



Journal of Exceptional Multidisciplinary Research (JEMR)

ISSN: 3007-8407 (Online)

Volume 2 Issue 2, (2025)

 <https://doi.org/10.69739/jemr.v2i2.996>

 <https://journals.stecab.com/jemr>

 Published by
Stecab Publishing

Research Article

A Qualitative Inquiry into the Determinants of Criminal Involvement Among Children in Conflict with the Law in Koronadal City, Philippines

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About Article

Article History

Submission: August 18, 2025

Acceptance : September 22, 2025

Publication : September 29, 2025

Keywords

Children at Risk, CICL, Juvenile Delinquency, Public Safety

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ABSTRACT

The study focused on determining the lived experiences of the CICLs before they committed a crime, and their reason in committing the crimes they are facing. The Key Informant Interview (KII) was conducted to the CICLs committed at Bahay Pag-asa in Koronadal City with the 14 CICLs, a social worker in charge, and Bahay Pag-asa In-Charge as participants. Despite the existence of RA 9344 and community-based interventions, there remains a lack of in-depth qualitative understanding of the personal and social circumstances that push CICLs into criminal involvement, particularly within the context of Koronadal City. The data gathered were subjected to a thematic analysis following the Clarke and Braun's Thematic Analysis (2006). The results revealed that CICLs before they committed juvenile crimes were children who came from broken families, raised by grandparents, or their parents were not involved anymore with their lives, leaving them to live on their own with no proper supervision, emotional support, or moral guidance. These children became at risk and committed crimes, thereby subjecting them to the procedures of the Juvenile Justice System pursuant to RA 9344. The participants revealed that reasons for committing crimes at early age were peer influence, lack of family support and guidance, personal choice, and economic pressures. Given these factors, it was recommended that the BCPC in the community should be strengthened focusing not only on CICLs, but also to Children at Risk.

Citation Style:

Derla, J. D., Bobon, R. H., Cerdana, N. S., Embolode, J. P., Arroyo, J. D., Romualdo, A. Q., & Suriaga, E. G. D. (2025). A Qualitative Inquiry into the Determinants of Criminal Involvement Among Children in Conflict with the Law in Koronadal City, Philippines. *Journal of Exceptional Multidisciplinary Research*, 2(2), 72-77. <https://doi.org/10.69739/jemr.v2i2.996>



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1. INTRODUCTION

Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) are those who committed crimes at their young age, preferably below 18 years old. Commonly, the commission of unlawful activities were due to the transition adolescents undergo from childhood to adulthood. Mental health professionals' views juvenile delinquency as a pattern of disruptive behavior that can manifest even at their young age. The child's environment is often the main factor of the formation of such behavior, especially if the child's upbringing is not properly guarded carefully from the negative influences such as dangerous neighborhood, which could lead the child to engage in criminal activities, especially if there is an easy access to alcoholic drinks, cigarettes, drugs, and delinquent behaviors in the community (Abella, 2016).

In the Philippines, Presidential Decree No. 603 article 87, encourages every barangay (as the smallest government unit) to be the first responder to prevent the juvenile delinquency and recidivism by organizing the Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC). The BCPC then shall coordinate to the Local Council for the Welfare of Children and Youth in the development of programs and initiatives to promote the welfare of children and to provide a safe environment in the community (Molina-Lingval *et al.*, 2024). However, CICL in the country is still growing rapidly that according to the UNICEF, there is a total of 15,892 arrests in 2020, while some sources reported that in between 2012 to 2016, 40,000 CICL cases were reported (Cabildo & Reysio-Cruz, 2016).

In Koronadal City, based on the police report as of May 2025, CICLs' activities are still prevalent with theft as the common offense committed. Notably, drug-related offenses were also recorded to emerged in 2023 to 2024, and both were committed Bahay Pag-asa, a center for rehabilitation and preventive intervention for CICL in the city. A single case of rape was also reported and committed in the center in 2025 for continued intervention for proper values formation and child protection measures. Moreover, curfew violators continue to rise, with the prevalence of children lurking in the streets at night, which can make these children at risks, and therefore vulnerable in committing crimes and displaying delinquent behaviors.

This area of study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of the CICLs before they were committed to Bahay Pag-asa, their reasons in committing crimes, and the driving factors that enable them to be exposed to these delinquent activities. Specifically, it aimed to identify the personal, familial, and socio-economic determinants of their criminal involvement and how these intersect with community structures and support systems. Further, this endeavor sought to become a basis for a continuous intervention and to motivate policymakers and innovators to design proactive measures not just to rehabilitate CICLs, but also to focus on children at risk in the community.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the PNP's 2016 Manual in Handling Children at Risk and Children in Conflict with the Law: "A child in conflict with the law refers to a child who is alleged as, accused of, or adjudged as, having committed an offense under the Philippine Law. The law in the Philippines has defined child as a person who is a person below 18 years old, and under the Juvenile Justice and

Welfare Act of 2006, children the age of 15 is the minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR), hence, lawmakers are still pushing to lower MACR to this day.

In the Philippines, according to Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (2022), the PNP Women and Child Protection Center has recorded that from January to December 2020, the law enforcement has apprehended 15,982 CICLs and 1,806 were under the police custody while 9,502 were turned over to the local Social Welfare and Development Office (LSWDO), 2,447 were returned to their families, and 3,111 were at large. CICLs have committed rape (1,506 offenders), violation of RA 9165 (1,207), theft (765), and other crimes (10,079). In response, 37 Bahay Pag-asa facilities in the country under the local government units. But these Regional Rehabilitation Centers are overcrowded were 1,118 beds served 1,738 CICLs.

With all these data, the juvenile justice system of the Philippines believes that a child who offended the law is the result of untoward environment and that he is entitled a chance and a new beginning, that the crimes committed was with no intention, and thus, a child cannot comprehend yet the consequence of his actions. It is therefore reckoned that a child offender must not receive punishment, but of transformative in nature based on his/her niche in the community where he/she comes from (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007). This assumption is supported by a study done by Parackal and Panicker (2019) concluded that juvenile offenders' behavior only happened on adolescents, and it is expected that it will not continue through adulthood.

Factors affecting adolescents in committing crimes were discussed by several studies. These factors have encouraged adolescents to commit unlawful activities, and these are categorized into internal or personal and external or environment (Frias-Armenta & Corral-Verdugo, 2013). In internal or personal factors, self-efficacy and self-esteem were one of the significant predictors to promote aggressive tendencies among juveniles (Okon *et al.*, 2011). Emotional and mental attributes such as impulsivity, low self-control, depression, anxiety, lack of attention, ADHD, and poor empathy, can lead to committing criminal acts (Frias-Armenta & Corral-Verdugo, 2013). This was supported by Bobbio *et al.* (2020), when he reported that personal characteristics are related to juvenile delinquency. Pratt and Cullen (2000), further proved that children with low self-control most likely to commit crimes, and these were traced from their childhood due to insufficient attention by the parents, where they were never taught of the consequence of delinquent behavior.

A study conducted by Renier *et al.* (2016) showed that age, the feeling of wanting for rewards, inhibition to behaviors, impulsiveness, and anxiety on situations can make adolescents to have no fear of taking risks, and the perception about risks. He further emphasized that mostly, male adolescents like to take more risks, not scared of the outcome of their actions, and less socially conscious than women. This was supported by Junger-Tas *et al.* (2004) on his study on the behavioral patterns between male and female adolescents' delinquency and he found out that school and family social control have contributions to the commission of crimes at an early age, whereas self-control is more displayed by girls.



Moreover, studies have shown how family life influences an individual to engage on criminal behavior. Okon *et al.* (2011) even suggested that family and personal characteristics can be a basis in looking into his/her risks to engage in criminal activities. Significant correlation between the family background, child-upbringing, self-control, and adolescents can be an indicator of criminal acts (Omoponle & Olanrewaju, 2020). Wherefore, the absence of parental guidance can also be a cause of juvenile delinquency (Harris-Mckoy & Cui, 2013). According to Liu *et al.* (2019), good relationships between parents and adolescents means less conflict, therefore, an essential to decrease behaviors that can put adolescence at risks.

Esiri (2016) explained that student's criminal behavior of juveniles can also be learned and acquired from the community when he gets to associate with people with the same behavior. Howell (2019) also supported that parental engagement to the community with criminal gangs can also influenced their children. This can also be the reason seen for children to befriend on these types of people with criminal behavior, causing them to be influenced by behavior opposed to the law and of the norms of the society. Classmates in the school as reported by Kim and Fletcher (2018) and Muller *et al.* (2016) can also essentially influence adolescents' criminal behavior and activity. This happens when parents and child emotional bond becomes weak, causing them to find this acceptance and be fit in the society (Esiri, 2016).

Studies also have reported that the rapid evolution of information technology has long been affected the societal life and crime development. Stalans and Finn (2016) proved that the advanced the technology available in public, the more accessible the more crimes will be developed. Violent films and other scenes that are heavily disturbed to watch can be available to children, that will make criminal acts may reached children's intellects, making criminal ideals to flourish (Browne & Halmilton- Giachritsis, 2005; Kheikha *et al.*, 2020). Thereby, cybercrime has become prevalence nowadays because of the advancement of technologies such as the internet, and cellphones (Stalans & Finn, 2016).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

The study utilized the Phenomenological design of qualitative research. The study underscored the lived experiences and the reasons of children in conflict with the law (CICL) in committing crimes, who were committed at the Bahay Pag-asa in Koronadal City, South Cotabato, Philippines.

3.2. Locale of the study

The data were gathered at the Bahay Pag-asa in Koronadal City, South Cotabato, Philippines. The Bahay Pag-asa is an institution where CICLs are committed after the court's disposition of the CICL cases. The Bahay Pag-asa is a rehabilitative and corrective intervention were done.

3.3. Participants of the study

The participants of the study were the CICLs who were committed in the institution for a serious offense, or they were refused to post bail by the court and were deemed for

rehabilitation and intervention. The participants were aged between 15 to 17 during the interview. The researchers also included the social worker in charge as a participant. There were 16 potential participants in the center, but only 14 were interviewed successfully, a social worker, and Bahay Pag-asa In-Charge, a total of sixteen (16) participants.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured Key Informant Interview (KII) protocol that ensured both consistency and flexibility in data collection. The core questions focused on the participants' family background, peer influences, personal circumstances, and reasons for committing the offenses.

Informed consent was obtained from Bahay Pag-asa administrators, social workers, and parents or guardians, while assent was secured from the CICLs to ensure voluntary participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and institutional ethics approval was granted to uphold child protection and responsible research standards.

3.4. Data analysis

The data were collected through a Key Informant Interview (KII) among the participants. The data gathered were then subjected to a careful transcription and were subject to a thematic analysis utilizing the technique as suggested by Clarke and Braun (2006). After a careful familiarization of the data, the sub themes were identified, and the themes were extracted. The themes were then defined and organized into a graphical representation in a form of flow chart to show the results.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Lived experiences of the children in conflict with the law (CICL)

Figure 1 shows the lived experiences of children before they committed unlawful activities. Several informants shared that they came from a broken family, raised by grandparents, or their parents were not involved anymore with their lives, leaving them to live on their own with no proper supervision, emotional support, or moral guidance.

"When I was a child, my mother and father separated... I did not grow up with them because I was raised by my grandmother."— Informant 7

Some of the informants on the other hand, described themselves as hard-headed, or rebellious which caused from having an absent parent that can be authoritative figures. Without these, it caused them to become vulnerable to being impulsive, to do vices, and be involved in crimes.

One of the informants expressed, "It's hard, when you do not have a father to correct you and teach you what's wrong and right." – Informant 13. According to the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2020), children must be raised in an environment that will support their overall development to shelter them from negative influences. In the fundamental level of childhood, children need someone who cares and provides emotional and physical security to support and nurture their development. Guidance to support their well-being and mental health, will help them build their self-esteem positively, manage stress regulate their emotions, and deal with their setbacks, thus, parents and guardians play a vital role in helping children deal with their emotions and behavior



that will enable them to avoid negative influences (Osofsky & Fitzgerald, 2005).

Also, most participants were found to have irregular schooling, or dropped out from school, due to poverty, behavioral issues, or peer influence. Some had expressed to loss interest, were expelled, thus opted to prioritize income-generating activities, or friendship over education. This dropping out and disengagement from school will likely reduce their opportunity in the future to have a better life, and this just removed them to an environment where they can be protected and guided. According to Skinner *et al.* (2008), students who are dropped out have lack of motivation to schoolwork, who in the future could show antisocial behavior, and have the difficulty in facing challenges and life problems.

During adolescence, peer relationships become a measurement

of social success and peer approval becomes more important (Brechtwald & Pristein, 2017) and peer connections becomes more necessary (Rubin *et al.*, 2015). Peer groups played a major role in influencing, thus, five (5) of 14 participants agreed that they were into vices (i.e., smoking, drinking alcohol, and gang fights). One expressed, "I got deeply involved with my peers... I was influenced by bad behavior of my group... we would look for alcohol to drink."—Informant 8.

Also, several children had to work at a young age because of financial hardship, and some participants faced an unsafe and dangerous environments, such as living in a conflicted areas (i.e., Maguindanao in Mindanao, Philippines), or had exposed to drugs and gangs in the community. These factors drove them to have survival instincts and just did everything to survive.

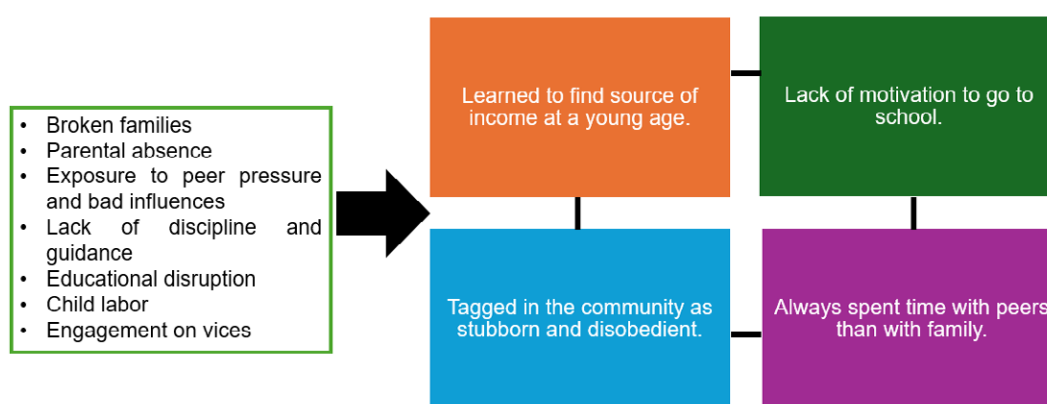


Figure 1. Lived experiences of the children in conflict with the law in Koronadal City

4.2. Reasons of children in conflict with the law in committing crimes

The lived experiences of the participants just before they were committed in the Bahay Pag-asa, were so drastic that it affects them so much that they got to work at an early age, they had lack of motivation to go to school, thereby, they were tagged in the community as stubborn, disobedient, thus, they prefer to spend more time with their peers than to their family. These had resulted to lack of parental guidance, lack of emotional support, lack of discipline, poverty, and personal accountability, as reflected in Figure 2.

Ten (10) out of fourteen (14) participants identified peers as the main reason of them being involved in delinquent activities. Some had emphasized that it was their peers who taught them how to do vices such as drinking alcoholic drink, cigarette use, and even drugs, which later led them to commit crimes. Informant 6 expressed, "My peers they were into vices; they were troublemakers."

While others have acknowledged that it was their personal choice driven by curiosity, as one of the factors in committing crimes. "I don't blame anyone. I don't blame my friends—it was my decision. I was tempted by a girl, I got emotionally involved with her, we were always together, and that's what led to it..." Informant 7 added. Further, Informant 8 emphasized, "Maybe because I got curious, I really wanted to try and see how it would

feel to drink and smoke. I wanted to explore it out of curiosity."

The data reflected that peers are the main delinquent pathways for most of children at risk. Peer pressures not only introduce delinquent behaviors but also provides emotional support which are likely to be lacking at home.

The next most responded reason was the lack of parental involvement in their lives, particularly the father figures. Participants expressed that the absence of consistent discipline, affection or advice from parents contributed to their vulnerability to peer pressure and indulge to risky behaviors. Informant 7 mentioned that he lacked family, since his parents separated from his early age and he was not raised properly, causing him to do and commit such crime. Informant 9 added that he missed his father's guidance and discipline causing him to be lost in track with his life.

These narratives reflected the importance of nurturing, and the critical effect of consistent and emotionally parenting. According to Cherry (2011), balanced parenting is needed as it characterized by a combination of warmth and involvement along with clear boundaries. Parents who are too strict, permissive, inconsistent presence, or emotionally distant can lead children to be involved to delinquent activities.

In an interview conducted to the Social Worker of Bahay Pag-asa, children in conflict with the law often comes from a dysfunctional family and faced poverty-related struggles.



Informant 16 (Bahay Pag-asa In-Charge) emphasized the harmful influence of the use of unregulated social media, particularly their exposure to pornographic content that leads to sexual offenses among minors.

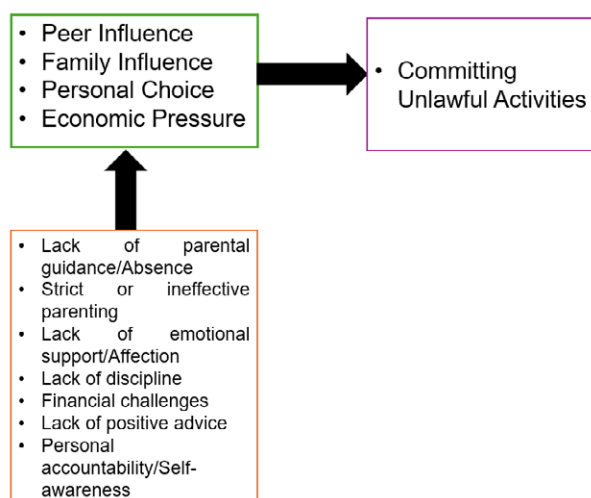


Figure 2. Reasons of the children in committing unlawful activities in koronadal city

These overlapping risk factors reflected its drastic effects in the children in the community causing them to become children at risk and later will be classified as children in conflict with the law due to their committal of criminal activities.

5. CONCLUSION

Identifying the reasons of the children at risk to commit criminal activities involved on the relation of their lifestyle and mode of living. Based on the data gathered, many participants were reported coming from broken families, single-parent households, and some were only raised by their grandparents since both parents have their own family, which led the child to be emotionally neglected and the lack of discipline.

Pre-offenses and offenses behavior was found to be driven by peers, who encouraged them to be involved in vices (smoking, drinking and drugs) and delinquent behavior (cutting classes, staying out late at night, theft, and violence).

Further, it was also determined that children tend to drop out of school due to poverty, where, they cannot be supported in their education, forcing them to work at a young age to support their family, and to survive.

Being proactive in addressing children in conflict with the law (CICL) is a whole lot mean to assess children at risk, so to reduce the likelihood of committing offenses. The community can stand as a support system for the children at risks.

At the micro-level, interventions should focus on the child and family through psychosocial support, parenting education, and livelihood assistance to strengthen resilience, guidance, and educational continuity. At the meso- and macro-levels, efforts must reinforce community institutions like the BCPC and schools while ensuring policy-driven measures such as adequate funding, inter-agency collaboration, and mainstreaming child

protection into development plans to sustain prevention and rehabilitation programs.

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