

EDITORIAL**Juvenile delinquency in urban areas**Nestor Courakis ¹ & Christina Zarafonitou²

The special issue “Juvenile Delinquency in Urban Areas” examines juvenile delinquency, through a synthesis of theory and research findings. Moreover, this issue is focusing on specific types of juvenile delinquency including school violence, juvenile gangs and stalking as well as in efforts to tackle the phenomenon.

Most of the articles include research results on the problems of juvenile delinquency in Greece. Consequently, there exist some basic conclusions which can be drawn from these findings and may give “food for thought” for broader and deeper reflections, exceeding national borders and offering the basis for an interesting theoretical approach, which could be labelled as “theory of institutional dysfunction in juvenile delinquency”.

This topic is extremely relevant in our days in which there are many incidents of Greek minors forming groups and being engaged in extreme forms of bullying towards their peers. According to the data from the Greek Police, a significant increase in both quantity and severity in recent years is recorded, with violence being a predominant element of this evolution. For example, robberies committed by minors aged 13-17 increased from 62 in 2000 to 476 in 2020, while violations of weapons legislation rose from 29 to 330 during the same period, indicating a remarkable spread over two decades. Nevertheless, the participation of minors in the offenders of criminal law is relatively low in Greece in comparison to other European countries.

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Indicatively, the mean of their representation in a European level for 2015, is placed in 6,8%. The highest percentages (17,2%) are recorded in France, while Greece is classified among the countries with the lowest representation of minors among the considered offenders (4,1%)³.

To answer the crucial question about the measures are worth considering, it is important to consider the factors that drive generally a minor towards violence and delinquency, with a focus on the environment in which they grow up. Far more than that because those incidents are mainly displayed in an urban environment. Exemplary are the researches of the ecological school of Chicago⁴ that linked the social conditions of the degraded areas of the city with the manifestation of minors' offending behavior, due to the failure of the community socialization and the informal social control in them ⁵.

Firstly, the family environment plays a crucial role. Often, there is a lack of parental supervision and qualitative communication with the minor, as both parents are usually working, returning home exhausted and without the willingness to "listen" to their child. Consequently, the child inevitably turns to the uncontrolled world of the internet—a world dominated by violence and cyberbullying, whether through video games or videos circulating among minors⁶.

Secondly, the school environment is also significant. The lack of emphasis on creativity, imagination, and critical thinking in the learning process, as evidenced by the poor results of the international student assessment program PISA for Greek students, creates an atmosphere of boredom and intellectual suffocation. Additionally, the absence of a permanent school psychologist exacerbates the students' problems.

Thirdly, peer groups (around 5-10% of students, according to some research findings) facing common problems in family and school environments and aware that poor academic performance may lead to unemployment and frustration, sometimes avoid attending school

³ Aebi M.F., κ.ά., *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics – 2021*, 6th edition, Göttingen Studies in Criminal Law and Criminal Justice, Volume 41, Göttingen University Press, 2021, σ. 52, as it is referred to Ch. Zarafonitou, *Empirical Criminology*, 3rd revised ed., Nomiki Vivliothiki, Athens, 2023, p.53.

⁴ Shaw, C. R., McKay, H. D., *Juvenile delinquency and urban areas*. University of Chicago Press, 1942.

⁵ Ch. Zarafonitou, *Empirical Criminology*, 3rd revised ed., Nomiki Vivliothiki, Athens, 2023, p.175 ff.

⁶ For what follows, see Nestor Courakis, *Juvenile Delinquents and Society. A Study of thw fundamental values, institutions and juvenile delinquents in Greece*, Athens- Komotini, 1999, pp. 65 ff.

altogether. Instead, they engage in delinquent activities such as theft and substance use, aiming to gain a negative identity that will earn them respect among their peers.

Fourthly, the broader society seems to lack an emphasis on rule adherence and faith in values that can inspire the youth, such as solidarity, respect for others' rights, and empathy. The prevalence of anomy and violence in some sectors of daily life such as the attitude towards people with disabilities, in whose ramps are put often obstacles, sends a detrimental message to young individuals, suggesting that there are no limits to their actions, and deviance from rules does not necessarily entail punishment.

Therefore, besides considering "drastic" measures for the delinquent minors themselves, it is critical for adults to examine their own responsibilities and realize that addressing the issue of juvenile delinquency must begin on a level of prevention with them, ideally as of "yesterday", before it becomes too late.

In light of the above, juvenile delinquency is obviously correlated with the broader value system prevailing in Greece over the past decades, as well as with the specific dysfunctions of the family, school, and labor market. Therefore, it would be interesting to approach now these practical problems theoretically and endeavor to build a theory based on the dysfunction of social institutions, as an effort to explain juvenile delinquency under a holistic and integrated aspect.

The theory of institutional dysfunction, as first presented by the co-signatory Nestor Courakis in 1987⁷. does not focus on individual factors that contribute to the manifestation of delinquent behavior on a general, universal level, as is the case with research based on some hypothetical behavioral linear relationship of the type 'stimulus>response' or cause and effect. Instead, it seeks to explain the phenomenon taking into account the actual functioning of socializing institutions not generally speaking, but within a given temporal and spatial framework, i.e. in a given period and country. Under this aspect, comparisons for determining the extent and quality of delinquency are not made with other groups of young people (e.g. non-delinquent

⁷ A first version of this theory was published in Greek by the co-signatory Dr. Nestor Courakis in the Volume in Honor of Prof. Michaelides-Nouaros, Athens, II, 1987, 117-139. See also Nestor Courakis, *Juvenile Delinquents and Society. A Study of the fundamental values, institutions and juvenile delinquents in Greece*, Athens: Ant. Sakkoulas Editions, 1999.

vs. delinquent persons), but rather with respective groups of other countries and the functioning of their corresponding institutions.

Yet, why institutions such as family, school, and labor market in connection with the broader value environment of a society are so important for the study of juvenile delinquency? The answer to this question is evidently connected to the fact that these institutions, if their functioning is efficient, become the means through which individuals at a young age assimilate fundamental social norms and, consequently, integrate into society. On the contrary, in cases where these institutions are dysfunctional and hinder the adoption of basic rules by a young individual for their social integration, that individual becomes susceptible to violating these rules more easily and hence to become delinquent.

It should be noted that the theory of institutional dysfunction seeks to comprehensively examine and analyze the interaction of all the institutions that contribute to socialization, rather than focusing on any one of these institutions, such as the family or school.

More specifically, the manifestation of delinquent behavior can occur under the following circumstances:

- (a) when families in a particular country or region lack cohesion and quality communication among their members;
- (b) when the teaching methods in schools prioritize the acquisition and accumulation of mere knowledge without aiming for the development of critical thinking and deeper cultivation of students; and
- (c) when job opportunities are scarce or do not match the qualifications of young individuals, leading to social dissatisfaction and, at times, social unrest due to adverse economic conditions.

When such institutional dysfunctions exist in a given society, young individuals, depending on their personal characteristics, are more likely to reject:

- (a) living within a family framework that does not provide emotional support,
- (b) attending an uninspiring and tedious school environment that offers no prospects for their educational or professional advancement, and
- (c) engaging in a seemingly futile struggle for survival in a competitive job market.

The rejection of these institutional opportunities leads to the formation of delinquent groups which, according to well-known either (a) engage in acts of blind violence and defiance (e.g., inside or outside sports arenas or during political demonstrations) to express their dissatisfaction and hostility toward the society that has rejected and disappointed them or (b) participate in the activities of organized groups that emphasize the use or distribution of substances or weapons and engage in thefts or robberies. Yet, the most vulnerable among them (c) withdraw from active social life and seek refuge in "artificial paradises," often engaging in actions related to substance abuse.

From a psychological point of view, the aforementioned young individuals are driven to engage in delinquent acts by adopting the mentality (primarily in the first two cases) that, since they are unable to acquire a positive identity accepted by other members of society based on potentially good performance at school and later in their work, they have nothing else left but to seek a negative identity. This negative identity can elevate them to 'heroes' and protagonists in the eyes of their disruptive friends and acquaintances. At the same time, this negative identity provides them with a shield to confront a society they believe has not only failed to help them integrate but has systematically rejected them, often stigmatizing them as deviant, delinquent, or even criminal individuals.

However, the impact of institutional dysfunction affects only a specific segment of young people (usually around 5-10%) who, due to their personality traits, have fewer inhibitions against their inclinations towards delinquency.

Furthermore, the value structure of a society also holds central importance for the extent and nature of youth delinquency. If a society's value codes, which permeate its institutions, favor a lifestyle emphasizing universal values like solidarity and social justice (hence values of a "post-materialist" nature, in order to use the terminology of Ronald Inglehart), individuals find a more positive context for coexistence and social action within families, schools, and the job market. In this context, even those who, due to their personality traits, are characterized by a higher likelihood of displaying deviant behavior find support from their fellow citizens and are restrained from progressing to what is known as the "acting out" of delinquency.

The theory's contribution to the field of crime prevention policy should be considered fundamental. To the extent that it highlights the impact of socializing institutions on

delinquency, it simultaneously suggests to lawmakers the avoidance of punitive/criminal measures and the adoption of social preventive measures against youth delinquency. Specifically, by promoting social welfare programs that strengthen central socializing institutions, it provides more comprehensive guarantees for the smooth integration of minors into society and the prevention of their involvement in criminal acts . This assumption also corresponds to the Preamble of Recommendation R (78) 62 of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, which emphasizes that 'the social integration of young people is not in the first instance a task of the judicial bodies but comes mainly within the scope of social policy and its development'.

Regarding juvenile delinquency, emphasis should also be placed on the interaction of *risk* and *protective* factors. This complex interplay between various factors that emerge during childhood and adolescence can either increase or decrease the probability for antisocial or delinquent behavior. These factors fall within five broad categories: individual factors, family, school, peers and characteristics of the area of residence and their impact depends on the juvenile's age. Therefore, during childhood individual factors and family play a significant role, however during adolescence when juveniles become part of wider social groups, school and friends seem to become of primary importance. It is also worth mentioning that in the light of *Developmental Criminology* risk and protective factors relate also to recidivism and desistance from crime and such a relationship seems to vary according to the reference age period. In this context, the empirical in-depth study of the action and interaction of these factors related to the different dimensions of delinquent behavior can contribute significantly to the development of evidence-based and more effective crime prevention policies⁸.

This special issue comprises four selected, peer-reviewed articles and two commentaries.

⁸Zarafonitou, Ch., (Scientific Responsible), Anitsi, E., Kontopoulou, E., Lempesi, M. & Panagos, K. "Research evidence for recidivism from EPANODOS, PLE for social reintegration of ex-offenders: Risk factors during childhood", In Ch. Zarafonitou, F. Milioni & E. Anitsi (Eds). *The social reintegration of minors and ex-offenders Proceedings from the 2nd Conference of Epanodos*, Dionikos. Athens, 2019, pp. 69-102.

The first article, titled “*Searching for the roots of juvenile delinquency. An integrated approach.*” by *Nestor Courakis* (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens & University of the Nicosia) approaches the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency by addressing the role of values and institutions in society in the interplay between the offender’s personal traits and the socio - psychological conditions.

The second article, a contribution by *Yiannis Panousis* (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens), is entitled “*In-School Violence revisited?*”. The author discusses on the distinct characteristics of school violence from other antisocial/ criminal actions, focusing on the Greek reality and highlights the significance of mediation in changing the culture of violence in schools.

The article that follows by *Erifyli Bakirli* is entitled “*Ecological approaches to urban juvenile gangs: A theoretical review.*” The paper presents a literature study, giving emphasis on the sociological aspects of juvenile gangs and the impact of urban environment to youth criminal behavior and gang affiliation.

The article “*Family victimization and youth delinquency through the narratives of ex-offenders*” by *Elli Anitsi* (Panteion University), explores how ex-offenders make sense of the connection between maltreatment and delinquency. The research material was collected from life stories interviews, while the themes which derived from the analysis represent four different types of reaction or of coping to the victimization experienced in the family, which are delinquent in content.

The special issue is closing with the Commentaries which include the contributions of *Ilektra Gioti & Maria P. Kranidioti* (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens) and *Karen Fullerton-Chalmers* (University of the West of Scotland). The first contribution entitled “*A research project on the work of boroughs on juvenile delinquency and victimization at a national level: From an issue of criminology to an issue of administration and local government*” presents preliminary research that was conducted on the Groups for Protection of Minors (GPMs), investigating their function and work at a national level. The second contribution entitled “*A Review of adolescent stalking*” provides an analysis of the prevalence of stalking within young people and briefly examines explanations, impacts and suggested interventions.