, economic and sexual offences, respectively.

Correctional centres and non-profit organisations, which manage youth in conflict with the law, are thus laden with the vital task of catering to the unique needs of young persons in their care. This is echoed in the White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (2005, 78), which highlights the need for adequate and effective rehabilitation and skills training during incarceration to ensure the successful rehabilitation and societal reintegration of youthful transgressors (Department of Correctional Services 2005, 79; Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons 2015, 48). It is therefore essential that rehabilitative and therapeutic interventions offered by correctional centres and other agencies, address the unique criminogenic risk factors that influence and motivate youth to contravene the law, thus emphasising the value of local research aimed at exploring the criminogenic factors that perpetuate youth misconduct, thereby serving as rationale for this article (Phillips 2019, 3).

Furthermore, crime reduction and intervention efforts hinge on identifying and understanding criminogenic-risk and protective factors in addition to determining the juncture during life-course development at which they emerge (Phillips 2019, 29; Shader 2001, 3; Siegel 2016, 310). Research of this nature may thus serve to inform policies on rehabilitation and societal reintegration of youth in conflict with the law, potentially contributing to the development of new programmes and the revision of existing programmes targeting the factors which perpetuate youth misconduct (Phillips 2019, 29). Programmes run at correctional centres and non-profit organisations such as NICRO or Khulisa, could thus cater specifically to the unique needs of the youth in their care, seeking to render intervention efforts more effective, in the pursuit of a much-needed conceptual understanding of socio-criminogenic risk factors, thus serving as further rationale for the current article (Phillips 2019, 29).

Although some research on these factors have been conducted, much of it pertains to the international context and a dearth of contemporary local research exists. One such pioneering international study was conducted by Hawkins et al. (2000, 2) based on a statistical analysis of the predictors for youth violence. This research aimed to determine the depth of the interrelation between certain criminogenic risk factors and the violence incurred as a result thereof. The findings identified parental deviance, academic failure, antisocial peer affiliation and socio-economic adversity as pertinent predictors for youth crime (Hawkins et al. 2000, 32). Similar studies conducted by Ferguson, Horwood and Swain-Campbell (2004) as well as Demombynes and Özler (2005), highlighted social disorganisation and relative deprivation as key factors motivating offending youth.

In the South African context, Dawes and Van der Merwe (2007) conducted a review of theoretical and empirical research on criminogenic risk factors. However, due to the shortage of local research, their review draws mainly on international studies (Dawes 2007, 95; Phillips 2019, 34; and Van der Merwe). A separate study, conducted by Khan and Singh (2014), sought to identify the psycho-socio and criminogenic risk factors

pertaining to incarcerated youth in Durban, through the use of a mixed-methods approach with 77 research participants. Their findings revealed that poverty, academic failure and poor familial relations were key features motivating youth in the sample to transgress.

Although the aforementioned studies succeed in identifying some socio-criminogenic factors perpetuating youth misconduct, a paucity of research exists aimed at exploring the lived experiences and narratives of youth with reference to their exposure to numerous criminogenic risk factors in the family, school, community and peer group domains. Limited local research thus remains, with existing studies focusing only on factors related to specific transgressions, or which are limited to a single social domain (Phillips 2019, 34). A considerable number of youths persist in violating the law and are frequently incarcerated as a result (Department of Correctional Services 2020, 46; Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons 2015, 48; Phillips 2019, 34). In addition, a limited number of studies delineating the unique views and perceptions of incarcerated South African youth are available, thus further highlighting the value of this study, which aims to explore the most pertinent socio-criminogenic risk factors that perpetuate youth misconduct based on the lived experiences and narratives of participants in the sample.

Accordingly, the following research aims were formulated in order to address the lack of local criminogenic risk factor research, as well as to contribute to the much-needed conceptual understanding of the relationship between socio-criminogenic risk factors and youth misconduct:

- i. To identify the socio-criminogenic risk factors which contributed to the law-contravening behaviour of a group of detained youth.
- ii. To achieve a greater understanding of the research participants' unique experiences related to their exposure to socio-criminogenic risk factors in the social environment.
- iii. To identify the most commonly recurring socio-criminogenic risk factors reported by youth in the sample.

The succeeding section presents an overview of existing literature and previous empirical studies related to criminogenic risk factors in the family, community, school and peer group domains. This is followed by a discussion on the research design, sampling procedure and data analysis utilised in the current study.

Review of Existing Literature and Previous Empirical Research

As noted previously, socio-criminogenic risk factors manifest across four interdependent domains; namely the family, community, school and peer group

(Phillips 2019, 10; Phillips and Maritz 2015, 54). Exposure in one domain such as the peer group, may affect conduct across other domains such as the family, school or community. Despite this, exposure to a single criminogenic risk factor is seldom sufficient to produce law-contravening behaviour. Hence, the effect is amplified when exposed to a greater number of factors, or when these factors present within different social domains (Hawkins et al. 2000, 7). Several authors concur, by highlighting numerous studies that show an upsurge in the development of serious deviant and unlawful behaviour when exposed to a combination of factors (Harder, Knorth and Kalverboer 2015, 1059; Loeber, Slot, van der Laan and Hoeve 2008, 147). The next section provides a brief exposition of the most pertinent socio-criminogenic risk factors in this regard.

The Family Domain

The family domain is significantly positively correlated with youth crime, as several factors in this domain have the potential to negatively affect the socialisation process of youth and increase their risk to transgress. This includes exposure to parental deviance, economic disadvantage, inadequate supervision, poor parenting skills, illicit substance abuse and family conflict (Bezuidenhout 2018, 88; Ntshangase 2015, 38; Phillips 2019, 133). Subsequently, youth are placed at a significant risk of transgressing when reared in families that are disrupted due to spousal or interpersonal conflict, inattentive caregivers who are not attuned to the behaviour or emotional state of their offspring or families where caregivers themselves contravene the law (Phillips 2019, 83).

This is supported in the research of Barnert et al. (2015, 1365), who conducted a qualitative study on the criminogenic risk factors associated with youth misconduct in a sample of 20 detained youth in the United States. The majority of participants in their sample depicted their family unit as “chaotic” and “unstructured environments” typified by neglect, parental apathy and economic adversity. A similar study conducted by Khan and Singh (2014) in South Africa, using quantitative data from 77 youths between the ages of 17 and 31 years, also highlights familial poverty as a key factor which motivated the participants to transgress. Based on this research, 74 per cent of the respondents violated the law due to their exclusion from the labour market, while 27 per cent revealed that no adult members of their household were employed during the time they transgressed (Khan and Singh 2014, 112; Phillips 2019, 86).

The research of Bartol and Bartol (2017, 55) concurs with the aforementioned studies, indicating that youths attempt to meet material and other needs unlawfully when families are unable to provide for them. Moreover, Bartol and Bartol (2017, 55) found that economic disadvantage encompasses several poverty-related co-factors including substandard education, inadequate parental supervision, divorce and parental dissonance. The role of the family as a predictor for youth misconduct has also been emphasised in several other research studies. These include the research of Hay et al.

(2007, 596) as well as Rekker et al. (2015, 2), which highlighted socio-economic adversity. Arthur (2007, 21) and Howitt (2015, 75), which affirmed the negative effect of parental or sibling deviance. Burton (2007, 19) and Clark (2012, 83), who emphasised family conflict and interpersonal violence, and Harris (2009, 44), who highlights inadequate parental supervision as a crucial factor associated with youth misconduct. The degeneration of families, particularly in developing countries, as such cannot be disregarded as a challenge which also includes child-headed households, parental deviance, and single-parent households where family conflicts are rife. These situations thus provide youth with a defective frame of reference for developing socially acceptable and moral behaviour (Bezuidenhout 2018, 88; Phillips 2019, 37).

The Community Domain

In addition to the family, Crowell, McCord and Widom (2001, 89) note that the community may also have a major influence on the behaviour of youth, as the risk of engaging in crime exponentially increases when residing in an unfavourable environment. Hoffman (2006, 869), supports this notion by affirming that youth are more inclined to transgress when residing in areas typified by poverty, unemployment, female-headed households and ethnic heterogeneity, as these characteristics generally signify a socially-disorganised environment represented by defective socialisation and supervision, weak kinship bonds, limited positive role models and restricted access to the opportunities needed for conventional success (Bezuidenhout 2018, 85; Phillips 2019, 103). From a strain perspective, adolescents residing in areas such as these would have limited access to the socially-approved means needed to achieve conventional success. These youths are therefore more prone to engaging in unlawful behaviour by adapting to the strain experienced through becoming innovative and using socially unacceptable or unlawful means in their pursuit for success (Phillips 2019, 101).

This is supported by the research of Barnert et al. (2015, 1368) who conducted an in-depth analysis of criminogenic risk and protective factors in the United States, in which research participants depicted their communities as unpleasant environments where poverty was rife. One participant in the aforementioned study motivated this view by stating, “In poor neighbourhoods, negative influences were more rampant” (Barnert et al. 2015, 1368). The research of Bartol and Bartol (2017, 54) further motivates these findings by highlighting the correlation between economic adversity and repeated violent offending by both youths and their adult counterparts, as measured by official surveys, victimisation studies and self-report data. Other key predictors associated with youth misconduct include residing in high crime-rate areas, areas where gang membership is rife and areas that offer limited support structures, as conditions like these form part of social learning processes and affect the way in which youths respond to adversity (Louw, Van Ede and Louw 2005, 55; Siegel 2004, 156).

The nexus between youth misconduct and exposure to criminogenic risk factors within the community is also affirmed by the research of Ntshangase (2015, 36), which shows that unfavourable living environments offer optimum opportunities to transgress, in addition to providing models from which to acquire the skills needed to successfully contravene the law. This is further substantiated by the research of Benekos and Merlo (2009, 85); Bezuidenhout (2018, 84) as well as Kaylen and Pridemore (2013, 907), in which poverty, disorganisation, illicit substance abuse, positive attitudes toward crime and violence, were highlighted as pertinent socio-criminogenic risk factors within the community domain.

The School Domain

The school is considered as one of the most important social institutions with regard to the moral and cognitive development of youth. Ideally, schools should have the capacity to convey social norms and values in response to the demands of conformity imposed by society, endorse and advance societal needs, as well as impart the relevant knowledge and skills to prepare learners for the adult role (Ntshangase 2015, 41). However, school systems, particularly those in developing countries such as South Africa, are often incapable of fulfilling these roles and in this regard, may become a key factor motivating delinquency (Bezuidenhout 2018, 92). Learners are particularly vulnerable to transgress when exposed to aspects such as academic failure, weak attachment to school, school-based violence, corporal punishment and a general lack of discipline (De Souza Da Silveira, Maruschi and Bazon 2012, 353; Phillips 2019, 111).

Bartol and Bartol (2017, 59) concur by supporting the correlation between academic failure and youth misconduct as their research indicated that “75 per cent of state prison inmates, 59 per cent of federal inmates and 69 per cent of jail inmates in the United States did not complete high school.” Furthermore, the data indicated that dropping-out of school increased the probability for arrest by 350 per cent (Bartol and Bartol 2017, 59). Similarly, several participants in the study conducted by Barnert et al. (2015, 1365) reported that academic failure “sets youths on a bad pathway” potentially resulting in frustration, truancy or leaving school (Phillips 2019, 113). The study of Khan and Singh (2014, 111) yielded comparable results as 92 per cent of the incarcerated youth in their study had not completed school.

In addition to the foregoing research findings, the qualitative study of Harris (2009) aimed at exploring the criminogenic risk factors related to youth sex offending, highlights the discrepancy between private and public schools in South Africa. The former, generally have more qualified educators, better access to academic resources and superior infrastructure, while the latter are typified by staff shortages, inferior academic resources and poor infrastructure. According to Harris (2009, 46) challenges such as these often lead to feelings of deprivation and low self-worth, often manifesting as antisocial behaviour toward peers and educators.

The Peer Group Domain

Similar to the foregoing domains, the peer group is an inimitable and dominant agent perpetuating maladaptive behaviour as “factors such as peer delinquent behaviour, peer approval of delinquent behaviour, attachment or allegiance to peers, time spent with peers, and peer pressure for deviance have all been associated with adolescent antisocial behaviour” (McCord et al. 2001, 80; Phillips 2019, 119). This is supported by the research of Harris (2009, 55) as well as Barnert et al. (2015), Harder et al. (2015), and Khan and Singh (2014), which all highlight antisocial peer affiliation as a key predictor for youth misconduct. Youth are consequently particularly vulnerable to transgress when joining a deviant peer group or when developing strong attachment to delinquent peers, as parental influence often dwindles during adolescence, creating a platform whereby peers influence one another negatively and substitute social values with new behavioural norms acquired in the peer group context (Bartol and Bartol 2017, 55; Phillips 2019, 119).

This notion is supported by the research of Ettikal and Ladd (2015, 615), which indicates that the peer group is characterised by unique relational processes that may create multiple opportunities to transgress, together with peer pressure to engage in unlawful conduct, as youths typically spend the majority of their time with peers in an unsupervised setting. Chen, Burgers and Drabick (2016, 823) amplify this notion by noting that youths generally mimic each other’s maladaptive or aggressive behaviour, in addition to displaying an increased propensity to respond to environmental stimuli in an aggressive or antisocial way during leisure-time spent with deviant peers. A longitudinal mixed-methods study examining the criminogenic factors associated with deviant behaviour, conducted by Harder et al. (2015) on detained youth in the Netherlands, yielded similar results. Their data indicated that antisocial peer affiliation, in addition to illicit substance abuse, were the most important predictors for youth misconduct. Likewise, the mixed-methods study of Khan and Singh (2014, 112), indicated that 61 per cent of their sample transgressed while in the company of peers in comparison to 39 per cent who had transgressed on their own.

Several other studies have also highlighted gang membership as a key factor promoting youth misconduct (Cauffman, Monahan and Steinberg 2009; Peacock 2006; Phillips 2019; Phillips and Maritz 2015). In this regard, it should be noted that gang members generally engage in more unlawful behaviour than any other youth in the social setting (Bartollas and Schmalleger 2013, 140; Phillips 2019, 125), with offences which most often include malicious damage to property, vandalism, shoplifting, assault, burglary, rape and homicide (Phillips and Maritz 2015, 61). According to the research of Phillips and Maritz (2015, 63) as well as Phillips (2019, 126), South African communities are plagued by an upsurge in youth gang activity with a considerable number of offences being perpetrated in the school domain. This is supported by an in-depth analysis of gang-related activity conducted by Barnert et al. (2015, 1366), in which the majority of

participants described schools in their communities as “unsafe” due to the high level of gang activity and bullying present, thereby leading many youths “to protect themselves by joining gangs, carrying weapons or avoiding school.”

Furthermore, youth misconduct is typically motivated by the need to gain peer approval (Phillips 2019, 119). Affiliation with deviant peers or youth-gangs therefore provides adolescents with a sense of camaraderie, a way to gain respect, achieve status, become popular and experience a sense of belonging, aspects which may be unattainable in the family, school or community domains (Bender 2010, 469; Phillips 2019, 124).

Research Methodology

Due to the importance of gaining an insider perspective on the social factors that motivate youth misconduct based on a sample of incarcerated South African youth, a qualitative methodological approach was used, together with research strategies of an exploratory and descriptive nature. This facilitated the exploration of the unique meaning and impetus youths in the sample ascribed to their own unlawful behaviour and generated a deeper understanding of the socio-criminogenic risk factors to which they had been exposed (Creswell 2014, 32; Hagan 2010, 14; Harris 2009, 89; Kvale 1996, 70; Neuman 2000, 17).

Data Collection Method

Data was therefore collected by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews, which promoted a degree of flexibility and structure to the data collection process and made it possible to probe the interesting avenues that emerged (Creswell 2014, 32; Hagan 2010, 14; Harris 2009, 89; Kvale 1996, 70; Neuman 2000, 17). The semi-structured interview schedule was centred on identifying pertinent criminogenic risk factors to which the sample had been exposed, as well as exploring their unique experiences and perceptions in this regard. Subsequently, the aspects covered included the biographic characteristics of each participant, as well as common family, community, school and peer group variables that facilitated the commission of their most recent transgression. Apart from questions relating to the biographic characteristics of the sample, all questions were open ended.

Research Population

Due to practical limitations, it was not feasible to collect a random sample of all youth detained at South African correctional centres. Even if a random sample within a single centre were to be obtained, this would only yield randomly-obtained data applicable to that centre, and would still not be representative to the universe of incarcerated youth in South Africa. Purposive theoretical sampling was therefore used, as this permitted the creation of an operational population constructed in such a manner that it represents the

ideal with reference to the aims of the current research (Bless and Higson-Smith et al. 1995, 95). Hence, the research population were selected at the Kimberley Youth Development Centre in the Northern Cape Province, based on their suitability to the topic and purpose of the study, which was to explore and gain a greater understanding of the socio-criminogenic risk factors that perpetuate youth misconduct based on the experiences and views of the participants themselves.

Accordingly, 79 males incarcerated at the Kimberley Youth Development Centre, aged 18 to 22 years were invited to participate in the study. From these, 20 youth offenders indicated their willingness to be included in the sample. As noted previously, the study was limited to male youths in this age group as young people in this phase of life-span development are considered part of a high-risk age-cohort for offending (Clark 2012, 77; Khan and Singh 2014, 105; Phillips 2019, 1). Further rationale was that this research site only permitted male inmates, the majority of existing literature and empirical research pertain to males, and because the majority of correctional clients in South Africa constitute this demographic variable.

Sample Description

Seven participants were 20 years of age, and seven participants were 21 years of age. Of the remaining six participants, three were 19 years old and three were 22 years. A total of 15 youths identified as African, while the remaining five identified as Coloured. Language followed a similar pattern, as English was preferred by 13 participants in comparison to Afrikaans, which was preferred by the remaining seven participants.

Concerning the level of education of the participants, seven had completed school up to Grade 11, three completed Grade 10, four completed Grade 9 and three had completed Grade 8. Two youths from the sample completed school prior to coming into conflict with the law, while one participant left school in Grade 6. Ten participants were serving a sentence for aggressive offences; namely armed robbery and homicide, five were incarcerated for economic offences; namely theft and burglary, while the remaining five were serving a sentence for rape. Almost half of the sample; 45 per cent had been sentenced to a period of incarceration exceeding six years, while five participants were serving sentences which ranged between four and five years, with the rest of the sample serving a sentence ranging from two to three years; 5 per cent, one to two years; 10 per cent and seven to eleven months 15 per cent respectively.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using thematic analysis, and involved the identification of themes and subthemes, in an attempt to understand the way in which participants experienced criminogenic risk factors in their social environment. Collected data were tape recorded and analysed according to the six phases of qualitative data analysis as indicated by

Creswell (2014, 247). These phases involved organising and preparing the data for analysis through transcribing interviews (Phase 1); reading/re-reading the data numerous times to gain a sense of the information and to reflect on the overall meaning of the data (Phase 2); coding the data by clustering similar topics together (Phase 3); reducing the number of topics by grouping related themes/ideas together (Phase 4); and categorising the data into various themes and subthemes (Phase 5). The final phase (Phase 6) involved recording, conveying and interpreting the data (Creswell 2014, 247). Subsequently, the main themes consisted of the four social domains as highlighted in the literature concerning socio-criminogenic risk factors, namely the family, community, school and peer group. The subthemes on the other end were compiled from the participant responses pertaining to the most pertinent criminogenic risk factors perpetuating youth misconduct in each of the aforementioned domains.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Prior to embarking on the full-scale project, a pilot study with five participants from the sample population was conducted to validate the feasibility of the research methodology. In addition, interviews were carried out with two personnel members from the Kimberley Youth Development Centre, which provided further validation of the data collection instrument and confirmed general themes/subthemes that emerged during the interview process, thereby enhancing the level of credibility and trustworthiness in the study. Member-checking further enhanced the credibility of the data, and responses were thus frequently read back to participants to ascertain whether the correct meanings, inferences and interpretations had been ascribed to the information they provided (Cope 2014, 90; Kornbluh 2015, 397).

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Head of the Policy Coordination and Research Division of the Department of Correctional Services, and from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Free State (Ethical Clearance Number: UFS-HSD2016/0160). Other ethical considerations included using pseudonyms, informing participants of their right to withdraw from the study, as well as clearly outlining the information sheet and informed consent form.

Discussion of Findings

This section presents an exposition of the findings obtained in the current study in relation to the most pertinent socio-criminogenic risk factors reported by participants in each domain. The collected data is presented according to the various themes and subthemes as discussed in the data analysis section. Narrative accounts of the lived experience of participants are also included where applicable.

Theme 1: Findings Pertaining to the Family Domain

Based on a review of existing literature and prior research, numerous factors within the family domain were identified as conducive to youth misconduct. Similarly, participants in the sample reported exposure to numerous criminogenic risk factors that in their experience motivated them to contravene the law.

Subtheme 1.1: Socio-economic Disadvantage

Several youths in the sample perceived their family as economically deprived and highlighted this as a challenge with regard to meeting their basic and other needs. Participant 1 supported this view by asserting:

The money was not enough because sometimes I'll be needing school fees or school uniform then I will have to wait close to nine months before I could get the things.
(Participant 1)

A similar sentiment was shared by Participant 2 and Participant 20 respectively, who noted:

There wasn't really any income, just my grandmother's pension. Things that we needed, we didn't get easily (Participant 2), and Yes, because sometimes nothing, no money. Sometimes at home, no food. (Participant 20)

Eleven participants from the sample also highlighted financial adversity as a criminogenic risk factor that contributed to their most recent transgression. In this regard, several participants from the sample explained the relationship between family poverty and their own unlawful behaviour as follows:

Yes, I can say that, because I couldn't get things I wanted so I joined a gang. We robbed people at night so that I could fit in with the guys. The money I got, I used for myself, not to help at home. (Participant2)

Yes, it was. I broke in and took things to sell. Then I gave the money to my mother.
(Participant 13)

Yes, because I suffered financially. I just committed crime to get money, but I did it with the gang. (Participant 19)

These findings therefore correspond with the research of Hay et al. (2007, 593) which revealed that poverty within the family unit significantly increases the rate of youth transgressions, as well as with the research of Khan and Singh (2014, 112) in which 74.4 per cent of participants cited family poverty as one of the major factors which preceded their offence. Limited financial resources, which is often accompanied by

restricted access to legitimate opportunities, thus motivated eleven youths in the sample to seek out alternative avenues to meet their material and other needs.

Subtheme 1.2: Family Conflict and Interpersonal Violence

Nine participants reported exposure to conflict within their household. Yet, only three participants identified family conflict as a factor that contributed to their own unlawful behaviour. It was also apparent that exposure to violence within the family was not perceived as a significant criminogenic risk factor, regardless of the severity or type of conflict experienced. This is evident in the response of Participant 6 who shared:

My biological father murdered my mother. He broke my two hands because I helping my mother. Broke two hands and he beat me with the fist, here. He also took the iron, but not the modern one. He beat my mother with that iron. (Participant 6)

When asked if experiences such as this had an impact on his behaviour he simply replied:

I don't think it was that violence. It was not about that. (Participant 6)

The findings obtained in this regard are therefore inconsistent with prior research and existing literature as family conflict was not regarded as a pertinent criminogenic risk factor by youths in the sample. However, due to the sample size and because a control group was not used in the current study, these findings apply solely to the sample and should not be considered as general to the universe of South African youth in conflict with the law.

Subtheme 1.3: Inadequate Parental Supervision

Youth who experience an inadequate level of parental supervision are at increased risk of offending, as they have a higher propensity to affiliate with deviant peers, abuse alcohol or illicit substances and engage in sexually promiscuous behaviour (Phillips 2019, 170). This notion was supported by the current findings as the majority of participants reported inadequate parental supervision and cited it as a contributor to their own law-contravening behaviour. These findings thus support the findings of Harris (2009, 44), Bartollas and Schmallegger (2013, 104) as well as Bezuidenhout (2018, 90), as most participants recalled spending their unsupervised time in the presence of peers or with members of a youth gang. In this regard, Participant 3 asserted:

Yes, I think so because by the time I was busy with the gangsterism thing I wasn't being guided because they (family) were not always there for me the time I was growing up. There was no one to guide me or to warn me about these gangs. (Participant 3)

Similarly, Participant 9 shared:

Yes I can say so. I didn't express my feelings with them. If I did, I will not be in this position. I think because I spend many times with friends is why I did this crime. I wanted to fit into society with negativity. (Participant 9)

The findings also concur with the research of Chaiken (2000, 7) who explored the environmental factors which promoted youth misconduct in a random sample of two 213 males, and found that 75 per cent of the participants were inadequately supervised for one or more days per week, while 48 per cent were reportedly never supervised.

Subtheme 1.4: Parental and Sibling Deviance

According to Ntshangase (2015, 39) youth are more inclined to display violent or criminal conduct when reared by caregivers who transgress, as they may imitate the observed behaviour. In addition, criminality may form part of their socialisation process, as they would learn to associate offending with social rewards, as well as learn specific skills needed to transgress (Howitt 2015, 75). With reference to the current study, 11 participants highlighted antisocial behaviour within their family, and cited it as a key factor that perpetuated their most recent transgression. Participant 8 motivated this by asserting:

To be honest, it did have an effect on my life because I felt like he didn't give me fatherly love when I was growing up because I got that from my grandfather. My mother also left me because she went to work, so I can say I grew up with one father and that was my grandfather. He (father) came home when he was released from prison then he told me he is my father, my real father. That's how I got to know him, but that time I was still a bit young, but that's how I got to know him. I also started to learn what type of man he is. When he is drunk, he is very violent. When he is sober, you don't even know he is there, so quiet he is. So, I think I also adapted that from him, because he is my father and he must be an example for me. So, I probably saw things from him, that's why I can say the things I have done, I saw it from him. (Participant 8)

This is supported by Howitt (2015, 75), who affirms that youth reared by deviant caregivers may come to view crime and violence as "common" or "normal" when resolving disputes, managing strain or attempting to reach social goals. This risk is compounded when antisocial behaviour is observed more often and reinforced more frequently, as is evident in the response of Participant 10 who shared:

Yes, because my older brothers and uncles did behave like I am behaving now. So, it (crime) is something that rotate in the family. (Participant 10)

Caregivers who violate the law themselves, are also less likely to chastise youth for antisocial conduct, thereby positively reinforcing deviance as youth would not successfully learn to associate unlawful behaviour with a negative outcome such as punishment (Louw et al. 2005, 59; Siegel 2004, 156).

Theme 2: Findings Pertaining to the Community Domain

Prior to exploring the criminogenic risk factors to which participants had been exposed in their community, it was crucial to first gain an understanding of the characteristics of the area in which the participants resided prior to being incarcerated. In this regard, 70 per cent of the sample typified their community as a negative environment plagued by crime and violence, substance abuse, gang-related activities and weak kinship bonds. One participant described his community by stating:

The community I lived was a very violent community, and I also adapted to that and told myself I want to be like that person one day – to be able to hurt people. The environment also traumatised me through the things I saw. Things that happened in front of me that I learnt from. (Participant 8)

While another reported:

I live in a rural community. It was a very rough community, there were a lot of crimes. People were killed like dogs on the street – and people were raped almost every day, so it was very rough. (Participant 10)

It was consequently apparent that many participants had been exposed to an array of unfavourable conditions within their community, indicating that exposure to community-level criminogenic risk factors may have been pivotal in their decision to transgress.

Subtheme 2.1: Community Disorganisation

Community or social disorganisation refers to cases where the community structure is incapable of sustaining control over the behaviour of youth and is generally typified by weak bonding between community members, ethnic heterogeneity, limited opportunities for conventional success and an absence of male role models (Bartollas and Schmalleger 2013, 54; Phillips 2019, 187). As a result, youth misconduct may ensue as weakened levels of social control within the community is often associated with the development of youth gangs, poor supervision of youth, inconsistent cultural norms and increased crime rates (Siegel 2016, 81). As this concept could not be measured directly, it was decided to assess the presence of the aforementioned elements characteristic of socially disorganised areas. Accordingly, the majority of youth reported ethnic heterogeneity (70%), limited opportunities for success (60%), inadequate community-level supervision (60%), weak kinship bonds (55%) and the absence of positive role models (55%). On this basis, it was apparent that 12 participants were exposed to community disorganisation, and identified this as a factor that motivated their misconduct. One participant motivates this view by stating:

Yes, because before I committed this crime that led me to prison I saw others in my community winning from crime. (Participant 4)

While another noted:

Yes, because I saw a lot of people make too much crime quickly to get cash. You didn't work, you make a crime and you get quickly money. So, I also wanted to get money quickly. There is also few role models that we can look up to and say 'I want to be like that one day, I want to finish school, I want to go study – maybe in Pretoria or Joburg, to have a good life. We saw the gangs as role models, because we also want to be respected there where we go. People must look at me and say 'I don't want to mess with that guy because I can get hurt'. I wanted people to be scared of me. That was one of our weak points. (Participant 8)

Subtheme 2.2: Alcohol and Illicit Substance Abuse

Twelve participants from the sample ascribed their law-contravening behaviour to the availability and frequent use of alcohol and illicit substances in their community, which ultimately led to their own use of substances. The former is highlighted by Bezuidenhout (2018, 86) as a pertinent predictor for youth misconduct, as areas with high consumption rates offer lucrative opportunities for crime including drug production and trade, bribery of state officials, theft and violence. This is supported in the current study, as motivated by Participant 8 who stated:

Yes, because I saw what these people are doing. They are making a living for them, and for us to need it is a nice feeling, so I also smoked drugs. I started to sell to see can I also make a living, because there is many unemployed in our community. I saw I also made money, but that money was just for me to buy clothes and give money for my family. I was also under the influence when I did this crime. The day I did this murder, I was under the influence of alcohol. It was because of that – and I never slept, that's why I was like that. You also find a lot of people there that say when they do crime they are under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Not thinking properly. Sober minded, they will not do that things because they will know the consequences they must face. So, what I can say is its drugs and alcohol. (Participant 8)

Several youths also reported addiction as a pertinent factor that perpetuated their unlawful behaviour, by sharing:

I smoked a lot. That's what made me commit crime. There wasn't a day I didn't smoke. When I started using drugs, I stopped helping my family with money because I was just with my friends. (Participant 13)

Yes, because it was becoming like an everyday kind of thing that I must smoke drugs. We would commit crime just to get the money so that we could smoke drugs. We would

rob people, we would steal. Sometimes I would even go to town just to make shoplifting and to break into people's cars. (Participant 15)

From the excerpts presented in this section, it is clear that alcohol and illicit substance abuse was a key criminogenic risk factor perpetuating misconduct, thus supporting existing literature and prior research.

Subtheme 2.3: Gang-related Activities in the Community

Nine participants reported the presence of gangs and exposure to gang-related activities in their community, as factors that motivated them to contravene the law. Two youths explained the nexus between their offending behaviour and the presence of gangs in the community by stating:

The gangs wanted to hurt my cousins and rob them, so I felt that they will look to me to help them. If I don't, how will they see me in years to come. So, I felt I must stand up and do something so that my younger cousins can see that I am here to protect them. So, I decided I am also going to join a gang, then I am also going to hurt people to also show those guys what type of person I am. I started to change until I found that I am now a very violent person. (Participant 8)

When you grow up, you also want to be like that guy that always commits crimes. He is respected, so you also want to be respected. They become your role models. (Participant 9)

It was also clear that many youths in sample joined gangs themselves, due to the strong presence of gangs in both their community and especially their school environment as discussed in the next section.

Theme 3: Findings Pertaining to the Peer Group

Several domestic and international studies have highlighted deviant peer affiliation and gang membership as a pertinent predictor of youth misconduct (Barnert et al. 2015; Harder et al. 2015; Harris 2009; Khan and Singh 2014; McCord et al. 2001; Peacock 2006). Associating with peers who engage in maladaptive behaviour is also linked to increased rates of co-offending, greater involvement in crime and the commission of more serious offences such as homicide and rape (Bender 2010, 469; Burfeind and Bartusch 2006, 425; Phillips 2019, 213). Deviant peer affiliation and gang membership has also been linked to academic failure, illicit substance abuse and detachment from school as highlighted in the following sections.

Subtheme 3.1: Deviant Peer Affiliation and Gang Membership

Fifteen participants in the sample reported associating with deviant peers and 13 participants acknowledged being members of a youth gang. Most youth in the sample

also reported spending the majority of their free time with peers and felt closer to their peers than to members of their family. One participant motivated this view by reporting that the peer group has the ability to fulfil his needs, by stating:

When I am with my friends it's not the same as being with my family. My friends give me everything I need. I feel like smoking, I smoke. If I feel like drinking, I drink. My family don't like my friends because they are bad people and its people who also commit crime, but I don't think they are bad people. (Participant 2)

Several youths in sample also reported that any time spent with peers usually involved using alcohol or illicit substances and engaging in law-contravening behaviour. Participants 14 and 15 respectively, explained their time spent with peers by stating:

Smoking dagga [cannabis], drugs and drinking alcohol. We also commit crime to get hold of these substances. (Participant 14)

When I'm with them we spend time doing the wrong things. If not robbing people, then we go town to steal. After that we go back to the location and we go smoke drugs and drink. I never did anything positive with them. (Participant 15)

These findings support the research of Harder et al. (2015), which identified deviant peer affiliation and substance abuse as the two most pertinent predictors for youth misconduct. Thirteen participants also affirmed being members of a youth gang and cited this as a motivating factor for their unlawful behaviour. Participant 8 elucidates his experience in the gang by asserting:

They encouraged me to stab people, I couldn't make my own decisions because I felt pressure on me. If I ignore them, I won't belong in the gang because they will think I'm scared. So, I showed them what I can do, and I hurt people's children very badly to show them, and to get their respect. (Participant 8)

Participant 10 reported a similar experience and notes:

Yes because they were always telling me 'it's now time for you to show that you are part of us. They will tell me I must go outside and take someone [robbery] so that they know they can trust me. (Participant 10)

Moreover, it became apparent that both gang membership and deviant peer affiliation were associated with exposure to risk factors in other domains, such as economic adversity, academic failure and dropping out of school, as discussed in the succeeding section.

Theme 4: Findings Pertaining to the School Domain

A number of risk factors in the school domain were identified as factors perpetuating the unlawful behaviour of the sample. These are discussed in the various subthemes which follow.

Subtheme 4.1: Academic Failure

Eleven youths reported poor academic performance as a contributor to their most recent transgression. Two participants described their level of academic performance by stating:

I only passed two subjects. (Participant 13)

My marks were not too much good. When I went to Grade 10, I leave school.
(Participant 20)

This corresponds with several longitudinal studies, which show that youth who perform poorly at school are more vulnerable to transgress in comparison to youth who perform at an adequate or exceptional level (Phillips 2019). Four participants from the sample cited their involvement in gangs as the primary reason why their school performance declined. In this, Participant 1 affirmed:

My marks were good. Then my marks were going down because I was concentrating more on gangsterism activities. After that I did not worry that much about school.
(Participant 1)

While Participant 15 reported:

I was already involved in gang-related stuff, so I used to go with drugs to school to smoke with my friends. My marks were good until this gang stuff. (Participant 15)

Academic failure was also related to truancy or frequent absenteeism from school and with dropping out of school, as highlighted in the following section.

Subtheme 4.2: Truancy and Dropping Out of School

With reference to staying absent from school, 13 participants reported truancy, however only 11 participants cited this as a factor which preceded the current offence for which they are serving a sentence. Similarly, 11 youths highlighted dropping out of school. Some of the reasons ascribed to the decision to leave school included gang involvement (40%), bullying or school-based violence (20%), academic failure (10%) and illicit substance abuse (20%). One youth described his experience by saying:

Because of gangs I leave school. There was a lot of pressure. When I want to go to school they call me and say ‘brother it’s time now, we must go to the bus stop and stand there’ waiting for some other guys to rob at the bus rank. (Participant 14)

Another participant recounts his experience by noting:

I was wasting time going to school. I came in the class when I was high, smoking dagga. I was once also found with dagga in my school bag, and a knife. (Participant 3)

Participants 10 and 20 respectively, reported a similar experience by highlighting:

The time when I must go to school, some of my friends will come with a packet of drugs. Then it’s like I must go to school and I must go to smoke – and then I decide to drop the school and go and smoke. It also contributed to my crime. (Participant 10)

I dropped out of school because of drugs, I liked drugs too much. When I get R50, even if I have no food at home, I go to smoke the drugs. After smoking, I feel why I didn’t buy the food first. Then I make the crime to get food money and for more drugs. (Participant 20)

Subtheme 4.3: Inadequate Motivation to Attend School

Half of the youth in the sample reported inadequate motivation to attend school. Parallel to the reasons provided for dropping out of school, gang membership and illicit substance abuse were cited as underlying reasons for the lack of motivation to attend school. Participant 8 supports this view by stating:

There were many times I didn’t want to go to school. My heart was not at school, it was with the gang – to hurt people’s kids to be able to get an image. (Participant 8)

Likewise, Participant 19 asserts:

I don’t like school. My behaviour was bad because of my friends, the gang. I was also chased away from school because of being naughty. (Participant 19)

Two other participants described experiences related substance abuse and the trade in illicit substances, by sharing:

I went to school every day, but not because I liked to be at the school. I went every day for the wrong reasons. I used to go to school with a lot of drugs, to go and sell to the children there at school. (Participant 15)

My motivation to go to school was not so good most of the time. The times when my mother give me money, I take my bag and make like I’m going to school – and after that

I run away from the school. I go to smoke drugs with my friends, tablets and dagga (cannabis). (Participant 20)

It also became apparent that a strong correlation existed between gang-related activities at school and the unlawful behaviour of the participants in the sample. Participant 8 explains this correlation by noting:

I learnt it [violence] there because my friends were in the gangs, and they were respected. They even fought the teachers. Then I saw I must join because I also want respect and worship. That contributed to me doing crime because I felt like the other kids could also worship me, so I can also go into gangsterism. I also wanted that feeling because I saw many guys that were violent at school got many girls. I saw that it's true, if you are violent the girls feel protected, so I got more women. (Participant 8)

Participant 14 supports this by adding:

It starts at school; gang activities start at school. Things we do at school, you will fool your parents. Your parents will think 'this boy is committed because he is attending school each and every day' but behind the scenes you are corrupt. After school, you will go and lie to your parents, 'no I have some extra classes' but then you go and rob – and your parents will cover you because they know this guy at this time, he was at extra classes or at the library. (Participant 14)

From these excerpts, it seems that the school setting is extremely conducive to gang activity and that gang membership often starts at school level, as opposed to any other social setting.

Theme 5: The Interrelated Nature Extant between Socio-criminogenic Risk Factors

Based on the findings presented thus far, it is clear that participants were exposed to a range of criminogenic risk factors across all four social domains. However, exposure to certain factors such as deviant peer affiliation, were more prominent than exposure to other factors such as family conflict, with reference to the behaviour of youth in the sample. Subsequently, participants were required to identify the factors that they perceived as having the greatest influence on their offending behaviour, from the collection of criminogenic risk factors, which were reported. This would also determine the presence of commonly recurring clusters of risk factors applicable to the majority of youths.

In this regard, gang membership (11 participants) was reported as the most commonly-recurring socio-criminogenic risk factor. This was followed by the abuse of alcohol and illicit substances (10 participants), socio-economic adversity (5 participants), a lack of bonding to the community (2 participants), negative labelling practices (2 participants)

and the absence of a male role model (3 participants). The most commonly-recurring cluster or group of factors reported by participants in the sample was therefore inclusive of gang membership and the abuse of alcohol or illicit substances. Although each are a dominant criminogenic risk factor in their own right, the combination of these factors may significantly compound the risk for youth misconduct, as illustrated in the findings obtained. The presence of these two prominent risk factors was also linked to several other risk factors such as academic failure, truancy, dropping out of school and inadequate motivation to attend school.

Concluding Remarks

Given the findings presented in the foregoing section, several key criminogenic risk factors were identified as predictors for the law-contravening behaviour of the participants and their unique experiences with regard to their exposure to these factors were clarified, thus realising the first and second research aims of the article. Deviant peer affiliation and illicit substance abuse were also highlighted as the most prominent recurring cluster of criminogenic risk factors to which participants had been exposed, therefore realising the final aim of this article. It can therefore be said that the current article has generated a greater understanding of the criminogenic risk factors that perpetuate youth misconduct. While this article was restricted to the exploration of social factors conducive to youth transgressions, several pertinent risk factors were identified. These included socio-economic disadvantage, social disorganisation, weak levels of attachment to the family and community, negative perceptions regarding school, illicit substance abuse and gang membership. Based on a review of existing literature and prior empirical studies, as well as on the findings obtained in this article, it was apparent that a significant number of youths are marginalised and extremely vulnerable due to their exposure to criminogenic risk factors across the different domains. The treatment and management of these factors however, appears to be an arduous task, which should be addressed at different levels and civic structures.

Recommendations

On a primary level, the role of the family as a principal socialisation agent cannot be overemphasised, as families should assume the responsibility of ensuring that the youth are equipped to deal with the strain concomitant of daily life. Caregivers should therefore prioritise their relationship with the youth and ensure honest and open communication. Parents should also be actively involved outside of the immediate family environment by establishing strong ties to the community and school, in order to facilitate this process for their offspring. At a secondary and tertiary level, schools and communities should be equipped with the resources necessary to manage potential risks such as substance abuse and gang membership. This would also require the assistance of state departments such as the police, and the expertise of other social agencies operating within the fields of diversion, rehabilitation and reintegration of youth in

conflict with the law. Although the findings obtained in this article may not be generalised, it is envisaged that the article will lead to further research in the field, with particular reference to research based on protective factors that have the potential to produce resilience to adversity, and buffer against the deleterious influence of exposure to criminogenic risk factors. The ultimate aim is to improve the quality and efficacy of policies and interventions available to youth in conflict with the law, as well as the reduction of harm with reference to the significant number of youths exposed to criminogenic risk factors.

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