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Article

Determinants and Risk Factors of Youth Delinquency: A Systemic Model and Integrated Prevention Mechanisms

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Abstract: This paper examines the determinants and risk factors of youth delinquency through a multi-level (micro–meso–macro) systemic model. Within the current reform context, it highlights the "social prevention" principle, emphasizing risk reduction by addressing young people's social and economic problems rather than relying primarily on punitive responses. The study also discusses the practical value of shifting from a punishment-centered approach to a risk-factor paradigm in designing targeted interventions. For Uzbekistan, the paper systematizes key risk drivers, including deficiencies in family-based legal education, the expansion of an uncontrolled digital environment, territorial socio-economic imbalances, and insufficiently targeted prevention measures. The conclusions propose strengthening school-based legal education, introducing a phased "Foundations of Law and Elements of Criminology" module for grades 7–11, and institutionalizing legal upbringing and mediation practices within educational institutions.

Keywords: Youth delinquency; determinants; risk factors; systemic model; social prevention.

1. Introduction

In the context of contemporary globalization and the digital transformation of society, the prevention of juvenile delinquency has become not only a legal issue but also a strategic priority for ensuring national security. As emphasized by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Sh. M. Mirziyoyev, "For us, the most important issue is the spiritual world of our youth, protecting their consciousness and hearts from alien ideas, and establishing a healthy lifestyle". [1] This task requires addressing youth crime not merely by combating its consequences, but through an in-depth scientific analysis of the systemic factors (determinants) that give rise to it.

At a videoconference meeting held on June 20, 2024, the Head of State proposed a fundamentally new system for crime prevention — the principle of "Social Prevention". [2] This approach prioritizes working with youth who are prone to committing offenses not through "punishment," but through minimizing risk factors by addressing their social and economic problems. From this perspective, the systematic study of the determinants of youth delinquency as a comprehensive model within this dissertation paragraph is of significant scientific relevance.

Within the framework of the objectives set out in the "Uzbekistan – 2030" Strategy of President Sh. M. Mirziyoyev, mechanisms for the meaningful organization of young people's leisure time and targeted engagement through the "Youth Register" and the "Mahalla Seven" system have been implemented. [3] However, practice shows that the emergence of offenses is influenced not only by economic factors, but also by a synthesis

of psychological, educational, and informational-ideological factors. This necessitates studying the determination of youth crime not from a one-sided perspective, but within the framework of a systemic model that reflects the interconnection of factors at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels.

From this standpoint, a deep scientific and theoretical analysis of the determinants and risk factors influencing the formation of youth delinquency—particularly through the study of conceptual approaches proposed by domestic and foreign legal scholars—ensures the scientific validity and methodological soundness of the research. Such a comparative-theoretical analysis makes it possible to systematically comprehend the social, psychological, economic, and legal factors that contribute to the propensity for delinquency among youth, as well as to provide a scientifically grounded justification for preventive measures.

In particular, according to the views of foreign scholar U. Bronfenbrenner, human development is defined as a dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment in which they live, with inter-system relationships (the mesosystem) considered a decisive factor in development. In his view, every child requires at least one loyal and responsible adult (a protective factor) who is committed to and accountable for the child's development. [4] The criminological aspects of the systemic model are reflected in D. Farrington's Integrated Cognitive Antisocial Potential (ICAP) theory. In examining the causes of criminal behavior, the scholar raises two key questions: "Why do people become offenders?" and "Why do they commit crimes in specific situations?" Farrington distinguishes between long-term antisocial potential (modeling and socialization) and short-term potential (situation-based motivation). According to his research, low academic achievement and family conflicts directly contribute to the formation of long-term antisocial potential. [5]

Uzbek legal scholars have also examined the determinants of youth delinquency within the context of national mentality and social-institutional control mechanisms, particularly the family and the mahalla (neighborhood community). In particular, M. Kh. Rustambaev and S. S. Niyazova analyze the victimological impact of the family environment, emphasizing that a socially unhealthy family atmosphere, actions contrary to the child's interests, and parental neglect constitute primary determinants that foster a propensity toward unlawful behavior. According to the scholars, domestic violence disrupts the process of a child's socialization and directs them toward a deviant developmental trajectory. [6] B. A. Mirazov, in turn, systematically analyzes socio-psychological factors and gaps in the educational process in the prevention of youth delinquency. In his view, insufficient supervision by the legal representatives of minors and public indifference are among the main conditions contributing to the commission of offenses. [7] Additionally, M. K. Urazaliev distinguishes two mechanisms in the formation of a minor's personality in the emergence of delinquent behavior: organizational mechanisms and sustained social practices. According to the scholar's conclusions, education and the influence of a specific social environment play a decisive role in the process of determination during critically important stages of personality formation. [8]

Based on an analysis of the above-mentioned scholars' theoretical perspectives, contemporary research on youth delinquency increasingly adopts a systemic approach that conceptualizes the individual as a component of interrelated and nested social systems. One of the most influential frameworks in this field is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes that youth behavior and well-being are shaped by the influence of social environments organized in concentric layers. [9] This approach facilitates the integration of diverse data on risk factors into a unified structure, in which each level exerts influence on the others.

Within the framework of the systemic model, the following levels of interaction are distinguished:

1. Microsystem: the immediate environments that directly influence the individual, such as family, peers, and school.

2. Mesosystem: the set of interactions between different elements of the microsystem (for example, relationships between parents and teachers).

3. Exosystem: social structures that do not directly involve the young individual but nevertheless affect their life (such as parents' workplaces, local government bodies, and the legal system).

4. Macrosystem: the broader cultural norms, laws, economic conditions, and social values of society.

5. Chronosystem: the temporal dimension, including changes over the individual's life course as well as broader socio-historical transformations. [10]

This framework enables criminologists to analyze how macro-level changes (such as economic crises or the digitalization of society) are reflected through microsystems (particularly the family) and ultimately influence the individual decision-making of young people. Systemic analysis also emphasizes the significance of the "multiplicative effect," whereby the accumulation of risk factors at different levels increases the likelihood of criminal behavior in a geometric progression. For example, a ten-year-old child exposed to six or more risk factors is ten times more likely to commit violent acts by the age of eighteen than a child exposed to only one risk factor. [11]

A central concept of the systemic model is the "age–crime curve." This universal empirical pattern observed across many societies demonstrates that the prevalence of delinquent behavior begins to increase in late childhood, peaks during adolescence (approximately between the ages of 15 and 19), and subsequently declines in the early twenties. [12] A systemic analysis of this curve reveals several important nuances. In particular, the peak for violent offenses typically occurs later than that for property crimes, while among females the peak tends to occur earlier than among males. [13]

For the development of effective prevention models, it is critically important to distinguish between early-onset offenders (those who begin before the age of 12) and individuals whose deviant behavior manifests only during adolescence. Research indicates that early-onset offenders have a significantly higher probability of becoming chronic offenders in adulthood. [14] At the same time, a substantial proportion of young people (between 40 and 60 percent) desist from offending upon reaching adulthood, indicating the presence of desistance factors embedded within the social system. [15]

The first level of the systemic model focuses on individual characteristics that may serve as internal determinants of delinquent behavior. These include genetic predispositions, biological aspects of development, and psychological traits.

Criminologists pay particular attention to the relationship between biological determinants and subsequent behavior. For instance, prospective studies have found that 80 percent of violent offenders experienced significant birth complications, compared to 47 percent among non-offenders. [16] These biological vulnerabilities may interact with adverse social environments, creating a foundation for the development of aggressive behavior. Nevertheless, the systemic model emphasizes that biology is not destiny; prosocial traits such as empathy and a desire to please adults can serve as powerful buffers against biological risks. [17]

Cognitive factors also play a decisive role. Deficits in intellectual development and poor academic performance are often associated with early entry into delinquent pathways. Conversely, high intelligence and strong academic abilities function as important protective factors that help young people successfully cope with adverse environmental conditions. [18]

Within the systemic model, the family is regarded as the most critical microsystem in which the foundations of behavior are established. Family-related determinants can be

divided into structural factors (family composition and size) and functional factors (quality of relationships and parenting practices).

Empirical research consistently identifies family conflict and dysfunction as major predictors of youth delinquency. [19] Harsh treatment of children, physical or emotional abuse, and neglect of a child's needs generate deep psychological trauma that may later manifest as antisocial behavior. According to Travis Hirschi's Social Control Theory, delinquency often results from the failure to establish strong social bonds with parents. [20]

Systemic family risk factors include:

- Inadequate or inconsistent parenting practices (excessive harshness or a complete lack of supervision);
- A parental history of criminal behavior or substance abuse;
- High levels of family conflict and domestic violence;
- Poverty and low socioeconomic status of the family. [21]

Parental antisocial behavior represents a particularly dangerous factor through the mechanism of "criminal inheritance," whereby such behavior serves as a model for the child through social learning processes. However, the systemic model also identifies key protective factors capable of neutralizing negative influences. A close emotional bond with one or both parents, high-quality parental monitoring, and an authoritative (yet fair) parenting style significantly reduce the likelihood of involvement in criminal activity. [22]

As individuals mature, the influence of the family is supplemented—and sometimes replaced—by the influence of peers and the school environment. At this stage, the systemic model highlights a crucial transition: whereas individual and family factors dominate in early childhood, extra familial social relationships become primary during adolescence. [23]

Association with delinquent peers is one of the strongest predictors of youth offending. Peers not only provide opportunities for criminal behavior but also shape value systems that justify law-breaking. Participation in gangs and youth groups increases both the severity and frequency of offending. [24] Notably, the systemic model treats this factor as dynamic: later-life transitions such as marriage and family formation often lead to desistance from crime by reducing time spent with deviant peers. [25]

School-related deficits—such as low motivation to learn, poor academic achievement, and conflicts with teachers—constitute serious risk factors. School functions not only as an educational institution but also as a platform for prosocial integration. When schools fail to meet students' academic and social-emotional needs, young people may experience alienation and seek recognition within antisocial circles. [26] Conversely, engagement in school life and supportive relationships with educators serve as strong protective mechanisms. [27]

A systemic model of youth delinquency cannot be considered complete without accounting for macro-level factors. These include socioeconomic inequality, prevailing cultural attitudes, and the quality of state institutional functioning. Problems faced by youth often reflect broader societal crises.

Economic instability, unemployment, and residence in disadvantaged areas characterized by high crime rates create environments in which deviant behavior becomes an adaptive response to the lack of legitimate opportunities. [28] Social disorganization—where social institutions such as the mahalla, clubs, and local communities fail to provide effective social control—is directly associated with an increase in youth delinquency. [29]

Cultural factors, including the glorification of violence in mass media, the spread of values centered on materialism and corruption, generate negative demonstration effects for young people, distorting their life philosophies and worldviews. [30] Under such

conditions, youths' legal consciousness tends to form on the basis of cynicism and a lack of respect for the rule of law.

Within the context of the Republic of Uzbekistan, youth delinquency and its prevention are shaped by specific determinants linked to national traditions, the ongoing reform of the legal system, and the region's socio-demographic characteristics. Systemic analysis indicates that in recent years an upward trend in juvenile delinquency has been observed, necessitating the adoption of urgent measures by the state.

Indicator / Characteristic	**Data for Uzbekistan (2022–2024)** [31]
Growth dynamics (2022)	Increase by 14%
Growth dynamics (2023)	Increase by 17%
Current status (2024)	Stabilization and a decrease of 1.5%
Main types of offenses	Theft, hooliganism, fraud, drug-related crimes

One of the distinctive features of Uzbekistan's prevention model is the use of the mahalla institution as an element of systemic social control and support. Research indicates that traditional family-based upbringing practices, combined with community supervision within the mahalla, constitute key factors restraining criminal behavior. However, contemporary challenges such as parental labor migration and the weakening of intra-family ties generate new risks. [32]

Risk factors specific to the Uzbek context include:

- deficiencies in legal education and upbringing within families;
- the expansion of an uncontrolled digital environment, which facilitates youth involvement in cybercrime; [33]
- socio-economic disparities in regional development;
- insufficient targeting of preventive measures implemented by state authorities. [34]

To neutralize these risks, initiatives such as the "Fidokor Yoshlar" (Dedicated Youth) community patrols and assistants to prevention inspectors ("Mahalla Posboni") are being actively introduced in Uzbekistan, contributing to enhanced public safety at the microsystem level. [35]

The systemic model not only explains the causes of delinquency but also proposes pathways out of a criminal lifestyle. The process of desistance is often associated with the emergence of new social ties and obligations in a young person's life, which foster conformity to social norms.

Key factors in the prevention of youth delinquency include:

1. **Stable employment**: Employment not only provides income but also structures time and reduces opportunities for criminal behavior. [36]
2. **Marriage and high-quality family relationships**: Marriage and cohabitation with a spouse significantly reduce crime rates among young men. [37]
3. **Military service**: Under certain conditions, military service may function as an institution that instills discipline and disconnects individuals from previously adverse environments. [38]

At the same time, contact with the criminal justice system itself (law enforcement agencies, the National Guard, the прокуратура, courts, and correctional institutions) may become a determinant of subsequent criminal behavior. Stigmatization [39] and incarceration are often associated with deteriorating mental health, declining academic achievement, and the disruption of prosocial ties, thereby increasing the risk of recidivism.

[40] Accordingly, contemporary systemic prevention models increasingly favor non-custodial and alternative sanctions. [41]

Based on the above analysis, effective prevention of youth delinquency today must be multi-level and address all identified determinants. The transition from a punishment-oriented model to a "risk factor paradigm" enables the development of interventions targeted at the specific causes of deviant behavior. [42]

Scientific-theoretical approaches and high-quality empirical evidence demonstrate that sustainable reductions in youth offending—particularly recidivism—are most effectively achieved when interventions are organized not as isolated measures but as comprehensive, multi-component therapeutic programs simultaneously addressing the family–school–peer environment. In particular, the Multi systemic Therapy (MST) model is grounded in the idea that adolescents' problematic behavior is shaped not solely by individual characteristics, but by the intersection of family supervision, school-related disciplinary and academic factors, peer influences, and risks associated with community and neighborhood resources. Accordingly, MST interventions simultaneously strengthen parental discipline and monitoring, systematize cooperation with schools, limit negative peer influences, and develop conflict-resolution skills.Long-term follow-up studies confirm a significant reduction in subsequent criminal activity among participants in Multisystemic Therapy. Randomized clinical trials with follow-up periods of 13–16 years show that recidivism rates in MST groups are lower than in individual therapy groups, alongside reductions in the number of arrests and days spent in correctional facilities. [43] Furthermore, an average 22-year "midlife" follow-up analysis indicates that the effects of MST may persist into adulthood, with lower rates of serious-offense recidivism and substantially reduced frequencies of offending on several indicators. [44]

Another effective form of comprehensive intervention is Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC), which provides a structured foster-care environment for adolescents with severe behavioral problems and a high risk of placement in group or institutional care. Through consistent rules, a balanced system of incentives and sanctions, continuous monitoring, and professional supervision, the adolescent's daily social environment is reorganized. Evidence indicates that, compared to group care, MTFC leads to reductions in criminal referrals and improvements in reintegration outcomes with biological families. [45] From a practical perspective, the MTFC model is also assessed as an investment in human capital: economic evaluations demonstrate a positive benefit-to-cost ratio, with some analyses reporting ratios of approximately 5.28 per participant. [46]

Functional Family Therapy (FFT) is likewise characterized as an evidence-based intervention aimed at strengthening family relationships, communication quality, parental supervision, and problem-solving mechanisms. [47] A key scientific feature of FFT is that its effectiveness largely depends on the level of fidelity (adherence) to the model. Large-scale implementation studies show that FFT outcomes are significantly stronger when therapists demonstrate high compliance with the protocol. This fidelity effect is also evident in economic evaluations: according to Blueprints data, when FFT is delivered competently, every dollar invested yields approximately 10.69 dollars in benefits through avoided crime-related costs, whereas low fidelity implementation may result in negative economic returns. [48] Accordingly, the principal methodological conclusion derived from the programs discussed above is that intervention effectiveness is determined not by the "program name" itself, but by systemic coverage (family–school–peer environments) and implementation quality (fidelity, staff training, and interagency cooperation). Therefore, when adapting these models to national practice, it is essential to institutionally and normatively strengthen standards, monitoring mechanisms, and evaluation indicators in advance.

Based on the foregoing theoretical and scientific analyses, the introduction of integrated legal and social mechanisms is essential for improving the prevention system

in the New Uzbekistan. Primary attention should be directed to the following. In particular, reforming the education system by drawing on international experience—such as Germany's "Law in School" initiative, which resulted in a 28 percent reduction in crime—demonstrates the expediency of introducing school-based programs in legal education and the fundamentals of criminology. [49]

Indeed, under the newly revised Constitution currently in force in the New Uzbekistan, the state guarantees free general secondary education, establishes its compulsory nature, and affirms that general secondary education remains under state supervision. [50] Accordingly, updating the content of general secondary education in line with the needs of strengthening public safety and legality constitutes a natural and lawful direction arising from the state's constitutional obligations.

In this regard, the Law "On Education" defines the content and stages of general secondary education and provides for its continuous and compulsory implementation. [51] A legal inference derived directly from the law is that if general secondary education is mandatory, it must encompass not only academic knowledge but also competencies essential for social stability, including legal literacy and civic responsibility.

Furthermore, at the level of state policy, the systematic and continuous nature of education and upbringing—beginning from preschool education—has been designated as the key mechanism for enhancing legal culture and instilling legal consciousness. [52] Based on this political and legal requirement, the institutionalization of legal education in schools (not as isolated awareness campaigns or episodic events, but as mandatory learning outcomes enshrined in state educational standards) forms a stable core of preventive policy.

At the same time, national legislation defines crime prevention not merely as punishment or control, but as a system of legal, social, organizational, and other measures. [53] Among the core objectives of prevention, the law explicitly identifies the enhancement of legal awareness and legal culture in society, as well as the strengthening of legality. [54] Consequently, strengthening legal education through the education system fully corresponds to the "goal–task" logic of prevention legislation and represents an institutional mechanism for its implementation.

The proposed introduction of the module "Fundamentals of Law and Elements of Criminology" (or "Law in School") primarily serves to form legal immunity among students. Competencies such as respect for legal norms, balancing individual and public interests, intolerance toward violence, peaceful conflict resolution (mediation culture), and legal responsibility in the digital environment establish stable behavioral standards from an early age. This approach aligns with the principle of "early intervention" in prevention theory, enabling the neutralization of risk factors at an initial stage.

From a legal-technical perspective, enshrining this provision directly in the Law "On Education" is also well-founded. The law regulates the system for developing and approving state educational standards and curricula, assigning the authority to develop general secondary education standards to the relevant ministry. Therefore, incorporating mandatory learning outcomes (legal literacy and civic responsibility) into Article 9 [55] ensures uniform, measurable, and monitorable outcomes nationwide through standardized implementation.

Finally, the proposal to introduce Article 9 ("Legal Education and Legal Upbringing in Educational Institutions") extends beyond teaching law as an academic subject by defining the preventive infrastructure of legal education. Legal upbringing programs, preventive trainings, and mediation skills contribute to reducing factors such as conflict, bullying, and deviant behavior that often lead to offenses within the educational environment. This approach frames prevention not merely as a law enforcement function, but as a comprehensive socio-legal mechanism integrated into educational institutions.

Proposed Article 9. Legal Education and Legal Upbringing in Educational Institutions

Educational institutions shall implement legal upbringing programs aimed at forming legal consciousness and legal culture among students.

Preventive trainings, legal awareness activities, the development of peaceful conflict resolution (mediation) skills, and measures for the early identification and prevention of risky behavior shall be applied within educational institutions. The procedure for organizing legal upbringing and legal education, the content of modules, instructional and methodological support, as well as mechanisms for training and retraining pedagogical staff shall be determined by authorized state bodies.

2. Conclusion and Suggestions

The adoption of this draft law would result in the following long-term outcomes:

First, legal literacy and civic responsibility would be закреплены as mandatory learning outcomes within state educational standards for general secondary education, transforming legal upbringing from sporadic and episodic initiatives into a systematic and continuous education policy. As a result, stable legal values—respect for the law, balance between rights and duties, adherence to public norms, justice, and accountability—would be formed from an early age, ensuring the institutional growth of legal consciousness.

Second, the phased introduction of the "Fundamentals of Law and Elements of Criminology" (or "Law in School") module in grades 7–11 would shift prevention from a reactive (post-incident) approach toward a proactive model emphasizing early intervention and early warning. This would expand opportunities to identify and neutralize risk factors—such as bullying, aggressive behavior, peer pressure, online offenses, and addictive behaviors—at an early stage, strengthening targeted mechanisms for addressing the causes of delinquency within the school environment.

Third, within the framework of the proposed Article 9^1, the legal grounding of legal upbringing programs, preventive trainings, and mediation skills development would foster a culture of conflict management, compromise, and constructive communication in schools. This would reduce the escalation of student conflicts into administrative or disciplinary sanctions, strengthen preventive immunity against bullying and violence, and contribute to the establishment of a safe and stable social environment within educational institutions.

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