

Social Sciences Spectrum

A Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, HEC recognized [Y-category](#) Research Journal

E-ISSN: [3006-0427](#) P-ISSN: [3006-0419](#)

Volume 05, Issue 03, 2026

Web link: <https://sss.org.pk/index.php/sss>



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Identity in Crisis: Juvenile Delinquency Among Secondary School Adolescents Through a Psychosocial Lens

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Article Information [YY-MM-DD]

Received	2026-05-18	Revised	2026-06-22	Accepted	2026-07-14
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Citation (APA):

Aurangzeb, W., Rauf, M & Khalil, S (2026). Identity in crisis: Juvenile delinquency among secondary school adolescents through a psychosocial lens. *Social Sciences Spectrum*, 5(3), 150-170. <https://doi.org/10.71085/sss.05.03.566>

Abstract

With the growing prevalence of juvenile delinquency, especially among adolescent secondary school students, understanding the educational and psychosocial factors becomes increasingly complex and important. This study sought to identify these risk factors contributing to the delinquent behavior of students in government secondary schools. Based on Erikson's psychosocial theory, the study sought to understand the interaction of school experiences with identity-related challenges and how they express in the form of delinquent behavior. The study adopted a qualitative approach where, through purposive sampling, equal numbers of students who were in grades 9 and 10, aged between 13–17 years, were sampled from urban and rural government secondary schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and subjected to thematic analysis. Findings reported that academic disengagement, identity confusion, delinquent peers, psychological distress, and perceived injustices of the system cumulatively exposed adolescents to greater risks of exhibiting delinquent behavior. The study called for the implementation of school-based preventive interventions. Specifically, the study suggested the establishment of supportive teacher-student relationships, and the establishment of balanced disciplinary practices as well as the implementation of school-based mental health services. These psychological services are aimed at the prevention of the development of delinquent behavior among students.

Keywords: Juvenile Delinquency, Psychosocial Theory, Identity Development, Educational Risk Factors, Secondary School Adolescents.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a stage of development where many of life's biologically driven changes occur. There is instability regarding the development of one's identity, and the risk of exposure to negative environmental elements is high. This is especially true during secondary school, the period when most children start displaying acts of delinquent behavior (Langevin et. al., 2022). The younger people are when they start displaying acts of delinquent behavior, the more detrimental the consequences will be to them, their families, and society (Bri'Asia, 2024). The consequences of juvenile delinquency may bring in criminal behavior, unemployment, and reduced participation in society.

The educational system is a critical component of adolescent development, as Grazia and Molinari (2023) noted, it functions as a dualistic system, proving to be a strong protective factor in a positive context, but a strong contributor to the risk of delinquency in a negative or inadequate one, most applicable to the challenges of secondary schools in urban and peri-urban Pakistan and the rest of South Asia. These challenges include overcrowding, resource constraints, a culture of discipline that is punitive, and an absence of mental health resources, while producing behaviorally at-risk adolescents and school- alienated adolescents.

There is a critical demand for qualitative studies in Pakistan that investigate the experiences and views of adolescent students, but such studies are largely absent. The majority of educational research in Pakistan employs a quantitative framework that misses the subjective, emotional, and psychosocial dimensions of students and their delinquent behavior. In an attempt to fill this gap, this study incorporates Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory, particularly the stage of adolescence and the challenges around the formation and disruption of identity.

1.1. Research Objectives

1. To explore how educational experiences (academic engagement, teacher–student relationships, school climate, and disciplinary practices) shape adolescents' behavioral trajectories.
2. To examine the psychological factors (identity formation, self-concept, emotional regulation, and psychological distress) influencing adolescents' vulnerability to delinquent behavior.
3. To understand the role of peer relationships and social environments in shaping adolescents' engagement with or resistance to delinquency.
4. To investigate how contextual factors (gender, socioeconomic background, and school type) influence adolescents' experiences of educational and psychological risk.
5. To identify protective factors and examine how institutional conditions within schools mitigate or exacerbate delinquency risk.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How do adolescents describe the role of educational experiences in shaping their behavioral trajectories and vulnerability to delinquency?
2. How do adolescents understand the influence of psychological factors on their behavioral choices and susceptibility to delinquent conduct?
3. In what ways do peer relationships and social environments influence adolescents' engagement with or resistance to delinquent behavior?
4. How do contextual factors such as gender, socioeconomic background, and school type shape adolescents' experiences of educational and psychological risk?

5. What protective factors and school-based conditions do adolescents perceive as reducing their risk of delinquency?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Theory

Erik Erikson (1968) proposed an eight-stage theory of psychosocial development which continues to be the most thorough and scientifically promising proposal to understand identity formation and the resulting behaviors of adolescents. At the core of this theory is the psychosocial crisis: developmental tension between two contradicting outcomes that each individual must handle in relation to their social context. Successfully dealing with each stage instills psychological development and an advanced preparedness for the psychosocial challenges of the next stage. Conversely, failing to resolve the psychosocial crisis of a stage creates developmental weaknesses that are further compounded in subsequent stages.

Stage Five, Identity versus Role Confusion, is fully encompassed by the secondary schooling years (approximately ages 12–18) and is especially pertinent to this research. In this stage, adolescents are faced with defining existential questions: Who am I? Where do I fit in? Where do I want to go? Successfully answering these questions results in an individual that has a coherent and stable personal identity which is a psychological pillar for operating as an adult. In contrast, failing to answer these questions creates a state of role confusion which can result in an individual being susceptible to negative peer pressure, defiance towards authority, and antisocial conduct as an alternate identity pathway (Eichas, 2025).

This study built on Erikson's position which recognizes the institutional structures, in this case, the family and above all the school, as co-founders of adolescent identity. It is during this phase of identity formation that the most critical lines (junctures) are disrupted. Erikson recalls the school-alienated adolescent as likely to carry what he labels a 'negative identity' (Meeus, 2022). This is the conscious, purposeful assumption of deviant roles that are socially recognized, providing a steady and definable self-image.

2.2. Other Theoretical Frameworks

There are three other theories which assisted in a psychosocial assessment. In Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, delinquent behavior is learned through observation and imitation and then reinforced socially, either by peers or family. Antisocial behavior is learned by an adolescent in a delinquent peer group, not by a conscious choice, but due to a normal social process (Manasse & Rebellon, 2024). Agnew (2006) General Strain Theory posits that delinquent behavior will result when an adolescent is unable to fulfill certain accepted goals (that are socially recognized and valued) through legitimate, socially accepted means.

Lastly, in the context of delinquency, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides a framework for understanding how interactions across multiple ecological systems influence adolescent behavior. Delinquent behavior may emerge when these systems fail to provide the protective factors necessary for healthy development during adolescence (Sheerin et al., 2023). Adding to this, Bronfenbrenner's model, when focused on socially and economically disadvantaged, as well as in underperforming schools, sheds light on the way adolescents encounter risk in an environment (the school) which has been socially, economically, and politically constructed.

The frameworks together provided a theoretically integrated, multi-level understanding of juvenile delinquency, applying this to government secondary school students. With Bronfenbrenner's ecological models as the contextual shaping factors.

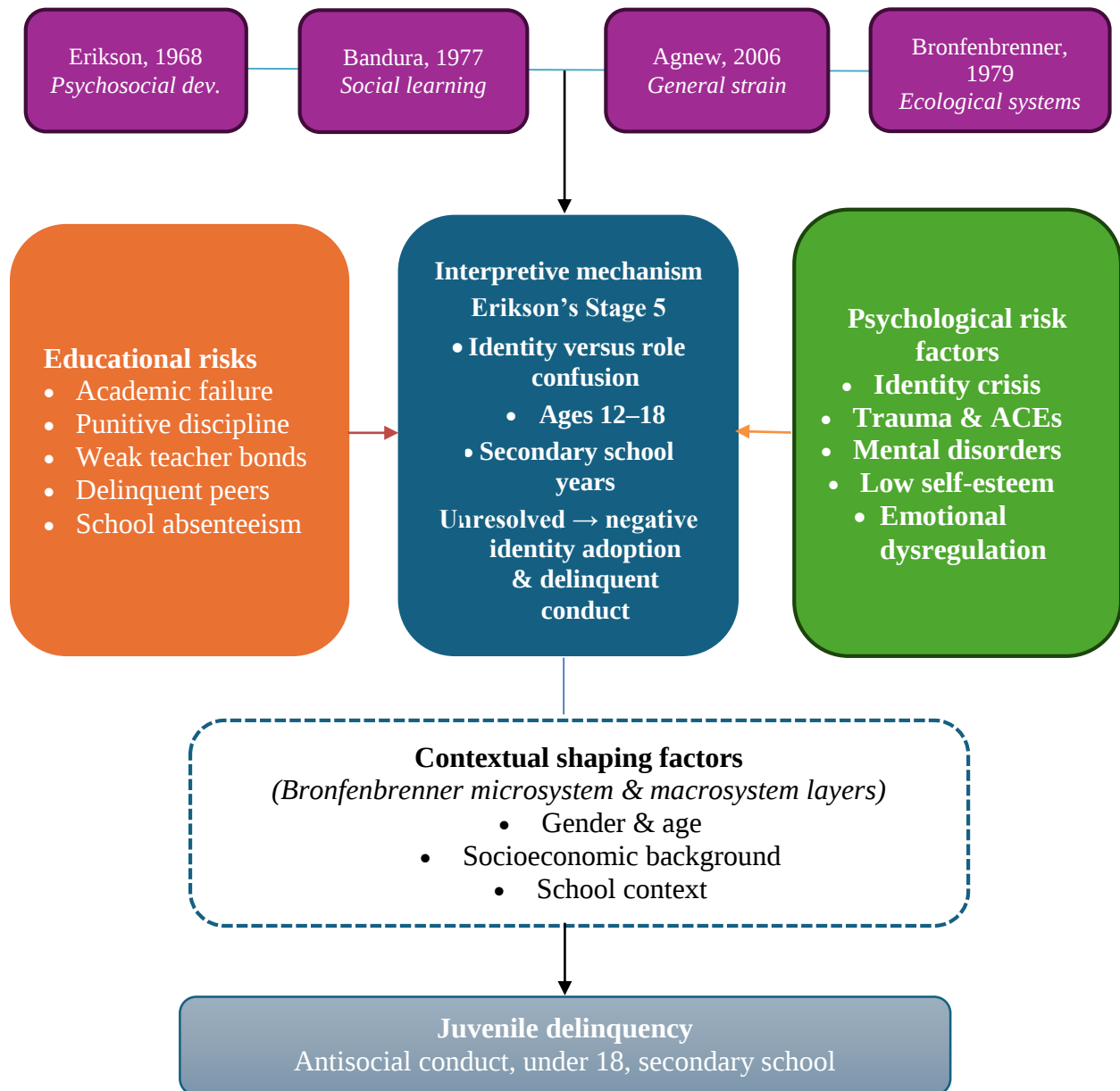
2.3. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 below illustrates the conceptual framework of this study. With the understanding that qualitative inquiry's framework's epistemological commitments delineate pathways or testable causal relationships among variables, the framework encompasses a qualitative inquiry of educational risk, psychological risk, and the Eriksonian identity formation interpretive mechanisms from which participant experiences will be examined. The framework encompasses four major components:

- 1) The collective interpretive frameworks of the relevant theorists (Erikson, Bandura, Agnew, Bronfenbrenner);
- 2) Educational and psychological risk domains that are the foci of the investigation;
- 3) Erikson's Stage Five as the primary interpretive framework; and
- 4) The contextual aspects of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, which are gender, socioeconomic status, and school type, as contextual shaping factors of risk, and how participants articulate risk that are not statistically definable.

The focus of the study is the lived experience of juvenile delinquency among Grade 9 and 10 students.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study



2.4. Educational Risk Factors of Juvenile Delinquency

2.4.1. Academic Failure and School Disengagement

Juvenile delinquency has a plethora of predictors. Academic failure is one of the most prominent predictor of delinquency in a large number of different populations and cultural settings (Jagasia et al., 2024). Students who underachieve consistently develop poor self-concepts academically and disengage progressively from school, in a psychological and physical sense. Disengagement from school literally pulls the adolescent away from a significant support structure (a school), increases time spent in unrestricted settings, increases the likelihood of delinquency, and increases delinquent peer associations.

Chronic school absenteeism in grades such as eight, nine and ten has been shown to predict the development of delinquent behaviors, regardless of socio-economic status. (Korkmaz & Aydın, 2025). Students who described school as negative and not relevant were (Irwin et al., 2022) three times more likely to commit delinquent acts when compared to students who described the school as relevant. Academic failure from an Eriksonian point of view undermines the adolescent's sense of industriousness in the productive stage (Stage 4) and coupled with failure, reinforces the confusion of identity in a later stage (Stage 5). This creates a student with a negative self-concept, poor school identity and no academic competence (Ettekal et al., 2026).

2.4.2. School Climate and Teacher–Student Relationships

Adolescents' behaviors can be influenced significantly by the elements of the school climate, including, safety, a sense of belonging, fairness, and the relational warmth between teachers and students. Schools that create an environment of punitive discipline, institutional indifference, and injustice continue to create an environment of heightened student misconduct and delinquency (Grazia & Molinari, 2023). Teacher-student relationships are particularly of importance: adolescents that hold the perception that a teacher is supportive and caring, show significantly lower levels of behavioral misconduct and a greater sense of connectedness to the school (Gonzalez et al., 2023). Emslander et al. (2025) found students that had no trusted adult in the school environment were twice as likely to engage in delinquent behaviors as compared to students who had even one significant relationship with a teacher.

The Pakistani government secondary school system has structural constraints of large classes numbering over 50 students, high turnover of teachers, and an examination-driven pedagogy which severely and meaningfully constrains the development of teacher-student relationships. As a result, many adolescents are effectively denied this critical protective factor (Saeed et al., 2023).

2.4.3. Punitive Discipline and Corporal Punishment

In spite of the prohibition in Pakistani law, the use of corporal punishment is still common practice within the realm of government secondary schools (World Health Organization, 2025). As schools attempt to use punitive discipline in order to deter negative student behaviors, research shows that punitive discipline actually increases negative student behaviors including resentment towards schools, emotional dysregulation, avoidance of school and aggressive antisocial retaliation, Among other behaviors. With the use of positive behavioral management in schools, Saeed et al. (2023) found that secondary school students subjected to higher levels of physical punishment had much greater levels of aggression, truancy, and delinquency. Punitive treatment causes psychological harm to the teacher-student relationship and removes the remaining institutional safety nets.

2.4.4. Delinquent Peer Association

During secondary school, young people have increased interactions with their peers, allowing their peers to be significant contributors to their social identity and social behavior. From a socio-cultural cross-national research perspective, association with delinquent peers is one of the strongest predictors of adolescent delinquent behavior (Patton, 2022). Adolescents dealing with role confusion (an important developmental task of this age period) are drawn to delinquent peers because these groups provide what schools, and society more broadly, do not: a sense of belonging and community, loyalty and status, and a coherent identity - even though it is negative and deviant (Maggs et al., 2023). Peer groups are important actors in elevating antisocial behavior, as evidenced by Walters (2023). It was done not only through modeling, but also through collective

moral neutralization and social reward systems that make delinquent behavior not only accepted but also admired.

2.5. Psychological Risk Factors of Juvenile Delinquency

2.5.1. Identity Confusion and Negative Self-Concept

From an Eriksonian perspective, the self-concept of an adolescent that is characterized by confusion (self-identity) is the most significant psychological risk factor in the research. Self-identity that is poorly integrated is associated with impulsivity, risk-taking behaviors, negative influences from peers, and anti-establishment behaviors (Meeus, 2022). Adolescents with a negative academic self-concept, a notion of their own intellectual inability with respect to academic achievement, additionally and significantly heightens this risk. As a result of their perceived academic failure, students disengage from socially accepted achievement methods and instead adopt antithetical paths, frequently antisocial, to find identity and recognition (Orth & Robins, 2022).

2.5.2. Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma

Emotional development, the neurobiological stress response, and executive function can all be disrupted by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These include, but are not limited to, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, domestic violence, and parental and community violence. Based on a meta-analysis of 47 longitudinal studies, Yannon et al. (2024) reported that four or more ACEs increased juvenile offending by more than 300%, with disengagement from school and mental health issues being key intervening variables. This highlights the importance of secondary school as a primary setting for trauma-informed interventions for affected adolescents.

2.5.3. Mental Health Problems

The relationship between mental health issues and delinquency is well established. Some of the strongest psychological predictors of delinquency are externalizing disorders, including but not limited to Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder, and ADHD (Guarnaccia et al., 2022). Internalizing disorders, such as anxiety and depression, also contribute by causing social withdrawal and school avoidance and by increasing substance use as a form of self-medication (Bowie et al., 2025). The lack of school counselors and the absence of mental health professionals in Pakistani government secondary schools means that the vast majority of students with emerging psychopathology go unidentified and unsupported, which provides fertile ground for mental health problems to develop into behavioral dysregulation and delinquency (Waqar et al., 2024).

2.5.4. Low Self-Esteem and Emotional Dysregulation

Low self-esteem, especially in self-perception as academically able, socially competent and peer accepted, is a stable predictor for adolescent delinquent behavior in secondary school (Alyana et al., 2023). In regard to Erikson's theory of negative identity, such secondary school students do not gain recognition from educators and peers, which contributes to a further breakdown of their self-concept, and they become supportive of deviant behavior. Emotional dysregulation, which is conceptualized as the inability to regulate one's emotions, is a driving factor in the link between low self-esteem and anti-social behavior, as it heightens impulsivity in situations of perceived humiliation, social exclusion and academic failure (Robertson et al., 2022).

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design. The use of qualitative inquiry is justified in this instance as the research seeks to understand the subjective experiences of adolescent students as well as the psychosocial processes involved in the interpretation of educational and psychological risk. Experience of educational and psychological risk is a multidimensional construct, which cannot be fully captured by quantitative measures (Creswell & Poth, 2022). The psychosocial theory of Erikson is the guiding theory for understanding the participants' narratives.

3.2. Study Setting and School Selection

Participants were selected from secondary government schools located in urban and peri-urban areas. To achieve variation in the school context and student experience, schools were included from three different categories:

Table 1: *Characteristics and Rationale for Selection of Participating School Categories*

School Category	Description	Rationale for Inclusion
Urban Government Boys' Secondary School	Located in densely populated urban area; high student enrolment (40–55 per class)	High exposure to peer delinquency networks and urban stressors
Urban Government Girls' Secondary School	All-female institution in urban setting; co-educational faculty governance	Gender-comparative perspective on delinquency risk factors
Peri-Urban Government Secondary School (Mixed)	Located on urban fringe; students drawn from both urban and rural households	Captures socioeconomic transition and resource-limited school experience

The strategy of selecting multiple schools from different contexts is meant to achieve a great measure of transferability and richness of the analysis of the findings by addressing variation in school climate, socioeconomic status, and level of institutional resources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lee, 2022).

3.3. Participants and Sampling Strategy

As outlined by Ahmad and Wilkins (2025), a purposive sampling strategy involves the collection of data from individuals providing information that is most relevant to the researchers' questions. Participants were required to meet the following inclusion criteria:

- a. Be enrolled in either Grade 9 or Grade 10;
- b. Be between the ages of 13 and 17;
- c. Be willing to participate and
- d. Parental or guardian informed consent and student assent.

To further deepen and capture a wider analytical breadth in the range of lived experiences, the sampling strategy planned for variation in all three of the contextual shaping components identified in the conceptual framework. This meant including male and female participants; participants from urban and peri-urban schooling contexts; and participants from different behavioral profiles leaving some of the students to be identified by school administration as having behavioral problems and others as not having such a designation. This variation aimed to enrich the scope of the thematic analysis in representing the diverse experiences of adolescents in light of the contextual factors outlined (Creswell & Poth, 2022).

Table 2: *Distribution of Study Participants by School, Grade Level, and Risk Profile*

School	Grade 9	Grade 10	Total	Profile
Urban Boys' School	2	2	4	2 at-risk, 2 non-at-risk
Urban Girls' School	2	2	4	2 at-risk, 2 non-at-risk
Peri-Urban School	2	2	4	2 at-risk, 2 non-at-risk
Total	6	6	12	6 at-risk, 6 non-at-risk

A total of twelve participants were recruited, in accordance with the principle of information redundancy in qualitative research where data collection ceases when thematic saturation is reached (i.e., no new substantially different themes were identified) (Guest et al., 2020). To ensure anonymity, participants were given alphanumeric codes (e.g., P1-P12).

3.4. Data Collection: Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) noted the versatility of semi-structured in-depth interviews for collecting data on subjective experience, emotional reality, and psychosocial meaning concerning the delinquent behavior of adolescents. In this case, semi-structured interviews enable the researcher and the interviewee to engage in a conversation that reflects a theoretical understanding of the topic, in this case, delinquent behavior of adolescents, while being responsive to the interviewee's particular interests and narratives. This balance is critical in the case of adolescent interviewees.

Interviews were conducted with adolescents in school in a quiet and private space to minimize the interviewees' concerns about the safety and confidentiality of the interview. This also meant that the interviewees were free to express themselves without fear of social desirability bias. The interviewee's parent, as well as the interviewee, consented to the interview being recorded in audio format. The interviews were all done in Urdu (the language of instruction in the schools) to avoid any linguistic and cultural barriers. The duration of interviews ranged from 45 to 75 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and then analyzed.

3.4.1. Interview Guide

The interview guide consisted of questions deductively created from some of the central constructs of psychosocial theory by Erikson, namely, identity formation, industry and competence, role confusion, and negative identity, as well as some of the other constructs that were derived inductively from a pilot interview conducted with two students not part of the target sample. The

questions were divided into five main categories that reflected the study's conceptual framework, with the intent of using probing questions to invite more elaboration on a particular point, more clarity, and/or to encourage a more profound level of reflection.

Domain 1: School Experience and Academic Engagement

(Theoretical basis: Academic engagement, school connectedness, sense of industry vs. inferiority; Erikson Stage 4–5 transition)

Q1. Can you describe what a typical school day looks like for you, what you enjoy, what you find difficult?

► *What subjects do you find easiest? Which ones feel impossible? Why?*

► *How do you feel when you are sitting in class?*

Q2. How important do you think school is for your future? Do you feel that your school helps you prepare for life?

► *Have your feelings about school changed over the years? When did it change, and why?*

► *Is there anything about your school that makes you not want to come?*

Q3. What happens in your school when a student misbehaves or breaks a rule? How do you feel about the way teachers and the school handle such situations?

► *Have you ever been punished at school? How did that make you feel?*

► *Do you think the rules in your school are fair? Why or why not?*

Domain 2: Identity, Self-Concept, and Future Orientation

(Theoretical basis: Identity versus role confusion, Erikson Stage 5; negative identity formation)

Q4. How would you describe yourself as a person; your strengths, your weaknesses? What kind of person do you think you are?

► *Do you feel you know who you are and what you want from life?*

► *Do other people; teachers, parents, friends, see you the way you see yourself?*

Q5. What do you want to become in the future? Do you think you will be able to achieve that?

► *Are there things that make you feel your future is uncertain or blocked?*

► *Does school help you move toward your goals, or does it feel like an obstacle?*

Q6. Have you ever felt like you don't really belong, in school, at home, or with the people around you? Can you tell me more about that?

► *When you feel you don't belong, what do you do or where do you go?*

► *Has that feeling ever led you to do things you later regretted?*

Domain 3: Peer Relationships and Social Influence

(Theoretical basis: Social learning theory; delinquent peer socialization; peer identity validation)

Q7. Tell me about your friends, who you spend most of your time with in and out of school. How do they influence the choices you make?

► *Have any of your friends ever encouraged you to do something that could get you in trouble?*

- ▶ *How easy or difficult is it to say no to your friends when they want you to do something wrong?*
- Q8.** Have you ever been involved in or witnessed any form of bullying, fighting, stealing, or other misconduct in your school? What was that experience like?
- ▶ *Why do you think students engage in such behaviors?*
- ▶ *What role do you think peer pressure plays in those situations?*

Domain 4: Psychological and Emotional Experience

(Theoretical basis: Emotional dysregulation; self-esteem; psychological distress; ACEs)

- Q9.** How would you describe your emotional life; do you often feel stressed, sad, angry, or worried? What causes these feelings most often?
- ▶ *Is there anyone at school; a teacher or counselor, you can talk to when you feel this way?*
- ▶ *How do you deal with these feelings? What do you do to cope?*
- Q10.** Have there been difficult experiences in your life; at home or in your community, that have affected how you feel or behave at school?
- ▶ *How have those experiences changed the way you see school or your future?*
- ▶ *Did any teacher or school official ever notice and try to help you through a difficult time?*
- Q11.** When you feel disrespected; by a teacher, a classmate, or someone at home, how do you typically react? What goes through your mind?
- ▶ *Have you ever reacted in a way you later regretted? What happened?*
- ▶ *Do you think your reactions sometimes get you into trouble at school?*

Domain 5: Perceptions of Delinquency and Protective Factors

(Theoretical basis: Delinquency perception; resilience; institutional and relational protective factors)

- Q12.** In your view, why do young people your age get involved in misconduct, law-breaking, or delinquent behavior? What are the main reasons?
- ▶ *Do you think the school environment plays a role in pushing students toward such behavior?*
- ▶ *What could schools do differently to prevent this?*
- Q13.** Is there anyone; a teacher, a family member, a mentor, who has made a positive difference in your school life or kept you on the right track? What did they do?
- ▶ *What qualities made that person important to you?*
- ▶ *If every student had access to someone like that, do you think delinquency in schools would decrease?*
- Q14.** If you could change three things about your school to make it a better place for students like you, what would they be?
- ▶ *Why are those changes important to you personally?*

3.4.2. Ethical Considerations

- i. Data collection commenced after receiving ethical approvals from the relevant institutional groups.
- ii. Informed consent was obtained from the legal guardians of the minors. Assent was granted by the participating students.
- iii. The rights of the participants to withdraw at any stage was explained to them. The participants were also informed of the potential risks of participating in the study.
- iv. During the transcription process, participant identities were protected by anonymizing the data
- v. Referral to child protection services was made for disclosures of abuse, self-harm, and/or serious concerning behavior.
- vi. Interview data were recorded and stored in an encrypted, locked file.

3.5. Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Data were analyzed based on the Braun and Clarke (2022) six phase thematic analysis. This approach is the best practice for developing qualitative themes.

- i. **Familiarization:** The transcripts were read multiple times to document first impressions.
- ii. **Initial Coding:** Using NVivo, data were coded, and semantic and latent codes were developed.
- iii. **Theme Development:** Candidate themes were reviewed and aligned with Erikson's psychosocial theory and supportive frameworks.
- iv. **Theme Refinement:** Themes were improved and assessed for relevance to the research.
- v. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Each theme was described and an appropriate name was assigned.
- vi. **Write-Up:** The proposed theories were documented, and participant quotes were used to support the theories.

To ensure Trustworthiness:

- Three participants verified summary findings.
- A secondary researcher independently reviewed the codes and findings.
- Reflexive journaling was utilized.
- Thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was utilized to provide support for the transferability of findings.

4. Findings

Five key themes were identified by analyzing the data of twelve interviews, with additional sub-themes associated with each of the key themes. Collectively, these themes represent the psychosocial domains which combine educational and psychological risk factors that contribute to the increased likelihood of secondary school students engaging in delinquent behavior. In order to promote data-focused analysis, several translated quotes from participants (who spoke in Urdu) have been incorporated with participant ID codes.

Theme 1: Academic Disengagement and School Alienation

This theme relates to RQ1 in examining how adolescents interpret the educational experiences that shape their behavioral patterns and their susceptibility to delinquency.

The most universal and consistently communicated experience of all participants was an overwhelming sense of disconnection from the school's academic life. Participants spoke of school

as a source of repeated frustration and humiliation, not a place where growth and potential are developed. This alienation was cognitive, relational, and institutional, i.e., the inability to keep pace with the demands of the school's curriculum, the inability to be seen and acknowledged by the teachers, and the perception of the school as an institution that does not care about the students and their struggles.

P3 (Grade 10, Urban Boys' School): *"I stopped understanding the lessons in Grade 8. After that I just sat there. The teachers never asked why. Nobody asked. I felt like a ghost in that class."*

P7 (Grade 9, Urban Girls' School): *"When I fail the test, I feel so ashamed that I don't want to come back. Sometimes I don't come for a whole week. Then I fall further behind and it becomes worse. It is a circle that never stops."*

These experiences represent environments that promote the Eriksonian dynamic of academic failure and loss of the sense of industry and competence, resulting in feelings of shame and withdrawal. For some participants, the withdrawal was the first in a series of steps toward engagement with delinquent peers. The school was not an institution that affirmed their identities, but a place where their identities were threatened, and each day brought new confirmation of their worthlessness.

The sub-themes for this area included teacher indifference, the view that teachers only cared about 'toppers', examination-related stress and anxiety, the lack of differentiated teaching, and the physical punishment of students as a reason for school avoidance.

P11 (Grade 10, Peri-Urban School): *"My teacher used to beat me in front of everyone when I got the answer wrong. After that, I never raised my hand again. I just wanted to disappear from that class."*

Theme 2: Identity Confusion and the Search for Belonging

This theme corresponds to RQ2 in understanding adolescents' perception of psychological factors and how they impact behavioral choices and susceptibility to delinquent behavior.

A second major theme arose out of participants' experiences of self-definition, as well as their search for a meaningful identity that was safe and consistent. This theme most directly aligned with Erikson's stage of identity vs. role confusion. Participants revealed, sometimes in very vivid and emotionally charged descriptions, experiences of confusion with their sense of self, feelings of being misunderstood by significant adults, and a profound sense of disparity between their self-image and how they were perceived by school and family.

P5 (Grade 9, Urban Boys' School): *"My family says I am lazy and bad. My teacher says the same. Maybe they are right. I don't know any more who I am, I just know what everyone says about me."*

P9 (Grade 10, Urban Girls' School): *"Sometimes I feel I am playing different characters for different people and none of them is really me. I don't know which one is the real me."*

In addition, it was particularly noteworthy the extent to which participants who had engaged in, or were at risk of, delinquent behavior described the process of adopting, even if reluctantly, a 'negative identity' and of embracing the label of deviance, as an institutionalized means of providing psychological closure to their identity confusion. For these students, being labeled as "the troublemaker" or "the bad one" was experienced as better than the existential void of being nameless in terms of identity.

P2 (Grade 10, Urban Boys' School): *"At least when I fight or cause trouble, people notice me. They know my name. When I sit quietly and do nothing, I am nobody. Trouble makes me somebody."*

In contrast, participants with a more secure self-concept, meaning those who described supportive teachers, supportive families, and participation in extracurricular activities, showed a significantly lower propensity to engage in the identity-driven pathways to delinquency, and thus provide strong evidence for the protective role of identity scaffolding in school contexts.

Theme 3: Peer Influence and Delinquent Socialization

This theme relates to RQ3, how do social and environmental factors facilitate or inhibit the expression of delinquency among youth?

The most proximal risk was identified as peer relationships, and for some participants, the protection offered by peer relationships was unforeseen. For those participants who were identity confused and disengaged from school, delinquent peer groups offered what the school had denied them: inclusion, affirmation, thrill, and group identity. It was stated that the attraction to delinquent peer groups was not a conscious choice to be delinquent but, in the absence of other institutional attachments, a social force that was irresistible.

P1 (Grade 9, Urban Boys' School): *"My friends outside school, they accept me as I am. They don't ask about my marks. With them I feel free, I feel important. When school makes me feel like nothing, I go to them."*

P6 (Grade 9, Urban Girls' School): *"My friend group, some of them do things I know are wrong. But if I say no, they will leave me. And then I have nobody. That fear is bigger than knowing it is wrong."*

Social learning theory was evident in the description of participants' delinquent activities such as truancy, delinquency, vandalism, and drug use. Many participants described a process of moral decay, including the erosion of the resistance to delinquency after repeated exposure to delinquent peers.

Participants with healthy prosocial peer relationships reported that such relationships provided protective shields. Creating healthy prosocial relationships in schools through after-school programs, peer mentoring, and cooperative learning are sound preventive initiatives.

Theme 4: Psychological Distress and Emotional Dysregulation

This theme pertains to RQ2, focuses on adolescents' psychological distress to a greater degree in the context of their behavioral outcomes.

Participants reported high levels of psychological distress, including anxiety, chronic stress, feelings of worthlessness, anger, and sadness. Distress levels were found to be related to school, family, and life in general. The most surprising element, however, was the absence of any form of acknowledgment, recognition, or response to psychological distress by school staff. Not one participant reported the presence of a school counselor in their school. Multiple participants reported that teachers were dismissive of emotional difficulties.

P4 (Grade 9, Peri-Urban School): *"I have been very depressed for two years. Nobody in school knows. Nobody asks. Sometimes I feel if I disappeared, nobody in school would notice. That feeling makes me angry, and when I am angry, I do things."*

P8 (Grade 10, Urban Girls' School): *"At home there are many problems, my parents fight every night. I come to school with all of that inside me and I am supposed to just sit and study. Sometimes I just explode."*

This indicates the school system fails to recognize that if space is not provided to manage emotional experiences, young people may manage complex psychological distress on their own. Several participants reported emotional dysregulation as the direct cause of offending behavior. Emotional pressure that had built up and overflowed was expressed through aggressive acts, skipping class, and breaking the rules.

For participants considered at risk of declining and antisocial behavior, the report of previous traumatizing experiences during childhood were in line with the meta-analytic results presented earlier. Multiple participants reported domestic violence, parental separation, and physical punishment as traumatic psychological wounds that had been totally neglected by the school system.

Theme 5: Institutional Failure and Perceived Injustice

This theme is relevant to RQ1 and 5, as it identifies how the design of some schools increases the risk of delinquency, while simultaneously offering inadequate protective measures.

The fifth, and most unifying, theme was the participants' perceptions of schools being unjust, disinterested, and unequipped to fulfill the needs of developing students. This theme as a unifying interpretive framework suggested that the other themes of academic disengagement, self-identity confusion, social-withdrawal, and emotional distress were, ultimately, the result of institutional failure.

P10 (Grade 10, Peri-Urban School): *"The school is for the smart students. For students like me, the ones who struggle, there is nothing. We are just filling seats until we leave or get expelled."*

P12 (Grade 10, Urban Boys' School): *"Rules are for some students and not for others. If you have connections, you get away with anything. If you are nobody, even a small mistake becomes a big punishment. How can you respect a system like that?"*

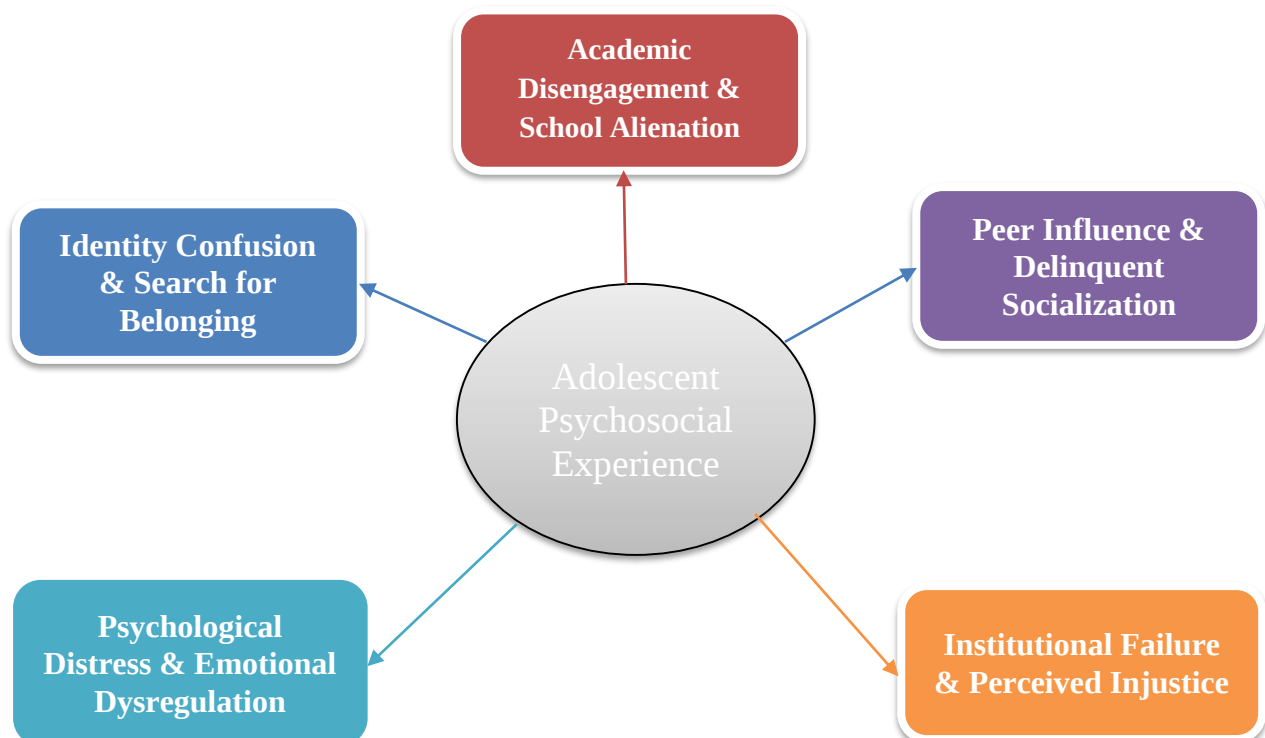
These perceptions of institutional injustice, uneven rule and behavior enforcement, teacher favoritism, and the dismissal of students in difficulty situationally relate to Agnew's strain theory. It is the adolescent's perception of a closed opportunity structure that legitimizes the use of institutional means and is most likely to result in criminal behavior. Importantly, the perception of injustice diminishes the institution's standing to the school, making the violation of rules easier to justify.

In contrast, several participants, especially those in the non-at-risk subsample, described instances of perceived institutional fairness and teacher acknowledgment which fulfilled their need to belong, and performed the function of inhibiting delinquent behavior. These descriptions emphasized the possible positive influence that school improvement of an incremental nature can have.

Table 3: Summary of thematic findings with core sub-themes and theoretical linkages

SN	Theme	Core sub-themes	Theoretical linkage
1	Academic disengagement & school alienation	Teacher indifference; exam anxiety; corporal punishment; dropout spiral	Erikson Stage 4–5: Industry vs. Inferiority → Role Confusion
2	Identity confusion & search for belonging	Negative identity adoption; labeling; absence of recognition; institutional invisibility	Erikson Stage 5: Identity vs. Role Confusion; Negative Identity
3	Peer influence & delinquent socialization	Delinquent peer groups as identity substitute; moral neutralization; social reward of deviance	Bandura's Social Learning Theory; Peer Socialization
4	Psychological distress & emotional dysregulation	Unaddressed mental health; ACE impact; absence of school counseling; emotional overflow	Bronfenbrenner microsystem failure; ACE framework
5	Institutional failure & perceived injustice	Selective rule enforcement; marginalization; erosion of institutional moral authority	Agnew's General Strain Theory; Ecological Systems Theory

Figure 2: Themes from In-Depth Interviews



5. Discussion

The findings revealed convergence and expansion with the existing empirical studies on juvenile delinquency in many ways. First, participants' narratives put Eriksonian identity dynamics in pole position and represented the first qualitative evidence for the theory. During the school contexts described, adolescents were working through Stage Five but in school contexts that do not support identity formation. Instead, the school contexts that keep identity formation in a sort of academic exclusion, punitive control, structural invisibility, and lack of adult relationships. Erikson would have assumed increased identity confusion and the associated rationality of delinquency (Erikson, 1968; Meeus, 2022).

The results suggested a continuously self-sustaining phenomenon of systemic breakdown and behavioral dysregulation. While existing quantitative literature has identified many of the same issues, there is little qualitative representation. Academic failure resulted in shame, and in turn caused withdrawal from the education system. This facilitated the formation of delinquent peer groups that socially embrace and hence reinforce deviant behavior (Bandura, 1977; Walters, 2023). As the deviant behavior attracted more and more disciplinary interventions from the system, there is an increase in the feelings of estrangement and loss of identity. Breaking this phenomenon is entirely plausible by concentrating on a number of interrelated aspects stemming from a Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Waqar et al. (2024) multiple deprivation framework. The greatest failure of the system, in this study, was the complete lack of in-school psychological support services. The lack of support from parents and the psychological pain suffered by students often caused them to lose control of their behavior. Other studies have also documented the links between adverse childhood experiences, psychological distress, and delinquent behavior in youth (Guarnaccia et al., 2022).

One of the most important findings of the study was that in extremely difficult school environments, having the school perceived as a just institution, along with teachers' ability to construct positive relationships with students, produced positive outcomes. This finding correlates with the studies which reported that the constructing of positive teacher / student relationships, together with a supportive school environment, were crucial to student engagement and adjustment (Emslander et al., 2025; Gonzalez et al., 2023). These findings are likely to be important for practice for a number of reasons.

5.1. Conclusion

During this qualitative study, established on Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the authors were able to observe and gain insights on the educational and psychological experiences of secondary school adolescents and the ways in which they often encountered the risk of - and occasionally, for the purpose of this study, they have used the term - succumbed to - acts of delinquency. There are five themes which were separated analytically; however, they were all intricately and deeply interconnected: academic disengagement, identity confusion, peer socialization, psychological distress, and institutional failure. These themes combinedly depict juvenile delinquency as being more than the product of individual moral shortcomings, but an act of psychosocial response to poor psychosocial relational and contextual frameworks. The investigation of these twelve students was supported by psychological theory as well as an ethical foundation. This study served as a clarion call to the institutions and staff showing that students who are at the highest risk for engaging in acts of delinquency also require the most in terms of psychosocial relational frameworks and supportive psychosocial frameworks, which schools are able to and constructed to offer, but most often choose not to. When appropriately and adequately

relational the psychosocial needs of students are met, secondary schools are able to contribute to an educational framework of justice which assists in the betterment of society as a whole.

5.2. Recommendations

- i.** School-Based Mental Health Integration: Government secondary schools should have trained counselors at a minimum ratio of 1:250 students. In the interim, teachers may receive in-service training in psychological first aid, trauma-informed pedagogy, and adolescent mental health recognition, with clear referral pathways to community mental health services institutionalized across schools.
- ii.** Restorative Discipline Practices: Corporal punishment should be replaced with restorative discipline approaches that address behavioral causes, repair relationships, and rebuild student belonging, through policy enforcement and teacher training. Evidence shows restorative practices may reduce misconduct while improving school climate.
- iii.** Social and Emotional Learning: Structured SEL curricula should be integrated into Grade 9 and 10 timetables to teach emotional regulation, self-awareness, empathy, and responsible decision-making. Such programs may address the emotional dysregulation and identity confusion this study identifies as core delinquency risk pathways.
- iv.** Structured Extracurricular Engagement: Schools should expand extracurricular programming sports, arts, debating, community service, as identity-affirming alternatives to delinquent peer groups. For adolescents facing identity confusion, these contexts may offer key opportunities for competence-building and recognition.
- v.** Teacher Professional Development: Teacher education programs should include modules on adolescent psychosocial development, the Eriksonian identity stage, trauma-informed relational practice, and early indicators of delinquency risk. Teachers who understand this developmental context may respond more protectively than punitively to challenging behavior.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

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