

Addressing Childhood Criminality in Low-Income Communities: the Protective Effect of Prosocial Dynamics Against Crime

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Abstract:

This article draws on previous psychological and criminological research to examine how prosocial dynamics within low-income families and communities can decrease childhood criminal behavior. The study is motivated by previous research into childhood criminality, which shows a strong correlation between experiences of living in a low-income community and childhood criminality and note that such correlation is often connected to abusive, antisocial, and unsafe conditions in families and communities. By drawing on research into supportive parenting styles, protective school activities, and inclusive community programs, I argue that the promotion of prosocial dynamics is protective against childhood crime, especially in low-income communities. To further support this claim, I use attachment theory—which demonstrates the impact of relationships (especially within families) on a person’s psychosocial development and behavior—to understand and explain the need for greater prosocial dynamics within families and communities. I conclude that more efforts need to be made, both on a family and community level, to encourage prosocial dynamics through one-on-one and group activities such as in-home nursing programs, mentor guidance, and afterschool workshops, in order to help reduce the risk of childhood crime.

Keywords: childhood criminality; attachment theory; prosocial dynamics; intervention

1. Introduction

Studies and data suggest that there is a positive correlation between poverty and levels of crime and violence. Reed (2020) notes that the incarceration rates for both men and women who grew up in

low-income families are almost 20 times higher than that of those who grew up in high-income families. For children in particular, the correlation between poverty and crime is especially strong as children are more vulnerable and susceptible to the social issues that arise from living in low-income communities.

Generally, children who are “economically disadvantaged” are exposed to higher amounts of violence in their communities (Reed, 2020) and are thus at a higher risk of developing behavior issues in the future. Of the numerous social and economic challenges faced by impoverished communities, the connection between poverty and child criminality is one of the most concerning for policymakers and communities. Bjerck found in 2004 that children from families of the poorest third of the wealth distribution are 65% more likely to commit violent crimes than those from families of the wealthiest third of the wealth distribution. In corroboration with this, data collected by the California Census and Criminal Justice Center shows that areas where over 20% of the population is impoverished, which are considered high-poverty areas, are accountable for almost 75% of violent crime arrests among adolescents 14-17 years of age (Reed, 2020).

Given the connection between poverty and childhood crime as well as the shortage of resources in terms of social programs and educational opportunities in low-income communities, it is important to consider the specific psychological and criminological factors involved in this problem when seeking to develop an effective low-cost, family- and community-based solution.

Thus, in order to explore the possible solutions to childhood crime in low-income communities, in this paper I will (1) summarize previous research exploring the link between poverty and childhood crime; (2) argue that encouraging prosocial dynamics – positive, supportive, and non-abusive behaviors and interactions – within families and communities, especially low-income ones, are potentially protective against childhood criminality; and (3) zoom in on the developmental and social perspective to explore how and why these prosocial dynamics can be beneficial. Based on these findings, I will propose improvements in prosocial dynamics in both families and communities as an effective method to address childhood crimes in low-income communities.

2. Poverty and Crime in Childhood

Numerous studies have demonstrated that there is a strong correlation between poverty and childhood crime. For example, Sariaslan et al. (2014) conducted a quasi-experiment that takes genetic and environmental factors into account to examine whether or not there is a causal relationship between family income during childhood and its inverse effect on the development of behavioral problems. They find that although there is a lack of evidence that shows a direct causal link between family income and childhood criminality, there is an increased hazard rate of being convicted of violent crime for children of parents

in the low-income quintile. They conclude that this can be accounted for by unobserved familial risk factors, such as parental criminality and the quality of the parent-child relationship, and conclude that prevention efforts should aim to take a greater range of familial risk factors into account. This source is important because it not only clearly demonstrates the correlation between poverty and childhood crime, but also the significance of social interaction and support within the family, specifically the parent-child relationship, suggesting that such dynamics are relevant to understanding this issue.

Similarly, in their longitudinal study, Hallsten et al. (2013) explore the connection between poverty and childhood crime, focus on socioeconomic factors, and evaluate how different factors contribute to the difference in crime rate among various groups in Sweden. They find that there is a negative correlation between socioeconomic class and crime rate. In this study, those of the lower socioeconomic class are often represented by childhood immigrants or children of immigrants, and they often have less access to educational and employment opportunities, which contributes to their heightened likelihood of criminal behavior. Furthermore, they note how poverty exacerbates the risk of engaging in criminal activities as it has a negative psychological impact on the children and often leads to increased levels of stress and social exclusion. These findings also build on Sariaslan et al’s study and further highlight the importance of social factors in influencing childhood crime, reflecting how the lack of positive social interactions may contribute to crime in low-income communities.

To further strengthen the idea, drawing on a wide range of previous research into childhood development, social factors, and behavioral problems including crime, Hao and Matsueda (2006) explore the effect of structural changes in the family and parenting practices on middle-childhood behavioral problems. They take into account single-motherhood, grandparent co-residence, welfare dependency, and poverty as the four dimensions of family conditions and examine how the timing and changes in family structure may impact child behavioral problems. In particular, from a developmental perspective, they note that longer exposure to poverty during early childhood can lead to a significant increase in behavioral problems in middle and late childhood. They also observe that unhealthy parenting practices have a negative effect on the child’s behavior and development. Once again, it can be observed that parenting style and parent-children relationship play a significant role in a child’s behavior and potential for future criminality, especially in low-income communities.

This extensive evidence of the correlation between poverty and childhood crime, taking into account economic,

social, and familial factors, all suggests that children in poverty require extra attention and support to prevent potential future criminality. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of social factors in this issue, illustrating that familial and communal dynamics have potentially significant effects on children's behavior and development. Thus, in the next section, I will explore how prosocial dynamics may have a protective and preventive effect against criminal behavior among children living in low-income communities.

3. Benefits of Prosocial Dynamics in Decreasing Childhood Criminality

To understand how and why prosocial dynamics can benefit childhood crime prevention in low-income communities, it is important to first explore the impact of social and familial factors on the child's behavior and development. In their meta-analysis, Leschied et al. (2008) analyze and synthesize thirty-eight prospective longitudinal studies from a developmental perspective to find the specific points of focus that would help increase the effectiveness of intervention efforts. They identify and examine multiple factors such as antisocial orientation, early disruptive behavior, as well as family-based elements like parenting practices and environmental influence, and examine the role they play in predicting later criminal conduct. They conclude that it is most important to focus on family-related factors such as maltreatment, domestic violence, and parenting style during childhood and adolescence to maximize the effectiveness of prevention efforts. They explain that these factors may hinder the child's ability to form prosocial connections and thus can have a long-term impact on the child's behavior. These findings highlight the importance of taking social, specifically familial, dynamics into account and promoting prosocial connections when it comes to designing effective intervention methods for children in impoverished communities.

Building on this idea, Hao and Matsueda (2006) zoom in on the familial factor and examine the negative impact of unhealthy parenting practices on child development in low-income communities. Having found a positive correlation between early childhood exposure to poverty and behavioral problems in middle childhood, they examine the impact of parenting methods on the child's development, and they find that coercive methods, such as physical punishment, have a detrimental effect on preventing behavioral problems in middle childhood, while positive practices such as the father's involvement in child-rearing are beneficial to the child's well-being. These results signify that the parent-child relationship is a crucial de-

terminant of the child's outcome and potential criminality and underscore the importance of creating a prosocial dynamic between the parent and the child, especially in low-income communities.

While Hao and Matsueda approach this from a familial angle, Nee et al. (2012) focus on the more community-centered solutions to preventing childhood crime in the context of poverty. They draw on results from the two studies that they conducted and highlight the importance of being responsive, which involves adapting preventive or intervention efforts to each individual's specific needs and characteristics. In particular, they identify the lack of information on intervention programs for child offenders and thus present two studies that focus on "in-program" factors such as the nature and intensity of the program to evaluate the effectiveness of the Preventing Youth Offending Program (PYOP)-type approach, which describes community programs that target prolific criminals, those with specific needs, and children in their middle childhood. They conclude that the children's vulnerability further highlights the importance of developing responsibility-centered and strength-oriented approaches to reduce the risk of criminal behavior in children. They focus on preteenage and early adolescent offenders in one of their studies, and they observe a significant decrease in the participants' average Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R; a risk score calculated based on interviews and information on the criminal's previous conduct used to predict the likelihood of reoffending) subscore for criminal orientation after six months of the PYOP intervention program. It is worth noting that group-based work designed to improve interpersonal skills, raise self-esteem, and encourage the formation of meaningful connections between the child and their community is a crucial part of the PYOP-type approach, and the success of the program illustrates that prosocial dynamics within the community help address and prevent childhood crime.

In combination, these findings explore the influence of environmental factors, which become more pronounced under the context of an impoverished community, on the child's potential for crime. Specifically, they highlight that the child's relationship with their family and their community is one of the most impactful on their future development and behavior, and thus suggest that encouraging prosocial dynamics within these two groups can be protective against childhood crime.

4. A Psychological Perspective: How Prosocial Dynamics in Family and Community Are Protective against

Childhood Criminality

Having established that prosocial dynamics can be helpful for preventing childhood crime in low-income communities, I will move on to examine the psychological reasons as to why it has this effect and thereby identify specific aspects of it that should be emphasized when it comes to designing intervention methods.

First, focusing on the familial perspective, Olds (2008) uses attachment theory to explain in his paper how a nurse-family relationship that encourages a healthy, competent parenting style can significantly improve the child's outcome and reduce their potential for crime. He suggests that since children are biologically predisposed to forming a connection with an adult for protection, they are also highly responsive psychologically to their caregiver. As a result, their relationship, or "attachment style," with the caregiver can majorly shape their understanding of themselves and their relationship with others, and therefore affect the amount of trust they put in the world around them and their capacity for empathy in the future, which are two factors frequently associated with a person's potential for crime. These findings suggest that it is important to create a positive, non-abusive environment within the family where the child has at least one stable connection to a reliable and responsive caregiver when it comes to addressing childhood criminality.

Zooming in on attachment theory, Ansbro (2022) explores how it may be implemented into probation practice. According to Ansbro, attachment theory has its roots in psychoanalysis and is influenced by cognitive psychology, and it suggests that a secure connection between the child and his or hers carer is vital to a child's healthy development, because it would otherwise lead to the child going to more extreme means to compensate for the absence of such a source of stability in later developmental stages. She explains from a criminology perspective that a "secure" attachment improves mental wellbeing and is important for decreasing crime. She comes to the conclusion that although attachment theory is now more commonly used in social service programs, it can also provide a practical lens through which probation practices can be designed. Such ideas can be extended overall to how prosocial dynamics, and secure attachment in particular, can be helpful in helping to approach crime and recidivism prevention efforts.

On the other hand, Masho et al. (2019) take on the community-based perspective and examine the effectiveness of the Olweus Bully Prevention Program and its protective effect against youth violence and crime. Based on their estimation of the reduction of youth violence six years after the implementation of the program using the Bayesian

hierarchical regression modeling, they conclude that such community engagement is effective, especially for youths who engage in higher frequencies of violence and crime. They attribute the success of the program largely to how it promoted the formation of a protective network of connections between the teenager and their teachers, parents, and community members, further suggesting how these prosocial dynamics can help lower the risk of delinquency among children and adolescents.

These two studies are significant not only because they both demonstrate and explain how prosocial dynamics within families and communities, especially impoverished ones, can contribute to the prevention of childhood crime and violence, but also because they indicate how intervention efforts can have different points of focus during different developmental stages. For example, Olds (2008) focuses more on the parent-child relationship during infancy and early childhood, while Masho et al. (2019) focus on school-centered interventions during middle childhood and adolescence. This may be connected to Nee et al.'s (2012) study as well, where they chose the cultivation of interpersonal skills for preteen and adolescent offenders to be the main target of their intervention program. These connections suggest that policymakers and communities should also consider the children's developmental pathways and identify their specific needs during different stages of development when it comes to designing and implementing preventive and intervention programs to address childhood crime.

In corroboration with this idea, Sampson and Laub (2005) point out that people's emotional attachment is "age-graded," meaning that people form attachment to different people and different roles during different stages of their lives. Specifically, parental attachment plays the major role during childhood, school attachment and connections with peers play the major role during adolescence, and marital attachment plays the major role during adulthood. In addition, they discover that these attachments are all closely connected to criminal behavior, with a strong, healthy attachment style having an inhibitory effect on delinquency and deviance. Understanding the formation of different attachments during different developmental stages should be immensely helpful, especially in communities with more limited resources as it would allow them to focus their efforts on the most effective methods.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I explore the link between poverty and childhood criminality and find a close correlation between poverty and the likelihood of engaging in violence or crime as a child. I then explore attachment theory and

summarize past research regarding child development in low-income communities and different intervention programs to argue that prosocial dynamics play a crucial role in all the various stages of the developmental pathway and have a protective effect against childhood crime. For example, increased unstructured play time with many opportunities for the child to form strong emotional attachments to his or hers carers may, based on these findings, help to ultimately decrease the likelihood of childhood crime. Similarly, community-based activities like sports and after-school programs that create prosocial dynamics between the community members are also helpful for the prevention and reduction of childhood violence and criminality.

Based on my findings, it is clear that prosocial dynamics play a major role in almost every stage of development regarding behavior and the potential for crime. However, to maximize the effectiveness of intervention efforts in different communities, it is also important to further explore, consider, and evaluate each community's unique situation, identify whom the children need such dynamics with the most, and adapt the intervention programs accordingly before actual implementation.

A wide number of interventions could be useful to promote prosocial dynamics within families. For instance, communities should create and fund educational programs to teach parents effective caretaking and dynamics within families. Specifically, in-home nursing programs where trained nurses can help new parents first establish a stable connection with their newborns (Olds, 2008) may be particularly effective. Another solution to increasing parental time to bond with their children is to offer increased paid family leave. According to a report by the US Department of Labor, although "many workers are entitled to take unpaid leave many workers are entitled to take unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), there is currently no federal law providing or guaranteeing access to paid family and medical leave for workers in the private sector." By improving laws and policies in that regard, communities and policymakers can help encourage the cultivation of prosocial dynamics within the family, especially in low-income communities, and thereby reduce the risk of childhood crime.

From a community-based angle, intervention methods can involve organizing and promoting educational support, after-school activities, and art or sports workshops that involve groupwork and collaboration. Efforts can also be put in creating a safer, more supportive environment at school by training teachers to create a more encouraging space within the classroom. Mentors and other community members should work to encourage children and adolescent to discuss the issues or challenges that they are

facing, and to guide them toward finding a more prosocial solution.

Future research can expand on the theoretical basis of this paper and further test the link between prosocial dynamics and the reduction of childhood crime by actively improving prosocial dynamics in families and communities and testing the results.

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