



## Thoughts Behind Action: Recidivism Among Children-in-Conflict with the Law

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### Abstract

Several factors contribute to the Philippines' continuing problem of children in conflict with the Law (CICL) recidivism. The acquisition of critical skills for positive reintegration into society is hampered by limited access to excellent education and a lack of tailored aftercare services. In order to address the critical problem of recidivism, this study attempts to provide information pertinent to the particular difficulties that cause CICL to interact with the legal system repeatedly. The rising rates of CICL reoffending in the nation and the significant consequences for these young people's futures highlight the urgency of this study. In order to break the cycle of criminality and promote rehabilitation, it is imperative to recognize and address its underlying causes. Utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), children ages 15 years and 1 day but not more than 18 years old with pending cases at law who had previously committed offences at Local Government Units in Second Chance Home of Calamba, Philippines (SCH) were asked using a semi-structured interview. This study generated eleven (11) superordinate themes, which were Dysfunctional Households, Multifaceted Issues in Early School Leaving, Inconsistent Support from the Community, Practicing Juvenile Justice, Criminality in the Community, Offender Profiling, Perceived Psychological Distress due to Formal Labels, Social Marginalization; Inexistent CICL Segregation; Social Modeling; and Delinquent Peers and Family. As a result, an enhanced diversion program for CICL released as adults and released as minors was crafted.

**Keywords:** *CICL, Recidivism, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

### INTRODUCTION

Recidivism is a complex issue that often stems from a variety of factors. Most countries have high recidivism rates, with at least one in every five people reoffending within two years (Yukhnenko et al., 2023). This places a considerable societal burden on public safety, healthcare, and related costs (Yukhnenko et al., 2023). Some juvenile courts have identified unmet or inconsistent mental healthcare as one of the major issues causing youth to remain in the system, usually for reoffending (Ch.12 Healthcare | Desktop Guide, n.d.). As such, more extensive rehabilitation and reintegration programs are required to address these underlying causes in order to lessen the chance of repeat offences and encourage effective re-entry into society (Onsat & Breva, 2023). In addition, identifying the various factors that lead to recidivism can facilitate the development of preventative initiatives that are customized to meet the criminogenic requirements of each unique individual (Villanueva, 2019). Reflecting on our social identities, particularly in light of the social positions of our respondents, allows us to gain a better understanding of the power dynamics to choose appropriate approaches to these issues (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Juvenile criminal responsibility is not positively correlated with age (Shang et al., 2021). At present, lowering the age of criminal responsibility in the Philippines has been a subject of considerable debate. There is no mechanism in place to protect these children from cohabiting with hardened criminals, and there is no guarantee that they will be protected from violence and exploitation in detention if such a proposal becomes law (UNICEF, n.d.).

Pursuant to the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act of the Philippines, a CICL found guilty of an offence shall not serve his entire sentence in jail; it is suspended (Laserna, n.d.). Instead of punishing and treating juvenile offenders as criminals, the State and community provide them with assistance to

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keep them from committing future offences (R.A. 9344, n.d.). However, there is a need to enhance the present diversion program implemented by the current laws of this country. Upon review of Guidelines in the Conduct of Diversion for Children-in-Conflict with the Law (Department of Social Welfare and Development [DSWD], 2008), there is no solid considered clinical basis for formulating a diversion program. Moreover, there is also no direct evidence that it will work; it is simply a model that can be used as a guide (Krishna, 2021). Furthermore, if Paragraph (b) of diversion proceedings contained in the same guidelines were used as a reference, it does not necessarily address the underlying psychological issues with CICL, including the need for improved essential aftercare and assessment right after termination of diversion. Hence, in order to address the current state of our juvenile justice system, we must urgently reform our laws (Sigue, 2019). Comprehending the core of the respondent's lived experiences with reference to recidivism may inform the existing proposal, as the concept of lived experience may be on the verge of widespread adoption in social policy (McIntosh & Wright, 2019). These perspectives give different meanings to the concept of public policy, and the idea gives public policy meaning (Digdowiseiso, 2022).

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Understanding the complexities of young offender recidivism necessitates a comprehensive exploration of the related literature, particularly within the frameworks of the Ecological Systems Theory, Labeling Theory, and Differential Association Theory. The Layers of Community, as conceptualized by the Ecological Systems Theory, provide a foundational framework for comprehending the multifaceted influences that shape the lives of young offenders. Delving into the Effects of Labels, as outlined by the Labeling Theory, further illuminates the psychological and social ramifications that categorizations can impose on juvenile offenders. Simultaneously, the examination of Association with Criminals and Deviant Individuals, within the scope of the Differential Association Theory, unveils the intricate social dynamics contributing to the acquisition of delinquent behaviours. By interweaving these theoretical perspectives, the related literature aims to unravel the interconnected layers influencing juvenile delinquency, providing a nuanced understanding essential for developing targeted interventions and strategies.

#### **Layers of Community**

Biswal (2020) studied and examined how different parental risk variables affected the development of delinquency in children. The results demonstrated that the primary cause of adolescent delinquency was a lack of adequate parental direction and supervision. Parental disapproval and the lack of maternal attachment and emotional support were the main causes of female misbehaviour. Lack of parental participation and parents' lack of quality time with their children were the key contributors to male delinquency.

In like manner, using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997) and the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (Malik, 2011), Sadiq et al. (2021) explored how parental approval and rejection affected the psychological problems of juvenile criminals. Paternal acceptance and all three types of paternal rejection—hostility/aggression, indifference/neglect, and undifferentiated rejection—significantly predicted psychological issues in young people, according to the results of simple linear and multiple regression analysis. According to the study, fathers' gestures of acceptance and rejection had a significant and considerable influence on the emotional and psychological development of their children.

Regarding this, Mwangangi (2019) said in her study of the "Role of Family in Dealing with Juvenile Delinquency" that while there were many contributing factors to juvenile delinquency, the role that the child's family played in his or her development was crucial. The study found that there were several important family-related traits that had an effect on teenage crime. A few of these were parental attitudes, the degree of family cohesion, physical aggression, and distant parenting. The flaws

of the juvenile justice system, poverty, restricted access to school, substance abuse, and genetic problems were some additional non-family factors that had an impact on adolescent misbehaviour.

In their examination of the effects of broken families on delinquency, Rao and Singh (2021) discovered that the absence of dads from children's lives was one of the key causes of adolescent crime, sadness, and eating disorders. Their research suggested that a solid parent-child relationship aids in reducing juvenile crime.

Similarly, Ullah et al. (2021), in a study entitled "The Nexus of Family Environment with Youth Street Criminal Behaviour in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan", hypothesized that family practices increased the severity of teenage street criminality and that harsh practices and insufficient support from a family were significant variables for street crimes.

The study "Delinquency, Arrest and Early School Leaving" by Van Ours (2021) illustrated how tightly interwoven arrest, delinquency, and early school leaving were. The study's reduction in educational achievement demonstrated involvement in income-producing delinquent activities. Furthermore, the significant impact of delinquency on school dropouts highlighted the importance of extending crime prevention efforts beyond youth who encountered the justice system.

Moreover, Nyariki & Onsarigo (2019) determined the impact of social factors on recidivism. He looked at the effect of prison rehabilitation on recidivism and determined how time spent in prison affected recidivism. A relationship was found between the level of education of respondents and the type of crimes committed. Additionally, the survey found that most respondents had not progressed beyond primary education and that the most common crimes committed by repeat offenders in institutions were robbery, drug trafficking, and corruption. Repeat offenders believed they would have had better chances had they been well educated, had a steady income, and engaged in better practices.

Lastly, Kumar (2021) investigated the sociological and historical aspects of youth, juvenile crime, and societal and governmental responses to children in conflict with the law (CCL) in India in a chapter of a book titled *Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology*. To criminalize children's acts, the book looked into how numerous social, economic, political, and legal factors had an impact on the redefinition of children's ages. The government's use of punitive measures to solve CCL and the "adultification" of children was criticized in the book from an abolitionist perspective. This led to what the author referred to as the resurgence of delinquent "adult children."

### **Effects of Labels**

In a study of recidivism in criminal gangs as the problem of social identity, Skovlund et al. (2021) stated that gang members returned to their gangs after imprisonment. His study argued that some interventions might be doomed to failure by default because they failed to appropriately address social identity concerns as a key component of the issue, even though the circumstances for successful intervention may be difficult to uncover.

Similarly, in a study entitled "Negative Public Perception and Reoffending of Discharged Offenders," Nwafor et al. (2022) investigated how convicts' propensity for reoffending in Anambra State was influenced by the negative public perception of them after being released from jail. This study revealed that the stigma associated with discharged offenders caused many of the societal ramifications that they encountered, which then encouraged them to commit crimes once more.

The fifth aspect identified in Idris et al.'s (2022) study entitled "Juvenile Delinquency: Why Minors Turn into Monsters?" was society's function as a catalyst for criminal behaviour. According to the specific findings, one of the characteristics that contributed to adolescents becoming involved in illicit activities was a neighbour who enjoyed chit-chatting with other neighbours. Anger and intimidation against the delinquent's environment were the primary motivators for criminal action.

Furthermore, Warren (2023) explored the negative impacts of criminal labelling on community reintegration because various barriers prohibited successful community re-entry due to the social

stigma associated with the criminal record. The findings of her study showed that, while more widespread reform was required to erase the stigma associated with being a criminal, smaller-scale measures were both feasible and necessary to increase the chances of successful re-entry and minimize the risk of recidivism.

Moreover, Ekanayake (2020) investigated the causes of the increase in recidivists. A section of the study showed how social rejection, criminalization, corrupt politics, and the socialization of minor offenders into major offenders had all led to the rise of recidivist and reconvicted offenders in modern society. The main causes of problems with social integration were low levels of community acceptance, a lack of skill-building during punishment periods, unpredictability, political influence on authorities, stigmatization and risk associated with social exclusion, and a lack of involvement in rehabilitation programs during the process of reintegrating offenders, psychological discomfort associated with social stigmas, and a lack of severity in punitive measures.

Lastly, *The Self-Esteem Sentence: Evidence for Labeling Theory* by Valenty (2021) revealed that lower self-esteem was an effect of criminal labels. This was in reference to the examination of the effects of criminal labels on self-esteem.

### **Association with Deviant Individuals**

In a study of criminal association and recidivism in selected prisons in Riverstate, Robert & Ifeanyi-chukwu (2022) examined the relationship between criminal association and recidivism. It had been found that association with criminals, overcrowding, and lack of properly categorized separation of inmates in selected detention facilities influenced recidivism.

Similarly, Loeffler & Nagin (2022) examined the available evidence on how incarceration experience may influence a former inmate's likelihood of reoffending. The research focused on two types. Negative effects of reducing relapse occurred primarily in settings where rehabilitation programs were emphasized, and positive criminalization effects were seen in settings where such programs were not emphasized. Findings for pre-trial incarceration were more consistent, with most findings showing a detrimental effect on recidivism after release. The study concluded that additional work was needed to better understand the heterogeneous effects of incarceration and the mechanisms by which incarceration effects occurred when observed. For policymakers, the conclusions on the general detrimental effects of pre-trial detention contributed to a larger body of evidence pointing to the societal value of limiting its use.

Furthermore, in his paper *Mediating the Gang-Delinquency Relationship with Proactive Criminal Thinking*, Walters (2019) noted that gang participation may encourage future delinquency because it raises children's chances of having a proactive criminal mindset. Associating with juvenile delinquents may reinforce criminal behaviour to the CICL.

By the same, Walters (2021) investigated the notion that prosocial connections can function as protective aspects by engaging with key components of peer influence effects. It was discovered that prosocial peer relationships can play a proactive role at various points in the peer influence sequence and that they can be more than just the opposite of peer delinquency.

Moreover, peer pressure, the adolescent stage (emotional instability and personality), financial instability, environmental factors (family background, parental skills, and surroundings), and social media were the main factors that influenced children to commit crimes, according to Surong et al. (2020) study on the causes of juvenile delinquency and its prevention by the community. It was also discovered that education played an important role in the formation of one's belief system and moral values and that communities and schools can develop awareness campaigns, role-playing exercises, and counselling to help young people learn how to engage in positive self-evaluation and deal with aggression.

Through qualitative analysis and firsthand accounts, the research sheds light on the intricate

dynamics within the lives of young offenders. The implications of this study extend to enriching our understanding of the contextual influences that contribute to juvenile delinquency, allowing for a more targeted approach to intervention and rehabilitation strategies. By addressing gaps and nuances uncovered in earlier investigations, the current study contributes valuable perspectives that can inform policy, practice, and further research in the realm of juvenile justice and rehabilitation.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The study focused on CICL recidivists who have pending cases at law and previous violations. The data was collected using a validated semi-structured interview questionnaire. Six (6) to 25 participants are sufficient to get saturated data (Ellis, 2016; Karahan, 2022). As such, the researcher selected ten (10) CICL Recidivists at Second Chance Home of Calamba, Philippines, who had prior violations and were undergoing rehabilitation. Purposive homogeneous sampling was used to select respondents who were male children aged 15-18 years.

The researcher, through electronic mail, submitted a written formal request addressed to the Officer-in-Charge of City Social Welfare and Development (CSWD) of Calamba. It was done to request permission to conduct the study among CICL. Attached to the written request were the objectives of the study, the intended approach for the study, the intended qualification of the participants of the study, and the validated semi-structured research questionnaires administered to CICL Participants. Upon approval by the head of the facility, the researcher personally appeared in the shelter and conducted the interview sessions among children who shared the same phenomenon. The CICL, being minors, cannot expressly give their consent. However, Courts may appoint a person or an institution who is deemed suitable to provide proper care and guidance to a minor (A.M. No. 03-04-04-SC, n.d.). An assent form was also used to acquire the consent of the child through the head of the facility, who then was with them for the duration of the interview.

The Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) was utilized for qualitative investigation, emphasizing similarities in group experiences and examining relevant details for a specific phenomenon. To increase the validity of the collected data, the researcher utilized methodical triangulation. Using an interview protocol, the responses were gathered by asking the respondents for a validated semi-structured interview. As contained in the same protocol, the observable manner and behaviour of how the CICL responded to the set of questions were noted. Following the interview, the transcription was made, and a copy was sent to the CICL shelter for member-checking. Thereafter, the member-checked responses were consolidated with the observed behaviour and the researcher's notes to form the final data.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The table shows the profile of respondents who were participants in the study; it shows their age as well as the number of offences they have committed. The information collected from the respondents is constrained to their ages and their responses to the posed questions, aligning with the provisions of the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (National Privacy Commission, 2023). Due to the pending legal cases involving the respondents, the researcher was prohibited from collecting additional personal information or detailed descriptions.

**Table 1.** Profile of Respondents

| <b>Respondent</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Number Of Offenses Committed</b> |
|-------------------|------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>AAA</b>        | 17         | 2                                   |
| <b>BBB</b>        | 17         | 2                                   |
| <b>CCC</b>        | 17         | 2                                   |
| <b>DDD</b>        | 16         | 7                                   |
| <b>EEE</b>        | 16         | 3                                   |

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| <b>Respondent</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Number Of Offenses Committed</b> |
|-------------------|------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>FFF</b>        | 15         | 5                                   |
| <b>GGG</b>        | 17         | 2                                   |
| <b>HHH</b>        | 15         | 2                                   |
| <b>III</b>        | 15         | 2                                   |
| <b>JJJ</b>        | 15         | 3                                   |

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The data collected from the investigation of CICL's experiences and the investigation of the provided similar experiences were among the methods of inquiry. As a result, the research was guided by the central question, that is:

"What is the essence of the lived experience of children in conflict with the Law as regards Recidivism?"

Meanwhile, the corollary question has been answered in the discussion below:

**Corollary Question:** How do the CICL describe their experience in the commission of offences?

Interview Question Number 1: How do your parents and siblings support you with your rehabilitation?

When asked, CICL AAA expressed sadness when he answered about his parents' death at a young age; he was expressing a desire for parental guidance. In reference to the same question, CICL CCC shared that he and his father were not on good terms; he felt uneasy and was rejected at home. It led him to leave home due to his father's biased belief in gossipers. This experience made his life unbearable.

In relation to this, Mwangangi (2019) found that family plays a crucial role in addressing juvenile delinquency, with factors like attitudes, cohesion, aggression, and distance impacting teenage crime.

Interview Question Number 2: How do your teachers, classmates, and school administration support you in your rehabilitation?

Upon inquiry, CICL BBB admitted that he stopped studying; he felt ashamed to answer and expressed a desire to continue his education. Likewise, when CICL JJJ was asked, he shared his experience of abuse in his second-grade school, describing the deep pain he felt. He was bullied and avoided by classmates, and his parents did not really bother to check on him.

In relation to this, Ward et al.'s (2020) study on delinquency, arrest, and early school leaving revealed intricate connections between reduced educational attainment and involvement in criminal activities. Early school leaving often emerges as a complex outcome within the microsystem of a child when confronted with multifaceted challenges.

Interview Question Number 3: How did the LGU, DSWD and other law enforcement agencies support you in your rehabilitation?

In the course of the interview, CICL EEE expressed gratitude for their commitment to a rehabilitation shelter. Likewise, when asked about the community support systems, CICL HHH expressed anger towards Local Government Officials, expressing disappointment with inconsistencies in their policies and handling minor violators. He was clenching his fist.

In a book by Kumar (2021), he explored youth, juvenile crime, and societal responses to children in conflict with the law in India. It critiques the government's use of punitive methods and the "adultification" of children, resulting in the resurgence of delinquent "adult children."

Interview Question Number 4: How did the Law help you with your rehabilitation?

When asked, CICL DDD expressed gratitude for the enforced law, stating that it has given him hope and a path for a better future. Likewise, CICL GGG expressed awareness of the absence of criminal records after release, expressing hope and excitement. He expressed gratitude for the opportunity to have no criminal record in his name upon release.

Children-in-Conflict with the Law (CICL) are granted a new start without fear of discrimination in employment applications. Sec. 38 of the Rule of Children in Conflict with the Law requires the removal of index references and adherence to directives SCweb (2023).

Interview Question Number 5: Is there any chance that you have experienced a criminal act in your community? If there were, what are those, and what were you able to feel upon seeing them?

When asked, CICL BBB reported that there are frequent fights in his community, revealing that he saw delinquent incidents firsthand. The researcher found his emotional response alarming, as he was not concerned with the widespread criminality in their community. When asked the same question, CICL DDD responded that he witnessed delinquent activities and was unaffected by criminal incidents in their community. He referred to drug addict raids and killings as "normal," indicating that recurring criminal behaviour became a part of their everyday life.

Relative to these, Joyner & Beaver's (2023) study analyses showed a significant correlation between callous-unemotional traits and aggressive and delinquent behaviours.

Interview Question Number 6: Did the people around you pre-labelled you in a negative manner? Do they call you hurtful words?

When asked, CICL CCC expressed anger and distress towards the deviant labels given to him. He used a loud voice to express his hurting experience, mentioning people who called him crazy and a troublemaker. Using the same question, CICL FFF reported that gossipers in their community blame him for missing items. They were accused of involvement in theft despite not doing anything.

In relation to this, Shi et al.'s (2022) study about Public Stigma revealed that both direct and indirect arrest experiences are positively correlated with public stigma.

Interview Question Number 7: How did the people around you react upon learning that you were convicted of a specific crime?

When asked, CICL CCC proudly spoke about what he did with his neighbours for gossiping. He was claiming that it was a way to take vengeance. He wished them ill and acted on the community's label. Also, CICL JJJ shared his experience of being treated rudely in his community, highlighting the pain he experienced due to a past mistake. He experienced physical harm, which was exacerbated by his label, making it difficult to view the world from his perspective.

Idris et al.'s (2022) study on juvenile delinquency found that society's role as a catalyst for criminal activity, including neighbourly chatter, hostility, and intimidation, contributes to minors becoming monsters.

Interview Question Number 8: How did discrimination and/ or opinions about your present conviction affect you as a person?

Upon inquiry, CICL AAA explained that people around him are avoiding him, causing him to feel anxious and limited in social interactions. While CICL BBB expressed pain and degradation from hearing labels.

Relatively, Valenty's (2021) study shows criminal labels negatively impact self-esteem,

highlighting the impact of labelling theory.

Interview Question Number 9: In the shelter, how were you segregated from your fellow CICL?

CICL GGG informed the researcher about the shelter's two rooms; he expressed satisfaction with the room designation and rehabilitation structure. However, CICL III expressed dissatisfaction with the shelter's current designation and the number of CICLs committed, stating they were sleeping beside each other.

In relation to this, Robert & Ifeanyichukwu (2022) found that criminal association, overcrowding, and inadequate inmate separation influence recidivism. Further investigation is needed to prevent indiscriminate detention and recidivism.

Interview Question Number 10: How does socializing with fellow CICL affect your judgment?

When asked, CICL AAA expressed enthusiasm for the shelter's positive impact on his rehabilitation. The child had a clearer understanding of what was right and wrong. While CICL BBB expressed his inability to think through actions in his association with other CICL residents.

Like these, Walton et al. (2021) found that relationship-orienting interventions reduced recidivism among children reentering school from Juvenile Detention.

Interview Question Number 11: Were you able to associate yourself with people in your community who have questionable character? If there were, what were you able to learn from them?

Upon inquiry, CICL AAA hesitated to answer the question, but he relayed that he associated himself with people with questionable characters, including distant cousins. At the same time, CICL CCC claimed that there were no criminals in his association with drug users. He was unaware that drug use is a criminal offence.

Walters (2021) examined if prosocial associations can protect against the effects of peer influence. They found that prosocial peer associations may be proactive and more than just a converse of peer delinquency.

Gathering testimonies from CICL Respondents, the researcher sought out the emergent themes from the manuscript. They were the following: Dysfunctional Household, Multifaceted Challenges in Early School Leaving, Inconsistent Support from the Community, Practicing Juvenile Justice, Criminality in the Community, Offender Profiling, Perceived Psychological Distress for Formal Labels, Social Marginalization, Inexistent CICL Segregation, Social Modeling; and Delinquent Peers and Family.

### **Dysfunctional Household**

The first interview question, "How do your Parents and Siblings support you with your rehabilitation?" generated the first theme, "Dysfunctional Household."

The researcher found that the CICL were part of a household where there was parental separation, dead parent/s, and emotional connection issues with parents. These changes affected their behaviour and decision-making abilities. Lack of parental guidance and rejection can negatively impact children, leading to reliance on peer groups and negative influences. Parents must provide guidance, encouragement, supervision, and protection to prevent harmful behaviour and create a stable environment for growth and development.

In relation to this, Sadiq's (2021) study on parental approval and rejection impacting young offenders' psychological struggles revealed that fathers' expressions significantly impact their children's development. The microsystem, as conceptualized by the ecological systems theory,



encompasses the immediate environment in which an individual exists, and crucially, this includes relationships within the family unit. In the context of a child's development, a home characterized by instability becomes a significant factor within the microsystem. The family, being the primary socializing agent, plays a pivotal role in shaping a child's personal experiences and overall well-being.

### **Multifaceted Challenges in Early School Leaving**

The second interview question, "How do your Teachers, Classmates, and School Administration support you in your rehabilitation?" generated the second theme, "Multifaceted Challenges in Early School Leaving."

As seen in the responses of CICL, most of them were only able to acquire a low level of education. The researcher noted similar responses from children relative to school quitting as well as its causes. None of the CICL respondents were able to continue their education. As such, a variety of challenges were found to be experienced by children that led to early school leaving. Parental Absence was a subtheme that exhibited the experience of CICL pertinent to the unavailability of parents that caused them to drop out of school; Financial Difficulties as a subtheme showed that CICL left school because of the limitations in finances; Language Barrier, as another subtheme, shows how the perceived shame of CICL pertinent to his use of a dialect caused him to leave school early; Friend's Influence was a subtheme that showed how association with peers have affected the child's perception that caused him to leave school; and the subtheme Bullying shows the excruciating experiences of the CICL pertinent to the series of abuse in their school and its system.

Relatively, Nyariki & Onsarigo (2019) studied the impact of social factors on recidivism and prison rehabilitation. Results showed a relationship between education level and crime types. Common crimes committed by repeat offenders were robbery, drug trafficking, and corruption. The study recommended mandatory participation in academic training for offenders. The microsystem, as posited by the ecological systems theory, comprises immediate and direct influences within a child's environment, with the school being a pivotal component. Persistent bullying can create a hostile and emotionally distressing school experience, driving some students to disengage from the educational system prematurely. When coupled with financial difficulties, the microsystem becomes a challenging arena where limited resources hinder access to support systems.

### **Inconsistent Support from the Community**

The third interview question, "How did the LGU, DSWD, and other law enforcement agencies support you in your rehabilitation?" generated the third theme, "Inconsistent Support from the Community."

This theme explores CICL's experiences with DSWD and local government support, emphasizing the inconsistent practical and emotional networks of the child. The subtheme, Helpful Shelter, showcases children's positive support and guidance from the CICL shelter, highlighting their rehabilitation efforts. On the contrary, the subtheme Apathetic Community referred to the responses of CICL as regards the nonchalant treatment of the local government units to the plight of its CICL.

Manuel's (2019) study found effective rehabilitation programs for rehabilitated teenagers in Cabanatuan City, Philippines, focusing on diversion, vocational training, livelihood skills, enjoyable activities, and sports development. In the context of the Ecological Systems Theory, inconsistent support from the community within this framework can impede the child's journey towards positive transformation. The exosystem, with its external factors like community services, policies, and resources, directly affects the child's access to rehabilitative opportunities. Inconsistencies in community support may lead to gaps in programs, mentorship, and social services crucial for the child's successful reintegration into society.

### **Practicing Juvenile Justice**

The fourth interview question, "How did the Law help you with your rehabilitation?" generated the fourth theme, "Practicing Juvenile Justice."

This theme revolves around the lived experiences of CICL related to the support received from the existing law. This revealed positive responses of the CICL as regards the support provided by law after release. These were personal transformation, protection from incarceration, and criminal record avoidance.

DSWD Caraga (2023) shares the story of Tata, a former CICL who experienced interventions and engagements that improved his social abilities, self-esteem, and character. Through individual and group programs, he became a responsible resident, respected protective practices, and developed strong character strengths. Legal frameworks, policies, and support systems within the exosystem play a crucial role in shaping the rehabilitation process for CICL. A robust legal infrastructure can provide the necessary framework for rehabilitation programs, access to education, and community-based services, contributing to the child's successful reintegration into society.

### **Criminality in the Community**

The fifth interview question, "Is there any chance that you have experienced a criminal act in your community? If there were, what are those, and what were you able to feel upon seeing it?" generated the fifth theme, "Criminality in the Community."

In this theme, the CICL detailed their experiences of the crime witnessed in their community. The majority of the CICL witnessed widespread criminality in their community, which some had even normalized. Some responses leaned towards their involvement in criminal activities, and some were even victims. It is alarming that such activities are even being coined as "normal" by the child through repeated instances of delinquency.

According to Jones & Pierce's (2020) empirical study, adverse childhood experiences experienced individually, cumulatively, or in clusters by the age of five are linked to juvenile delinquent behaviour. The normalization of delinquency through exposure to crime is a concept closely aligned with the principles of the Differential Association Theory. When individuals, particularly young people, are consistently exposed to criminal behaviour, these behaviours may become normalized within their social context. In a social environment where criminal activities are prevalent and normalized, individuals may learn and internalize these behaviours as acceptable or even expected, contributing to the perpetuation of delinquency within certain social groups or communities.

### **Offender Profiling**

The sixth interview question, "Did the people around you pre-labelled you in a negative manner? Do they call you hurtful words?" generated the sixth theme, "Offender Profiling."

This theme emerged from children's responses to community treatment before conviction, highlighting hurtful words and social exclusion. This perpetuates the cycle of stigmatization and exclusion, negatively impacting mental well-being.

Relative to this, Skovlund and Larsen's (2021) research on recidivism in criminal gangs emphasizes the need to address social identity issues in interventions, as some may fail. Public stigma, as seen through the lens of the Labeling Theory, plays a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of reoffending. When individuals are stigmatized as criminals, they may face limited opportunities for rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society.

### **Perceived Psychological Distress for Formal Labels**

The seventh interview question, "How did the people around you react upon learning that you were convicted of a specific crime?" generated the seventh theme, "Perceived Psychological Distress for Formal Labels."

The theme encapsulates the community's response to the CICL's formal label. Others were surprised; some were the centre of rumours, and some were even subjected to unauthorized community punishment. These are perceived psychological distress of children as regards labels given by competent authorities.

The study by Nwafor (2022) found that negative public perception of discharged offenders in Anambra State impacts their reoffending propensity; stigma encourages reoffending; community social initiatives are suggested to convince neighbours. The labelling theory provides valuable insights into understanding young offenders in relation to criminal labels. Individuals internalize the criminal identity imposed upon them, potentially leading to increased delinquent behaviour. In response, some young offenders might adopt the aggressive or delinquent roles expected of them, perpetuating a cycle of criminal behaviour.

### **Social Marginalization**

The eighth interview question, "How did discrimination and/ or opinions about your present conviction affect you as a person?" generated the eighth theme, "Social Marginalization."

This theme emerged out of the effects of the labels on children on account of the feelings and personal reactions of the child towards these informal or formal labels. There was the invalidation of personal feelings from some children, low self-esteem, scapegoating of the community for all criminality, paranoia, and social withdrawal.

Relatively, Valenty's (2021) study shows criminal labels negatively impact self-esteem, highlighting the impact of labelling theory. Relative to the mentioned theory, when individuals, especially young offenders, are labelled as delinquents or criminals, the reaction of society can significantly impact their self-perception.

### **Inexistent CICL Segregation**

The ninth interview question, "In shelter, how were you segregated from your fellow CICL?" generated the ninth theme, "Inexistent CICL Segregation."

Under this theme, the CICL were able to enumerate the segregation of CICL with his fellow delinquents. The answers of the CICL reveal that the CICL in the shelter were heterogeneous. The CICLs in the shelter were not segregated according to the gravity of the crime charged and their age. Furthermore, free communication happens on all CICLs. There was overpopulation in the shelter as it already exceeded its sheltering capacity.

Relative to the corresponding information gathered, Robert & Ifeanyichukwu (2022) studied the link between criminal association and recidivism in River State prisons, finding associations with criminals, congestion, and inadequate inmate separation impact recidivism. In the context of overcrowding, the differential association theory suggests that individuals confined in densely populated and restricted environments, such as prisons, can engage in criminal association. In an overcrowded setting, the chances of forming associations with individuals who have a criminal background increase, potentially leading to the learning and adoption of criminal behaviours.

### **Social Modeling**

The tenth interview question, "How does socializing with fellow CICL affect your judgment?" generated the tenth theme, "Social Modeling."

This theme arose from the judgement of the CICL after associating themselves with fellow CICL. There was a positive change in behaviour among children. As a matter of fact, the children were

able to peacefully resolve their misunderstanding with their fellow CICL. Some responses suggested that there was also a relapse in committing violations inside the shelter.

In relation to this, Walton et al.'s (2021) study explores relationship-oriented interventions for reducing recidivism in children returning to school after juvenile detention, minimizing discrimination. While the Differential Association Theory is often associated with the learning of criminal behaviour, its principles can also be applied to reinforce good behaviour among young offenders.

### **Delinquent Peers and Family**

The eleventh interview question, "Were you able to associate yourself with people who have a questionable character in your community? If there were, what were you able to learn from them?" generated the tenth theme, "Delinquent Peers and Family."

Under this theme, CICL were able to respond with the associations they had with persons with questionable characters. These were peers who engaged in delinquent activities and, thus, were interpreted as criminals and members of the family who engaged in criminal acts.

Relatively, Surong and Lyngdoh's (2020) study found that peer pressure, adolescent stage, financial instability, environmental factors, and social media influence juvenile delinquency. Education plays a crucial role in shaping moral values, and communities can develop awareness campaigns, role-playing exercises, and counselling to help young people handle aggression. The application of the Differential Association Theory to the association of young offenders with criminals in the Philippines has been a topic of debate in discussions about lowering the age of criminal liability. Proponents of lowering the age often argue that exposure to criminal behaviour at an early age, especially through association with delinquent peers or adults, may contribute to the learning and adoption of criminal activities.

### **CONCLUSION**

Emerged themes like dysfunctional households, multifaceted problems resulting in early school leaving, inconsistent community support, and criminality in the community enhance our comprehension of the interplay of different systems underpinning the Ecological Systems Theory. This contribution highlights the need for focused interventions that address the complex issues at the family and community levels, promoting a more nuanced viewpoint of the theory.

In a relative sense, in addressing issues on the role of different systems in the development of a child, expanding the existing rehabilitation plan to incorporate the legal guardian of the juvenile into the rehabilitation, utilizing psycho-education, and introducing the concept of therapeutic foster care for abandoned children in the existing diversion programs recognize the crucial role of legal guardians in shaping the immediate environment (microsystem) of a child. By means of integrating legal guardians into the rehabilitation plan, the theory acknowledges the significance of fostering positive and supportive relationships within the family structure. In addition, by uncovering the complexities within the microsystem related to early school leaving, the study recommends extending the Alternative Learning System (ALS) from junior high school to senior high school. It enhances the ecological perspective by recognizing the interconnected relationships between different microsystems, specifically the family, school, and community. Furthermore, by uncovering the influence of criminality in the community on the lives of young offenders, the study emphasizes the need for enhanced training for local government units (LGUs). This recommendation extends the ecological perspective by recognizing the role of external systems, such as local governance structures, in shaping the environment for juvenile development. These additions to the Ecological Systems Theory underscore the importance of adapting and expanding support structures within the different systems to meet the unique needs of the child.

Emerged themes such as offender profiling, perceived psychological distress linked to formal

labels, and experiences of social marginalization significantly enrich our understanding of the dynamics of labelling. This contribution emphasizes the intricate interplay between societal categorizations and individual experiences, shedding light on the psychological and social dimensions of labelling. The study extends the Labeling Theory by providing a more detailed exploration of how specific components, like offender profiling and perceived distress, contribute to the social dynamics of marginalization. In light of the study's findings, a crucial recommendation emerges for the strict implementation of laws safeguarding the privacy of data pertaining to children in conflict with the law. Recognizing the potential harm associated with labelling and the sensitivity of personal information, the study underscores the importance of protecting the privacy rights of these young offenders. Additionally, recognizing the potential isolation and psychological distress experienced by CICL-facing labelling, the study suggests the establishment of support groups. These groups can provide a platform for individuals with shared experiences to connect, share coping strategies, and offer emotional support.

Building on the theoretical contribution of a qualitative study to the Differential Association Theory in the lives of CICL, two critical themes emerged. First, there is a pressing need for proper categorization within institutional settings, specifically addressing the inexistent CICL segregation. Implementing and reinforcing effective categorization protocols will not only contribute to a more conducive environment for rehabilitation but will also align with the foundational principles of the Differential Association Theory by recognizing the impact of social contexts on the learning of behaviours. Secondly, recommending increased funding for programs and initiatives that support positive influences is crucial. Adequate funding can facilitate the implementation of intervention strategies aimed at redirecting associations toward more positive influences, addressing the root causes of delinquent behaviour.

### **LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH**

To enhance the diversion program based on study findings, the researcher recommends adopting a holistic approach. Utilize the principles of the Ecological Systems Theory by involving immediate systems like family and school in the child's rehabilitation. Implement laws strictly to safeguard privacy, address Labeling Theory concerns, and create social groups for supportive rehabilitation. Further, it aligns with the Differential Association Theory by categorizing CICL properly and increasing funding for shelters. This integrated strategy aims to create an effective and targeted diversion program, acknowledging the diverse influences on juvenile behaviour. Moreover, further study is recommended to improve the existing diversion program in the Philippines continually, ensuring ongoing refinement and adaptation to the evolving needs of the CICL involved.

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