Poverty and delinquency: A qualitative study on selected juvenile offenders in Malaysia

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Abstract
This qualitative case study explored the voices of juvenile offenders in Malaysia who were plagued with poverty, and brought to light their plight. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of poverty on the delinquent character and behavioural development of the children on three major crime-enhancing themes – miserable family conditions, school failure and association with deviant peers – to get a broader view of how poverty could influence their life trajectory. The purposive maximum variation sampling method was used in the selection of six young offenders between the ages of 13 and 17 years from Sekolah Tunas Bakti Sungai Besi, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. A multiple data collection method that included observation, in-depth case study and document analysis was used for data collection. Results showed that three major crime-enhancing themes due to poverty were strongly related to children’s delinquent character and behavioural development. The knowledge gained from this study will further contribute to understanding the real-life experiences of juvenile offenders, particularly those who are experiencing extreme deprivation, and it is hoped that the insight gained could help in the prevention and control of juvenile delinquent behaviour in Malaysia.

Keywords
Delinquency, deviant peers, juvenile offenders, Malaysia, miserable family conditions, poverty, school failure
Introduction

The developmental risks associated with poverty and economic disadvantage have been well documented, but the processes that account for the relations between poverty and children’s development have not been thoroughly explored (Bradley and Corwyn, 2002; McLoyd, 1998; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). Socio-economic status has always been used as a means to provide an explanation for juvenile delinquent behaviour (Bjerk, 2007; Leiber et al., 2009). The literature has shown that poverty and low socio-economic status in childhood are powerful risk factors that have always been associated with substance abuse, crime and delinquency (Bjerk, 2007; D’Onofrio et al., 2009; Galloway and Skardhamar, 2010). In general, one cannot deny the fact that lack of financial resources is one of the greatest reasons why some people turn to illegal means for the sake of survival. Economic hardship often results in spiritual, emotional and material deprivation, all of which could exacerbate antisocial behaviour among children.

Agnew et al. (2008) argued that the relationship between economic problems and delinquency is nonlinear, such that only the experience of economic problems is associated with higher delinquency. They found that the relationship between socio-economic status and economic problems is only moderate in size. The fact that the rich get richer and the poor get prison (Reiman and Leighton, 2013) does have its repercussions, as one cannot deny the painful truth that the moment a child is born into a poor family, he or she may have to face a bleak future. In the process of struggling for existence some may thrive well, but many of them will end up being victims of fate and circumstances. One cannot deny the fact that risk factors leading to later damage occur more frequently among children in families that are poor, and still more frequently among families that are persistently poor and live in areas of concentrated poverty (Schorr and Schorr, 1989: 29). Needless to say, children are more likely to fare badly in life if their parents have a low education level, and/or low occupational status, or are unemployed. However, it should be noted that poverty is not restricted to one dimension, for example income, but it manifests itself in all domains of life, such as housing, education, health (Deleeck and Van den Bosch, 1992: 3) and one’s daily activities.

Based on the Drug Report in 2012 by the National Anti-Drug Agency of Malaysia, from January 2012 to September 2012 among 6935 drug abusers, the young people comprised 4618 abusers. It is found that in 2011 there were 5547 juvenile cases in Malaysia, where males were involved in 5270 cases, while females were involved in 277 cases. In terms of ethnicity, juvenile delinquency is the highest among Malays (4357 cases), followed by Indian (389 cases), Chinese (352 cases), natives of the State of Sabah (230 cases), natives of the State of Sarawak (122 cases), others (88 cases) and natives of the Peninsular Malaysia (9 cases) in 2011 (Department of Social Welfare, 2013). The Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA), Malaysia registered an increased number of 5305 juvenile delinquency cases where it went up from 3399 cases in 2012 to 8704 cases in 2013 (Mallow, 2015). These statistics show that juvenile delinquency in Malaysia is becoming more serious, and this problem will continue to increase if appropriate action is not taken (Choon et al., 2013). Jalal (2005) mentioned that as regards family factors, poor family management practices, family history of problem behaviour, family conflicts, family low socio-economic status and single-parent families are contributory issues. Mallow (2015) further mentioned that the issue of juvenile delinquency in Malaysia is largely an urban phenomenon brought about mainly by the process of national development and, more specifically, by the increasing pace of industrialization and urbanization. We would argue that poverty in itself is not a cause, but combined with other circumstances may induce such deviant behaviours. The main objective of this study was to examine the effects of poverty on the character and behavioural development of Malaysian children.
Literature review

This study underpins three main concepts: poverty, delinquency and juvenile offenders. Poverty transcends the traditional definition of a shortfall in income levels. In other words, income levels are not the only determinant of poverty. Poverty is a multidimensional concept (Akindola, 2009). Peter Townsend, a leading authority on UK poverty, defines poverty as when someone’s ‘resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities’ (Seymour, 2009: 15). According to Booth (cited in Fried and Elman, 1971), the ‘poor’ are those whose means may be adequate, but are barely sufficient for a decent independent life; the ‘very poor’ are those whose means are insufficient for this according to the usual standard of life in this country.

Delinquency is an act or conduct of a juvenile that is socially undesirable. Juvenile delinquency generally means the failure of children to meet certain obligations expected of them by society. The blame can be placed on factors ranging from a child’s embryonic development to dysfunctional families, dilapidated schools, abject poverty, peer relations, low self-control or any combination of these and other issues (Joshi, 2013). Juvenile delinquent behaviour refers to the behaviour committed by someone below 18 years of age that violates criminal law (Houston and Barton, 2005). These delinquent behaviours can range from less severe behaviours such as abusing the school rules, absenteeism, school truancy, cigarette smoking and vandalism to more severe crimes such as stealing, robbery, substance abuse, rape and weapon possession (Choon et al., 2013). Based on the law in Malaysia, the term juvenile delinquent refers to a young person who has committed a criminal offence and has been given a court order (Maznah, 2007). The Malaysian Ministry of Education states that delinquency in school includes violation of both the Penal Code and the school norms. In Malaysia, two forms of status offences are recognizable, namely, being beyond the control of parents and being exposed to moral danger (Hussin, 2007). According to the Prison Act 1995, a juvenile or a young offender is defined as ‘a prisoner who is under the age of 21 years’ (Kassim, 2006). Students may be punished by the school authorities for behavioural misconduct such as vandalism, fighting, smoking and truancy, as well as for minor misbehaviour including disrespect to others, impoliteness, inappropriate or messy school attire or appearance, and bringing to school items that are banned, such as mobile phones (Choon et al., 2013).

Since poverty can lead to various kinds of delinquent activities, one cannot deny the fact that it is directly related to juvenile delinquency (Prochnow and Defronzo, 1997) as it not only leads to stressful living conditions, but also creates situations that are conducive to antisocial activities. Earlier studies of the relationship between socio-economic status and juvenile delinquency have shown that it is mostly a low social class problem. Defined as ‘an act by a juvenile under the age of 18 that if committed by an adult would constitute a crime, a disorderly person offense, a petty disorderly person offense, or a violation of any other penal statute, ordinance or regulation’ (New Jersey Judiciary, 2012), delinquency is inextricably related to poverty in the four primary settings affecting child development, namely, family, school, peer groups and communities.

Previous studies have shown that children who live in persistent or chronic poverty have less favourable cognitive and social development and poorer physical and mental health than those who live in transitory poverty (Costello et al., 2003; McLeod and Nonnemaker, 2000). Many studies have shown that poverty-related stress can have serious repercussions on a child’s upbringing and development due to lack of family integration as consequences of inevitable life circumstances such as anxiety, depression, discrimination and hostility (Wadsworth et al., 2008). ‘Family stress caused by problems with the fulfilment of the family economic function, affects the way parents
fulfil their parental role’ (Banovcinova et al., 2014), which clearly explains the reason why parents who encounter serious financial constraints tend to have delinquent children. Parents who feel emotionally insecure themselves often have difficulty coping with the many responsibilities of parenthood, and this is clearly manifested in the way in which they bring up their children. Family conflict, increased irritability, poor supervision, harsh discipline and erratic punishment are but some of the more common occurrences in families threatened with financial crisis (Guajardo et al., 2009). This clearly explains why children who come from poor families are more likely to drop out of school, associate with deviant peers and participate in antisocial activities.

An investigation by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network (2005) revealed that children in persistently poor families had the lowest levels of performance of the four groups on tests of language and school-readiness skills, and their scores were significantly different from those in families that experienced short-term poverty. The Institute reported that the children in chronically poor and late-poor families have more externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems than those in the other groups. One cannot deny the fact that children of the present generation can be very demanding and often compare themselves to those who are more affluent than themselves, and the feelings of relative deprivation as a result of these comparisons can have serious consequences on the parent–child relationship. Young people can become very hostile when their parents cannot afford to give them the things that they ask for. Thus, one can see how economic stress could play havoc with the life and well-being of children in families plagued by financial crisis. Poverty and low socio-economic status therefore not only affect the parents psychologically, but also cause emotional and behavioural problems in children as they struggle to cope with their stressful life events (Wadsworth et al., 2005). This clearly explains why poor children tend to have more socio-emotional and behavioural problems compared to their more affluent counterparts.

The Strain Theory, which emphasizes the fact that children with lower socio-economic status have a greater tendency towards delinquency, clearly explains the interrelationship between poverty and delinquency (Merton, 1969). According to Merton, although US society places great emphasis on success, it does not emphasize the socially approved means of attaining it. Since the American value is to attain success at any cost irrespective of whether the right and proper means have been employed, there is thus a great disparity between living the ‘American Dream’ and achieving the ‘American Dream’ for the less privileged members of society. It should be noted that Merton’s Strain Theory is not restricted to US society alone as it clearly explains the criminal behaviour of the poor worldwide. The painful truth is that lower-class individuals are often drawn into delinquent behaviour by the adverse circumstances of life which they cannot escape. Merton is also of the opinion that individuals with early success in life could easily increase their future success without much effort. On the contrary, those without early success have to work hard and cannot afford to make mistakes (Merton, 1973). Citing a verse from the Bible, he calls it the ‘Matthew Effect’:

For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that little which he had. (p. 445)

Basically, this would mean that lower-class children often find it more difficult to get the things that they want or attain success in life compared to their more advantaged contemporaries. Should they wish to live up to the expectations of society, crime is probably the only way out.

Given the negative impact of poverty on children, this study intended to investigate the consequences of poverty and how it affects the behavioural and character development of children. Since most studies in this field conducted by local researchers are quantitative by nature – that
is, they have the tendency to emphasize the statistical relationships between poverty and delinquency – a more in-depth analysis through the actual worldviews of the juvenile offenders pertaining to this chronic social phenomenon is necessary, and we aimed to fill this gap in the present study via a holistic qualitative approach as this could provide for a deeper insight into their real-life experiences.

### Research objective and methodology

#### Research objective

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of poverty on the character and behavioural development of the Malaysian children. This study explored these effects on three major crime-enhancing themes that were strongly related to poverty, namely, miserable family conditions, school failure and association with deviant peers.

#### Methodology

**Research approach and research method.** The research approach was qualitative. This approach enabled us to gain a deeper insight into the phenomenon under investigation based on the experiences of the juvenile offenders in a natural setting. It also provided a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, hence getting the voices of the juvenile offenders heard. Here, we wanted to understand the effects of poverty on the character and behavioural development of the children while they are experiencing difficult family conditions, failing at school and associating with deviant peers. This study followed a case study method, where the cases were multiple in nature. Our main objectives for using this method were the contradictory behaviours, beliefs, opinions, emotions and relationships of individuals (Mack et al., 2005), which contribute greatly to a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

**Sampling and respondents’ profiles.** A purposeful maximum sampling was used for the selection of participants to generate a rich and descriptive picture of their lived experiences for this study. Six participants (four Malay boys, one Chinese boy and one Indian boy) between the ages of 13 and 17 years from Sekolah Tunas Bakti Sungai Besi, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, were selected from a population of 99 juvenile offenders, who were incarcerated in a juvenile prison in Malaysia. This method of sampling was used for the purpose of heterogeneity so as to create a more diverse picture of the phenomenon under investigation. Table 1 presents the profile of our six selected respondents in terms of their age, education level and socio-economic conditions.

### Table 1. Respondents’ profiles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/religion</th>
<th>Crime committed</th>
<th>Parents’ marital status</th>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Work experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ariffin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Malay/Islam</td>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>Form 1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah Fook</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Chinese/Buddhist</td>
<td>Wounding</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Form 1</td>
<td>Restaurant/motor shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loga</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Indian/Hindu</td>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>Car workshop/casino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irwan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Malay/Islam</td>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Form 5</td>
<td>Fed cows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zulkifli</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Malay/Islam</td>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Form 1</td>
<td>General worker/guard/hawker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syazwan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Malay/Islam</td>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Form 3</td>
<td>Lorry attendant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data collection methods and instruments. This study used multiple qualitative data collection methods such as observation, in-depth case interview and document analysis. An unstructured guideline was developed for in-depth case study of the children. Two separate sets of checklists were prepared for observation and documentation survey. The in-depth case interviews with the children were conducted in an informal conversational manner in a quiet room in the institution/school. An audio tape recorder was used to record all information and then transcribed verbatim in full length so as to capture every word (including pauses and repetitions) that came from the mouths of the participants. Notes and reflection were also jotted down during the interviews for the purposes of accuracy and transcription. For those interviews that are originally conducted in Bahasa or Chinese, every attempt was made by the researchers to translate them into English without losing their originality. This study recorded children’s behaviours using observation guidelines. This study used ‘Web of Science’ and ‘Scopus’ search engines for literature reviews that included journal articles, books and conference proceedings.

Data analysis technique. A thematic content analysis was used to interpret data generated from the multiple qualitative data collection methods. Thematic analysis is a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns (Lapadat, 2010). It enabled us to identify the commonalities and variations based on the participants’ lived experiences. During data collection, we used appropriate codes and then categorized those into themes. Data analysis revealed three major crime-enhancing factors or themes that were triggered by poverty: miserable family conditions, school failure and association with deviant peers.

Ethical consideration. As we collected data from six young offenders between the ages of 13 and 17 years, we strictly followed the ethical guidelines provided by the University of Malaya. The consent form was given to the principal of the Sekolah Tunas Bakti School as well as to the participants for signing before the commencement of data collection. Written permission was also obtained earlier from the Social Welfare Department, Malaysia. The names of the children that we mentioned in our study are pseudonyms in order to secure their privacy, anonymity and confidentiality.

Results

Miserable life conditions

Children from low-income families often feel unhappy about their family’s financial situation, which causes various forms of deprivation in their lives. They also long for more money or some enjoyable possessions which they cannot afford to have. Times have changed, and it seems that the young people of the present Y generation have more demands than their predecessors. They need money to top up their mobile phones and buy cigarettes. They need money to go cyber cafes or hang around with their friends. Not having enough money to carry out these activities means that they have failed to live up to the norms and expectations of society. To participate in peer society, they have to resort to illegitimate means and take some risky chances, thus putting themselves in a very disadvantageous position. This was clearly exemplified in the lives of all our respondents since all of them were encountering some kind of financial problem or another. As Irwan, for instance, claimed,

My pocket money is actually not enough. I need to pay RM2 (US$0.50) for petrol when I go to school. My father only gave me RM2. That was why I did not eat at school. That was why I sat in the toilet to ask for money from other students. (Irwan/Juv/03-04/Sch)
With a family income of RM3400 (US$850) per month and six children to support, there was not enough money for the children to go around and it was difficult for Irwan to put up with the kind of life that was lacking in many things.

Syazwan is in a similar position. With a family income of less than RM2000 (US$500) per month and six children between the ages of 2 and 18 years to support, he has to forego many luxuries in life. Syazwan’s parents only gave him RM1 (US$0.25) pocket money every day, and to supplement his pocket money he also resorted to extorting money from his schoolmates:

Interviewer: How did you disturb people?
Syazwan: Beat
Interviewer: Beat who?
Syazwan: Beat my schoolmates
Interviewer: Why did you beat your schoolmates?
Syazwan: Asked for money… they did not want to give me.
Interviewer: Why did you ask them to give you money?
Syazwan: I wanted to hang around with friends at night
Interviewer: How much did you ask from them?
Syazwan: RM5 (US$1.25) only
Interviewer: Did you always ask for money from the same people?
Syazwan: Those … like … whoever I like and always ask.
Interviewer: Did any of them give you money?
Syazwan: Yes
Interviewer: Why did they give you it?
Syazwan: They were afraid that I would beat them up. (Syazwan/Juv/06/Sch)

Surviving with just RM1 (US$0.25) per day was indeed a great joke when the prices of things had all gone up, and it was no wonder that Syazwan had to look for other means to make money. When asked what he needed the money for, he said he needed money when he went out with his friends. He also wanted to buy some branded clothes, something his parents would never be able to afford. Poverty therefore had serious repercussions on the children as they had to look for other means of obtaining money when the pocket money given by their parents was too little.

Our study showed that many single mothers lacked necessary qualifications and skills, thus rendering it difficult for them to secure proper employment. Loga’s mother, for instance, only has primary education, and apart from doing manual work there was not much that she could do. As a cleaner she could not make much money, and that was why Loga had to extort money from his schoolmates to increase his pocket money. In fact, he was so desperate that he even went to the extent of stealing his schoolmate’s packet drink:

Interviewer: Apart from asking for money, what else did you do at school??
Loga: (laughing) Steal drinks … . He was buying drinks … I took the drinks ahh. He fought me, I fought him ahh. When I beat him, he went to report to the headmaster. (Loga/Juv/08/Sch)

Loga is a very thoughtful child who cares a lot about his family’s financial situation. Since his mother was jobless at that time and his father did not give them any money, he decided not to trouble his mother and tried to look for other means of making money. Maternal job loss can therefore have serious repercussions on children’s behaviour, particularly in single mother families.
Ariffin’s mother was no better off than Loga’s mother as she had only managed to study up to Standard 5. She had to work two jobs to earn RM250 (US$62.50) per month through tailoring and another RM300 (US$75) working at a food stall. With RM300 (US$75) spent on rental every month, it was not possible for his family to survive without the charity of their relatives.

My father’s brothers and sisters help us a bit. They give us foods like rice, onions …. They also give us pocket money. (Ariffin/Juv/02/Fam)

Being overburdened by the many responsibilities of raising a family after her husband left her, her children had to be contented with an extremely low standard of living which they find impossible to endure. Although Ariffin did not extort money from his friends, he would not forego any opportunity to make money whenever circumstances allow him. According to him, he ‘would go into the classrooms during assembly to steal whatever [he] could find in the school bags’ (Ariffin/Juv/10/Sch) to supplement his pocket money. Although Ariffin did not drop out of school to find work, he was constantly worrying about his family’s financial situation. Both he and his brother were admitted to the same institution for stealing RM17 (US$4.25) from the mosque because they needed the money to go to the cyber café on that day. The interview with Ariffin clearly indicated that his greatest fear was his family’s financial woes:

Interviewer: What do you worry about most in your life?
Ariffin: Family … not enough money.
Interviewer: You mean your mother always does not have enough money?
Ariffin: (nods his head)
Interviewer: Do you feel happy or not?
Ariffin: No
Interviewer: Why not?
Ariffin: No money
Interviewer: If you were given a choice, what kind of family would you want?
Ariffin: Rich (Ariffin/Juv//06/Fam)

Poverty therefore caused Ariffin and his brother to resort to crime to fulfil their needs since the RM1 (US$0.25) pocket money provided by their mother each day was just too little for them.

Out of our six respondents, Ah Fook is the only one who did not steal. He did not like to steal because he knew that it was not right to do so. When asked whether he and his friends had ever stolen anything or not, he seemed to be very offended and said, ‘My friends are not like that’ (AhFook/Juv/09/Pee). Being frugal in his expenditure, what he earns was enough to meet his daily expenses. However, being frugal also had its disadvantages as it caused him to feel bitter about his life:

There are many things that I want but my family cannot give me. Want to buy a computer also cannot. When I was in Year 2, I had a computer. I had to pay half from my angpow money [a monetary gift given during holidays] and gambled during Chinese New Year to get the money. My mother said you want anything, you must pay yourself. I won’t pay for you (crying). My mother has no money. When my father bought the house he asked my mother to pay RM10000. She had to borrow money from her sister. He hasn’t returned the money to her up to now. My father owed the bank money, about RM6000 (US$1500), because he couldn’t pay for the house instalments. I had to pay for the maintenance fees of RM150 (US$37.50) since I was in remove class. I gave my mom RM400 (US$100) and my grandmother RM100 (US$25) a month. I only earned RM1000 (US$250) per month (crying). (AhFook/Juv/03/Fam)
Ah Fook seemed to be very sad each time he talked about his family’s financial situation. Poverty therefore made the children feel miserable and discontented with their lives because they could not afford to have what others had, even though they were willing to work hard for it.

As for Zulkifli, his situation was even worse than Irwan, Syazwan, Loga, Ariffin and Ah Fook. Being rejected by his family all his life, battered as a child and kicked out of his home at the age of 13, he had to find other means of survival, and crime was his only alternative. While most children of his age are still being cared for and nurtured by their parents, Zulkifli had to work like an adult just to earn a pittance, and the temptation to steal was just too great to overcome, particularly when he needed money for survival. The examples quoted clearly illustrate the miserable life conditions brought about by poverty that our participants had to endure. Living a life that is seriously lacking in everything can even tempt an upright man to err, not to mention innocent children.

**School failure**

Our study clearly explained why poverty tends to be associated with lower test scores and higher dropout rates. Loga, for instance, was unable to read or write and was labelled ‘stupid’ by his teachers. His bad school experiences coupled with his mother’s inability to support him through school killed whatever interest he had had in his studies during his primary school years. Knowing that he could not do well at school, dropping out was his only alternative. Loga had to stop schooling at 12 because he did not want to burden his mother. Being the only child in his family, he wanted to ease his mother’s financial burden and helped to provide for his family:

Last time my mother was a Tamil dance teacher. Last time she had students to teach. But now all the students have become teachers. My mother could not find students to teach. My mother could not even find a cleaner’s job. At that time, my mother could not find any job. When I saw my mother’s situation, I did not want to study anymore when I was in Form 1. After that, I stopped schooling …. (Loga/Juv/09/Fam)

At a very young age he had already made up his mind to quit school in the belief that if he wanted to make a lot of money he must work hard for it:

Since last time I saw people work … if I work hard I can get a lot of money. I see it that way ahh. If I don’t work hard I don’t get money. If I work hard then only I can get money. (Loga/Juv/09/Sch)

However, dropping out of school at the age of 13 also put him in a vulnerable position as he was easily influenced by his friends to misbehave. In a way, Ah Fook seemed to share the same beliefs as Loga as he honestly believed that staying in school was meaningless because of his low literacy level:

No matter how hard I study, my brain cannot absorb it. It’s like forcing a piece of thick wood into a small hole. Impossible, isn’t it? Unless they (my parents) put the dictionary inside my brain. What do they think I am? Robot ah? If I don’t study, I can still learn a skill and become a boss. Those who study in the university can only earn RM2000-RM3000 per month. (AhFook/Juv/06/Sch)

Furthermore, since he needed money to help support his family, instead of going to school Ah Fook worked part-time at a bakery and spent his time at the shopping complexes looking for ways to make more money:
I’ve got reason. I wanted to make money. I went ‘fishing’ at Mutiara Kompleks and made a lot of money. I won many tokens that can be exchanged for money at the counter. My parents know that I don’t like to study. They know that I like to make money. (AhFook/Juv/08/Sch)

Ah Fook stopped schooling altogether and started working at the age of 13 because he needed money to buy the things that his parents could not afford to buy for him and to pay for maintenance fees of the condominium in which he was staying with his family. The financial distress that he was going through made him feel that making money seemed to be wiser choice compared to education. Taking advantage of his teacher’s suggestion that he should stay away from school for some time to reflect on his behaviour, he decided to stop schooling altogether and worked full-time to help support his family. Sadly, dropping out of school at 13 did not help him much either as it provided him with more opportunities to associate with bad company, hence he ended up in a juvenile detention institution.

The fate of Zulkifli did not differ much from that of Loga or Ah Fook. Being abused and neglected by his parents and lacking interest in his studies, he decided to quit school and did not continue his studies in a secondary school after having completed his primary education. Like Loga and Ah Fook, Zulkifli felt that

… sometimes even those who studied in the university could not find a job. Those who did not study in the university … who studied in a primary school … could find a job. The only thing is … you must work hard to make money. (Zulkifli/Juv/07/Sch)

Zulkifli did not want to burden his aunt by asking for help, knowing that she is not very well off. After leaving school at 13, the rest is history.

Ariffin, however, had a long history of family conflict prior to his parents’ separation. After his father left him, his mother had to take on two jobs, thus leaving very little time for her children. Extreme poverty and lack of parental supervision caused him to lose interest in his studies altogether and he became truant. At school he was more interested in going through others’ school bags to see what he could find than in studying. Syazwan, however, was so desperate for money that he even went to the extent of sneaking out of the house after midnight to break into shops, as a consequence of which he was distracted from his studies and ended up being expelled from school. After he was expelled from school, he participated even more actively in antisocial activities prior to being arrested and incarcerated in the institution. His parents did not have any idea at all about his antisocial activities until he was apprehended by the police. Irwan, on the other hand, wanted to go to a vocational school in order to escape from his delinquent friends, but his parents could not afford to send him there. Under the influence of his delinquent friends, he had since lost interest in his studies and spent his time participating in delinquent activities with his peers without his parents’ knowledge. The fate of Loga, Ah Fook, Zulkifli, Syazwan, Ariffin and Irwan therefore clearly indicates that poverty and failure at school were directly interrelated as it seemed that many poor Malaysian parents really lacked the capacity to keep their children at school due to life’s demands.

**Association with deviant peers**

When children are disappointed with their family and/or are doing badly at school, they tend to turn to their peers for advice and consolation. Since friendships are limited by socio-economic class as poor children failing at school often do not mingle with children succeeding at school (Irwan/Juv/Pee/08). When poor children failing at school get together, there is a great likelihood that they may resort to some kind of criminal activities such as burglary, theft or robbery in order to make some
money to buy the things that their parents cannot afford to give them. Ariffin, for instance, incorporated the art of stealing into his life in an unknowing manner through constant association with his deviant peers. Going through school bags during assembly was nothing new to him and his friends and had since become a kind of tacit agreement between them. His habitual stealing habit was also the cause of his arrest as he was the one who suggested that his brother steal RM17 (US$4.25) from the mosque on the day they were apprehended by the police. He also stole cigarettes from the institution, as a consequence of which he was incarcerated for 3 months. Zulkifli and Irwan suggested breaking into shops and houses to steal because they had mastered the art of stealing from their friends. Syazwan broke into shops after midnight with his four classmates. Loga, however, went into some kind of partnership with his friends/triad members to make his motorcycle-theft business a success. Stealing motorcycles has since become a lucrative business for them as it enabled them to make a lot of money. Ah Fook was the only one who did not steal, because his peers did not have such a habit. However, since most of them were triad members, Ah Fook also became a triad member. Here, one can see that as young people mingle with their delinquent peers, their perceptions and attitudes towards life also change to suit their needs and aspirations, thus resulting in more refined antisocial behaviour.

Discussion

This qualitative case study reported six young offenders’ (between the ages of 13 and 17 years) delinquent character and behavioural development with a broad view of how poverty could influence their life trajectory in Malaysia. This study used three major crime-enhancing themes that were strongly related to poverty: miserable family conditions, school failure and association with deviant peers. According to the experiences of six young people, the study found that difficult family conditions, school failure and association with deviant peers due to the poverty of their families were strongly related to the development of their delinquent behaviours.

First, our study showed that the difficult family conditions created various forms of deprivation in the families. Due to the parents’ low qualifications and skills, they did not have good jobs and were sometimes jobless. All six participants in our study mentioned that they could not fulfil their needs during their school time, and as a result they were involved in stealing. Our study findings were similar to a couple of studies such as those by Burrell and Roosa (2008) and Clarke-Stewart et al. (2000). If poverty can have such drastic effects on poor children from intact families, then it is most likely that children from poverty-stricken single mother families are more likely to fare worse in life (Burrell and Roosa, 2008). In actual fact, it is not just the divorce itself but rather the mother’s education level and income that affect the well-being of the children after a divorce (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000). This is because many single mothers lack necessary qualifications and skills, thus rendering it difficult for them to secure proper employment. A couple of studies also found that maternal job loss can have serious repercussions on children’s behaviour (Hill et al., 2011; Kalil and Wightman, 2011) particularly in single mother families.

Second, our study showed that children’s failure at school was directly related to their parents’ poverty. Our study established a link between children’s lower test scores and dropout with poverty. We found that the dropout children looked for work in order to help their parents and to fulfill their individual needs. The stress of poverty jeopardized children’s educational attainment since many poor parents did not place any importance on their children’s academic performance due to the lack of time spent monitoring them, nor could they afford to pay for their tuition fees and revision books. In actual fact, some of these poor parents were only too glad that their children had stopped attending school and were helping to support the family. Socio-economic factors are therefore related indirectly to children’s academic achievement through parents’ beliefs.
and behaviours (Davis-Kean, 2005). Studies have shown that constant parental monitoring and assistance with homework greatly enhance their children’s academic achievement (Lowe and Dotterer, 2013; Patall et al., 2008; Van Voorhis, 2011), but the opposite seems to be true for children who lack guidance in their studies.

Third, this study proved that poverty pushed the children to associate with their delinquent peers. This is because poorer children limited their peer groups to similar socio-economic classes. Our study showed that children were involved in some criminal activities such as stealing, robbery and burglary in order to fulfil their individual needs. However, bad group association was seen as a fundamental factor in youth crime since juveniles who ventured into crime were not entirely alone but were members of various peer groups. According to the World Youth Report (2003), the statistical data in many countries showed that delinquency was largely a group phenomenon and that between two-thirds and three-quarters of all juvenile crimes occurred in groups. These peer groups are well known for their high levels of social cohesiveness, hierarchical organization and a certain code of behaviour based on the rejection of adult values and experience. In these peer groups, influences often take place through face-to-face interactions by way of a number of ‘proximal processes’ (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998). Through peer associations, a child may be encouraged to skip classes, play truant from school, visit cyber cafes, smoke, take drugs or participate in illegal activities. Deviant behaviour is not uncommon to many of these peer groups and may even have an important role to play in some of these groups as a means of survival. When poor children cum school failures get together, there is a great likelihood that they may resort to some kind of criminal activities such as burglary, theft or robbery in order to make money to buy the things that their parents cannot afford to give them.

Conclusion

Despite a number of limitations such as a small number of sampled children, narrow focus and lack of generalizability, the study gave a snapshot of the factors of poverty that exacerbated children’s delinquent behaviours. Poverty can lead to severe financial constraints, family stress and hardship, strained parent–child relationships, family conflict, parental divorce, school failure and association with bad company (Kalil and Wightman, 2011; Oreopoulos et al., 2008), all of which can have adverse effects on the children. These factors are clearly exhibited in the lives of our respondents. Given these crime-enhancing factors, any child can easily be tempted to commit a crime. Our respondents are only ordinary young people who are trying to live up to the expectations of their peers. Since they cannot do so through legitimate means, they have to resort to illegitimate ways to fulfil their dreams.

Whenever juveniles commit an offence, people ask ‘What’s wrong with our society?’, ‘Who is to blame?’. Although previous researchers have looked into the effects of poverty on juvenile delinquency, they have failed to look into the fact that poor parents not only lack proper parenting skills, but they are also less concerned with their children’s well-being and academic performance due to their inability to cope with life’s demands. As such, they have contributed a great deal towards their children’s misery, failure at school and delinquent pathways.

In order to prevent juvenile delinquent behaviour, the impact of poverty-related factors must be counteracted in some way. This study could enable policy-makers to rethink the present economic situations of the poverty-stricken Malaysian families and come up with plans to tackle the issue. Since poor parenting can have serious repercussions on the children, they should be sent for parenting skill courses so as to improve their ways of managing their children. Schools should be also play a role in the prevention of crime and delinquency through intervention programmes such as
extracurricular activities, in order to keep the children busy with meaningful activities at school and protect them from the negative effects of outside influences.

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**References**


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