

Lived Experiences of Childhood Trauma and Crime Involvement among Malaysian Youth in Rehabilitation

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Abstract

Childhood trauma strongly predicts adverse psychosocial outcomes, yet its link to youth criminal behaviour remains insufficiently explored in Malaysia. This study examines how early traumatic experiences shape the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural development of five male adolescents aged fifteen to nineteen in Sekolah Tunas Bakti Sungai Besi through an interpretative phenomenological approach. Thematic analysis revealed three key domains. First, participants reported substantial physical and emotional abuse, neglect, unstable caregiving, and unsafe home environments that contributed to emotional dysregulation, weak self-identity, and insecure attachments. Second, social and environmental pressures, including poverty, family conflict, negative peers, and high-risk neighbourhoods, emerged as major pathways connecting trauma to deviant behaviour, with early offending often driven by unmet needs, fear, distress, and the desire for acceptance. Third, criminal behaviour sometimes functioned as a coping response for adolescents who lacked emotional support, safety, and positive role models. Overall, childhood trauma exerts long term influence on adolescent behaviour, underscoring the need for early intervention among high-risk families and trauma informed, psychosocial rehabilitation. These findings carry important implications for policymakers, counsellors, psychologists, and social workers involved in child protection and juvenile crime prevention in Malaysia.

Keywords: Childhood Trauma, Crime Involvement, Adolescent, Initial Motive, Criminal Factor

Introduction

Childhood trauma refers to a spectrum of adverse experiences during formative years, such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, and exposure to violence or chronic conflict. These experiences, often framed as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), expose young individuals to prolonged stress that can profoundly disrupt neurobiological development, emotional regulation, and social functioning (Felitti et al., 1998; Hughes et al., 2017; Norman et al., 2016). Far from being transient events, childhood

traumas leave enduring imprints that shape self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and behavioral patterns well into adulthood. This topic warrants in-depth exploration because it intersects psychology, sociology, and criminology, revealing how early adversities not only impair individual well-being but also contribute to broader societal challenges, including criminal behavior and public health burdens. The importance of studying childhood trauma lies in its pervasive global impact and its role as a root cause of various maladaptive outcomes. According to the World Health Organization (2020), approximately one billion children worldwide endure some form of maltreatment annually, leading to heightened risks of mental health disorders, substance abuse, and antisocial behaviors. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2019) reports that individuals with four or more ACEs face a sevenfold increase in the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities or substance misuse. Similarly, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020) estimates that about 30% of individuals involved in serious offenses have histories of childhood abuse or neglect. These statistics underscore a critical need: without addressing childhood trauma, societies perpetuate cycles of vulnerability, crime, and economic strain through increased healthcare costs, lost productivity, and overburdened justice systems. Research in this area is essential to break these cycles, as it provides evidence-based insights for prevention and intervention, ultimately fostering healthier communities and reducing long-term societal costs.

This topic is particularly vital in linking childhood trauma to criminal involvement, a connection that demands urgent attention due to its implications for youth development and public safety. Individuals with traumatic histories often exhibit emotional dysregulation, diminished self-esteem, and challenges in forming secure attachments, which can manifest as aggressive, impulsive, or deviant behaviors (Erikson, 1950; Bowlby, 1969; Agnew, 1992; Bandura, 1977). Erikson's Psychosocial Theory posits that unresolved early conflicts hinder identity formation and self-control, while Bowlby's Attachment Theory emphasizes how insecure bonds erode social connectedness, potentially leading to maladaptive relational patterns. Agnew's General Strain Theory highlights how strains from neglect or abuse generate anger and frustration, channeling into criminal acts, and Bandura's Social Learning Theory illustrates how exposure to negative role models normalizes deviance. Despite these theoretical foundations, the pathways from trauma to crime are complex and influenced by cultural, socioeconomic, and environmental factors, necessitating context-specific studies to inform targeted solutions.

In Malaysia, the need for research on this topic is amplified by emerging local data and cultural nuances that remain underexplored. Reports from the Institut Sosial Malaysia (2022) indicate that over 60% of juvenile offenders hail from families marked by conflict and emotional neglect, while UNICEF (2021) notes that children in low-income urban areas face elevated risks due to limited educational access, inadequate social support, and high-risk environments. Malaysian studies have primarily focused on child protection and family welfare, with limited attention to the psychosocial mechanisms driving trauma's evolution into criminal tendencies, especially among adolescents in rehabilitation settings. This gap highlights a pressing need: without localized insights, interventions may overlook cultural factors like collectivist family structures, stigma around mental health, or socioeconomic disparities, rendering them less effective. The significance of this study extends to its practical utility and benefits for multiple stakeholders. For policymakers and government agencies,

such as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, understanding these lived experiences can guide the enhancement of national child protection policies, promoting trauma-informed frameworks that integrate mental health support into juvenile justice systems. Rehabilitation institutions and welfare organizations stand to gain by developing culturally sensitive programs that address root causes rather than symptoms, improving recidivism rates and rehabilitation outcomes. Educators and community leaders can use these findings to implement preventive measures in schools and neighborhoods, such as early screening for trauma and mentorship initiatives, benefiting at-risk youth by fostering resilience and reducing crime involvement. Ultimately, society as a whole benefits through decreased crime rates, stronger family units, and a more equitable social fabric. By focusing on Malaysian youth in rehabilitation, this research demonstrates the effectiveness of qualitative approaches in uncovering subjective narratives, paving the way for sustainable interventions that are not only reactive but proactive, extending from institutions to community and policy levels.

The present study thus aims to explore the lived experiences of childhood trauma, early contributing factors, and underlying motivations for criminal involvement among Malaysian adolescents in rehabilitation institutions. Employing a qualitative methodology, it seeks to illuminate subjective meanings and long-term trauma effects, informing trauma-informed, culturally attuned interventions. These insights are poised to contribute to comprehensive strategies that enhance rehabilitation efficacy, support youth reintegration, and advance national efforts in child welfare and crime prevention.

Theoretical Approach

Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1963) asserts that human development unfolds across eight stages, each characterised by a distinct psychosocial conflict that must be resolved in order to achieve a stable sense of identity. Within the context of this study, two developmental stages are especially relevant to the impact of trauma, namely early childhood which involves the conflict between trust and mistrust, and adolescence which involves the conflict between identity and role confusion. Childhood trauma, including abuse, neglect, and the loss of emotional care, compromises an individual's ability to develop basic trust in their environment. This disruption often results in difficulties forming healthy social relationships, emotional dysregulation, and the expression of rebellious or aggressive behavioural patterns (Newman & Newman, 2009). During adolescence, unresolved trauma may hinder the formation of a coherent self-identity and contribute to role confusion, leading young people to seek meaning or affirmation through deviant peer groups (Erikson, 1968).

Cloninger (2008) highlights that coping mechanisms are a central component of psychosocial functioning because they shape whether individuals respond adaptively or maladaptively to life stressors. Adolescents who are unable to utilise positive coping strategies may attempt to escape distress through deviant actions such as aggression, running away from home, or participating in criminal behaviour. In the context of students in Sekolah Tunas Bakti Sungai Besi, unmet emotional needs and the absence of stable social support impair the resolution of developmental crises, resulting in a heightened reliance on high-risk peer groups for validation and belonging. Erikson (1985) also emphasises that cultural institutions such as family and community are critical for strengthening ego resilience and fostering positive

identity formation. When these support systems are disrupted due to histories of abuse or social rejection, adolescents lose essential sources of guidance and become more vulnerable to negative external influences. Consequently, the theory underscores the necessity for psychosocial rehabilitation interventions that prioritise the reconstruction of positive identity, enhancement of coping skills, and the establishment of stable community support.

Agnew's General Strain Theory

Agnew's General Strain Theory (1992) complements Erikson's theoretical perspective by explaining how social and psychological pressures contribute to criminal behaviour. According to Agnew, strain arises when individuals experience stress associated with the inability to achieve valued goals, the loss of meaningful relationships or resources, or exposure to negative stimuli such as abuse, poverty, or family conflict. This strain generates negative emotional states including anger, frustration, and hopelessness. When these emotions are not effectively managed, they may escalate into aggressive or delinquent behaviour (Agnew, 2001; Regoli et al., 2008).

Among adolescents in rehabilitation institutions, childhood trauma functions as a major source of strain that destabilises emotional functioning. In situations where adolescents lack social support or adequate coping skills, accumulated strain increases the likelihood of negative emotional reactions and subsequent criminal behaviour (Broidy and Agnew, 1997; Siegel and Welsh, 2005). Agnew also notes that not all individuals who experience strain respond similarly. Protective factors such as social support, healthy self-esteem, and psychological resilience play a significant role in reducing the impact of strain on criminal tendencies (Miller et al., 2006). Therefore, General Strain Theory provides insight not only into the origins of criminal behaviour but also into the interaction between trauma and social pressures that shape diverse behavioural outcomes among at-risk adolescents.

Literature Review

Previous research consistently demonstrates a significant relationship between childhood trauma and involvement in criminal behaviour during adolescence and early adulthood. Kerig and Becker (2015) found that physical, emotional, and sexual abuse during childhood increases the risk of psychological disorders and antisocial tendencies. Craig et al. (2018) emphasised that family neglect disrupts emotional and social development, eventually contributing to aggressive and delinquent behaviour. Fox et al. (2015) and Norman et al. (2016) further showed that untreated early trauma often leads to persistent patterns of behavioural problems, while Van der Kolk (2015) explained that complex trauma results in pronounced impairments in emotional and impulse regulation. Smith and Thornberry (2019) also identified domestic conflict and violence as major determinants of the emergence of criminal behaviour among adolescents.

From a neuropsychological perspective, Cook et al. (2017) reported that trauma can alter brain structures associated with emotional regulation and decision-making, increasing the likelihood of impulsive and aggressive responses. Levenson, Willis, and Prescott (2016) highlighted that early sexual trauma often contributes to antisocial behaviour and the adoption of escape mechanisms such as substance misuse. Within the Malaysian context, Ismail and Ramli (2019), using a phenomenological approach, found that most adolescents in rehabilitation institutions have histories of neglect, domestic violence, and substance abuse

within their family environments. Their findings support international evidence demonstrating that childhood trauma is not merely an event of the past but an ongoing psychosocial reality that continues to shape adolescent identity, emotional functioning, and behavioural choices.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how childhood trauma shapes adolescents' involvement in criminal behaviour and to understand the social and psychological mechanisms that influence this relationship. The methodological choices were guided by the need to capture the depth, complexity, and subjectivity of adolescents' lived experiences within their sociocultural context. Data were generated through in depth semi structured interviews that enabled participants to share their narratives with flexibility while ensuring that essential areas were explored, including forms of trauma, emotional and cognitive effects, coping mechanisms, family and peer influences, and pathways into delinquent behaviour. This design was appropriate because such experiences cannot be adequately understood through quantitative measures alone.

The researcher maintained reflexivity throughout the study by keeping a memo journal to acknowledge personal positioning, including professional interest in at risk youth, proximity to the institution, and a stable family background that might influence interpretation. Potential biases were managed through the use of a standardised interview protocol, peer and supervisor review of analytical decisions, maintenance of a clear audit trail, and participant validation through member checking of transcript summaries or preliminary thematic interpretations. The study was conducted at Sekolah Tunas Bakti Sungai Besi, a government rehabilitation institution for male adolescents aged fifteen to nineteen placed under court orders. This setting was selected because it concentrates adolescents who have experienced various forms of early trauma, family dysfunction, economic hardship, and exposure to high risk environments. The institution also met ethical requirements by providing a safe, private, and confidential space for interviews.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on strict criteria. Approximately five adolescents participated, with additional interviews conducted only if necessary until data saturation was achieved. Eligible participants were Malaysian males aged fifteen to nineteen, with documented involvement in misconduct or criminal activities, and who screened positive for significant childhood trauma using the Adverse Childhood Experiences Index. The ACE Index was used solely as a screening tool and administered with the assistance of the institution's counsellor or psychological officer to ensure participants' emotional safety. Data collection involved individual interviews lasting between forty five and ninety minutes, conducted in a secure room within the institution. Audio recording was used with informed consent to ensure accuracy, and field notes captured non verbal cues and emotional dynamics. Interviews were conducted flexibly, allowing the researcher to probe deeper based on the flow of each participant's narrative. Non personal institutional documents were consulted only with official permission and without gathering any sensitive or identifiable information.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. Interview transcripts were examined through repeated reading, inductive coding, and

systematic grouping of codes into broader themes that aligned with the study's analytical focus. Themes were refined to ensure internal consistency and conceptual clarity, and were supported by representative verbatim excerpts. Analysis was further grounded by integrating insights from relevant theories such as Erikson's Psychosocial Theory, General Strain Theory, the Adverse Childhood Experiences framework, and Social Learning Theory. All analytical decisions were documented in a structured audit trail to ensure transparency and trustworthiness.

Findings and Discussion

Childhood Traumatic Experiences

Childhood trauma emerged as a significant factor that profoundly influenced the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural development of the informants throughout adolescence and into early adulthood. The findings of this study indicate that most informants had experienced multiple forms of traumatic events during childhood, including physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and prolonged family conflict. These unresolved traumatic experiences became the foundation for various behavioural difficulties, including an increased susceptibility to involvement in delinquent and criminal activities.

For the informants in this study, childhood trauma was not perceived as a single painful event but rather as a continuous process that shaped their understanding of themselves, their relationships with others, and their interpretation of the world around them. Many described experiences of being harmed by family members, receiving little to no affection or attention, and living in environments characterised by violence and instability. These conditions created enduring feelings of anger, worthlessness, and vulnerability. Such emotional states contributed to a tendency to act aggressively or to seek acceptance and belonging through peer groups that were similarly engaged in deviant behaviour.

The findings reinforce the central argument that childhood trauma exerts a sustained impact on individual development, influencing patterns of emotional regulation, self-perception, and social decision-making. These patterns, when left unaddressed, create pathways that increase the likelihood of criminal involvement. This is consistent with previous literature highlighting the long-term consequences of early adversity on psychological functioning, identity formation, and risk behaviours.

Traumatic Experiences within the Family Environment

This sub-theme explains how unstable and conflict-ridden family environments served as a primary source of trauma among the informants. The findings indicate that most informants had either witnessed or directly experienced physical abuse, emotional abuse, or neglect within their own homes, particularly from parents or caregivers who were expected to provide safety and protection. Household environments marked by frequent arguments, domestic violence, substance misuse involving drugs or alcohol, and the absence of affection or positive communication created a toxic atmosphere from an early age. These conditions not only undermined emotional and psychological stability but also shaped the informants' perceptions of themselves and their understanding of the external world.

This is illustrated through the interview session with Informant 1:

"I once spoke to my mother. At that time she had some money, and he (my father) had no drugs, and after that he would hit people. I begged my mother, 'Umi, please...'. I tried to persuade her—not to manipulate her, but because I did not want to be beaten, and I did not want my mother to be beaten. So I threatened her, because if he did not take drugs, he would beat the whole family. He would force us to find money. Sometimes he would ask us to walk along the floor and look for any small items like coins to pick up. If I pretended not to see anything, I would get beaten. I asked my mother if she had any money, and she said she had some, around RM500. I told her, 'Give him RM80, please, I do not want to be beaten. It hurts to be beaten every day. If you give him the money, he will keep quiet. Every day he shouts and wants to hit us. It is painful, you know.'"

(Informant 1)

The extract above reflects the traumatic experience of an informant who lived in constant fear due to physical abuse from a father struggling with drug addiction. In an attempt to protect himself and his mother, the informant pleaded for his mother to give money to the father in order to prevent further violence. This situation demonstrates not only the intensity of emotional pressure experienced but also the forced role the informant assumed within an unsafe family environment. The burden of responsibility placed on the child highlights the severe psychological strain associated with growing up in a household characterised by instability, coercion, and the absence of meaningful parental care.

Informant 2 described a different traumatic experience, one rooted in neglect by his own mother:

"My mother only cared about herself. If there was food, it was only for her. I was not allowed to take any. She would not even cook."

(Informant 2)

The mother's self-centred behaviour, refusal to share food, and failure to provide meals for her child illustrate a form of emotional and physical neglect. Such neglect can have profound implications for a child's emotional and psychological development, shaping negative perceptions of family relationships, trust, and personal safety. Growing up in an environment where basic needs are ignored creates feelings of rejection, insecurity, and emotional deprivation, which may later influence behavioural patterns and social adjustment.

Previous studies have shown that traumatic experiences within the family environment, including physical abuse, emotional maltreatment, neglect, and parental conflict, exert long-term effects on the psychosocial development of adolescents. Cicchetti and Toth (2005) argue that children exposed to family-based trauma are at heightened risk of emotional disturbances, aggressive behaviour, and difficulties in forming healthy interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Chemtob and colleagues (2010) found that unresolved familial trauma can disrupt cognitive development and increase the likelihood of delinquent behaviour. These findings collectively suggest that instability within the family environment plays a critical role in shaping antisocial tendencies during adolescence.

Absence of Caregivers and Early Protection

The absence of responsible caregivers or an effective protective system during the early developmental phase emerged as a critical factor contributing to the informants' childhood traumatic experiences. Many informants reported being left without supervision, cared for by unstable individuals, or raised in environments where their safety and well-being were not

prioritised. The lack of a structured support system exposed them to prolonged risks of exploitation, abuse, and neglect. In numerous cases, family members failed to fulfil their protective role, while external interventions from neighbours, schools, or social welfare agencies were either delayed or insufficient.

This absence of early protection obstructed the development of healthy emotional regulation and contributed to the formation of maladaptive behavioural patterns. Growing up without a reliable adult figure, stable routines, or consistent emotional support hindered the informants' ability to form secure attachments and develop a sense of safety. Over time, these disruptions increased their vulnerability to high-risk behaviours, including involvement in deviant peer groups and delinquent activities. The findings reinforce the argument that inadequate caregiving and weak protective structures during childhood serve as core antecedents to the psychosocial difficulties that later manifest during adolescence.

This situation is further illustrated through a recent interview conducted with Informant 3: *"Since the moment I entered government care, which includes protection centres and rehabilitation institutions, from 2014 until now I have never seen my family."*

(Informant 3)

The interview with Informant 3 demonstrates that he had been separated from his family from a very young age and had no caregiver who provided consistent protection or affection. The prolonged absence of familial support contributes to feelings of abandonment and loneliness, which can lead adolescents to seek acceptance elsewhere, including through high-risk behaviours such as involvement in criminal activities.

The findings align with another narrative shared by Informant 5:

"I lived with my grandmother and grandfather since I was a child. Until now, I do not know who my siblings are. When I was only three days old, my grandmother was the one who took care of me."

(Informant 5)

This account highlights another form of early deprivation, where the informant grew up without parental presence or knowledge of immediate family members. Although grandparents served as substitute caregivers, the loss of parental connection and the absence of biological family ties may contribute to emotional fragmentation, insecurity, and identity difficulties. Such conditions further reinforce the risks associated with early caregiver absence and instability.

The findings highlight the absence of a primary caregiver and the lack of early protection that a child is expected to receive immediately after birth. In this case, the informant, who is now eighteen years old, had been placed under the care of his grandmother since he was three days old and grew up without any knowledge of his siblings' identities or family background. This situation reflects an early separation from biological parents, which can produce emotional voids, inadequate attachment support, and gaps in the development of a coherent self-identity. The absence of a primary caregiver affects more than emotional stability; it has long-term implications for psychological security and the formation of social relationships,

particularly during the early developmental years that are critical for shaping attachment and emotional regulation.

Past research indicates that the absence of caregivers and lack of early protection constitute major risk factors contributing to the development of antisocial and delinquent behaviours later in life. Children raised without a primary caregiver, especially without parental presence, frequently experience emotional deprivation, neglect, and a lack of consistent moral guidance, all of which negatively influence their social and psychological development (Widom, 1999). Furthermore, insufficient early protection from abuse or neglect increases the likelihood of prolonged trauma, which may impair the child's ability to form healthy relationships and manage emotions effectively (Dubowitz et al., 2005). Ryan and colleagues (2008) also found that children placed in alternative care systems or institutional settings face a higher risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system, particularly when strong familial support is absent.

Long-Term Effects of Childhood Trauma

Unresolved childhood trauma has the potential to produce profound long-term effects on emotional, social, and behavioural development. Within the context of this study, the informants exhibited a range of persistent trauma-related symptoms, including emotional instability, difficulty trusting others, uncontrolled anger, and tendencies to rebel against authority. Traumatic experiences that were not adequately addressed weakened their ability to adapt to healthy social environments, leading them to seek attention, escape, or a sense of protection through delinquent or criminal behaviour. Reliance on deviant peer groups or engagement in criminal activities often functioned as coping strategies for internal pain and emotional emptiness rooted in early adverse experiences.

This is illustrated through a recent interview with Informant 4:

"I always got beaten by my brother and my father because I did not listen to them, and there were times when I was kicked out of the house. I was kicked out when I was in Form One, and after that I stayed at my grandmother's sister's house. From then on, I learned to live on my own and earn my own money."

"For example, my family has never been close to me because I grew up alone. I already consider them as just other people. I do not have a family. I see myself as someone who has no family. They are selfish. In my entire life, I have only celebrated my birthday once, and that was with my aunt."

(Informant 4)

These accounts reveal the long-term effects of trauma experienced by the seventeen-year-old informant as a result of physical abuse and rejection within the family from a young age. Being frequently beaten by his brother and father, and being expelled from the home during early adolescence, forced him to learn independence and financial survival prematurely. The trauma left enduring psychological consequences, including feelings of being unloved and a loss of family support, which developed into emotional detachment and distrust towards his own family members. His perception of relatives as "other people" and his belief that he does not have a family illustrate deep emotional alienation and the disruptive impact of trauma on healthy social and emotional development. Never having his birthday celebrated further

signifies prolonged emotional neglect, which can affect emotional stability and the formation of self-identity in the long term.

Previous studies support these findings, demonstrating that childhood trauma can lead to significant long-term consequences for psychological well-being and behavioural outcomes. Felitti et al. (1998) found that individuals who experienced childhood abuse or neglect face a higher risk of developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and aggressive or antisocial behaviour in adulthood. In addition, Teicher and Samson (2016) reported that traumatic experiences can disrupt brain development, particularly in regions responsible for emotional regulation and impulse control, thereby increasing the likelihood of involvement in criminal behaviour. Thus, the long-term effects of trauma extend beyond emotional disturbances and are closely linked to social functioning and engagement in high-risk behaviours.

Contributing Factors to Criminal Involvement

This theme explains the primary elements that contributed to the informants' involvement in criminal activities, which ultimately led to their placement in Sekolah Tunas Bakti Sungai Besi. The findings indicate that criminal behaviour did not emerge spontaneously. Instead, it was shaped by a range of interconnected factors rooted in the informants' early life experiences. Many informants shared that their initial involvement in delinquent activities began as early as childhood and was influenced by pressures within the family, emotional neglect, and negative social environments.

Through interviews with the informants, several key sub-themes were identified, including social factors, economic factors, and environmental influences. These findings illustrate a clear link between childhood trauma and subsequent criminal behaviour, where adverse experiences such as abuse, neglect, and lack of social support served as the backdrop to the offences committed.

Social Factors

Social factors refer to the influence of interpersonal relationships in the informants' lives, particularly involving peers, family members, and individuals within their immediate environment. The study found that interactions with deviant peers, the absence of healthy social support, and ongoing family conflict contributed significantly to the informants' inclination toward criminal behaviour. Friends engaged in negative activities often served as behavioural models, while the lack of family supervision and guidance increased the likelihood of informants being drawn toward deviant pathways.

This is demonstrated through the interview with Informant 2:

"Then the next day when I went to school, my friend asked me to skip class. It was a Friday, and school was supposed to end at 12 p.m., but we had already left at 10 a.m."

(Informant 2)

This quote reflects the influence of peer relationships as a social factor encouraging deviant behaviours such as truancy. In this context, the informant tended to follow peer demands in order to maintain social acceptance or protect group belonging. Similar patterns were evident in the interview data of Informants 2, 4, and 5:

“After everyone went back into class, I repeated the same behaviour and was immediately expelled from school (when I was in Form Two).”

(Informant 2)

“The last time I attended school was in Form One. During that year, I only went to school for about two days, and then I stopped— because I had no interest in studying.”

(Informant 4)

“I was in Form One and Form Two in Kuala Lumpur. After finishing Form Two and about to enter Form Three, I started working and dropped out of school halfway through Form Two— because I did not want to study.”

(Informant 5)

These accounts illustrate recurring patterns of school disengagement arising from various social factors, including family environment, peer influence, and lack of motivation or support for education. The early termination of schooling such as attending for only two days or dropping out midway through Form Two signals the absence of educational continuity and the de-prioritisation of schooling in the adolescents’ lives. Reasons such as “lack of interest” or being “expelled” reflect underlying issues of discipline, limited academic guidance, and the absence of structured support systems.

Persistent non-attendance severs the adolescents’ connection to educational institutions that typically serve as crucial spaces for personal and social development. Consequently, the lack of educational engagement increased their likelihood of involvement in unhealthy or high-risk activities. This pattern underscores how disconnection from schooling functions as a social factor contributing to behavioural deviation and the progression toward criminal behaviour.

Previous research supports these findings. Social influences such as deviant peers and negative family dynamics play a critical role in driving adolescents toward criminal involvement. Warr (2002) found that adolescents who frequently associate with delinquent peers are more likely to imitate such behaviours as part of social learning processes. Patterson et al. (1992) argued that problematic family interactions, characterised by persistent conflict and weak communication, contribute to the development of delinquent behaviour. According to Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (1977), behaviour is learned through observing and imitating others, particularly influential peers. Therefore, encouragement or reinforcement from peers involved in negative activities increases the likelihood of an individual engaging in similar behaviours, especially when school or family supervision is weak.

Economic Factors

Economic factors encompass financial pressures, poverty, and the lack of basic living resources experienced by the informants and their families. The interview findings reveal that many of the informants came from families with low and unstable incomes, which forced them to find their own means of survival, including through unlawful activities. The urgent need to obtain money—whether for themselves or to support their families—emerged as a major trigger for involvement in criminal acts such as theft, robbery, or drug distribution. These experiences illustrate that economic hardship is a significant factor that shapes decisions that conflict with legal and moral norms.

This is demonstrated through the interview session with Informant 1:

“Regarding my family, things were quite difficult. In terms of finances and housing, that was the main issue. We were always moving from place to place.”

(Informant 1)

This quote highlights the economic challenges faced by the informant, particularly relating to financial instability and frequent changes in residence. Such conditions indicate that the informant’s family lived in a low socioeconomic situation, prompting them to relocate repeatedly in search of affordable housing. This instability creates psychological stress, especially for children, as the absence of a stable home environment disrupts feelings of safety and emotional security. In this context, economic hardship becomes a contributing factor to prolonged uncertainty, which can increase the likelihood of developing problematic behaviours or turning to criminal activities as a coping mechanism for life pressures.

Further evidence supporting this theme can be seen in the interview with Informant 2:

“I did not have any money, and my mother kept scolding me. The house rent was never paid, even though I knew that zakat was the one actually covering the rent. She kept complaining that the rent was never paid, saying I was not helping her in any way. At that time, she had already divorced my stepfather.”

(Informant 2)

This account illustrates the intense life pressures faced by the informant due to economic hardship and structural family instability. The statement “the rent was actually paid by zakat” reflects extreme poverty within the household, with the family relying on external aid to meet basic needs such as housing. This created conflict between mother and child, as the mother expressed frustration over the informant’s inability to provide financial support. The situation was compounded by repeated family disruptions, including divorce from both the biological father and the stepfather. This instability generated emotional strain and may have contributed to the development of negative coping behaviours among adolescents, who were left to navigate life with limited resources and inadequate familial support.

Economic pressures such as poverty, parental unemployment, and financial instability have been widely identified as contributing factors to early involvement in criminal activities. Moffitt (1993) notes that individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds are at higher risk of exhibiting antisocial behaviour due to chronic economic stress. Similarly, Fergusson and colleagues (2004) found that financial hardship within families can create unstable home environments, increasing the likelihood that adolescents will become involved in illegal activities in order to meet basic needs or fulfil material desires.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors refer to the physical and social conditions within the informants’ residential areas that influenced the development of their behaviours and value systems. The study found that informants who grew up in high-risk neighbourhoods such as informal settlements, areas with frequent criminal activity, or generally unsafe environments were more exposed to negative influences and criminal behaviour. Living in such pressured and non-conducive environments reduced their access to quality education, healthy activities, and positive social role models. Consequently, problematic social environments not only

contributed to emotional neglect and compromised child safety but also accelerated the normalisation of criminal behaviour among these adolescents.

This is demonstrated through the interview sessions with Informant 3 and Informant 4:

“The area where we lived was like an old abandoned house. If I stayed at home it was fine, but when I followed my father to his spot, I saw people... I saw them taking drugs.”

(Informant 3)

“People around me did not react much because I was surrounded by people who used drugs. Because of drugs— at that time I broke into buildings and shops.”

(Informant 4)

These excerpts illustrate how physical and social environmental conditions shaped the informants' exposure to high-risk behaviours such as drug misuse. The description of living near “an old abandoned house” reflects a non-conducive and potentially neglected environment that often becomes a hotspot for immoral or criminal activities. Direct exposure to negative behaviours, particularly when involving close family members such as a father engaging in drug use, can normalise such actions and reduce an adolescent's sensitivity to their harmful consequences. In this context, the environment refers not only to the physical condition of the neighbourhood but also to the social influences embedded within the community. Individuals growing up in environments where deviant behaviours such as drug use or burglary are commonplace are more likely to adopt and replicate these behaviours. The absence of negative reactions or consequences from the surrounding community signals that such behaviours are acceptable or not taken seriously. This normalisation blurs the boundaries between acceptable and illegal actions, reinforcing tendencies toward criminal involvement. The lack of positive role models and the presence of a socially toxic environment further increase the likelihood of engaging in crime, especially when protective social structures and guidance are limited.

Previous research supports these findings. Unsafe neighbourhoods characterised by crime, drug use, and limited social support significantly increase the risk of adolescent involvement in delinquent behaviour. Sampson and Groves (1989) emphasise that neighbourhoods with weakened informal social controls and reduced community supervision tend to exhibit higher levels of youth crime. In such contexts, adolescents are more vulnerable to negative influences and have fewer opportunities to learn from positive role models.

Initial Motives for Engaging in Criminal Activities

This sub-theme explores the primary motivations that prompted the informants to first engage in criminal behaviour. The interviews revealed that most informants were driven by financial need, peer influence, curiosity or the desire to try something new, and the absence of family supervision. In many cases, their initial involvement in criminal acts was perceived as an immediate and convenient way to meet urgent needs or to gain acceptance within their social circles. These findings indicate that early decisions to commit crime were often not rooted in malicious intent but were instead shaped by environmental pressures and unresolved emotional voids.

This is illustrated through the interview sessions with Informant 2 and Informant 3.

“I needed money. I could not possibly rely on my parents to give me money. I felt excited, so I just did whatever my friends were doing, like taking drugs and stealing. All I thought about

was money, money, money, because when I went home, there was no food. I did not even have money to buy food. Sometimes I stole from a shop."

(Informant 2)

This account shows how life pressures, poverty, and peer influence pushed the informant toward criminal behaviour at an early stage. His initial motive was driven by unmet basic needs at home, such as the lack of food and the absence of financial support from parents. The lack of resources led him to seek alternative means such as stealing or using drugs with friends. In this context, the desire to fulfil daily necessities and the influence of a negative social environment made crime appear to be an easy and quick solution for obtaining money. This indicates that early involvement in criminal behaviour was not purely self-determined but strongly associated with socioeconomic instability, family neglect, and adverse environmental influences.

Another account from Informant 3 further illustrates this point:

"I came here because of an extortion case, because he touched me, and it was because I took his belongings. I took his phone because I wanted to look for my mother. Then I switched it off and threw it away. When he kept asking for it back, I lied because I was scared he would hit me. He kept asking for the phone, but I refused to give it. Eventually he said to return it nicely, that nothing would happen, but when I handed it over, he touched me and I got angry, so I threatened him."

(Informant 3)

The interview with Informant 3 indicates that his involvement in the offence did not begin with criminal intent but rather as a reaction to stress and fear. Taking the phone was driven by a desire to look for his mother, reflecting emotional longing, confusion, and dependence on family. The situation escalated when the other individual demanded the phone in a manner perceived as threatening. The physical contact triggered anger and led the informant to respond aggressively. This illustrates that his initial motive was shaped by trauma, emotional pressure, and self-protection rather than deliberate criminal intention. It also reflects how emotional instability and the absence of social support can lead adolescents to commit offences as a response to perceived threats.

Previous studies support these findings, showing that early involvement in crime is often linked to the need for attention, power, or survival. Hirschi (1969) argues that individuals with weak bonds to social institutions such as school and family are more likely to violate laws to fulfil personal needs. McCord et al. (2001) similarly found that many adolescents engaged in their first delinquent act as a means of coping with feelings of helplessness or to prove themselves within their peer groups.

Conclusion and Implications of the Study

This study has explored the relationship between childhood traumatic experiences and the tendency to engage in criminal behaviour among adolescents in a rehabilitation institution. Based on thematic analysis of participant narratives, the findings indicate that unresolved early trauma exerts a profound psychological and emotional influence on individuals. Experiences such as physical and emotional abuse, deprivation of affection, and unstable family environments were found to disrupt the development of self-regulation, emotional

stability, and identity formation. These disruptions subsequently increased the likelihood of deviant and criminal behaviour during adolescence.

The study also demonstrates that the social environment plays a crucial intermediary role in linking trauma to criminal behaviour. The absence of family support, economic hardship, and the influence of negative peer groups drove individuals to seek recognition and social acceptance through maladaptive means. Within this context, criminal behaviour often functioned as an adaptive mechanism for adolescents who struggled to cope with the emotional impact of trauma and the loss of parental affection. However, the findings also highlight the potential for recovery when adolescents are given opportunities to rebuild self-confidence through guidance, psychosocial interventions, and sustained community support. In conclusion, childhood trauma is not merely a past experience but a dynamic factor that continues to shape an individual's psychological and social well-being. Early interventions that focus on emotional recovery and the development of effective coping mechanisms are essential, particularly for children living in high-risk family environments. Rehabilitation programmes in institutions such as Sekolah Tunas Bakti should strengthen their psychosocial and trauma-informed counselling components to help residents process past experiences in a healthier and more constructive manner. The implications of this study are significant for policymakers, psychologists, counsellors, and social workers, as they underscore the need for evidence-based child protection policies and more holistic juvenile crime prevention strategies.

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