

Children in Conflict with the Law in Single-parent Families: A Case Study

Hyacinth Salazar¹ and Richelle H. Verdeprado¹

¹ College of Arts and Sciences,
University of Negros Occidental-
Recoletos, Incorporated, Bacolod
City, Philippines

ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that relationships in the family and the roles that each member plays affect the socialization and upbringing of children. Thus, questions have been raised about children with single parents and in a rehabilitative environment after being accused of committing offenses. This qualitative study focused on Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) from single-parent families. Using the case study's idiographic approach, the researcher identified the participants through homogenous purposive sampling based on undergoing Case Management at the Social Development Center, a facility for CICL in Bacolod City. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to deepen the understanding of the participants' experiences and to categorize the results. Findings from this study support the researcher's hypothesis that children raised in homes with one or both parents absent may be prone to deviant behavior due to their family dynamics. The theories mentioned in this study proved that delinquency is associated with the type of family structure and some underlying factors rooted in the type of family structure which, in this case, are the single-parent family structures. Lastly, through the narratives transcribed, this study uncovered the resiliency and vision of both the CICL and the parents. This study has also brought up more recommendations for the further exploration of future researchers.

Keywords

children in conflict with the law, single-parent, family structure, social work, case study, Bacolod City (Philippines)

INTRODUCTION

In the family, children learn the values and attitudes that guide their actions throughout their lives, with the parents serving as the first role models for their children. The situations that arise in the family may positively or negatively influence a child's development. Many experts believe that

family dysfunction is a crucial factor in developing emotional deficits that eventually lead to long-term social problems such as juvenile delinquency. When children interact with their parents and siblings, there are opportunities for them to acquire or inhibit social and behavioral patterns that may develop to a different level, especially when tolerated (Siegel & Welsh, 2014). According to Burfeind and Bartusch



(2016), who conducted a study on crime and delinquency for 40 years at Harvard University, family life was the most critical factor that distinguished delinquents from non-delinquents.

This study focuses on Children in Conflict with the Law in single-parent families. A study conducted in the United States and other countries indicates that children raised in homes with one or both parents absent may be prone to antisocial behavior (Siegel & Welsh, 2014). Since socialization begins at home, any dysfunction in the family structure could hurt the child's development. In contrast, experience and observation tell us that intact families who have a consistent sense of attachment and communication with one another are most likely to provide a good foundation for children.

Socialization is crucial to the familial unit in the Philippines, where family ties are close-knit. Parents financially incapable of raising their children spend more time finding ways and means to meet their basic needs and have less or no time to guide them, causing them to be negligent or become involved in deviant acts. In some situations, it could be worse with family deviance being passed on to the child by deviant parents. Moreover, Senate Bill No. 2026, pursued by Sen. Vicente Sotto III, the Philippine National Police, and the national government seeks to amend RA 9344, known as the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act of 2006, by mandating that children aged below 18 but above 12 «shall be held criminally liable» unless proven that they acted without discernment. According to Sen. Sotto, this change is needed to «adapt to the changing times» since adults are using children in criminal activities nowadays (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2018).

Aside from the presented factors, juvenile delinquency may also arise from peer pressure, personal desires, illicit drug use, discrimination in schools and communities, intimidation from higher social classes, and other multidimensional factors that

can be countered by effective parenting. It can help neutralize individual and social forces that promote delinquent behaviors (Siegel & Welsh, 2014).

This study delves into the lived experiences of children in conflict with the law (CICLs) from single-parent families. It aims to provide a deeper understanding of the factors and circumstances that have led these children to deviant behavior while exploring the familial dynamics that shaped their actions and responses. By examining these experiences, the study hopes to contribute to developing more effective interventions and rehabilitation programs, which could be integrated into social work practices to promote the restoration and recovery of CICLs.

At the core of this investigation are several key questions designed to uncover the complex interplay of factors influencing the lives of these children. First, the study seeks to explore how and why the child became a CICL, shedding light on the specific events or patterns that led to their involvement in delinquent activities. This includes examining the motivations and underlying factors that prompted their engagement in deviance, such as peer influence, socio-economic struggles, or personal choices.

Another critical focus is on the child's current family life and their perspective on how their familial situation has shaped their experiences. By understanding how these children describe their present family dynamics, the study aims to reveal the emotional and relational impact of living in a single-parent household.

Additionally, the study examines the significant changes the children experienced following their parents' separation. This includes their reactions to these changes and the coping mechanisms they employed during this challenging period. The narratives will provide insight into how these changes may have influenced their behavior and choices.

The study also investigates the actions taken by parents upon learning that their child had

become a CICL. It seeks to understand these actions' effectiveness and emotional impact from the child's perspective, highlighting their feelings and responses to their parents' efforts to address the situation. One of the theoretical foundations of this study is Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Bandura's earlier research on the social learning of aggression led him to explore the components of observational learning, which also investigates how people are influenced by their behavior and motivation (Engler, 2012).

The Social Learning Theory of Observational Learning states that children learn behaviors, attitudes, actions, or manners of speaking through observation from their parents and the people around them. These behaviors may be accidentally or intentionally modeled to them (Engler, 2012).

Bandura's theory also implies that observational learning is not merely imitation and that a person distinguishes between acquisition, what he has learned and can do, and performance, what he does. This is the concept of motivation. A person has the know-how to do certain things and actions. However, he is also likely to engage or conform to a modeled behavior if it leads to consequences that he values and is likely to engage in a behavior if the results are punitive (Engler, 2012).

According to social learning theories that examine the relationship between peers and delinquent behavior, peer groups are the setting in which delinquent behavior is learned and reinforced. According to some social learning theories, Peers are mostly unimportant in explaining why young people choose to commit crimes (Burfeind & Bartusch, 2016).

According to Burfeind and Bartusch (2016), this study concentrated on family relationships, which are the source of informal social controls such as emotional attachment, sensitivity to others, identification with others, parental supervision, and informal sanctions.

The study is also based on Travis Hirschi's Social Bond Theory, which holds that delinquent behavior

results when a person's ties to society are weak or destroyed (Hirschi, 1969; Burfeind & Bartusch, 2016).

According to Hirschi, four elements strengthen or weaken an individual's bond to society. These four elements are attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. These four give the individual a reason to conform or not to conform (Burfeind & Bartusch, 2016).

Attachments are regarded as the primary element of the social bond. Hirschi referred to attachment as the «bond of affection.» It results in conformity because of the child's invested interest in a relationship. This relationship can be found with peers, in school, or with parents. Hirschi believes that if a child's social bond to society weakens, he is more likely to be delinquent.

Another element proposed by Hirschi in his theory is commitment. It includes the conventional activities that a child most likely engages in. The more the child invests time in school or at work, the more his social bond is solidified because he is less likely to risk losing his material possessions (such as money invested), reputation (especially in school), and positions (at work) by doing illegal activities or taboo. On the contrary, if the child's commitment to school or work is more committed to unconventional activities such as smoking, alcoholism, illicit drug use, virtual addiction, and the like, he is more likely to be delinquent. This proposes that the higher the weight of unconventional activity, the greater the number of delinquent acts a child can commit (Burfeind & Bartusch, 2016).

The third element mentioned by Hirschi is Involvement. Hirschi believed that there are two specific types of conventional activities a child could get involved in in school and work. He said that the more a child spends time doing homework or gets involved in school-related activities, the less likely he is to be delinquent. The time spent getting involved in conventional activities creates little opportunity for

the child to be involved in delinquent acts.

The last element that Hirschi mentioned was the element of belief. According to Hirschi, «delinquency is not caused by beliefs that require delinquency but rather the absence of beliefs that forbid delinquency.» Social control theories consider the strength of belief in the Law and legal system in which, if an individual adopts these beliefs, delinquent behavior is less likely to be acquired (Burfeind & Bartusch, 2016). Generally, Hirschi's elements of the Social Bond Theory established that the four elements are supplementary and interrelated to each other. The more bonds an individual has, the more likely he is to conform to society's norms and laws (Burfeind & Bartusch, 2016).

A local study conducted in 2017 by Social Work students of the University of Negros Occidental – Recoletos entitled «The Effect of Family Structure on Delinquency among Children in Conflict with the Law» found that there is no family structure that more likely influences delinquency among CICLs admitted in the Social Development Center (SDC) (Alfonso et al., 2017). In a focused group discussion conducted by the students among the participants, nine male respondents came from a nuclear family, eight of whom seven were male. One is a female who was raised by either their grandparents, relatives, or single parents; the majority agreed that their family structures have nothing to do with their delinquency. It was their free will to do the act. They also admitted that it was difficult to stop once they had started engaging in deviant acts and behavior (Alfonso et al., 2017).

This study also explored various strategies and programs present in the United States but yet to be adopted in the Philippine context. These strategies were considered for their aim and effectiveness in reducing juvenile delinquency by changing the child's behavior by altering the family's social environment.

The treatment method known as Multisystemic

Therapy (MST) is centered on the family and the community. This strategy aims to equip parents and young people with the knowledge and tools they need to overcome risk factors and take advantage of protective possibilities. For more than four months, it consists of cognitive behavior treatments, behavioral parent education, structural family therapy, and strategic family therapy (Regoli et al., 2008). The Strengthening Families approach program, a 14-week family skills intervention aimed at lowering risk factors for substance abuse and other problematic behaviors, was another. «Preliminary evaluations of MST have shown 25 to 70 percent reductions in rearrests and 47 to 64 percent reductions in out-of-home placements (Regoli et al., 2008), despite the challenges inherent in treating seriously antisocial people.»

The scope of this study includes CICLs, which are presently being held inside the SDC. The participants live in a single-parent family structure. Single-parent families are composed of a mother and child or a father and child or children living in the same household.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach using the case study method to explore and understand children's experiences in conflict with the law (CICLs) from single-parent families. As Grünbaum (2007) described, a case study is a comprehensive and detailed examination of a specific unit or a small number of units within a particular system level. These units can vary widely, encompassing individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, or even larger social systems. In this research, the focus was on individual CICLs within the context of their single-parent family structure.

The primary goal of this research design was to delve deeply into the motivations, lifestyles, and outcomes associated with being a CICL in a single-parent

family setting. By adopting a case study approach, the researcher aimed to uncover the nuanced and complex factors that shape the experiences of these children, seeking to understand their worldview and how their unique circumstances influence their behavior and decisions.

The study involved a detailed examination of five CICLs, utilizing in-depth interviews as a central data collection method. These interviews were conducted with the children and their family members, friends, acquaintances, and other individuals in their social circles. This holistic approach provided multiple perspectives, offering a richer and more layered understanding of the children's lives and experiences.

In addition to direct interviews, the researcher analyzed various forms of secondary data to supplement and triangulate the findings. This included reviewing official reports, assessments, and other relevant documents related to the CICLs, which provided valuable insights into their behavior, history, and social environment. By combining these methods, the study captured the personal and systemic factors influencing the lives of CICLs in single-parent families, highlighting their challenges and the broader social dynamics at play. This study's participants were CICLs who were held inside the SDC for the duration of the study and who belonged to single-parent families.

The head of the Social Development Center (SDC) played a crucial role in selecting the participants for this study, opting for five male children in conflict with the law (CICLs) to minimize the potential for researcher bias. The selection process was grounded in homogenous purposive sampling, which relies on the expertise and judgment of the SDC head to identify participants who share similar characteristics relevant to the study. This sampling approach ensured that the participants represented the target group—male CICLs from single-parent families—providing consistency for the analysis.

To gather the necessary data, the researcher

developed a self-made questionnaire tailored to the study's objectives. The primary instrument was an in-depth interview guide designed with open-ended questions to allow respondents to share their experiences, thoughts, and emotions freely. This format enabled the researcher to capture a rich and detailed understanding of the participants' lives, delving into their perspectives and the complexities of their circumstances. Before conducting a focused group discussion with the five respondents, the researcher had a case review using the respondents' secondary sources available at the center. The researcher conducted a one-on-one interview with each of the five male respondents to discuss their life experiences in depth.

After interviewing the five children in conflict with the law (CICLs), the researcher carefully analyzed the data in accordance with the study's problem statements. This analytical process involved systematically examining the participants' responses and information to identify patterns, themes, and insights relevant to the research objectives.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

Five willing CICLs were screened and participated in the study. Four out of the five respondents are the same age, 17 years old, and one is 16 years old. Among the five respondents, one committed a robbery: one violated RA 9165, and one with a violation of Sections 5, 11, and 12 of Art. II of RA 9165, one committed rape and sexual assault, and one committed theft.

For the focused group discussion, respondents were asked about their current situation in the center and how they are doing. The majority answered that they were doing just fine. Everyone also agreed that they sometimes felt sad because they suddenly missed being outside the center. Everyone agreed that they feel happy when their parents, friends, or relatives visit them because they feel that they are not alone

and are being given importance.

The respondents were also asked about their school life outside the center and were still attending classes. Three of them shared that they enjoyed playing basketball at school or leisure time. One CICL noted that he often goes to Sunday mass alone or with his aunt sometimes. While outside the center, they shared that they liked being with their peers rather than staying home. When asked about their relationship with their families, two said they are content with their family lives. One respondent also said that he has a good relationship with his brothers and sisters, but sometimes, because of their differences, they have misunderstandings; yet, for him, it is a normal situation and is already a part of his daily experiences.

The narratives provided by the respondents highlight the complex role of peer influence in deviance and delinquent behavior. For two respondents, peers significantly shaped their decisions to engage in deviance, emphasizing the social aspect of delinquent behavior. This aligns with the concept of co-offending, as proposed by Reiss in 1988, which indicates that delinquency often occurs in the presence or influence of peers. The social dynamics within peer groups can foster an environment where deviant behavior becomes normalized or encouraged.

Another respondent acknowledged that while peers played a role in his delinquent behavior, his actions ultimately led him to become a Child in Conflict with the Law (CICL). This insight suggests that, beyond peer influence, individual accountability and decision-making also contribute to deviance. Similarly, another respondent pointed to personal choice as the root cause of their actions, rejecting external attribution and taking responsibility for their wrong decisions.

Burfeind and Bartusch (2016), elaborate on this concept by explaining that delinquency is often a collective activity deeply embedded in social interactions. Co-offending reinforces the idea that

delinquent acts are not just individual choices but are often influenced by group dynamics, shared values, and the desire for acceptance or recognition within a peer group. This interplay between social influence and individual agency underscores delinquency's multifaceted nature, where external (peer influence) and internal (personal decisions) factors interact. One of the respondents said that the family transitions motivated him to get involved in deviant acts and delinquency. When asked how they perceive their family life, all five respondents claimed that they are content with their present family situation. They generally see their family situations as neither happy nor sad; bad situations can sometimes happen. One reality they must accept is that their family lives are not perfect.

Among the five respondents, one has a deceased mother, two have deceased fathers, and two have separated fathers. One respondent lives with his mother, and the other is under his aunt's custody.

The respondents' admission at the SDC was a significant transition in their family life because they were detached from theirs. All five of them recounted that the first time they were admitted to the center, they felt regretful of their actions and guilty, especially when their parents or relatives visited them. They all share the same sadness whenever their parents or relatives leave after visiting them because they cannot go with them. Two respondents said that they would prefer not to be visited at the center because it reminds them that they are unfree, making them feel caged even more.

During their admission to the center, one respondent said his brother visited him the next day; their mothers visited three, and his aunt visited one.

The respondents were also asked what they plan to do in the future, especially when released from the center. All five said that they wanted to go back to their studies. Four are enrolled in the center's Alternative Learning System classes every Saturday.

The researcher found that all five respondents are willing to pursue their studies when they leave the center, build their own homes, help their families, make up for their wrongdoings, and have their own families. These showed their willingness to renew their lives.

Hirschi's Social Bond Theory supports the findings of this study. CICLs in Single-Parent Families have weak attachments to their families, either with their siblings, their parents, or a relative. These caused an element of the social bond, attachment, to be broken, which led to other elements being disrupted. Regarding moral disengagement, Bandura's Social Learning Theory tells us that a child can be controlled initially through external sanctions given by his parents and other people around him, supported by the findings of this study. One of the findings proved that a respondent acquired deviant behavior, such as smoking, through observational learning from his parent. The respondent, as a child, had observed the behavior and acquired the belief that it is socially acceptable because it is acceptable in his primary social context, which is the family.

Gottfredson and Hirschi's Self-Control Theory, developed as an extension of Social Control Theory, provides a critical lens for understanding this study's findings. According to their theory, individuals with low self-control are more likely to engage in impulsive and risk-taking behaviors, including deviance and delinquency. This low self-control is often rooted in early childhood socialization, where inadequate parenting practices play a central role.

As the primary agent of socialization, the family serves as a foundational institution for instilling values, norms, and behavioral regulations. Children raised in single-parent households may experience challenges such as reduced supervision, inconsistent discipline, and limited emotional support. These deficiencies in informal social controls can hinder the development of self-control, leaving children

vulnerable to engaging in deviant behaviors. For instance, without adequate supervision, children may lack the guidance necessary to navigate peer pressures or resist the temptation of delinquent activities.

Additionally, the absence of strong familial bonds in single-parent households can contribute to low self-esteem. As a psychological consequence, low self-esteem weakens an individual's capacity to regulate their actions or consider the long-term consequences of their behaviors. This dynamic aligns with Gottfredson and Hirschi's argument that low self-control is a key predictor of delinquency. Furthermore, the findings also served as a further extension of the study conducted in 2017 about The Effect of Family Structure on Delinquency among Children in Conflict with the Law, which stated that there is no family structure that more likely influences delinquency among CICLs in the SDC (Alfonso et al., 2017). The findings in this study showed that their single-parent family structure did not directly influence the CICLs. Instead, they suggested that the underlying factors, such as informal social controls, parental supervision, social bonds, attachment to peers, and other dynamic aspects, should be paid attention to since these could affect the child without the parents knowing them. The factors, such as low self-esteem and low self-control, which the parent or the guardian could address, caused the child to be delinquent.

The study also found that the single parents and guardians of the respondents are mostly working and spending less time with the children, thus having poor attachment and communication. As noted in Chriss (2007), Hirschi through the social bond theory supports this, saying that the strength of the relationship bond between the parent and the child is closely related to the child's conforming behavior.

The findings from this study support the researcher's hypothesis that children raised in homes with one or both parents absent may be prone to deviant

behavior. People usually believe that children who live in single-parent families are more likely to be delinquent because of the lack of supervision from their parents, which causes other underlying factors to occur and contribute to the possibility of them being delinquent. This study suggests that further analyses should be made since earlier studies stated otherwise.

The theories mentioned in this study supported the findings that it is not just the type of family structure that affects delinquency but also the underlying factors rooted in family structure in single-parent families. This implies that children in single-parent families are more prone to deviant behavior when the underlying factors mentioned in the study are left unaddressed.

The study also implied that it is important for single parents to spend more time with their children despite the circumstances that prevent them from doing so. In this case, children are helped to have a sense of identification, which could contribute to developing their self-esteem and self-control to make purposeful decisions in life. The parent-child relationship is important in the child's and the parent's growth, maturity, and learning.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the gathered information and experiences of the CICLs, the researcher concludes that CICLs in single-parent families are prone to deviant behavior that, when left unaddressed, may increase delinquency over time.

Children raised in homes with one or both parents absent usually lack supervision and guidance from their parents and tend to become more attached to their peers than their parents or other family members. Single parents often act as the family's breadwinner, resulting in less time spent with their children, which also causes a lack of attachment and

communication between parent and child.

Children who lack attachment to their parents may have underdeveloped self-esteem, which eventually causes them to have less self-control in their actions and become easily influenced by their peers; when children get engaged with deviant peers who are morally disengaged, their level of delinquency increases.

The researcher also concludes that not all children in single-parent families are motivated to commit deviant acts because of their family structure. The underlying factors in the family structure determine whether or not the children are deviant.

Based on this study's findings, the researcher also concludes that CICLs in single-parent families become more motivated to renew their lives when they become more engaged in conventional activities or activities that stimulate their sense of purpose and give them realizations in life.

Furthermore, the researcher concludes that the Alternative Learning System Program, which the CICLs in the center enroll in, is an effective intervention program since it encourages the CICLs to realize the importance of education, which will help them reach their goals in life, such as finding a decent job that will sustain them in the future.

The researcher also concludes that CICLs in the center developed a sense of resiliency because of the activities that helped build their spiritual foundation. They become closer to God throughout their stay in the center.

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends the following:

For the DSSD, it is recommended that the agency extend its support to single-parents and single-parent families by strengthening the programs and services accessible to them, especially those that will help them financially. Reflective training and seminars are also recommended to help promote good parenting and strategies in parental supervision.

For the SDC, the researcher recommends improved activity conduct for the CICLs in single-parent families wherein the single parents or guardians are involved so that parent-child relationships will improve with renewed foundations that will establish closer ties between them.

The center may also train houseparents on properly supervising the children, especially since the researcher noted during the visits that they sometimes give cold treatment to the CICLs and treat them indifferently.

The researcher also recommends that social workers help promote reconnecting families, especially single-parent families, and assert the rights of single parents who lack the proper support from their separated partners in sustaining the basic needs of their children and their educational needs.

It is also recommended that the houseparents help promote a positive environment for the CICLs, especially in how they treat and supervise the children. They should act as second parents to the CICLs, especially if the children are detached from their families.

Barangay officials may also do their part in the intervention program for the CICLs to help reconnect the children to their families during the diversion program when they are released from the center.

Through the Student Development and Placement Center, school administrators may propose wholesome activities for students to increase their involvement in conventional activities.

The researcher also suggests that more communities should provide a better environment for single-parent families and foster a society that lessens the stigma on both single parents and their children in conflict with the Law.

It is also recommended that CICLs participate well in the activities, services, and programs offered in the SDC, as these will help boost their morale and create a better outlook in their lives. These will also promote

self-acceptance as they learn from each other's experiences.

Lastly, it is highly recommended that further in-depth studies about CICLs in different family structures should be conducted. Through this, future researchers may better understand the root causes of how and why a child becomes a CICL.

REFERENCES

- Burfeind, J., & Bartusch, D.J. (2016). *Juvenile delinquency: an integrated approach* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Chriss, J.J. (2007). The Functions of The Social Bond. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 48(4), 689–712. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2007.00097.x>
- Engler, B. (2012). *Theories of personality, Philippine edition*. Cengage Learning Asia, Philippines.
- Grünbaum, N. N. (2007). Identification of ambiguity in the case study research typology: what is a unit of analysis?. *Qualitative Market Research: an international journal*, 10(1), 78-97. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13522750710720413>
- Hirschi, T., & Selvin H.C. (1996). *Delinquency research: an appraisal of analytic methods* (1st ed.). Transaction Publishers.
- Philippine Daily Inquirer. (2018, October 9). *Child 'criminals.'* Inquirer.net. <https://opinion.inquirer.net/116634/child-criminals>
- Regoli, R. M., Hewitt, J. D., & DeLisi, M. (2008). *Delinquency in society: youth crime in the 21st century* (7th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Siegel, L. J., & Welsh, B. C. (2014). *Juvenile delinquency: the core* (5th ed.) Wadsworth Publishing.

