

## **Editorial**

# **Juvenile delinquency**

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(Key words: Juvenile delinquency)

According to the Collins English Dictionary, a juvenile delinquent is defined as a child or young person, who is guilty of an offence, an act of vandalism or antisocial behaviour<sup>1</sup>. Juvenile delinquency (JD) is the participation in unlawful behaviour by persons younger than the statutory age of majority<sup>2</sup>.

According to research carried out by Moffitt (2006)<sup>3</sup>, there are two types of adolescent offenders. The first is the repeat offender, who commences to show antisocial or aggressive behaviour during childhood which continues into adulthood. The second is the adolescence-limited offender. Although adolescence-limited offenders generally refrain from criminal activity once they become adults, they suffer greater mental ill health, substance abuse, and financial problems compared to adolescents who were never delinquent<sup>4</sup>.

The two highest predictors of JD are the parenting style and the antisocial peer group association<sup>5</sup>. Prediction of delinquency is more probable with “permissive” parenting where there is no consequence-based discipline and “authoritarian” parenting where there is severe discipline which is justified solely on the basis “because I said so”<sup>5</sup>. “Permissive” parenting includes both “neglectful parenting” where there is a lack of knowledge of the child’s activities and “indulgent parenting” where there is positive affirmation of bad behaviour<sup>5</sup>. Association with antisocial peer groups is more probable when there is lack of supervision of adolescents<sup>5</sup>. Other factors leading adolescents to JD include a low socio-economic status, poor school performance, peer rejection and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, biological factors, like high serotonin levels, may result in bad temper and poor self-regulation<sup>5</sup>.

Individual risk factors making JD more probable are decreased intelligence, lack of ability to forego gratification, aggression, absence of empathy and restlessness<sup>6</sup>. Risk factors seen during childhood include aggressive behaviour, language delays, lack of emotional control and cruelty to animals<sup>7</sup>. Adolescents are prone to take risks, which may be the explanation for the disproportionately high rate of JD in adolescents<sup>5</sup>. Family factors influencing JD are the extent of supervision by parents, modes of disciplining a child, conflicts among parents, parental separation, parents or siblings who are

criminals, abuse by parents and the parent-child relationship<sup>8</sup>. Juvenile delinquents are often diagnosed with conduct disorders which may develop during childhood and then manifest during adolescence<sup>9</sup>.

Since juvenile delinquency is influenced by many factors, preventive efforts have to be comprehensive. Learning about substance abuse, family counselling, youth mentoring, learning about parenting, educational support, and youth sheltering are some of these efforts. Prevention through education helps young people to interact more effectively socially, thus reducing the need for delinquency. Interventions may leave at-risk children worse off than no intervention as bringing these children together merely propagates delinquent behaviour<sup>10</sup>. Ideally, at-risk teens should be separated from anti-social peers and placed with pro-social ones, at the same time improving their home environment by training parents with appropriate parenting styles<sup>10</sup>.

In Sri Lanka, juvenile justice is administered according to the Children and Young Persons Ordinance of 1939<sup>11</sup>. In the Ordinance, a “child” is aged below 14 years whilst a “young person” has reached the age of 14 years but is below 16 years of age. Under the Ordinance, juvenile courts are established to hear charges against children and young persons. Juvenile Courts are presided over by a Children's Magistrate and sit in a place separate from other courts. In Sri Lanka, only one Juvenile Court has been established so far, and that is in Colombo.

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The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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