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## Juvenile Delinquency

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**Keywords:** juvenile delinquency, youths and crime, minors, delinquency, juvenile delinquents, maltreatment, juvenile delinquency rates, child abuse

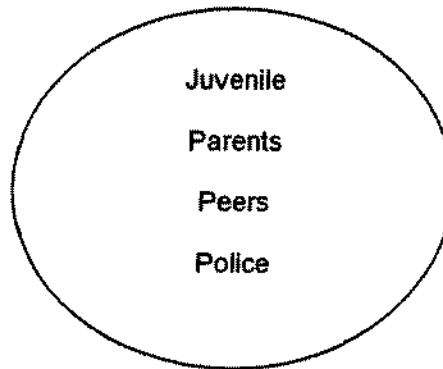
**Abstract:** The purpose of the Juvenile Delinquency Model is to find out the social processes that cause a juvenile to become delinquent. Self report studies have found that juvenile delinquency is a widespread phenomenon taking the form of status offending, property offending, and violent offending. The causes of juvenile delinquency are often misunderstood by the public. This paper will explore five distinct underlying causes that have been found through secondary research but have a common theme; the juvenile is often the victim before he becomes the offender. The model will demonstrate in particular that the processes of family conflict, family structure changes, strain, abuse/maltreatment, and police bias impact juveniles causing them to cope using delinquency.

**Introduction:** Public opinion polls reveal that most Americans cite divorce, single parent households, working mothers, and child abuse as causes of juvenile delinquency (Pershing Lecture, 2002). "Delinquency, such as school misbehavior, drug usage, and weapon carrying, is a disturbing issue confronting adolescents, parents, and teachers alike. It is estimated that in the United States, 1,234 youths run away from home and 2,255 teenagers drop out of school each day. Every five minutes a youth is arrested for some type of violent crime, and every two hours a child is killed by a gun [Edelman, 1995]. Taken together, the increase in the number and severity of such delinquent acts and their overwhelming cost for society validates the notion that delinquency has become a prominent national issue (Matherne and Thomas, 2001). In an article by Dennis Embry, a child psychologist he expresses not only the media interest, but the increasing interest of prosecutors, defense attorneys, and correctional staff wanting to know why some youths are violent. The purpose of this paper is to determine at least five of the underlying causes of juvenile delinquency ranging from status offending to the most serious types of offending. In this paper we will use current studies to explore family conflict, family structure, abuse, labeling, and strain as processes that bring about delinquency. As demonstrated in Figure 1, we will explore the relationships between juveniles, their parents, their peers, and the police have that create and maintain the social system of juvenile delinquency.

## Figure 1: Social Systems Model of Juvenile Delinquents

**Social System:** The statistical group of juvenile delinquents (the population of youth engaging in delinquent behavior and processed through the Juvenile Justice System).

**Elements:**



**Relationships:**

Encourage delinquency  
Model delinquency  
Developmental Disruption  
Bias Issues  
Creation of repeat offenders  
Teaching behaviors  
Conflict  
Abuse(s)

**Boundaries:** Juveniles are under the age of 18.

The social systems model shows juveniles, their parents, peers, and police interact with each other producing a variety of relationships which create the context for the processes that will be discussed later for the majority of juveniles to become delinquents. The parent's role is especially critical because conflict and change in family composition have positive impacts on delinquency. The police also have a critical role because they determine who will be processed through the system thus they are the ones that define who is a "typical" juvenile delinquent. Peers become increasingly important for juveniles when they experience conflict or changes in their families. Exposure to delinquent peers teaches delinquent behavior and increases the likelihood that a youth will also become delinquent. It is important to note that for the purposes of this paper a juvenile is a person under the age of 18 and will be referred to in this discussion as a juvenile, youth, minor, or adolescent. Each element of the model has a distinct influence on the juvenile.

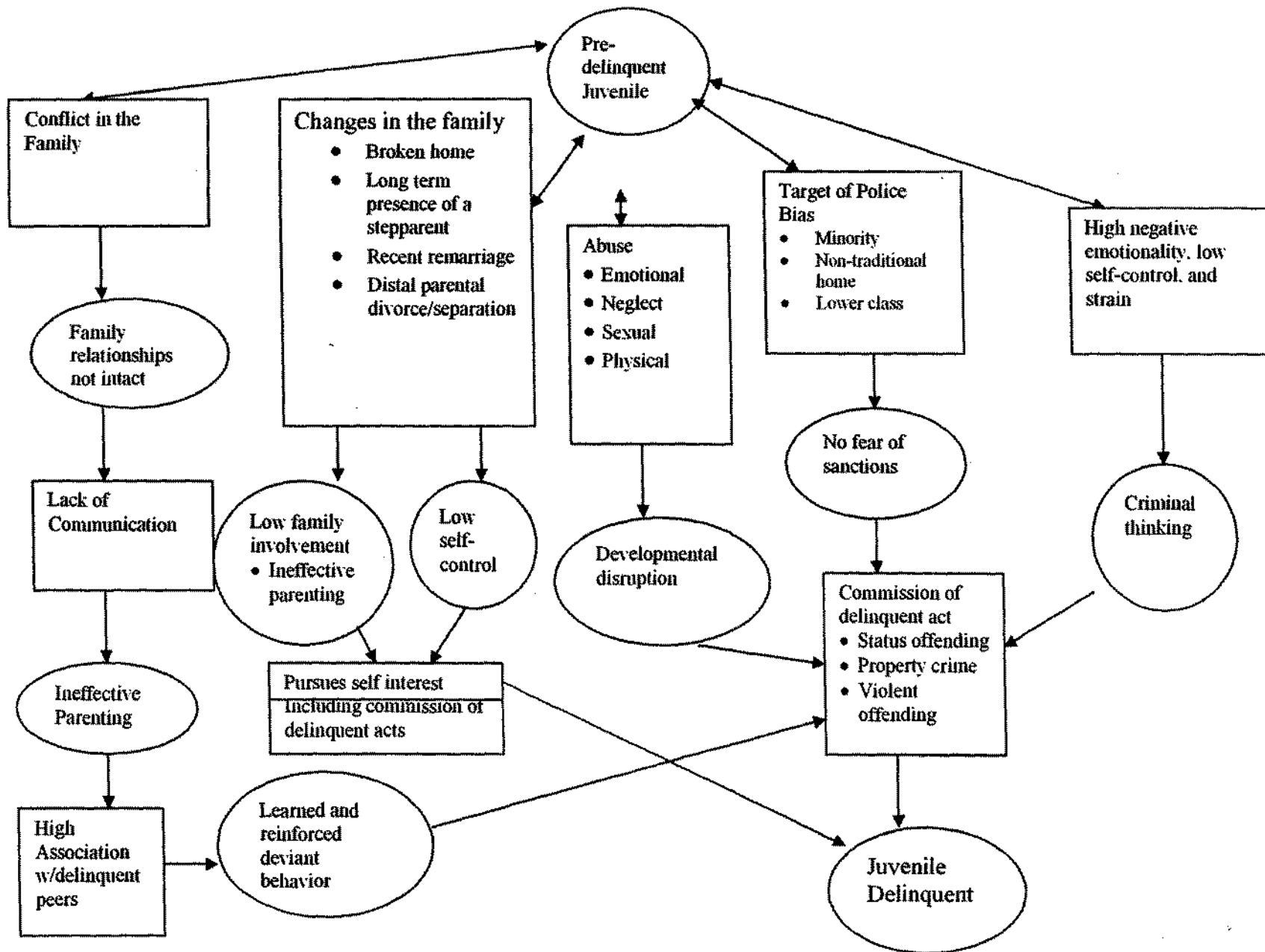
**Method:** Solely secondary sources were used in the creation of this paper.

These secondary sources came from hard copy scholarly journal articles found in the Current Periodicals section of the Love Library at San Diego State University as well as on-line scholarly journal articles found via the internet. The References section at the end of this paper contains a complete list of sources used.

**Results:** The research shows that five processes in particular, family conflict, family structure, abuse, being labeled as delinquent, and certain personality traits lead to juvenile delinquency as depicted in Figure 2 State/Process Dynamic of Juvenile Delinquency. Each condition presented in the dynamic includes a varying number of states and processes. It is the changes that occur in the juvenile which eventually lead to his change from a juvenile to a juvenile delinquent. These processes are individual but could also overlap and occur concurrently. In this section we will address each process individually and its ability to affect a juvenile and create the means whereby the juvenile reacts with delinquency.

The model shows that a process involving conflict in the family leads to delinquency. The initial conflict leads to a state where family relationships are not intact. There is a lack of communication and escalating conflict which lead to a state of ineffective parenting. Ineffective parenting gives way to the juvenile associating more with peers, including delinquent peers. A longitudinal study based on self-report data from 200 original families over 18 years done by Garnier and Stein states that a child will pick peers based on the values and behaviors that he sees his parents upholding. This means that if the juvenile has seen his parents doing criminal acts then he is going to choose peers involved with delinquency. According to Kalkoff (2002), delinquent peers would be part of the subculture of delinquency. He says that the relationship between holding values and attitudes in support of delinquency or violence is a precursor for actual involvement in these activities (p.1). The high association with delinquent

Figure 2: State/Process Dynamic Model of How a Juvenile Becomes a Juvenile Delinquent



peers reinforces deviant behavior which ultimately leads to the juvenile committing a delinquent act and becoming a juvenile delinquent. In a unique qualitative study of inner-city families with a delinquent child—a previously underrepresented group in empirical investigations on delinquency, showed an interesting divergence of opinion from the parents and youth. The youth focused their ideas about what was “wrong” around family relationships and the dynamics of their relationship with their parents (amount of conflict, structure, [lack of] communication), while the parents agreed that this contributed to the problems in their family, more of their ideas focused on their child’s actual behavior (Madden-Derdich, Leonard, and Gunnel 2002). “These reports of problematic parent-child interactions by youths are consistent with past empirical findings indicating a significant association between delinquency and low levels of parental warmth and a lack of emphasis by parents on the importance of family [Henggler, Melton, & Smith, 1992; McCord, 1996]. The desire on the part of the youths for fewer negative interactions is also important in light of research indicating that negative affective expression by parents, more than any other affect parents may express, has the most salient influence on adolescents’ perceptions of the quality of parent-child relationships [Flannery, Monetmayor, & Eberly, 1994] (Madden-Derdich, Leonard, and Gunnel 2002).” Herrenkohl, Huang, Kosterman, Hawkins, Catalano, and Smith’s research to “determine whether the socialization processes in the Social Developmental Model (SDM)... predict violence in late adolescence (age 18) for childhood initiators of violence (ages 10-11) and adolescent initiators of violence (ages 12-16) support Madden-Derdich et al’s claims (p.46).

Herrenkohl et al says that social control through the socialization process in the SDM influences the keeping of norms and positive behavior versus delinquent and negative behavior.

Another process that brings about delinquent juveniles is changes in the family structure. A broken home which could include the long term presence of a step-parent, recent remarriage, and a distal parental divorce or separation are noted as the specific types of structural changes. "Broadly defined, a 'broken home' consists of a family in which at least one biological parent is missing (Rebellon, 2002:2)." These changes lead to low family involvement and ineffective parenting. The broken home simultaneously leads to low self-control which leads the juvenile to have a desire to pursue his self-interests including immediate gratification and the commission of delinquent acts. A recent study by Cesar Rebellon found that "...broken homes are strongly associated with a range of delinquent behaviors, including minor status offenses and more severe property/violent offenses. In particular, distal divorce/separation appears related to three different types of delinquency, recent remarriage appears related to status offending, and the long-term presence of stepparent appears related to violent offending. In keeping with prior research at the individual level of analysis, single-parenthood, per se, does not appear to be associated with delinquency. Rather, certain types of changes in family composition appear related to delinquency". These results are congruent with the outcome that self control theory suggests. "Distal family disruption is more consistently related to delinquency than is recent family disruption. However, contrary to a purely self-



control argument, the broken homes/delinquency relationship persists for two of three offense types even after controlling for two measures of parenting and for prior delinquency" (2002). This data came from the first (1976), second(1977), and third (1978) waves of the National Youth Survey (NYS), a panel study that employs a national probability sample of 1,725 adolescents between the ages of 11 and 17 at the time of their first interview. The NYS provides information concerning the number of parents living in each respondent's household as well as information concerning parental divorce, separation, and remarriage. In addition, it probes whether such forms of disruption occurred prior to the first, second, or third samples. ("Broken homes" was measured using five dummy variables.) The first reflects distal divorce/separation. It is coded "1" if parents indicated their marital status to be "divorced" or "separated" at the time of their wave 1 interviews and simultaneously answered "no" to questions probing whether a divorce or separation had taken place in the year prior to their wave 1 interviews. The second broken homes measure reflects recent divorce/separation. This variable is coded "1" if parents reported that a divorce/separation took place in 1976 or if a corresponding youth reported that a parental divorce/separation took place in 1977. The third broken homes measure reflects the distal presence of a stepparent in a given home. This variable is coded "1" if parents indicated that a youth was living with a stepparent at the time of their wave 1 interviews. The fourth broken homes measure reflects the recent addition of a stepparent to a given home. This variable is coded "1" if parents indicated that they remarried in 1976 or if corresponding youths indicated

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that their families experienced a remarriage in 1977. The final broken homes measure reflects any other form of single-parent home and includes any youth who lived with only one guardian at the time of his or her wave 1 interviews but did not fall into any of the above categories. Such individuals may include those who experienced the death of a parent or those who never knew one parent.

Both processes of family conflict and family structure involve the state of ineffective parenting. An article by Carter Hays (2001) says that low self control is a result of ineffective parenting. Ineffective parenting is when the parent does not 1) monitor child's behavior 2) recognize deviant behavior when it occurs; and 3) punish such behavior. In Hays' study "Parents' level of monitoring was measured with four items asked separately for mothers and fathers. The items asked respondents to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed that their parents keep close track of them, are personally familiar with all or most of their friends, are clear about rules that they are to follow, and make a big effort to know if they are following the rules. Response categories ranged from 0 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree); high scorers, therefore, report high levels of monitoring. Items for mothers and fathers were combined to create an eight-item scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .79. Parental willingness to discipline deviance was measured with a four item scale consisting of two items asked separately for mothers and fathers. Respondents were first asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed that if their mother and father found out that they had done something that was strongly dislike, "she/he would definitely do something to try to stop me from doing it again." The second item asked

respondents to indicate how likely it is that their mothers and fathers would respond to their rule-violating behaviors by “doing nothing at all.” The items were coded such that high scorers on this scale report high levels of parental discipline. The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .45 which is lower than what would be desired. In this study a sample of 197 adolescents taken from an urban area in a southwestern state of the U.S. completed self-administered questionnaires. The results were generally consistent with self-control theory’s predictions. The adjusted R<sup>2</sup> for Equation 2 is marginally higher therefore indicating that the combined measure’s (of monitoring and discipline) does not come at the expense of explanation.

Another process in the model is being abused whether physically, sexually, or emotionally which leads to developmental disruption which can then turn a juvenile delinquent. In a self-report study given to juveniles already incarcerated by Felton, Koopman, McGarvey, Hernandez, and Canterbury II (2001), results showed that there is a “significant correlation between physical and/or sexual abuse in childhood and high rates of illicit drugs... Drug use, especially in early adolescence, interferes with normal cognitive, emotional, and social development and is closely linked to... delinquency (p.76)”. “Youths who reported physical abuse reported significantly greater externalizing problems compared to youths that did not report a history of physical abuse. Additionally, youths that reported sexual abuse reported significant greater externalizing problems compared to youths who did not report a sexual abuse history (p.80)”. “Sexual abuse and physical abuse were related to behavioral problems (p. 82)”. Externalizing

problems include examples of delinquent behavior such as sexual risk behavior and drug use. This suggests that “sexual abuse may lead to a behavioral trajectory of youths getting involved with social networks and lifestyle choices that increase their later ... (deviant) behavior (p.83)”. Ireland, Smith, and Thornberry (2002) confirmed that abuse does lead to delinquency and they went a step further to find out if the timing of the abuse impacted delinquency. According to Ireland, et al., “exposure to any type of abusive conditions (i.e. physical, sexual, neglect, emotional kinds of maltreatment) disrupts the normal course of development and leads to maladaptive behaviors, including delinquency and drug use at later ages, (p.360).” As Figure 3 illustrates, the study does find that when you break down “childhood” into two groups, early childhood (0-11) and adolescent childhood (12-17) the timing of maltreatment has a positive impact on delinquency. This study supported previous research findings that maltreatment does affect delinquent behavior and more importantly does demonstrate that the timing of such maltreatment has a strong contemporaneous correlation to the delinquency committed. Official data and self reported data were used. Both data sets showed the same pattern of conclusions. Early childhood maltreatment did not significantly impact delinquency but that maltreatment during adolescence did have a significant positive impact on delinquency. Furthermore, the study determined that continuous maltreatment (maltreatment from childhood through adolescence), which has never been tested before, had strong correlations to chronic offending and more serious acts of offenses.

Figure 3: Table 1: Age specific Maltreatment and the prevalence of Official Delinquency

Table 2. Age-Specific Maltreatment and the Prevalence of Official Delinquency

	Early Adolescent Arrest ( <i>N</i> = 880)			Late Adolescent Arrest ( <i>N</i> = 853)		
	<i>b</i>	Odds Ratio	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	Odds Ratio	<i>p</i>
<b>Maltreatment</b>						
Childhood Only	0.41	1.51	0.21	0.09	1.09	0.76
Adolescence Only	1.22	3.39	0.02	1.30	3.67	0.01
Persistent	1.34	3.83	0.01	1.45	4.26	0.01
<b>Controls</b>						
Female	-1.07	0.34	0.00	-1.32	0.27	0.00
Community Poverty	0.01	1.01	0.40	0.01	1.01	0.56
Economic Disadvantage	0.14	1.15	0.60	0.00	1.00	0.99
Both Biological Parents	-0.26	0.77	0.26	-0.27	0.76	0.25
African-American	1.45	4.24	0.00	1.15	3.17	0.03
Hispanic	1.07	2.93	0.01	1.32	3.74	0.02
Parent Education	-0.32	0.73	0.20	-0.32	0.73	0.16
Model Chi-Square	85.58		0.00	94.07		0.00

NOTE: Reference category for race/ethnicity is "white," and for maltreatment, the reference category is "never maltreated."

Source: Ireland, Timothy, Carolyn Smith, and Terence Thornberry. 2002. "Developmental Issues in the Impact of Child Maltreatment on Later Delinquency and Drug Use." *Criminology* 40:350-389.

The model shows that a juvenile in a strenuous environment or situation who is high in negative emotionality, and low in self-control, will result in criminal thinking and lead to the commission of a delinquent act. Agnew, Brezina, Wright, and Cullen (2002) extend on "Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST)" by trying to explain why some individuals are more likely than others to react to strain with delinquency, taking into account that there are several conditioning factors that contribute to this reaction. They focused on personality traits as an important factor or indicator for relating strain with juvenile delinquency. Strain is a condition derived from "negative relationships with others; that is, "relationships in which others are not treating the individual as he or she would like to be treated (Agnew, 1992:48). There are three major types of strain or negative relationships; others may (1) prevent individuals from achieving their positively valued goals, including monetary, status and autonomy goals; (2) remove or threaten to remove positively valued stimuli that individuals possess (e.g., the death of friend or family members, the loss of romantic partners); and (3) present or threaten to present individuals with noxious or negatively valued stimuli (e.g., verbal insults, physical assaults). Several strain measures are examined, including certain family, school, and peer strains. Neighborhood strain is also examined. Most of the strain measures were created in two sets of oblique factor analyses: The first factored all family-related items, and the second factored all school related items. Strain items were factored with social control items in order to help ensure that the strain measures were distinct from social control measures. A third factor analysis focused on a small group of items that

measured peer relations. All items in the scales listed below load at least .35 on that scale with most loadings in the .6 to .7 range (Agnew et al., 2002:4-5)."

(1) Family strain. The juveniles in the sample were asked whether several statements described their family life in the past six months.

(2) Conflict with Parents. High scores on this four item scale state that their parents often yell at them when they do something wrong and that they often argue with their parents. Conflict with both mother and father was measured for juveniles in two-parent homes, whereas conflict with the sole parent, usually the mother was measured in one parent families.

(3) Parents lose control of feelings: Parents were asked, "Do you have times when you lose control of your feelings and feel you might hurt your child, with response categories ranging from never to often.

(4) School Hatred. Juveniles were asked whether they "love, like, dislike, or hate going to school."

(5) Picked on by Kids. High scorers on this two-item measure of peer abuse state that they are "sometimes picked on or bothered by" older kids and by kids their age or younger in their neighborhood.

(6) Neighborhood strain. Juveniles were asked, "How is your neighborhood as a place for kids to grow up," with five response categories ranging from "excellent" to "poor".

The data are from the second wave of the National Survey of Children, which focuses on the well-being of children. It included children aged 12-16 years old.

The following results coordinate with the set of strain above:

(1) High scorers lived in stressful, chaotic families (alpha reliability = .70).

(2) See above— (alpha reliability = .56)

(3) 12.2% of the parents state they "sometimes" or "often" feel this way.

(4) 8.7% of the juveniles state that they "hate" school, and 12.2% state that they "dislike" school.

(5) See above— (alpha = .60)

(6) 7.4% of the sample state their neighborhood is poor.



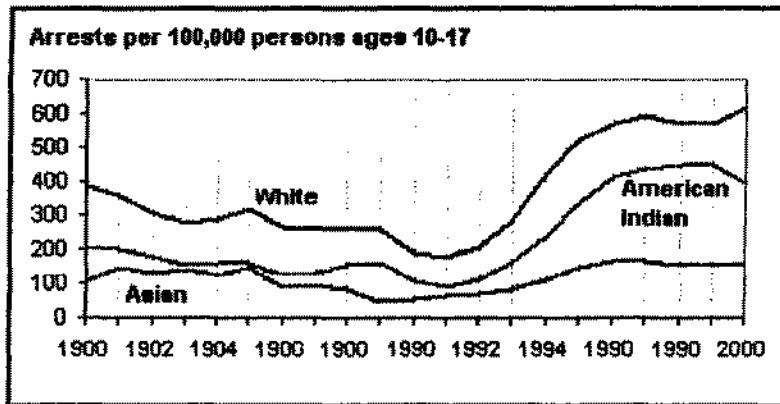
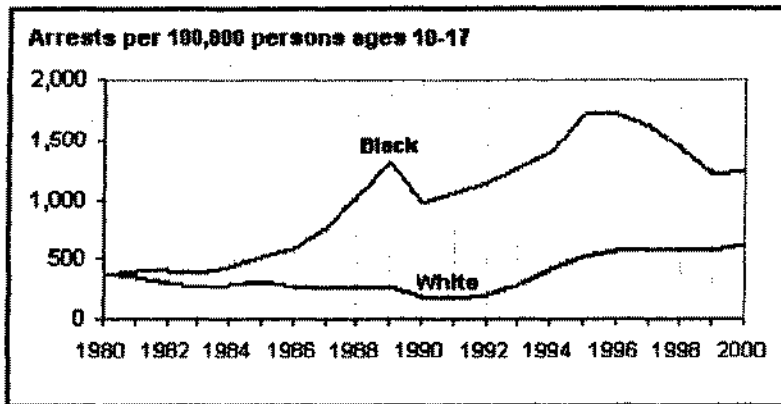
In another article by Agnew (2001), it was found that "strains are most likely to lead to crime when they (1) are seen as unjust, (2) are seen as high in magnitude, (3) are associated with low social control, and (4) create some pressure or incentive to engage in criminal coping (p. 31)."

Another process in the model is being a target of police. The first important state is whether or not the juvenile is a member of a minority group, and or the lower classes, and or comes from a non-traditional home (broken home). These factors are critical because a highly disproportionate number of poor, minorities, and youth from broken homes are prosecuted for delinquency (Wolcott, 2001); this leads to the contribution the police make in the change of juvenile to juvenile delinquent. The social indicators in Figure 4 show the juvenile arrest rates for drug abuse violations by race over 20 years. These graphs show the arrest rates of persons ages 10-17 per 100,000 persons ages 10-17 in the resident population. Persons of Hispanic ethnicity may be of any race, i.e., white, black, American Indian, or Asian. Arrests of Hispanics are not reported separately and this may cause inflationary numbers above, but nonetheless we will use this information. Since 1980, drug abuse violation arrest rates for white juveniles generally declined through 1991 while the black rate soared. Between 1980 and the peak year of 1995, the black arrest rate for drug abuse violations increased more than 350%. The declining trend in the white arrest rate turned around in the early 1990s, but not until 1994 did the rate surpass its 1980 level. At its peak in 2000, the white rate was above 60% its 1980 level. Despite the

Figure 4: Social Indicators – Juvenile arrest rates for drug abuse violations by race, 1980-2000

**Drug abuse violation arrest rates were equal for white juveniles and black juveniles in 1980.**

**Juvenile Arrest Rates for Drug Abuse Violations by Race, 1980-2000**



Source: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. 2000. *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Statistical Briefing Book*. Washington D.C. Retrieved November 12, 2002 ([http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatbb/asp/JAR\\_Display.aspID=qa2414031502](http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatbb/asp/JAR_Display.aspID=qa2414031502)).

substantial decline between 1995 and 2000 for black juveniles, the black rate was double the white rate in 2000. This information is significant because it shows that black juveniles are disproportionately arrested for drug violations and that this has been an historic trend. The trend shows a great disparity between blacks and whites. Official data indicates then that police are essentially creating the population of juvenile delinquents to be a homogeneous group rather than reflecting the population. The model then shows that this prejudice coupled with a lack of fear of sanctions as a result of the commission of delinquent acts leads the average juvenile to become a formal juvenile delinquent. Figure 5 demonstrates how juvenile delinquents rate the effectiveness of the sanctions placed on them as a result of delinquent behavior. From this table it is easy to see that deep end sanctions were rated by the delinquents as more beneficial than low end sanctions. The following question then would be why? The article that this table came out of explains that the numbers in the table represent the sentiment that juvenile delinquents expressed that low end sanctions were not capable of changing their delinquent attitudes and behaviors because they lacked the "intensity needed to address their problems or to give them the skills to do better (Lane et al. 439)."

**Conclusion:** In this paper secondary research has given us five distinct processes that serve to answer why juveniles become juvenile delinquents. Some processes lead to status offending, some to property crime, others to drug abuse and some to violent offending. Whatever the cause and whatever the consequence, juvenile delinquency is an important social phenomena because in

Figure 5: Comparison of Low-End and Deep-End Juvenile Dispositions

TABLE 2: Ratings of Juvenile Dispositions and Comparisons of Low-End and Deep-End Juvenile Dispositions

	<i>% Beneficial</i>	<i># Rated Beneficial</i>	<i>Total # of Ratings</i>
Ratings of juvenile dispositions			
Low-end	20	44	221
Deep-end	58	59	101
	<i>% More Beneficial</i>	<i># Perceived as More Beneficial</i>	<i>Total # of Comparisons</i>
Comparisons of low-end v. deep-end dispositions			
Low-end	4	3	73
Deep-end	40	29	73

Source: Lane, Jodi, Lonni Lanza-Kaduce, Charles Frazier, and Donna M. Bishop. 2002. "Adult Versus Juvenile Sanctions: Voices of Incarcerated Youth." *Crime and Delinquency* 48 (3):431-455.

all of these distinct processes the juvenile holds a common theme; he is the victim first. Before he commits delinquency he may be a victim of unbearable family conflict and changes, he may be a victim of abuse or neglect, he may be the victim of police bias or the victim of some overbearing strain and he turns sadly to delinquency to remedy his status. The causes of juvenile delinquency are complex and although this analysis gives a preliminary explanation of some of the causes of this widespread social phenomenon, there is much research still to be done. This is imperative so that we may be able to have better policies and laws in place that can be created in a way to reflect the discoveries of today and protect the generations of tomorrow. As Alfred Regenery (1986), the head of the federal government's principal office dealing with juvenile justice stated in his article about juvenile justice reform in Crime and Delinquency, "There is much to be done. We must call on our governments to respond, but we must also respond ourselves, lest our governments exceed their limits. The stakes are too high not to respond. Together we can reform a system to provide justice as well as order. Experience says it will not be easy. And reality says we have no choice (p. 51)."

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**Appendix:** Lorelei Hernani began studying sociology at the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1995 where she decided to pursue a Bachelor of Arts degree in it. Currently, she plans to continue her education to the Master's level and possible Doctoral level. As a transfer student now at San Diego State University, Lorelei is married and has two young children. Her interest in the causes of juvenile delinquency was sparked by a class taken at SDSU in which her own opinions about the causes of juvenile delinquency were, to the author, surprisingly contradicted. Responsible now for raising two children of her own, she hoped to gain insight into this widespread phenomena that touches the lives of so many youth. She also hopes that this work will educate others on this topic to avoid creating unnecessary policies based on misperceptions and biases.