

How General Strain Theory Applies to Juvenile Delinquency

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Juvenile delinquency is an ongoing issue in the United States. Hundreds of juveniles are arrested every day for crimes; the most frequent arrests for juveniles under the age of fifteen are larceny-theft (60%), burglary (15%), and aggravated assault (12%) (Bates & Swan, 2018).

There have been many attempts to identify the causes of juvenile delinquency. Psychologists and sociologists have suggested that during the time of adolescence there is a lot of confusion and turmoil that leaves them vulnerable to being caught in antisocial behaviors, and opens the door to a lot of stress and negative emotions (Lin, Dembo Sellers Cochran, & Mieczkowski, 2014). Stress can have a different effect on adolescents than adults. "Life stress can have a deleterious impact on the psychological adjustment of adolescents," (DuRant, Getts, Cadenhead, Emans, & Wood, 1995, p. 233). Such strains on adolescents can have many different types of negative outcomes that include delinquency and negative emotions (Lin et. al. 2014).

General strain theory (GST) is a theory of criminology developed by Robert Agnew. Agnew derived the theory from classical strain theory which was founded by Robert K. Merton. Classical strain theory's main critique is that it focuses on class-based delinquency and crime, given that everyone's main goal is wealth. "GST focuses on what circumstances lead individuals and groups within a society to engage in delinquent behavior," (Bates & Swan, 2018, p. 115). Agnew believes that people are pressured into crime, and that there are other types of strain besides economic. The three types of strain described by Agnew are failure to achieve a positively valued goal, actual or anticipated loss of positively valued stimuli, and actual or anticipated presence of negative stimuli (Bates & Swan, 2018). Negative stimulus may include physical assault, failing grades, public insults discrimination, and oppression. Negative stimuli

often lead to anger and frustration, which may lead the juveniles to delinquent behavior. GST identifies the specific triggers at the micro level of what causes juvenile delinquency.

### **General Strain Theory and Juvenile Delinquency**

According to GST, there are different types of strain that juveniles can experience that may lead them to delinquency. Strain has direct effects on delinquency and also indirect effects through negative emotions. It can lead them to experience different negative emotions like depression, anger, and fear. Anger is the most important emotion to GST because it increases a person's level of outward attribution toward the source of strain (Agnew, 2006). Another negative emotion that sometimes contributes to delinquency is depression. Several studies have found that juveniles that are depressed are very likely to show delinquent behaviors like substance use as well as violent behavior (Ford & Schroeder, 2009).

In a study done by Wen-Hsu Lin, Richard Dembo, Christine S. Sellers, John Cochran, and Thomas Mieczkowski (2014), based their research on comparing GST model between a Western (United States) and Eastern (Taiwan) country. One sample was taken from each country, and were recruited from public middle schools and high schools. It was found that negative life events and victimization showed "large, direct, and statistically significant effects on delinquency in both countries," (Lin et. al. 2014, p. 423). Students from both countries whose victimization scored above average, were 55% more likely to consume alcohol than the students who scored average victimization. Also, anger and depression remained big risk factors in delinquency in both countries.

### **Strain at School and Delinquency**

Strain stemming from school can cause delinquency. Juveniles can experience strains such as peer rejection, negative interactions with teachers, and bad grades. In a study done by

Byongook Moon, David Burton, and John D. McCluskey (2008) they used a sample of Korean youth to see what strains are most likely to lead to delinquency and crime. It was found that teachers' physical and emotional punishment in the past few months were more likely to engage in general delinquency. It also showed that older punishment from teachers were significantly related to general delinquency.

During the time of adolescents' peers and peer relationships play an important role. People that are rejected often from groups may feel worthless, "negative affect that influences their coping with the rejection," (George E. Higgins, Nicole L. Piquero, and Alex R. Piquero, 2011, p. 1278). Higgins et. al. (2011) conducted a study focusing on early peer rejection and later delinquency/crime. They did their study on a large sample of male and female adolescents from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). There was a distinct correlation between peer rejection and delinquency. Most individuals who reported lower peer rejection and lower delinquency and most who reported higher peer rejection had higher rates of delinquency. The strongest finding was the relationships between peer rejection and delinquency in male specific samples, but not as strong in the females. However, a small number of females that were in the high peer-rejection had the most delinquency. This provides further evidence that peer rejection can be quantified as a strain and has relations to delinquency among adolescents.

### **Conclusion**

Being a relatively new theory, General strain theory has made many contributions in finding the causes for juvenile delinquency. Multiple researchers have found links between specific emotional strains such as anger and depression and juvenile delinquency. Future studies should look into the comparison of juveniles and adults on how/if there is a difference on how they cope with anger, and how its linked to delinquency/crime. There has been less research

done on the relationship of delinquency and the strain of peer rejection, but the study that was conducted resulted in positive relationships with each other. The next step would be to have further research done on GST and peer rejection to further support the findings.

Policies can be created from this research linking GST to delinquency. It can potentially divert many young people from delinquency and crime. Knowing that a lot of strain that adolescents go through happen at school, policies should be created to help lessen these strains therefore lessening delinquency. This information should also be shared with schools, their students, and parents. It is important for them to understand how specific strain can lead to juveniles to delinquency, so they can teach and practice positive coping mechanisms to help divert them from negative behaviors.

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