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# Family dysfunction: A major factor contributing to juvenile delinquency

## Somlata Sharma and Purnima Janghu

### Abstract
Children are the future of mankind and the most valuable national asset we possess as a society. They represent the dreams and aspirations of a nation and have the potential to shape the future of humanity. We, as individuals, parents or guardians, and collectively as a society, have the duty to nurture and protect them, ensuring a safe and healthy environment for them so that they develop into well-rounded individuals capable of making meaningful contributions to society. However, the current trends and the reports from NCRB portray a completely different tale and highlight the failure of society to secure the healthy upbringing of children. While many factors contribute to the issue of juvenile delinquency, the impact of family dysfunction and poor upbringing stands out as major contributors. Therefore, understanding the relationship between family dysfunction and the resultant issue of juvenile delinquency is important for devising preventive strategies. This research paper focuses on the family as a starting point for the socialization of children and delves into issues of family dysfunction and its relationship with juvenile delinquency, with a special emphasis on the theory of delinquency as a learned behaviour.

**Keywords:** Delinquency, family, family dysfunction, juvenile delinquency, learned behaviour

## Introduction
Juvenile delinquency is a major concern not only for India but for the entire world and poses a serious threat to the future of humanity and mankind. It covers a wide range of criminal acts committed by minors, the consequences of which are far-reaching and impact not only the juveniles involved, but also their families and society at large. In India, this problem has gained increasing attention due to its growing prevalence and the serious consequences it brings. According to the NCRB, the number of cases registered against juveniles has shown a concerning trend over recent years. In 2020, 29,768 cases were registered [1], which increased to 31,170 in 2021 [2], before slightly decreasing to 30,555 in 2022 [3]. While data may vary due to inconsistencies in the collection of data and underreporting of cases, crimes committed by juveniles account for a notable portion of overall crimes reported in India. These figures point out the gravity of the issue and indicate the society's failure in guiding children towards a meaningful existence and the necessity of effective interventions. While such delinquent behaviours in youth can be due to various reasons, the issue of family dysfunction and parental behaviours remains a determining factor. The family is considered the foremost socializing agent, which provides emotional and physical support, imparts values and morals, teaches ideal behaviours, and stresses the importance of compliance with existing societal norms. When the family, as a social institution, fails to fulfil its responsibilities due to dysfunction, the consequences can be severe. Family dysfunction, which may arise due to broken homes, neglect, substance abuse, and mental disorders, has a noteworthy effect on the upbringing of children. Such poor upbringing due to insufficient parenting and neglect strongly correlates with delinquent behaviours. Understanding the impact of family dysfunction on juvenile delinquency is important for addressing the

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[1] National Crime Records Bureau, "Crime In India 2020 Volume - I"(Ministry of Home Affairs, 2021) available at:https://www.ncrb.gov.in/uploads/nationalcrimerecordsbureau/post/16959885631653645869CII2020Volume1.pdf (last visited on August 22, 2024).

[2] National Crime Records Bureau, "Crime In India 2021 Volume - I" (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022) available at: https://www.ncrb.gov.in/uploads/nationalcrimerecordsbureau/custom/1696831798CII2021Volume1.pdf(last visited on August 22, 2024).

[3] National Crime Records Bureau, "Crime In India 2022 Volume - I" (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2023) available at:https://www.ncrb.gov.in/uploads/nationalcrimerecordsbureau/custom/1701607577CrimeinIndia2022Book1.pdf(last visited on August 22, 2024).

underlying causes and devising effective prevention strategies. This paper aims to explore how family dysfunction contributes to delinquency among juveniles. Through a review of existing literature and analysis of available statistical data, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the issue and suggest recommendations for alleviating its effects. The findings of this research demonstrate how important it is to address the issue of family dysfunction to prevent delinquency among juveniles. By implementing certain programs such as family counselling, parental education, school-based and community-level initiatives, it is feasible to establish a supportive environment for children at risk of delinquency. Ultimately, addressing the problem of family dysfunction can play a significant role in guiding children towards a meaningful existence, thereby reducing the incidence of delinquency among juveniles.

## Family as the Starting Point Of Socialization

The family, as a social institution, serves as a foundation for the socialization of a new-born child. When a child is born, it lacks understanding about its environment and requires parental assistance to ensure its safety and survival. In addition to physical care, the family also offers emotional support, guidance, morals, and values that shape the entire personality of the child. These early interactions provide the foundation for the child understands of societal values, morals, human relationships, and the importance of self-regulation. Moreover, family serves as a medium for the transmission of culture, imparting language, customs, and traditions that shape the personality of a child and develop a sense of belonging to the community. As the child navigates through its initial years of development, the family's influence extends beyond mere care giving to include broad family dynamics, interactions with siblings, and extended family networks, providing a colourful rainbow of human relationships and rich socialization experiences. Thus, the role of family as a primary agent of socialization is paramount, which results in the development of children and preparing them for adulthood.

**Family as care-givers:** Throughout their early years, children remain dependent on parents or guardians for their safety and survival. They can not protect themselves so they require someone to take care of them and give them with the bare necessities of life. So, the parents or guardians are shouldered with the obligation to protect them and act as care-givers who provide them not mere physical safety and care but also emotional and financial assistance ensuring their overall well-being.

**Family as a source of morals and values:** Family plays an important role in shaping the moral and ethical beliefs of children, as when a child is born, it lacks understanding and is unable to distinguish between good and bad, moral and immoral acts, or right and wrong [4]. By conforming model behaviours and punishing delinquent behaviours, parents or guardians teach morals and values to children and shape their moral reasoning.

**Family as a guardian of cultural legacy:** Family serves as the guardian of cultural legacy and passes on knowledge from one generation to the next through its traditions, rituals, and customs. Children learn their native languages, cultural values, and history within their families through daily practices, celebrations of festivals, and storytelling. These cultural interactions inculcate in children a sense of identity and belonging to their cultural heritage. In addition, children learn gender roles and expected behaviours by observing behaviours modelled by their families, which shapes their understanding of gender roles within society.

In short, family serves as the first school, with parents or guardians acting as the first teachers of their children. Whatever a child learns, he or she learns from his or her close contacts, particularly family, indicating the premise that all human behaviours are socially learned as a new-born child is like a piece of white paper, and the colour it takes entirely depends on the upbringing provided by the family.

## Concept of Family Dysfunction and Its Impact on Children

A family is not just a group of people living together in one home. It is a place where a child learns basic lessons of life and explores different shades of human relationships. But no family is perfect. Like all social systems, every family goes through ups and downs. People argue disagreements happen, and tensions escalate. In fact, families suffer from occasional dysfunction. However, there is a difference between occasional dysfunction and constant dysfunction within a family [5]. The actual problem arises when dysfunction becomes the normin day-to-day life. Since disputes are bound to occur in social institutions, occasional dysfunction does not necessarily result in lifelong trauma for the members of the family, but if dysfunction becomes a constant feature of the family system, it may have a disastrous impact on the members of the family, particularly children. A dysfunctional family is characterized by constant conflict, misbehaviour, abuse, or neglect of the children, and interactions and relationships are so impaired that the members are unable to form attachments and a sense of self-expression [6]. Such dysfunctional families are the product of inappropriate behaviours of parents as they are the ones who exercise power and control within the family. To survive in such families, children learn to imitate behaviours or adapt to roles to protect themselves. Such dysfunctional families can be identified by the following characteristics:

- **Power imbalances and struggles:** In happy families, parents assume the role of provider, protector and supporter, with distributed power and shared responsibilities. But in dysfunctional families, one or both parents attempt to control and dominate other members of the family. This may include making unilateral decisions, imposing those decisions, and advancing threats to maintain their dominance. These power disparities create an unhealthy environment where respect is replaced by fear. Children may feel emotionally cornered, ignored and powerless. They may, over time, exhibit rebellion or submissiveness,

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[4]Rosemary Kakonzi Mwangangi, "The Role of Family in Dealing with Juvenile Delinquency," 7 *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 52-63 (2019).

[5]Kaytee Gillis, "The 5 Major Types of Dysfunctional Families" *Psychology Today*, (2023) *available at*: https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/invisible-bruises/202304/5-types-of-dysfunctional-families (last visited on August 18, 2024).
[6]"Dysfunctional family," *Wikipedia*, (2024) available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dysfunctional_family (last visited on August 18, 2024).

both of which are signs of psychological distress. Sometimes, power struggles between parents drags children into the dispute, creating a constant tug-of-war within the household.

- **Excessive control over children:** Some parents denies freedom or self-expression to their children by controlling every aspect of their life and interferes even with the basic freedom essentials of what to wear or eat, with whom to talk and even what to think. Such excessively strict parent often equates discipline with punishment and disregards the emotional needs of a child. On the other hand, some parents are too lenient and fail to set firm boundaries. Both extremes can harm the emotional development a child, making him struggle to develop a sense of self-discipline, emotional control, and a clear difference between right and wrong.

- **Substance abuse and addiction:** Family life is deeply disrupted and the home turns into a battleground when individuals, particularly parents are addicted to substance abuse. Such addicted parents may become unpredictable and they may neglect, abuse, or emotionally abandon their children. In such dysfunctional households, children often feel insecure, embarrassed, or invisible, resulting in deep emotional scars. They may also grow up normalizing addiction or imitating alike behaviours in their adulthood, continuing the cycle of addiction.

- **Domestic violence and abuse:** The effects of violence and abuse extend beyond the immediate victims and also have detrimental effects on the children who witness it. Such children may face several psychological and developmental challenges, as the ordeal of living in such abusive environment can leave lifelong emotional scars on the tender heart of the children. Such children may begin to perceive violence as a way to assert control, thereby perpetuating cycles of abuse into their adulthood. The constant fear and anxiety can also hinder their capability to form healthy relationships in future.

- **Criminal behaviour of parents or guardians:** Criminal behaviour of parents or guardians can create turmoil and instability within the family. Children may struggle with the consequences of their parents' actions and live in environments filled with fear, shame and uncertainty. This can lead to emotional state of embarrassment and loneliness, as children may fear about being judged by their peers or feel the need to keep their family's issues a top-secret. The lack of a positive role model can adversely impact children's moral values and their ability to make rationale choices.

- **Neglect and poor parenting:** Neglect goes beyond physical absence; it includes emotional neglect as well. Even if the basic physical needs such as food, clothing, education and healthcare are satisfied, children may feel abandoned when their parents are emotionally aloof, distracted, or unresponsive. They grow up believing that their feelings and emotions are insignificant and hinder their emotional growth. Such neglected children often struggle with low confidence and may find it hard to build trustworthy relationships as they grow.

- **Lack of boundaries, privacy and independence:** There is a lack of boundaries, privacy and independence in the dysfunctional families. Children are not given privacy and independence. Parents may intrude on their personal space, read their diaries, or even control their friendships, denying them the right to autonomy. This lack of autonomy and respect can lead to severe emotional distress and hinder their personalities by ignoring their unique identities.

- **Impaired communication:** Open communication is the foundation of any happy relationship. However, communication often breaks down in dysfunctional families. There is a lot of chaos, shouting, arguments, or quietness. Parents may be indifferent, judgmental, or even intimidating, which stops children from articulating their opinions and feelings. Such communication can lead to misunderstandings, bitterness, and a sense of loneliness among family members. Children learn to suppress their emotions out of fear of being judged or rejected. Over time, this impairs their ability to efficiently communicate with others.

- **Lack of respect and empathy:** Lack of mutual respect and empathy is one of the most striking features of dysfunctional families. An environment of misunderstanding, neglect, resistance or abandonment is created when family members fail to respect each other's perspectives and feelings. Parents may demean the emotions and dismiss the experiences of children resulting into lack of emotional closeness. As a consequence, children may struggle to develop empathy and mutual respect in themselves and their relationships outside the family.

- **Lack of intimacy:** Functional and happy families develop strong emotional bonds, nurturing trust and a sense of belonging. However, dysfunctional families frequently lack intimacy. Children may find it hard to relate to their parents when they are too judgmental or emotionally unavailable. This want of intimacy may lead to feelings of loneliness and estrangement, profoundly affecting a child's emotional stability.

- **Broken families:** The experience of dwelling in a broken family can be devastating for children. The absence of a parent whether it be due to divorce, separation, or death leage a huge emotional void. Such disruptions often lead to feelings of rejection, misperception, and sorrow. Children in such families struggle to control their emotions and trust others, impacting their future relationships.

- **Emotional dysregulation:** Children who grow up in dysfunctional families often experience intense emotional absence of guidance required to process their feelings. In such families, parents are emotionally unpredictable. They are loving and kind at one moment and emotionless or short-tempered the next. Everything seems fine for a moment and someone is screaming or sobbing the next. This emotional instability creates a sense of fear. The lack of emotional regulation can obvious in numerous ways, including mood swings, annoyance, and struggling to manage the stress. When children do not learn how to regulate their emotions, they carry these problems into adulthood, impacting relationships and overall well-being.

- **Unrealistic expectations and Excessive criticism:** Some parents set unrealistically high standards and push their children too hard. They expect excellence in every aspect of child's life whether it be academic, behaviour or other achievements, and respond to

disappointment with severe criticism. This constant criticism damages the confidence and sense of self-worth of a child. This environment can lead children to develop a undesirable self-perception, resulting in anxiety and depression as they grow.

- **Promoting bad behaviours** [7]**:** Dysfunctional families may unconsciously encourage negative behaviours, such as lying, deceit, violence, substance abuse, or aggression. Children raised in such surroundings may model the behaviours they see, believing them to be acceptable. Without positive role models, they struggle to adopt moral standards and make rationale choices as they grow. This can lead to delinquency or harmful tendencies in later life.

Such dysfunction disrupts the healthy working of a family and has lasting impact on the family members, especially children. When children are raised in such a chaotic family environment, they experience various effects that negatively impact their lives and hamper their entire personalities. Such children may face several issues such as anger, stress, anxiety, fear, loneliness, depression, low self-esteem and a sense of worthlessness, problems in developing relationships and trust, behavioural issues such as aggression, impulsiveness, and defiance, poor social interactions, poor academic performance and achievements, and the continuous cycle of dysfunction by learning and imitating such unhealthy behaviours.

**Juvenile Delinquency as a Learned Behavior**
Society is at the root of all delinquent behaviours. Criminals are not born; rather, they are made by society's environment. When a child is born, he lacks understanding and doesn't possess the intelligence to distinguish right from wrong. He learned everything through socialization, highlighting the premise that all human behaviours including delinquent and criminal behaviours are learned and perpetuated if people experience rewards and gains, and abandoned if pain and punishment are experienced. Here, observation serves as a foundation for learning behaviours. Albert Bandura's ARPR learning process - Attention, Retention, Production, and Reinforcement - illustrates how children learn, retain, and replicate observed behaviours, with reinforcement determining the likelihood of repetition of learned behaviour [8].
According to Albert Bandura [9], humans learn behaviours by observing and imitating other people but in the views of Gabriel Tarde [10], the origin of delinquency and crime is alike to that of fads and fashions, as both are socially learned behaviours. Delinquency and crime are the outcomes of the human tendency to imitate others. This tendency to imitate works on the basis of three laws:-

- Law of close contact - People tend to imitate those with whom they share close contact. If a person is frequently exposed to deviant behaviour, he is more likely to imitate that behaviour.
- Imitation of superiors by inferiors - People from low social classes often emulate those in positions of power or higher status because they want to become superior. A child may imitate parents or guardians or the poor may imitate the rich.
- Law of insertion - It is based on the premise that imposing new behaviours on old ones extinguishes the prior ones and makes the new ones a part of existence.

This mechanism of social learning tends to develop either conforming behaviours or delinquent/criminal behaviours and explain how children in dysfunctional families are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviours. Thus, there is a significant relationship between the individual, the social environment, and delinquent actions, supporting the premise that social factors do shape individuals over time. The NCRB data, when paired with these theoretical frameworks, supports the idea that delinquent behaviour is learned and perpetuated in dysfunctional family contexts. Addressing familial dysfunction is therefore critical to prevent juvenile delinquency.

**Relation between Family Dysfunction and Juvenile Delinquency**
The concept of family dysfunction lies in the disturbance of the healthy functioning of a family. Such disturbance brings changes in the traditional structure, environment, and roles of the family that compromise the welfare of its members. A normal, healthy family affords a supportive environment for all its members, especially children, where they can grow and develop into well-rounded individuals. On the other hand, dysfunction within a family system involves the breakdown of this supportive and nurturing environment and is often characterized by power imbalances, conflicts, unhealthy communication patterns, a lack of understanding and trust, neglect, insufficient parenting, violence and abuse, substance abuse, unrealistic expectations, and mental health issues. This family dysfunction has a profound and long-lasting effect on the children, as it increases the likelihood of repetition of the same unhealthy and dysfunctional patterns or behaviours by the children, thereby resulting in a continuous cycle of dysfunction. When children are raised in such an unhealthy family, their overall development is hampered due to the severe impact on their physical, emotional, psychological, and social well-being, diverting them to the path of delinquency.

**Table 1:** Family Background of Apprehended Juveniles

| Year | Living with parents | Living with Guardians | Homeless | Total Juveniles apprehended |
|------|--------------------|-----------------------|----------|----------------------------|
| 2020 | 29,285 | 3,742 | 2,325 | 35,352 |
| 2021 | 31,757 | 3,496 | 2,191 | 37,444 |
| 2022 | 32,430 | 3,502 | 1,848 | 37,780 |

**Source:** Crime in India

The above data indicates the following facts
1. Delinquency is a learned behaviour.

[7]Julie Savignac, "*Families, Youth and Delinquency: The State of Knowledge, and Family-Based Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Programs*" (National Crime Prevention Centre, Ottawa, 2009). Available at: https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcs/pblctns/fmls-yth-dlnqnc/fmls-yth-dlnqnc-eng.pdf (last visited on August 21, 2024).
[8]Mitch J. Fryling, Cristin Johnston & Linda J. Hayes, "*Understanding Observational Learning: An Interbehavioral Approach*" 27 THE ANALYSIS OF VERBAL BEHAVIOR 191 (2011), available at :https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3139552/ (last visited on August 19, 2024).
[9]"Albert Bandura," *Wikipedia*, (2024) available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Bandura (last visited on August 18, 2024).
[10]"Gabriel Tarde," *Wikipedia*, (2024)available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Tarde (last visited on August 20, 2024).

2. Family dysfunction is a determining factor in delinquency among juveniles.

3. Insufficient parenting and poor upbringing diverts the children to the path of delinquency.

4. There is a constant increase in the total number of juveniles apprehended, rising from 35,352 in 2020 to 37,780 in 2022, demonstrating a persistent issue with juvenile delinquency.

5. The most striking trend is the increasing percentage of apprehended juveniles who live with their parents. This figure increased from 82.84% in 2020 to 85.84% in 2022. This pattern casts doubt on the perception that parental absence causes delinquency and shows that children living with their parents tend to indulge in delinquent behaviours more than those who are homeless and lack supervision and guidance.

6. At the same time, there has been a constant decline in the proportion of apprehended juveniles who are homeless or living with guardians. The percentage of homeless juveniles dropped from 6.58% to 4.89%, and those with guardians fell from 10.58% to 9.27%.

7. The findings suggest that the problem is not the absence of a family structure, but rather the presence of a dysfunctional one. The fact that over 85% of juveniles apprehended in 2022 lived with their parents strongly implies that the home atmosphere itself is a critical area for investigation. This provide support to the theories that identify certain factors within the family unit, such as parental conflict, neglect, punishment, lack of emotional support, exposure to violence, or substance abuse, as key drivers of delinquent behaviour. The physical presence of parents does not associate to a stable, caring, or functional household.

**Preventive Strategies to Address Family Dysfucntion and Juvenile Delinquency**

Addressing juvenile delinquency needs a comprehensive approach that focuses on the underlying causes, including familial dysfunction. It is important to emphasize preventive measures that focus on strengthening family structures, enhancing parental abilities, and providing support to families at risk. The following are few key strategies:

- Implement programs within the community that provide assistance and resources to dysfunctional families. These initiatives can include counselling, financial help, and workshops on effective parenting, aiming to help families overcome issues that lead to dysfunction.
- Promote access to counselling and therapy services for families to address conflicts, communication breakdowns, and other issues contributing to dysfunction. Through therapy, families can build healthier relationships, improve communication, and resolve conflicts constructively.
- Provide education to parents on effective parenting practices, child development, and the influence of their behaviours on their children.
- Implement programs to engage youth in constructive activities such as arts, sports and community-service that helps the youth to develop skills, enhance self-esteem and build positive relationships among peers.

- Promote activities that foster family bonding, such as outings, family meals and playing games [11].
- Implement school-based programs that offer counselling, mentoring, and academic assistance to students at risk of delinquency.
- Implement home visit programs where skilled social workers evaluate family environments and offer assistance to families in need. Social workers can provide guidance on parenting and monitor the well-being of children at risk.
- Implement policies that support work-life balance, alleviate financial stress, provide access to childcare, parental leave, encourage flexible working hours to alleviate the pressures that contribute to family dysfunction.
- Ensure the effective enforcement of child protection laws.
- Launch public awareness campaigns to educate the community to promote positive parenting practices and inform about the ill-effects of family dysfunction on children and significance of early intervention.

**Conclusion**

The relationship between family dysfunction and juvenile delinquency highlights the significance of the family in shaping a child's behaviour and future. To effectively combat juvenile delinquency, it is essential to implement preventive strategies that enhance family support systems, encourage early intervention, and foster positive family dynamics. By focusing on these areas, society can reduce the prevalence of family dysfunction, promote healthy development of children, and ultimately prevent juvenile delinquency. Effective collaboration among community organizations, schools, social services, and policymakers is necessary to devise a holistic approach to this critical issue.

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