

YOUTH IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC EXPERIENCES IN THEIR CHILDHOOD: A RELATIONSHIP?

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ABSTRACT: Youth in conflict with the law is a growing phenomenon in South Africa. To answer the question: "What happened in the early lives of these children that drove them to violent crimes?" a qualitative study, using 58 life stories of young people awaiting trial, was conducted in Gauteng, South Africa. From these life stories, the researcher identified a clear relationship between socio-economic circumstances, childhood experiences, and conflict with the law. Poverty was found to be the main contributing factor to criminal activities. A lack of knowledge and understanding also contributed to crimes such as rape and sodomy. Child and youth care practitioners therefore should not only consider these aspects, but should also address educational needs in communities.

KEY WORDS: secure care centre; delinquent youth; life stories.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of South African newspaper articles (e.g., "Girl Arrested," 2002; "Grade 8s More Violent," 2002; "Four Pupils Caught," 2002) about young people coming into conflict with the law, as well as a spate of South African televised documentary programmes about the ever-younger age at which youngsters commit crime led to a research project conducted in Johannesburg and the West Rand in Gauteng, South Africa, culminating in this article. Newspaper articles ("Raped in Class," 2002; "Twelve-year-old Arranges Murder," 2002) about youths of 12 to 13 years raping an eight-year-old in the classroom during school hours, and a 12-year-old who had her grandmother murdered, led the researcher to question whether we as child and youth care practitioners as well as other social service professionals are really addressing the factors causing our youth to come into conflict with the law. This also led the researcher to ask the question: *What has happened in a young person's life that he or she ends up committing violent crimes such as these?*

Since 1995, the transformation of the child- and youth-care system in South Africa has contributed to many changes. Although the government had always recognised that the detention of young people in prison was not the ideal situation, the lack of alternative resources led to many youths being detained in prison while their cases were being investigated.

In May 1995, the former president, Nelson Mandela, signed legislation that prohibited children from being detained in prison, and all children had to be transferred to places of safety, or the care of their parents or other adults. The places of safety were equipped to care for children and youths in terms of the Child Care Act, No. 74 of 1983, and were not suitable for youths detained in terms of the Criminal Procedure Act, No. 51 of 1977. This situation highlighted the need for the establishment of secure care facilities, which forced the government to review the legislation signed in May, 1995, as well as the above-mentioned Child Care Act. Today, young people may be detained in prison provided that there are no other alternatives and that they are separated from adults.

To satisfy the need for secure care facilities, some resources were adapted to care for the awaiting trial youth, and several new centres were built. Protem Youth Centre is an example of existing facilities adapted to meet the needs of awaiting trial youth. The Walter Sisulu Youth Centre was the first new secure care centre to be opened in 1998 and both these centres are owned by Government. In June 2002, there were 4,089 youths awaiting trial in custody, including youth centres, places of safety, and prisons. With these high numbers of youths awaiting trial, it is essential to ensure that our service programmes address the real factors contributing to these young people coming into conflict with the law.

A Nexus literature search in March 2003 showed that 52 South African studies relating to children, youth, and criminal behaviour had been done. Most of these studies were done for postgraduate qualification at a Master's level and few of them resulted in publications. Furthermore, most of these studies were done before 1994 and did not focus on all the population groups in South Africa. Although the target population was youth in conflict with the law, data was collected from all sources except from the youths themselves. This led the researcher to ask: *What about the experiences and perspectives of the youth themselves?*

The purpose of this research was, therefore, to gather information from the youth themselves to determine which factors contributed to their coming into conflict with the law by taking into account the young people's own stories and personal interviews. The approach to learn from the experiences of children and youth in Child and Youth Care Work is not new. As Fewster (2001) called on parents to listen to their children, we should listen to the experiences and views of these youths. Garfat (1998) stressed that "Through understanding how people have constructed their experience of needing care, we are more able to connect with them and to help them find different ways to frame their experience" (p.25). By learning from what the youth experienced as factors that contributed to their coming into conflict with the law we can, through our service delivery, empower them to deal with these factors in a different way. Within this qualitative study, the young people were asked to write or tell the researcher about their childhood and to write down, or tell, what they perceive to be the reasons for their current situation, namely being accused of committing a

crime. The researcher then wanted to check whether the factors contributing to young people coming into conflict with the law, as indicated by the literature, support the factors as supplied by the youth or not. To enable the child and youth care worker to deliver a supportive service to the youth and to contribute in a meaningful way to a development plan, it is necessary to find out what impact the young people's backgrounds had on their present circumstances.

In this article, the concept *youth* refers to a child between the ages of 12 and 18. For the purpose of this study, the target population was youths who were kept in secure care facilities and who were under 18 years of age at the time they had committed the alleged offences.

In the rest of this article, the focus will be on the research methodology used in obtaining the data, the analysis of the data, the discussion of the findings in terms of the youths' perspectives and experiences and how this relates to the relevant literature. Following that, the way forward in terms of research is discussed as well as conclusions in terms of the findings and the value thereof for the child and youth care practitioner.

RESEARCH PROJECT

The research project was conducted between May and July 2003 at three youth centres, two of which are on the West Rand and one the Johannesburg Metropole (Gauteng Province, South Africa). Although youth in conflict with the law is a national phenomenon, Johannesburg is known as the crime capital of South Africa.

The aim of this research project was to learn from the youths what circumstances and experiences contributed to their decision to commit a crime.

Methodology and Inquiry Method

The aim of the research necessitated a qualitative inquiry into the phenomenon of youth in conflict with the law. To determine the experiences and views of the young people, the researcher used a multiple case study as the inquiry method to collect the data. Working with troubled and traumatised young people with limited educational opportunities, the researcher was of the opinion that collecting their life stories through interviews or their own essays would be more appropriate than merely interviewing them on the phenomena of being in conflict with the law (Creswell, 1994; Mayan, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Target Population and Sampling Method

The researcher lives and works in Gauteng and the study was, therefore, limited to the Gauteng Province in South Africa. There are five secure care centres and four places of safety in Gauteng, that provide care for young people awaiting trial. However, the majority of these youths are in custody in secure care centres. The feasibility, timeframe, and cost implications forced the researcher to limit the study to three of the five secure care centres nearest to her workstation. The three centres identified for the

research were Centres A and B for boys, run by a private company¹, and Centre C for boys and girls, run by the Gauteng Government. These centres are open to all population groups. Centres A and B for boys are built on the same premises and are also situated in an area traditionally occupied by white residents. Centre C is situated in a traditionally black community.

The target population was youths between the ages of 13 and 18 who were in custody at a youth centre. These youths were all accused of committing a crime before turning 18. Some of them pleaded guilty and were awaiting their sentences; others were in custody pending the investigation, alternatively referred to as *awaiting trial*. The target population groups in these centres were 80 youths in Centre C for boys and girls and 500 youths in Centres A and B for boys.

The researcher made use of convenience sampling. After explaining the purpose of the research to all the young people in custody in the different centres, only those who availed themselves to participate in the research project submitted their written life stories or conveyed these orally to the researcher and research assistant. From the 500 young people in Centres A and B for boys, 41 participated in the project, and of the 80 young people in Centre C for boys and girls, 23 participated.

Data Collection Method

The researcher explained to the youths that their life stories would enable social workers and child and youth care workers to understand the youths' conflict with the law from their perspective and in relation to their particular life experiences. As experts on their own circumstances, the youths were motivated to participate voluntarily in the research project. To overcome the language barrier, all participants were also allowed to choose to write their life stories in English, Afrikaans or an African language. It was also explained to the youths that the researcher would use the expertise of a colleague to assist with the translation of stories written in an African language. The colleague who acted as a research assistant was also a lecturer at the former Technikon SA and is competent in four African languages. The social workers and teachers at Centre C for boys and girls assisted the researcher with the collection of the written life stories. They created the opportunity for the youths to write their life stories, collected them and delivered them to the researcher. From the 23 stories submitted by youths at Centre C for boys and girls, 17 could be analysed.

Three weeks after the researcher had addressed the young people at Centres A and B for boys, the centres were revisited to collect their life stories. Although the teachers at these centres created an opportunity for the children to write their stories, only 13 stories were submitted, eight being in English and five in an African language. Following this, the researcher revisited these youth centres and again addressed and motivated the young people to participate in the research project. The youths then expressed the need to tell their life stories rather than to write it themselves. The researcher and research assistant revisited Centres A and B for boys

¹ The private company receives a subsidy from the Gauteng Provincial Government to provide accommodation and food for the youth.

on three occasions at a later stage and collected 25 orally-conveyed life stories during the interviews with the youths in English, Afrikaans or an African language. These were transcribed to make it easier to analyse them. During these visits, three further written life stories were received, bringing to 16 the number of written life stories from these centres, all of which could be analysed. Due to the working relationship that developed with the teachers at the centres, and understanding of the importance of the research project, one teacher indicated that the researcher might use narratives written by the youths about the *Meaning of Life*². The researcher received 43 such narratives altogether.

Data Analysis

The research assistant assisted in translating the written life stories as well as the orally-conveyed life stories from an African language into English. The eight steps identified by Tesch (Creswell, 1994) were used in the analysis of all the life stories.

- The researcher read all the life stories carefully. She then jotted down the ideas that centred on the themes that related to the young people's childhood experiences and the factors they identified as contributing to their coming into conflict with the law.
- The written life stories were analysed first, and then those that were orally conveyed. Each time, the researcher selected the longest story first and asked and invited the youth to talk about his or her childhood experiences and factors contributing to his or her current situation. These themes were highlighted using different colours.
- After completing this task for all the life stories, the researcher clustered the similar themes together and sorted them according to the different childhood experiences and the factors the majority of the young people identified as contributing to their coming into conflict with the law.
- The researcher then went back to the life stories and ensured that they were all appropriately coded by the highlights.
- As new themes or topics emerged, the data was re-organised.
- The appropriate or most descriptive wording was then sorted and put into different categories. Categories related to each other were grouped together to limit the number of categories.
- The researcher then finalised the categories and organised them in logical order in terms of childhood experiences, while the factors contributing to young people coming into conflict with the law were arranged in order of priority.
- The data belonging to each category was assembled in one place and a preliminary analysis of the categories and the

² The children dealt with issues concerning their personal circumstances and the meaning of life in an in-school Life Orientation programme, after which they had to write a narrative on the Meaning of Life.

respondents' direct quotes in each category was carried out. After checking the data, it was also checked against the narratives on the Meaning of Life, and the analysis was then finalised.

Following that, the life stories received from Centres A and B for boys were compared to those received from Centre C for boys and girls. Lastly, the life stories of the boys and girls were compared to determine any differences.

Trustworthiness and Validity

To enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the research, the findings from the written and orally-conveyed life stories and the *Meaning of Life* narratives were triangulated. With this triangulation, the findings from the life stories supported each other, and the information gathered from the *Meaning of Life* narratives supported the finding that the circumstances contributing to the youths' involvement in criminal activities were of an external nature. The latter referred to the fact that family and parents encouraged good behaviour, whereas it was friends who encouraged them to do crime.

Ethical Considerations

The Gauteng Provincial Department of Social Services and Social Development granted the researcher permission to conduct this research with youth in conflict with the law at all secure care facilities and places of safety in Gauteng. The same research proposal was submitted to Centres A and B for boys and Centre C for boys and girls, and committees from each of these institutions also granted permission for the research to be conducted at their youth centres. Throughout the process, all information gathered was treated with confidentiality. Regarding the life stories, the only identifying information requested was the name, age and alleged crime of the youth concerned. The youths were informed that only the researcher and research assistant would have access to the information and that it would not be placed on their files, nor would it be accessible for court purposes. It is believed that this undertaking of confidentiality contributed to the youths' request to convey their life stories orally rather than writing it down. The commitment to confidentiality probably also contributed to the validity of the study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings are presented in terms of the two themes that emerged from the life stories, namely: (a) how the young people experienced their family circumstances during childhood, and (b) the factors contributing to their coming into conflict with the law.

Family Experience During Childhood

The themes that emerged from the data analysis could be clustered

into three categories: the composition of the family as regards to the number of siblings; where the participant spent his or her childhood—being with his or her parent(s), with the parent and other family members, only with family members, or whether the parents were deceased; and how the participant experienced the treatment by his or her parents or family members. The latter identified the presence or absence of child abuse, substance abuse by the adults, and other participants' experiences. As regards issues included under *ill treatment by parents or extended family members*, responses ranged from, "I had to do all the chores at home"; to "I was not sent to school as promised"; "I had to go without food...my younger brothers got food first"; "I was chased away...my mother was drunk" and "I had to go without new clothes... the younger ones got first." The analysis of the young people's life stories reflected the following information pertaining to the composition of their families:

- The majority of the participants had brothers or sisters. Only seven of the 58 youths were an only child and six of the seven were boys;
- Thirteen of the participants lived with both parents and 18 with one of their parents—four of these were girls;
- Four of the participants lived with one parent and the extended family;
- Thirteen of the young people, of which three were girls, indicated that they lived with the extended family whilst their parent(s) had to work elsewhere; and
- of the 58 participants, ten have lost both parents and three of the nine boys had to make ends meet on their own.

The fact that alcohol abuse was communicated in only two of the 33 written life stories and that only two of the young people were assaulted or abused by their parents shows that these two factors were not the main contributing factors for the youths coming into conflict with the law. These factors also did not emerge from the 25 orally-conveyed life stories. According to the 58 life stories, only ten youths were ill-treated where they stayed, and three of the youths' experience of being responsible for their younger siblings contributed to criminal behaviour. A very positive finding is that, in 41 of the 58 life stories received, the youths did **not** experience circumstances at home that contributed to crime.

According to the life stories, 31 of the 50 boys lived with both, or at least one, parent. Furthermore, the parents/families did not abuse alcohol, and only two cases of assault were reported. However, those who lived with family members (7) did experience ill treatment in the sense that their basic needs were not met. As eldest children, three of the participants felt the need to assist their mothers in caring for the younger siblings, and they then started to commit crimes because they had no other means of

obtaining resources to contribute to the support of their families. Only one of the four girls who stayed with their parents experienced ill treatment by her parents. Of the four girls who stayed with family members, also only one reported alcohol abuse by that family member.

Circumstances That Contributed to Crime

In analysing the data from the participants' life stories, the following themes or circumstances emerged as having contributed to the alleged crimes:

- poverty
- the use of drugs
- influence of peer group/friends
- influence of gangsters/adults
- other

The above themes/contributing factors will be discussed below by using direct quotes from some of the life stories received to give an indication of how the young people viewed their experiences.

Poverty

The following verbatim responses of the participants indicated that living in circumstances where basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter were not met contributed to their coming into conflict with the law.

"... did start with robbery in 2002 in attempt to give mother power to support us"

"Shop breaking (burglary—business) was for money to pay school fees"

"... even getting food is tough"

"... that's why I ended up stealing socks... could sell them and get money for food"

"I was hungry, nobody at home, I took bread and cheese"

"I was without food for two or more days, I was hungry"

The use of drugs

Although the use of drugs played a strong role as a factor causing youth to come into conflict with the law, it was, in most cases, linked with poverty issues or the influence of friends or gangsters. The following verbatim responses were evidence of the influence of drug (ab)use on the youths' alleged criminal behaviour.

"I did take drugs with gangsters, then feel empowered to steal cars"

"... cash and cell phone from driver... sell for money for drugs"

"... drunk from dagga (marijuana)..."

"... did take drugs during the day my friend grabbed woman and raped her"

*"... smoked dagga with friends... wanted to see what I could get from crime"
"I was involve (sic) with drugs again"*

Influence of peer group/friends

Together with poverty, the influence of friends or the peer group had the greatest effect on youth coming into conflict with the law. Verbatim responses such as the following confirmed this.

*"... friend telling me to go and take the car"
"... living with friend... gave me dagga and alcohol... later gave me money to buy it"
"... (I was the) only one that could go through the window..."
"... friend took money from a person and cell phone... gave gun to me before robbing the person...friend told me to shoot straight... (person) pushed friend in front of gun"*

Influence of gangsters/adults

Although not as significant as poverty and friends, the influence of gangsters and other adults (persons of 18 years and older) played a definitive role in the youths' dysfunctional behaviour. Verbatim responses of the youth included the following.

*"... started with gangsters... jealousy other boys... nice clothes"
"... with gangsters... influence other... saw crime as means to get money"
"I worked for a Nigerian from 15:00 until 04:00... paid me R15,00... had to pay R300,00 rent"
"... this man promised good job in Johannesburg"
"... 15 and 16 years get involved in stealing guns and then with hijackers... I got information, training from a friend who was a commander³"*

Although not present in the majority of cases, it was clear that gangsterism has a serious influence on young people coming into conflict with the law. For these young people, the gangsters project a lifestyle with good clothes and parties, of which they also wanted to be part. Once they start to operate with these gangsters, it is very difficult to break ties with them again. Young people from rural areas who come to Johannesburg to find a better future, are easy prey for adult gangsters and illegal immigrants in Hillbrow, Johannesburg.

Other

Other explanations for the alleged crime indicated either the youths' reasoning that committing a crime to replace something lost was acceptable,

³ Commander refers to a rank in the South African Military Service.

or their limited understanding of crime and of what it means to be an accomplice. Verbatim quotes that indicated the above were the following.

"I took the computer to sell to replace the cell phone"

"... girl (10) come... ask play 'mother and father'... play 'make sex'"

"I did not steal it, my friend take the jacket"

"I did not do crime, I did shoplifting"

Table 1 gives a quantitative summary of what the participants experienced as factors that contributed to their alleged criminal offences.

Table 1.

Experiences and Influences Contributing to Alleged Crimes							
Experiences/Influences Contributing to Crime	Responses According to Youth Centres			Gender of Participants		Mode of Presentation	
	Centre ^a A	B	C	Girls	Boys	Written	Oral
Poverty*	5	9	2	1	15	7	9
Drug (ab)use*	4	4	3	0	11	7	4
Peers/friends*	4	10	3	2	17	9	10
Gangsters/adults*	1	4	4	2	7	5	4
Don't know/attention	0	0	2	2	0	2	0
Other							
Accident	0	1	1	0	2	1	1
Self-defence	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
Set up by other person	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
Not seen as a crime	2	1	0	0	3	2	1
Denies alleged crime	7	3	1	1	10	4	7

^a Centres A and B are boys centres; centre C is for boys and girls.

*In most cases, a link could be established between *friends* and *drugs* or between *gangsters* and *drugs*. In two (2) cases, poverty could be linked to *drugs* or *friends*. Due to the fact that in most cases more than one of the identified factors contributed to the alleged crimes, none of the columns will calculate to N=58.

TYPES OF CRIMES

The types of alleged crimes committed by the young people were as follows.

- robbery / attempted robbery (common)
- armed robbery
- theft
- housebreaking (burglary—residence)
- fraud
- rape
- shoplifting
- murder
- sodomy
- drug dealing
- child abuse
- assault
- hijacking
- possession of drugs
- car breaking (burglary—motor car).

According to the data, 20 boys were between 13 and 15 years old and 30 of the 50 boys were 16 and 17 years old—21 of these boys were only 16 years old. As regards the eight girls, three were between 13 and 15 years old, one was 16 years of age and the other four were 17 years old. The alleged crimes listed by the participants confirmed the increasing involvement of young people in serious and aggressive crimes such as hijacking (3), murder (3), rape (6), armed robbery (6), and assault (2) as reported in the newspapers.

The only difference between the alleged crimes of the youths at Centre C for boys and girls and those at the Centres A and B for boys stems from the fact that Centre C for boys and girls also makes provision for girls. The two girls who committed shoplifting could not explain why they had done it and indicated it could have been because they wanted attention, whereas the boys accused of shoplifting had done so to obtain food. One girl was also accused of child abuse and another of dealing with drugs, whereas none of the young people at Centres A and B for boys was in custody for these types of crimes.

DISCUSSION

From the data analysis, it is clear that poverty, friends, drugs and gangsterism, in this order, are the main contributing factors for young people to come into conflict with the law. Furthermore, the families' failure to meet the youths' basic needs largely contributed to the latter's decision

to find a better lifestyle than that which they had at home. The participants saw this as the result of poverty. They did not, however, regard their crime to be the result of dysfunction in the family.

According to the 58 life stories used in this research project, 13 of the young people lived with family members because their parents were working elsewhere; seven lived with family members because their parents were deceased; and two were on their own after their parents had passed away. Research findings reported earlier in this article showed that none of the boys experienced ill treatment by the parents, and alcohol abuse was only reported in two cases. It, therefore, also suffices to note that the nine boys who experienced ill-treatment lived with family members, either because the parents were deceased or because the parents worked elsewhere. The latter is a common phenomenon in the black communities in South Africa and should, therefore, not be regarded as the family being dysfunctional; this is also not the way it is experienced by the young people. The fact that some of the young people resorted to criminal activities to pay for their school fees also relates to the *poverty* category where the parents cannot meet their children's basic needs. However, this motivation also indicates a lack of knowledge in the community as regards legislation pertaining to compulsory school fees. The income of the parents is taken in consideration and parents can apply for exemption or partial exemption from the school fees, depending on their income.

The literature on factors that contribute to young people coming into conflict with the law indicates disrupted or dysfunctional families as the main contributing factor. Under dysfunctional families, phenomena such as divorce, child abuse, child neglect, alcohol, and substance abuse were included, which did not manifest as the main factors in this study (Cronjé, Van der Walt, Retief, & Naudé, 1987; Kratcoski & Kratcoski, 1990; Shoemaker, 1990; Hollin, 1992; Regoli & Hewitt, 1997; Hoffman & Summers, 2001). The findings in this research, namely that the young people themselves regarded *poverty* as the main contributing factor, therefore brings a new dimension to working with these young people. The fact that elder siblings experienced co-responsibility for their younger siblings and then came into conflict with the law while assisting parents in making ends meet has also not been identified as a contributing factor in the literature. The research findings that friends and peer group relationships, drug abuse, and gangsterism are contributing factors for young people coming into conflict with the law are supported by the literature cited above.

Although the youths referred to in the newspaper articles in the introduction were not involved in this project, it was meaningful to learn that the young people (aged 13 and 14) did not view sex or even sodomy as a crime when playing. This phenomenon may be a result of their living conditions. These living conditions are often of such a nature that more than one family lives in a four-roomed house (not four-bedroomed house) or even in an informal house (shack) that consists of just one or two rooms. Often parents and children/youths sleep in the same room, and it

is inevitable that the youngsters will see and/or hear their parents or adults having sex. Then, when they play "mother and father", they also have sex and do not see it as a crime.

The youths' lack of knowledge about criminal offences, especially as regards being guilty of a crime, and about the consequences of being with friends while the latter commit a crime, was eye-opening in terms of the education needed in this regard.

THE WAY FORWARD

The researcher submitted a report on these research findings to the Gauteng Provincial Department of Social Services and Social Development as well as to the youth centres that participated in this research project. However, there are two other youth centres and three places of safety in Gauteng where awaiting trial youths are in custody. The data collected in this qualitative study will now be used to compile a questionnaire to conduct a quantitative study at these five institutions to determine whether the qualitative findings could be generalised. The report on the results of the quantitative research study will be submitted to the relevant institutions and the government department concerned. In addition, the information will be used in the education and training of child and youth care workers through the specialised subject Child and Youth Care/Youth Works in Residential and Secure Care at UNISA, Florida.

CONCLUSIONS

The increasing number of young people, aged 13 and 14 years, who come into conflict with the law (as reported in the findings), poses a challenge to the service delivery of child and youth care workers and other social service professionals. In this article, the researcher investigated the reasons for young people coming into conflict with the law and their childhood experiences from the young people's perspective to determine the relationship between these factors. Furthermore, the researcher investigated what the young people identified as the main factors contributing to their coming into conflict with the law.

The research findings indicated a clear relationship between young people's socio-economic circumstances, their childhood experiences, and their coming into conflict with the law. The research findings that poverty, friends, peer group relationships, drug abuse, and gangsterism are contributing factors for criminal behaviour are not new and are supported by literature that explores the epistemology of young people coming into conflict with the law. However, although this literature also indicates a strong relationship between dysfunctional families and the epistemology of young people coming into conflict with the law, this relationship did not emerge from this study. The main socio-economic circumstance that contributed to their coming into conflict with the law, as experienced and reported by the young people, was poverty. This included the fact that

parents/families could not meet their children's basic needs for food, clothes and education. In some of the cases of ill treatment by the family, even a lack of food and appropriate clothing were reported as contributory factors.

The main conclusions from the findings and the discussion in this study are as follows:

- poverty was experienced as the main factor contributing to young people coming into conflict with the law, along with the influence of peer groups, drug abuse, and gangsterism;
- the youths' lack of knowledge about criminal offences, especially being guilty of a crime, and about the consequences of being with friends while the latter commit a crime also contribute to their coming into conflict with the law;
- feelings of co-responsibility for younger siblings contribute to elder siblings coming into conflict with the law in order to obtain money to assist parents in providing for the basic needs of the family; and
- in this study, factors such as child abuse or neglect, divorce, and alcohol abuse did not play an important role in the young people's coming into conflict with the law.

The findings of this study have important practical implications for practitioners and policy-makers. Not only are the youth in our secure care centres at risk, they are also traumatised in various ways, and it is, therefore, recommended that proper and appropriate training of child and youth care workers at these centres should be regarded as a priority at the policy development level. At the practitioner level, the individual development plan of the young person needs to address his or her specific needs. The child and youth care worker should, therefore, be aware of the specific factors that contribute to young people coming into conflict with the law. This may vary from meeting material needs to the development of skills in order to resist negative peer pressure. The meeting of material needs may also include the involvement of resources outside the secure care centre as the child in the centre may, for instance, refuse to eat because he or she knows that the family members may not have food. Many of these children are not aware of the implications of their actions or may be trapped in circumstances beyond their control. The availability of life skills programmes is very important if child and youth care workers want to contribute to the well-being of our troubled youth. Child and youth care workers have to contribute to the education of parents and other family members in order to eliminate factors that have a negative influence on the social and moral development of the children as well as their rights, for example, in terms of the payment of school fees. Lastly, child and youth care workers should contribute to the education of parents, families, and children and the youth about the different activities that are regarded

as criminal offences, as well as the consequences of being with friends while the latter commit a crime.

Within this study, the participants did not identify factors, for example, differences between races and other political issues such as belonging to a previously disadvantaged group in South Africa, as contributing to coming into conflict with the law. Although the youth centres visited in this study are open for all population groups, only one of the participants was white. It is therefore recommended that;

- further research be done to determine whether these findings also apply to the white population group; and
- the research project be expanded to a quantitative study to include all secure care facilities and places of safety in Gauteng to determine whether the findings in this study can be generalised and whether factors of a political and cultural nature contribute to our youth coming into conflict with the law.

If we care about our youth, and if we are serious, in child care work, about making a difference to the world of our youth at risk, we need to listen to what they are saying, and we should focus our service delivery on meeting their needs and on empowering them to change their life stories when they go back to the community.

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