

Exploring Socio-Psychological Factors in Juvenile Delinquency: Insights from American Memoirs

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Abstract

The troubling increase in juvenile crime underscores the urgent need for this research paper, which aims to unravel the complexities of this pressing issue and unveil effective solutions. The well-being of our children is inextricably linked to the future of society itself; thus, it is imperative to shield them from the corrosive influences of delinquency and to cultivate nurturing environments that promote their development. In addition, the memoirs explored within this study serve as a powerful lens through which we can glimpse the lived experiences of delinquent youth. This research aspires to weave these narratives into the fabric of mainstream literary studies. This paper goes beyond examining juvenile delinquency; it is a loud plea for collective introspection and sustained change. It seeks to foster environments prioritising understanding, guidance, and support for young individuals grappling with these challenges. By delving into the chosen works, this study illuminates the diverse sociopsychological factors that contribute to the inclination of youth toward delinquent behaviour. In examining these underlying motivations, this thesis seeks to highlight the intricacies of the issue and advocate for a more compassionate and inclusive societal response to the struggles faced by juvenile delinquents.

Keywords: Juvenile delinquency, American Memoirs, Socio-Psychological aspects, Family Dynamics, Emotional Manifestation, Drugs, Child Abuse

INTRODUCTION

Children are a vital part of our society, representing the future of any nation. A happy and healthy childhood lays the foundation for a prosperous future. However, what occurs when these children veer onto the wrong path? In such cases, it becomes essential to address juvenile offences. Often, the underlying reasons or motives for the crimes committed by young individuals are overlooked due to their age and challenging environments. However, over the past two decades, juvenile crime has been rising significantly. As children become more exposed to a globalised world, they gain access to information and experiences reserved for adults. The interplay of various psycho-social factors comes into play, and an intensive and comprehensive understanding that includes the juveniles' conflict with their families is required and also takes into account community, school, and peer interactions.

Any 'minor' or a person below the legal age of majority who commits an act that violates the law is known as a juvenile delinquent, and the participation of minors in such activities is called juvenile delinquency or juvenile offending. Delinquency may be broadly understood as the failure of young people to adhere to

socially acceptable norms of conduct. It encompasses behaviours with varied social repercussions, ranging from minor mischief to serious assault, subject to legal penalties.

Subgroups and communities within a society undergoing a modernisation process face swift and intricate changes in the chances and circumstances that govern daily life. This societal transformation affects people and eventually leads to many social issues. One of the many societal issues discovered in recent years is deviant conduct. Different societies have different ideas on what constitutes aberrant behaviour. The viewpoints of others and the spectator's cultural and social background determine whether an action is good or terrible. Different treatment based on age is required for certain conduct deemed abnormal. A toddler running out in the nude, for instance, is not taken seriously, while an adult committing the same conduct is. On the other hand, whilst many activities are not illegal for adults, they may result in governmental involvement if children carry them out because they encourage criminal activity. Running away from home and disobeying parents or teachers are two examples of behaviours that adults can engage in without consequence, which could result in a child being taken to court and possibly even placed in a correctional facility.

Delinquency may be broadly understood as the failure of young people to adhere to socially acceptable norms of conduct. The word delinquency is derived from the Latin word "delinquent," which signifies neglect. Delinquency refers to behaviours having varied social repercussions, ranging from minor mischief to serious assault, that are subject to legal penalties. There is universal agreement among the great majority of the countries of the globe that antisocial conduct, which in their laws is characterised as a criminal offence, constitutes delinquency when committed by a juvenile. A pattern of extended emotional and social disengagement characterises delinquent activity, which eventually leads to an explosive eruption of violent action. In this case, the delinquent behaviour is not a reflection of a persistently antisocial tendency but rather the result of a personality disorder.

Juvenile delinquency is a reality that is a part of people's social lives, not just an abstract concept. Because of this, it cannot be taken lightly or ignored; if left uncontrolled today, it is a live issue that might drain the country of its very life tomorrow. If the future of society is to be prepared, the problem must be addressed scientifically right away. Delinquents disrupt the educational environment and cause issues for the instructors. In addition to causing personal pain and societal losses, they have rioted on school campuses and contributed to the pervasive problem of social indiscipline. Some sources of data make it abundantly evident that the source of youth power is not being adequately harnessed for social, cultural, economic, and civil improvements. Delinquency is becoming a significant issue that no responsible parent or educator can overlook. Instead of punishment, juvenile offenders receive thorough treatment to aid in reformation, correction, and rehabilitation. Understanding the reasons behind juvenile offenders' socially unacceptable behaviour is essential to treating them effectively.

Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse by caregivers or authority figures can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and low self-esteem. These emotions can manifest as aggressive or delinquent behaviour. Chronic neglect, often seen in poverty-stricken families, can lead to feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and depression. Neglect can also cause children to seek attention and validation through delinquent behaviour. Exposure to domestic violence or conflict between parents can create a stressful and unpredictable environment, increasing the likelihood of delinquency. The loss of a loved one, often due to incarceration, addiction, or mental illness, can lead to feelings of grief, anger, and resentment. These emotions can manifest as delinquent behaviour. Growing up in areas with high levels of community violence can desensitise young people to aggression and increase the risk of delinquency.

Trauma can disrupt the development of secure attachments to caregivers, leading to difficulties in forming healthy relationships and an increased risk of delinquency. Trauma can disrupt the regulation of emotions, leading to intense anger, frustration, and aggression. Trauma can increase impulsivity, leading to reckless behaviour and a decreased ability to consider the consequences of one's actions. Trauma can also lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and low self-esteem, which can manifest as delinquent behaviour. Trauma can increase the risk of substance abuse as a means of coping with emotions and numbing the pain of past experiences.

Literature captures all the subtleties of life and is a vital aspect of human existence. It reflects both society's positive and negative facets. With a distinct viewpoint, it examines social issues like crime and delinquency, offering a profound comprehension of the intricacies of human life. Literary explorations of the human condition shed light on the fundamental causes of societal evils. To better comprehend juvenile delinquency, this paper examines a few American memoirs that emphasise its social and psychological aspects.

Juvenile crime, a prominent theme in literature, is examined through various perspectives such as social commentary, psychological analysis, and moral dilemmas. Authors frequently portray the experiences of young characters to explore issues like poverty, social injustice, family dynamics, and the loss of innocence. Many notable works delve into the lives of a group of teenage boys from diverse socio-economic backgrounds who are involved in gang-related violence, highlighting the effects of social class and the quest for identity during adolescence. Furthermore, juvenile delinquency is often a manifestation of deeper psychological trauma. Research indicates that numerous young individuals who exhibit delinquent behaviour have faced traumatic experiences, including abuse, neglect, or loss. Such trauma can significantly affect their mental health and behaviour, leading to an increased risk of delinquency.

The theme of juvenile delinquency in American literature underscores the depiction of delinquent characters within this literary genre. The introduction highlights the emergence of a dynamic youth culture in twentieth-century America. As the century progressed, the U.S. experienced a burgeoning youth culture, prompting a transformation in children's literature from moralistic stories to those focusing on adventure and entertainment. This transition is reflected in Peter Hunt's *An Introduction to Children's Literature* (1994). Alongside this change, detective fiction gained popularity, captivating young teens while alarming adults who perceived them as defying conventional boundaries. Series like the *Hardy Boys*, created by Edward Stratemeyer, and the *Nancy Drew* mysteries presented teenage protagonists who exemplified a new sense of independence. These works seldom depicted school life, featured young teens who were assertive and authoritative and challenged traditional concepts of adolescence. The literature exposed young readers to serious themes such as crime, murder, drug trafficking, and diamond smuggling, raising concerns among adults about the potential impact of such content on youth.

The theme of juvenile delinquency in American literature highlights the presence of delinquent characters in this literary tradition. The introduction traces the emergence of a vibrant youth culture in twentieth-century America. As the twentieth century emerged, the United States witnessed a surge in youth culture, with children's literature shifting from didactic tales to adventure and entertainment stories. Rarely depicting school life, these stories showcased young teens who were outspoken, authoritative, and contradictory to traditional notions of adolescence. The literary material exposed young readers to mature themes like felonies, murder, drug peddling, diamond smuggling and more. This sparked concern among adults about the influence of such literature on youth.

Paula Fass, a historian specialising in childhood and youth in the United States, notes that the post-World

War I period marked a notable rise in college enrolment among the middle class, driven by newly acquired wealth. As young people entered these educational spaces, free from parental oversight, they began to adopt bold styles and philosophies that surprised their elders. This growing independence sparked concern in the American media, which expressed alarm over the concept of 'flaming youth,' a term popularised by a 1923 book of the same name. The emergence of this independent and rebellious spirit is powerfully depicted in literary works like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which examines the extravagances and disillusionment of the Jazz Age, and S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, which delves into the conflicts and loyalties among teenage gangs in 1960s Oklahoma.

World War II gave American teenagers a fresh sense of independence and social power. The conflict led to significant disruptions, resulting in many adolescents being left without adult supervision as women took on roles in factories and men were deployed overseas. This situation fostered greater financial autonomy, reduced compliance with parental authority, and contributed to an increase in rebellious behaviours such as smoking, drinking, and vandalism among young people. The issue of juvenile delinquency during this time has been depicted in various fictional works by American authors like Hal Ellison, Ed McBain, and Susan Eloise Hinton. Themes of profanity, sexuality, and violence are prominent in these narratives.

The socio-psychological factors contributing to juvenile delinquency are illustrated in selected American memoirs by Deborah Jiang Stein and Stefany Sowell. By analysing the personal stories of young offenders in these works, the aim is to reveal the complex interplay between social and psychological influences that shape the experiences of juvenile delinquents. Through a critical review of the memoirs, the research seeks to understand how social factors such as poverty, adoption, abuse, violence, neglect, and peer pressure interact with psychological aspects like trauma, attachment issues, autonomy, and unmet basic needs, ultimately affecting the behaviours and decisions of these young individuals. Additionally, the paper examines various contemporary factors that have significantly influenced the types of misbehaviour exhibited by youth, particularly noting how the rise of technology and media has expanded access to subcultures, contributing to an increase in cybercrimes and facilitating participation in illegal activities like violence, theft, and substance abuse.

Deborah Jiang Stein was born in 1962 in an Appalachian prison to a mother who was addicted to heroin. She spent her first year of life in confinement before being placed in foster care, ultimately being adopted by a permanent Jewish family in Seattle, Washington. Her early years were characterised by chaos and instability. The knowledge of her birth in prison and subsequent adoption was traumatic for her, leading her to experiment with drugs and engage in delinquent behaviour as a way to cope with her overwhelming emotions. In her memoir, *Prison Baby* (2014), she recounts her tumultuous teenage years and battles with addiction. She also shares her journey and the quest to discover her true identity. Her story embodies resilience, hope, and transformation as she navigates the challenges of her troubled past while working towards healing and redemption. In addition to her writing, she is a versatile author, speaker, and advocate for change. She founded the unPrison Project, a nonprofit organisation dedicated to empowering incarcerated women and girls through education, literacy, and life skills programs. Her contributions have earned her several accolades, including the 2017 L'Oreal Paris Women of Worth award. She is also the author of *Women Behind Bars*, a collection of interviews with incarcerated women, and the memoir-based play *Lockdown Love*, inspired by her passion for film and theatre. StarTribune.com on *Prison Baby*- The business of the addiction-and-recovery memoir writer is to tell all about the tenuous, soaring highs and gripping, crashing lows of substance abuse. The tool of choice is brutal honesty, and the goal is redemption.

Minneapolis writer Deborah Jiang-Stein proves herself a master at this — and then some — in her searing new book, *Prison Baby*, the story of an adoptive daughter raised by socially and politically progressive, academic Jewish parents. Jiang-Stein cuts to the chase on the first page by recounting the heart-stopping, disorienting moment of trauma she experienced when, at age 12, she came across a hidden letter revealing that she had been born in prison to a heroin-addicted mother. Jiang-Stein's self-destruction is not so much a fall as a leap, as the trauma ignites a passion for risk-taking that leads from jumping from high walls to trafficking drugs across borders and into prisons. While Jiang-Stein's life of crime, violence and addiction had put her on the path to life as a prisoner, in recovery, she uses that experience to return to prison and transform into an advocate and mentor for incarcerated girls and women. She also unlocks her capacity to love her adoptive mother. *Prison Baby* by Deborah Stein is a memoir that recounts her experiences as a pregnant woman incarcerated in a women's prison. The book addresses various psychological issues that arise from the challenging circumstances surrounding incarceration, particularly about motherhood and the impact on both incarcerated individuals and their children. One of the most prominent themes is the emotional toll of separation from family, especially for mothers. The inability to bond with their newborns can lead to feelings of anxiety, guilt, and depression. The psychological impact of separating a mother from her child can have lasting effects on both their relationship and mental health. Stein discusses the prevalence of mental health issues among incarcerated women, as many enter the prison system with pre-existing psychological difficulties. These can be compounded by the stress of incarceration, lack of access to mental health resources, and the trauma associated with confinement. The experiences that led to Stein's incarceration often involve trauma, whether from abuse, neglect, or exposure to violent environments. The experience of prison itself can exacerbate trauma symptoms and lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Women in prison often face societal stigmatisation and internalised shame regarding their circumstances. Stein's narrative reflects the struggles of navigating a system that frequently views incarcerated individuals as less worthy or deserving of empathy and support, which can lead to feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Incarceration can significantly impact one's identity, particularly for mothers. Stein's story explores how the experience alters her self-perception and challenges her sense of identity, especially as it relates to motherhood. The conflict between being a mother and being a prisoner creates a complex psychological landscape. Despite the myriad challenges, Stein's narrative also highlights resilience. She explores how individuals cope with their circumstances, find support, and seek to maintain a sense of hope for the future. Long-term incarceration can lead to a phenomenon known as "institutionalization," where individuals become so accustomed to the prison environment that they struggle to reintegrate into society. This can lead to feelings of disconnection and inability to adapt to life outside prison walls. In *Prison Baby*, Deborah Stein sheds light on the psychological issues faced by incarcerated mothers, addressing broader themes of mental health, trauma, and resilience. Her memoir not only provides a personal account of her experience but also serves as a commentary on the systemic challenges within the prison system that affect the psychological well-being of individuals, particularly vulnerable populations like pregnant women and mothers. Jian Stein's memoir explores themes of trauma, identity, and resilience. The narrative probes into the author's experiences with the incarceration of a parent, shedding light on the emotional and psychological impact that can arise from such circumstances. Trauma is exemplified through the author's reflections on their childhood, the feelings of abandonment, and the complexities of growing up in a challenging environment. The author may recount specific events highlighting the struggle to navigate a world shaped by stigma and the effects of systemic issues related to incarceration. The memoir also addresses how trauma can shape personal identity and relationships. Despite the profound challenges faced, the author often seeks to find hope and strength amid adversity, showcasing the power of storytelling as a means of healing and

understanding.

Jason Sole is a former drug dealer and member of a notorious street gang. The middle of three children, Jason was raised on the mean streets of Chicago by a father who was addicted to drugs and an overburdened mother left to pick up the pieces. He turned to a life of crime to gain a lucrative position of authority and improve his life. Jason Sole's memoir tells a harrowing tale of a life of selling drugs and gang activity. He was convicted of a felony for the third time. Originally from Chicago, Sole tells his story in a compelling memoir *From Prison to PhD – a memoir of hope, resilience, and Second Chance* (2014), which is up for a Minnesota Book Award. The raw storytelling follows Sole's life chronologically from a bright kid with a troubled home life to his descent into crime, followed by his journey out of the system to where he is today. In an interview, Sole said he wished he could go back and choose not to sell drugs when he was young. Elizabeth H. reviews the book *From Prison to PhD* as 'From Desperation to Leadership'- "Jason Sole's autobiographical account is breathtaking. I was tormented by the societal conditions and barriers he and his friends and family had to contend with, heartbroken for the suffering and injuries he was dealt as a child and young man, and amazed and profoundly moved by his determination and drive to apply his substantial energy, social intelligence, and wisdom toward excelling professionally and personally. Jason's story is compelling, and his life demonstrates how relationships and resiliency can transform from desperation into purpose, inspiration and leadership." In "From Prison to PhD," Jason Sole shares his transformative journey from incarceration to earning a doctoral degree, highlighting themes of hope, resilience, and second chances. His narrative is a powerful example of how individuals can overcome significant obstacles and change their life trajectories despite having faced serious challenges. Sole's story emphasises the importance of hope in the face of adversity. Throughout his time in prison, he reflects on how fostering hope for a better future enabled him to envision possibilities beyond his current circumstances. This hope acts as a driving force, motivating him to pursue education and personal growth while incarcerated. Resilience is a central theme in Sole's narrative. He confronts the struggles and setbacks of prison life but chooses to rise above them by focusing on his education and personal development. His journey illustrates how resilience can be cultivated through determination, self-reflection, and a support network. Sole often highlights how leveraging resources, such as educational programs and mentorship, played a critical role in building his resilience. Sole's journey exemplifies the concept of a second chance. He takes advantage of opportunities to reintegrate into society and further his education. His success in achieving a PhD underscores the idea that individuals can change and that society should provide support and opportunities for those who have made mistakes in the past. The concept of a second chance is crucial for Sole and serves as a broader commentary on the importance of rehabilitation over punishment in the criminal justice system. Through his experiences recounted in "*From Prison to PhD*," Jason Sole effectively communicates how hope, resilience, and the principle of second chances can lead to profound personal transformation. His story inspires others and encourages a more compassionate understanding of the potential for reform and growth within individuals who have faced the challenges of incarceration. Sole discusses various forms of trauma, including the emotional and psychological impacts of growing up in a challenging environment, facing systemic injustices, and the harsh realities of prison life. He emphasises the importance of understanding and addressing trauma as part of the healing and transformation process. By sharing his story, he also focuses on the broader issues of mass incarceration and the need for support systems that address the root causes of trauma in marginalised communities. His journey is a testament to resilience, the transformative power of education, and the importance of finding purpose and hope despite past hardships.

The chosen works have been examined through the lenses of critics such as Freud, Aichorn, and Jung. In his book, "*The Ego and the Id*" (1923), Sigmund Freud establishes a foundation for understanding various psychological conditions, including pathological and non-pathological, which stem from intense internal conflicts. The prime focus is on the ego and the impact these conflicts have on it, suggesting that they can lead to maladjustment and a predisposition toward delinquency in children. August Aichorn, in "*Wayward Youth*" (1955), proposed that there is a psychological inclination toward engaging in criminal and delinquent behaviours. He argued that developmental inertia in youth is an early indicator of antisocial behaviour, attributing this issue to disruptions in early child-parent relationships. Meanwhile, Carl Jung's "*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*" (1996) introduces the 'Father Complex' which pertains to how these impulses may be positive or negative. Jung posits that these impulses can manifest as positive (adoring or seeking out older paternal figures) and negative (mistrustful or fearful). Unlike other psychoanalysts, Jung believed that both males and females could experience a father complex with positive and negative aspects.

The analysis of the selected works reveals that various sociopsychological factors influence the degree to which young people engage in delinquent behaviour. By investigating the underlying sociopsychological tendencies linked to juvenile delinquency, this thesis highlights the complexities of the issue and advocates for a more compassionate and inclusive societal response to the challenges faced by young delinquents.

The significant increase in juvenile crime underscores the urgency of this research, which aims to unpack the intricacies of this issue and identify effective solutions. As the future of society hinges on the well-being of its children, it is crucial to shield them from the detrimental effects of delinquency and to cultivate supportive environments that foster their growth. Moreover, these memoirs offer a unique insight into the experiences of delinquents. The research aims to integrate similar works into mainstream literary studies. This thesis goes beyond simply exploring the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency; it serves as a call to action for collective reflection and reform, striving to create environments that nurture understanding, guidance, and support for youth facing these challenges.

Sociological and psychological perspectives are intertwined to build a robust framework for analysing delinquency in the chosen American memoirs. The diverse manifestations of delinquent behaviour and the societal influences that shape the mental frameworks of young people are also illustrated and examined. Additionally, it delves into the thought processes of the delinquent protagonists, shedding light on the various ways they rationalise and enact their rebellious actions.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates the significance of life writing as a means of social commentary, critique, and advocacy for change. It offers insights that can inform evidence-based practices within juvenile justice, education, and social work. By amplifying the voices of these young authors, this study aims to foster a more nuanced understanding of juvenile delinquency, challenge stigmatizing narratives, and contribute to the development of more compassionate and effective approaches to youth offenders.

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