CRIME BIAS.

WHY ARE MINORS INVOLVED IN CRIME?

A Multidimensional Review of Psychological, Social, Family, Educational and Environmental Factors Behind Juvenile Delinquency in India

RESEARCH / REVIEW PAPER

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Figure 1. Juvenile justice involves a balance between evidence, accountability, child development and rehabilitation.

Abstract

Juvenile delinquency is a complex social, developmental and forensic issue. Recent Indian crime data show that registered cases involving juveniles increased from 31,365 in 2023 to 34,878 in 2024, an 11.2% rise. In 2024, 77.7% of apprehended juveniles were reported to be in the 16–18 age group. These figures show the importance of late adolescence, but registered cases are not the same as convictions and do not by themselves prove that one factor causes offending. This review examines family relationships, peer influence, psychological and behavioural development, school engagement, socioeconomic conditions, community environment and digital exposure. It also analyses selected Indian juvenile-justice cases and discusses the balance between accountability, public safety and rehabilitation.

Keywords

Juvenile delinquency; children in conflict with law; adolescence; peer influence; family environment; forensic science; juvenile justice; rehabilitation; India

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental period marked by changes in judgement, emotional regulation, identity, social relationships and risk-taking. Family, school, peers and the wider community can influence behaviour. When an adolescent comes into conflict with law, the behaviour should therefore be examined within its developmental and social context rather than reduced to a single label.

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 is India's central child-focused legal framework. Its stated purpose includes care, protection, development, treatment, social reintegration and rehabilitation.

2. Research Problem and Questions

The popular question “Why are minors committing more crimes nowadays?” can be misleading if it assumes a universal increase and a single cause. The more precise research problem is to understand the factors associated with children's contact with the criminal-justice system and the conditions under which risk factors accumulate.

Research questions:

- Which individual, family, peer, educational and community factors are associated with juvenile delinquency?
- Why does the 16–18 age group appear prominently in recent Indian juvenile-crime statistics?
- How can case law explain the balance between rehabilitation and accountability?
- What protective factors may reduce persistent offending?
- How can forensic science contribute without replacing psychological, social and legal analysis?

3. Objectives

- Review major factors associated with juvenile delinquency in India.
- Examine interaction between family, peers, school, psychology, socioeconomic conditions and community.
- Interpret recent Indian juvenile-crime statistics cautiously.
- Analyse selected landmark juvenile-justice cases.
- Identify protective factors and evidence-informed prevention strategies.
- Explain the role and limitations of forensic science in juvenile cases.

4. Methodology

This paper uses a narrative literature-review approach supported by published systematic reviews, Indian legal materials and recent crime statistics. Academic reviews were examined for recurring risk and protective factors; Indian legal materials were used for the Juvenile Justice Act and selected Supreme Court decisions. The paper does not conduct interviews with minors and does not claim causal relationships from correlational evidence.

5. Current Indian Data

Cases involving juveniles increased from 31,365 in 2023 to 34,878 in 2024. Recent reporting also indicates that 77.7% of apprehended juveniles in 2024 were aged 16–18. These are registered/apprehended cases, not convictions, and should not be interpreted as a complete measure of actual offending.

6. Major Risk Factors

6.1 Family environment: low parental supervision, family conflict, inconsistent discipline, neglect and weak parent-child communication can be associated with delinquent behaviour.

6.2 Peer influence: association with delinquent peers can provide models, reinforcement and social approval for rule-breaking. Prosocial peers can instead be protective.

6.3 Psychological and behavioural factors: impulsivity, poor self-control, emotional-regulation difficulties and persistent behavioural problems may be associated with offending. A mental-health condition does not make a child a criminal.

6.4 School disengagement: absenteeism, dropout, poor academic attachment and weak relationships with teachers may remove important protective structures.

6.5 Socioeconomic conditions: poverty, unstable employment, limited opportunities and neighbourhood disadvantage can create stress and reduce access to protective resources. They do not automatically cause crime.

6.6 Community environment: exposure to violence, disorganised neighbourhoods, criminal networks and lack of safe recreation can increase opportunities for delinquent behaviour.

6.7 Digital environment: online spaces can amplify peer influence, bullying and harmful social learning, but social media should not be treated as a direct or universal cause of crime.

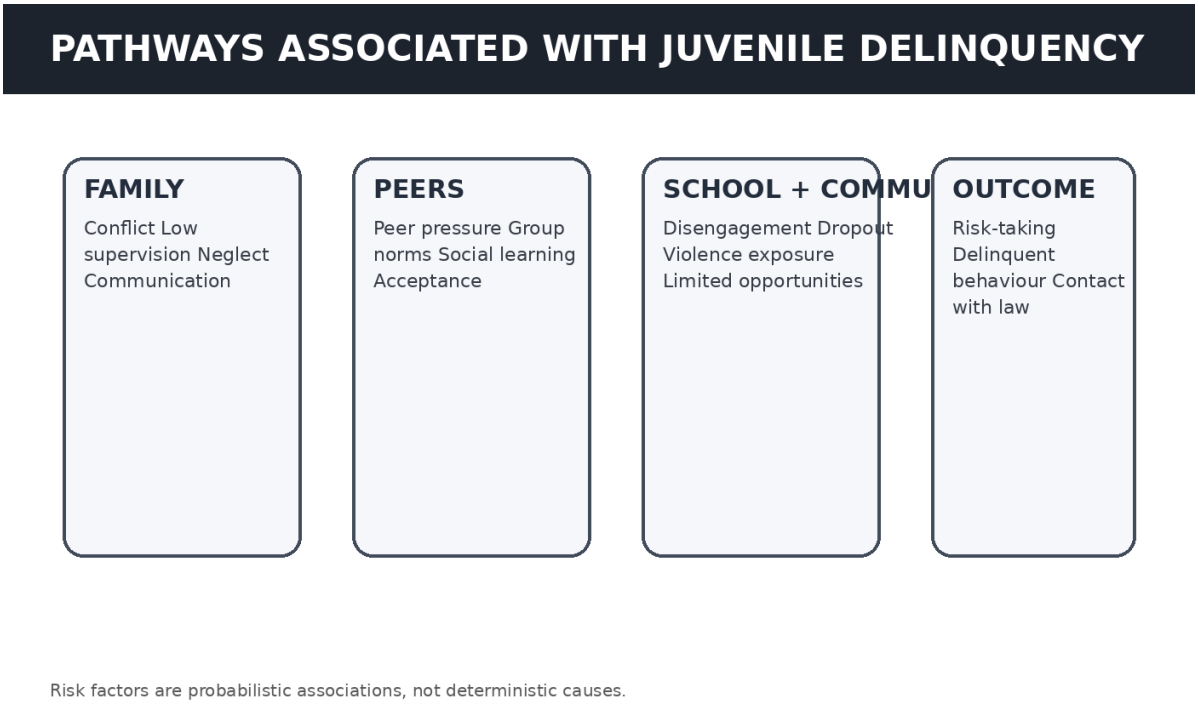


Figure 2. Conceptual pathway showing interacting risk domains. Risk factors are not deterministic causes.

7. Multidimensional Interpretation

Juvenile offending is best understood as the interaction of individual, family, peer, school, community and digital factors. A child exposed to several risks may still not offend if protective factors—supportive adults, prosocial peers, education, mentoring and safe environments—are present.

8. Selected Indian Case Studies

Case Study 1 — 2012 Delhi Gang-Rape Case: The case became a major turning point in public debate about juvenile justice because one person involved was below 18 at the time. In Dr. Subramanian Swamy & Ors. v. Raju, Member, Juvenile Justice Board & Anr. (2014), the Supreme Court considered challenges to the juvenile framework then in force. The case shows how a high-profile offence can trigger debate about age, culpability, public safety and rehabilitation. It should not be used to claim that one case explains why all minors offend.

Case Study 2 — Shilpa Mittal v. State of NCT of Delhi (2020): The Supreme Court considered the meaning of "heinous offence" under the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015. The Court held that an offence carrying a maximum sentence above seven years but no minimum sentence of seven years could not be treated as a "heinous offence" under Section 2(33). The case demonstrates why statutory classification matters before applying the special procedure for 16–18-year-olds accused of heinous offences.

Case Study 3 — Subramanian Swamy & Ors. v. Raju (2014): The decision illustrates the tension between public demand for severe punishment and the developmental rationale of juvenile justice, highlighting the importance of accountability alongside rehabilitation.

9. Legal Framework in India

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 is the central legal framework for children alleged or found to be in conflict with law. It establishes Juvenile Justice Boards and provides child-focused procedures. Section 15 provides for preliminary assessment in certain alleged heinous offences involving children above 16 years. Being 16–18 does not automatically mean an adult trial; the statutory process requires preliminary assessment and a decision within the framework of the Act.

10. Forensic Science Perspective

- Crime-scene examination: objective documentation, collection, preservation and reconstruction.
- Biological and trace evidence: scientific examination where relevant and lawfully obtained.
- Digital forensics: examination of legally obtained digital evidence in relevant cases.
- Forensic psychology: behavioural assessment by qualified professionals; it should not label a child as inherently criminal.
- Age documentation: age at the time of the alleged offence can be legally significant.
- Evidence-led interpretation: forensic findings should be separated from assumptions about motive or personality.

11. Protective Factors

A strong paper should also ask why many children exposed to risks do not offend. Research reviews identify protective domains such as positive peer relationships, prosocial peers, parental control, resilience, social skills, school self-esteem and supportive relationships. Prevention should therefore strengthen protective environments rather than simply label children.

12. Prevention and Rehabilitation

Family: communication, supervision, emotional support and non-violent discipline.
School: attendance support, counselling, mentoring, teacher relationships and career guidance.
Community: sports, arts, skills, youth clubs, safe public spaces and adult mentorship.
Digital: digital literacy, cyber-safety education, critical thinking and healthy online networks.
Justice system: child-sensitive policing, timely Juvenile Justice Board proceedings, legal aid, appropriate assessment, education and rehabilitation.
Post-release: family reintegration, education/vocational pathways and mentoring without stigma.

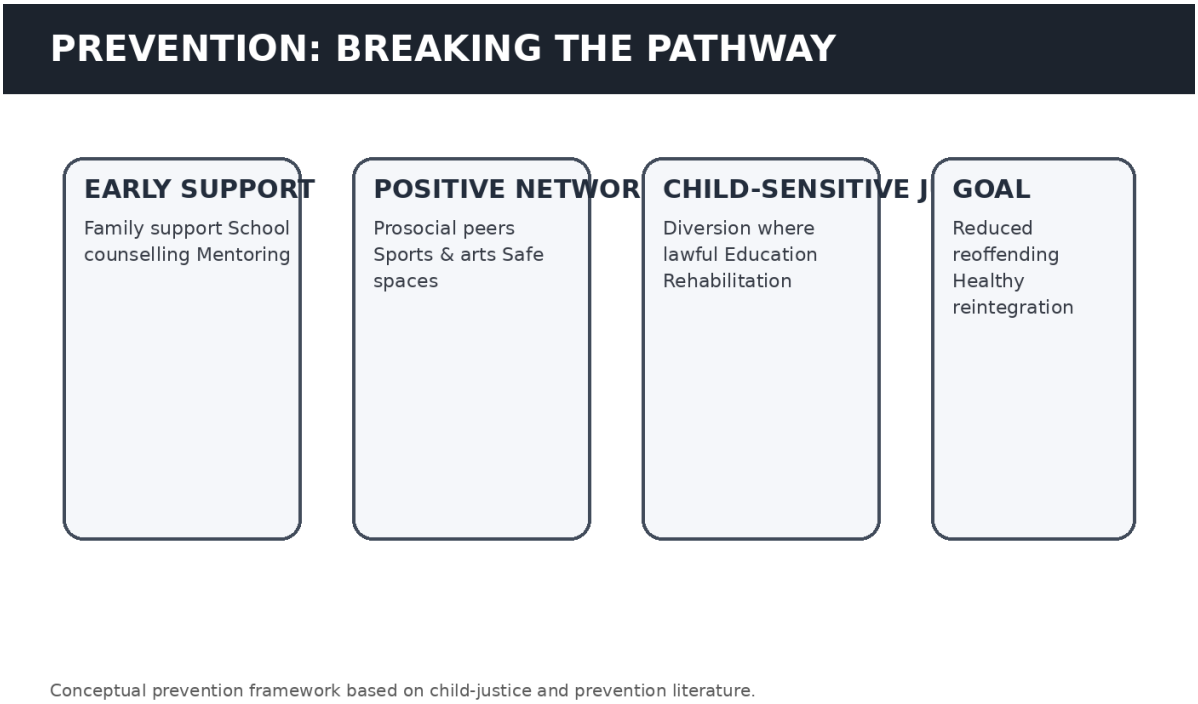


Figure 3. Prevention framework: strengthening protective factors and supporting rehabilitation.

13. Discussion

The evidence supports a multidimensional explanation. Family conflict, weak supervision, delinquent peer association, school disengagement, socioeconomic stress and community disorder can overlap. Individual behavioural characteristics may influence responses to these environments. Protective relationships can interrupt the pathway to persistent offending. Recent increases in registered cases make prevention important, but the statistics cannot identify one cause or represent every child in conflict with law.

14. Research Gap

More India-specific longitudinal research is needed to examine how risk and protective factors interact over time. Further research should examine digital peer influence, urban-rural differences, rehabilitation outcomes, family- and school-based interventions, and ways of combining forensic evidence with developmental and social information.

15. Limitations

- This is a review paper, not an original interview or experimental study.
- Registered crime figures do not measure all offending and are affected by reporting, detection and recording.
- Risk factors are probabilistic associations, not deterministic causes.
- Individual case studies cannot represent all juvenile offenders.
- Legal provisions should be checked against the latest official text before final submission.

16. Future Scope

- Longitudinal studies of offending and desistance.
- India-specific research on peer networks and digital influence.

• Evaluation of rehabilitation and community interventions.
• Comparative research across states and urban/rural settings.
• Evidence-based early support that avoids harmful labelling.
• Interdisciplinary work combining forensic science, psychology, criminology, education and child protection.

17. Conclusion

Minors do not become involved in crime for one universal reason. Juvenile delinquency is better understood as the outcome of interacting developmental, family, peer, educational, socioeconomic, community and individual factors. Recent NCRB figures show a rise in registered juvenile cases in 2024, with late adolescents forming the majority of apprehended juveniles, but these statistics require careful interpretation.

The strongest response is neither to ignore serious offending nor to define a child permanently by an offence. A balanced approach combines accountability with developmental understanding, scientific investigation, child-sensitive justice, prevention and rehabilitation. Forensic science can provide objective evidence, but preventing juvenile delinquency requires the combined work of families, schools, communities, professionals, law-enforcement agencies and the juvenile-justice system.

Central message: Understanding the pathway to offending is essential to breaking the pathway to repeated offending.

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