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**ASSESSED SOCIAL SUPPORT AND ANTI-SOCIAL  
BEHAVIORS IN JUVENILE DELINQUENTS: PRELIMINARY  
INVESTIGATION**

Edgar Demeter (a, b)\*, Alina S. Rusu (a)

\*Corresponding author

(a) Doctoral School Education, Reflection, Development, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, eddemeter@yahoo.com

(b) Department of Psychology, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Psychology and Social Sciences, Aurel Vlaicu University, Arad, Romania, eddemeter@yahoo.com

***Abstract***

Literature in the field of delinquency indicates that social support (SS) can play an important role in terms of prevention or decreasing of antisocial behaviours among young individuals. SS is generally considered as the perception or experience of an individual that he/she is loved, nurtured, esteemed or appreciated within a given social network. The purpose of this study was to investigate the associations between SS and the level and types of antisocial behaviours in a sample of juvenile delinquents in Romania. The study is part of a larger investigation regarding antisocial behaviours and the effects of rehabilitation programs in juvenile delinquents. Instruments assessing the criminal behaviours and cognitions, but also criminal history and the level of SS (the How I Think Questionnaire and the institutional psychological/individual evaluation sheet) were administered to 47 incarcerated delinquents from Arad, Romania (aged between 16-19). Negative correlations between SS and antisocial behaviours (lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history) and positive correlation between SS and education level were hypothesised. The results showed that a high level of SS was negatively associated with lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history and positively associated with a high level of education (Spearman correlations). Significant differences regarding SS were obtained between the variables physical aggression, stealing, criminal history and education level. These preliminary data indicate that juvenile individuals with higher levels of SS have a higher level of education and lower levels of antisocial behaviours and criminal history.

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**Keywords:** Assessed social support, anti-social behaviour, criminal history, education, juvenile delinquency.



## 1. Introduction

In literature it is argued that social support can play a significant role in criminology as it can serve as a protective, preventive or rehabilitative purpose for delinquent or anti-social behaviour (Cullen, 1994; Wright, Cullen, & Miller, 2001; McConnell, Breitzkreuz, & Savage, 2011; Kort-Butler, 2010; Cullen & Wilcox, 2013). In this context, it is often claimed that social support can be regarded as a buffer effect on the stressful factors, that is, when an individual passes through stressful life events, social support has the role of diminishing potential negative consequences arising from stress factors (Thoits, 1995).

Social support is generally defined by the awareness or sensation of an individual that he/she is loved, nurtured, esteemed or appreciated within a given social network with assistance and mutual obligations (Wills, 1991). In some studies in the literature, social support is identified as emotional support (represented by empathy, worry, affection, trust, acceptance, intimacy and care), instrumental support (represented by direct and concrete actions, financial or material support provided to an individual) and informational support (represented by the provision of guidance, suggestions or useful information) (Cullen, 1994; Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997; Slevin et al., 1996; Wills, 1991).

To better understand how social support works on individual functioning, it is recommended to take into account the difference between perceived social support and social support that is offered in real time situations. Perceived social support refers to the subjective judgment of the individual to whom support is or it was offered in times of need, whereas the social support offered in real time refers to specific support actions (counselling or encouragement) provided during periods of need (Taylor, 2011). Literature suggests that, among all the types of emotional support, the emotional social support and support offered by family members can play an important role in protecting individuals from the negative effects of stress and engagement in anti-social behaviour (Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Cullen, 1994).

In a study (Wright, Cullen, & Miller, 2001) it was found that, on one hand, the social support or family capital was positively associated with an increased level of moral beliefs and positive educational outcomes, while on the other hand, it was negatively associated with delinquency. Also, social support can have effects on the symptoms of internalization (Cornwell, 2003), i.e. it was found that adolescents who had a low level of support from family and friends have had a higher level of depression compared to teenagers who have had a high level of support from family and friends. Also, in another study by Kort-Butler (2010), individuals who had a lower level of social support and were victimized or witnessed victimization had higher chances to adopt delinquent or anti-social behaviour.

According to the definitions identified in the literature, juvenile delinquency is represented by the engagement in unlawful or anti-social behaviour by minors, i.e. individuals younger than the legal age of the majority (Siegel & Welsh, 2011; Bartol & Bartol, 2011). Anti-social behaviour can be characterized by those actions that have a negative effect or do not consider the well-being and freedom of other individuals (Berger, 2003), such as lying, stealing and physical aggression (Barriga, Gibbs, Potter, & Liao, 2001). Anti-social behaviours in adolescents are usually linked with a number of risk factors, such as high levels of impulsivity, negative personality characteristics, social detriment, exposure to negative situations, substance abuse, lack or failure in education and family difficulties (Bailey & Scott, 2008). For example, failure in or the absence of education can be associated to crime and delinquency because

individuals with poor level or absence of education may lack the necessary skills to lead a socially desirable life, thus turning to illegal means to fulfil their needs (Walklate, 2007; Millie, 2009; Shoemaker, 2009; Agnew, 2001; Marica, 2007).

According to the literature, individuals who develop in environments that provide more social support are less likely to engage in delinquent or anti-social behaviour (Cullen & Wilcox, 2013). In other words, delinquent or anti-social behaviour can be discouraged when communities, friendships and families provide individuals with proper education and support to live a pro-social and crime free lifestyle (Cullen & Wilcox, 2013).

## **2. Problem Statement**

*Hypothesis 1:* There will be a negative association between the assessed Social Support (SS) and anti-social behaviours (i.e. lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history) in juvenile delinquents.

*Hypothesis 2:* There will be a positive association between the assessed SS and education level in juvenile delinquents.

*Hypothesis 3:* There will be significant differences at the level of lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance, criminal history and the level of education between the juvenile delinquent groups with different levels of social support (0 – no social support; 1 – minimal social support; 2 – appropriate/optimal social support).

## **3. Research Questions**

Does social support have any connections with anti-social behaviours (i.e. lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history) and the level of education in juvenile delinquents?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The study is part of a larger doctoral investigation regarding anti-social behaviours and the effects of rehabilitation programs in juvenile delinquents, aiming to deepen our knowledge and to better understand social support and anti-social behaviour within the Romanian population of young delinquents. The purpose of this study is to investigate the associations between social support and the level and types of anti-social behaviours in a sample of juvenile delinquents in Romania.

## **5. Research Methods**

### **5.1. Participants**

A total of 47 delinquents participated voluntarily in this study, based on informal consent and official approval of the study by representatives of the National Administration of Penitentiaries, Romania. All participants come from incarcerated environments and were condemned for prison-breaking (2.1%), stealing (27.7%), murder (19.1%), profanation of graves (4.3%), robbery (29.8%), robbery and murder (2.1%), attempted of murder (2.1%), trafficking of minors (2.1%) and rape (10.6%). Subjects of this study come from orphan (2.1%), mono-parental (17%) and bi-parental (80.9%) family backgrounds. The participants of this study were comprised of 5 females and 42 males (N = 47), aged between 16 and

19 years ( $M = 17.11$ ;  $SD = .89$ ). The gender distribution of the sample reflects the male majority of inmates of the Penitentiary from Arad, Romania and the Re-education Centre from Buziaş, Romania.

## 5.2. Instruments

In order to assess anti-social tendencies, the How I Think Questionnaire (HIT; Barriga et al., 2001) was used, which allows for assessing the self-serving cognitive distortions (Self-Centred, Blaming Others, Minimizing/Mislabelling, Assuming the Worst) and the four categories of anti-social behaviour (i.e. opposition-defiance, physical aggression, lying and stealing). HIT (Barriga et al., 2001) consists of 54 items, with a 6-points Likert type response scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). The questionnaire consists of 12 scales, meaning that out of the 54 items, 39 items evaluate the four "self-serving" cognitive distortions and the four categories of anti-social behaviour, 8 items evaluate the level of anomalous responding, and 7 items are positive filters (in order to camouflage the 39 items) (Barriga et al., 2001). The sum of Opposition-Defiance and Physical Aggression constitutes the Overt Scale, which involves direct encounter with the victim, and the sum of Lying scale and Stealing scale constitutes the Covert Scale, which indicates the anti-social behaviours that do not confront the victim in a direct way (Barriga et al., 2001). In order to measure anti-social behaviours, the present study will use the opposition-defiance, physical aggression, lying and stealing scales provided by the How I Think Questionnaire (HIT; Barriga et al., 2001). HIT (Barriga et al., 2001) was linguistically validated in the Romanian language in a previous study (Demeter, Balas-Timar, Ionescu (Pădurean), & Rusu, 2018).

The level of social support, criminal history and education were obtained for each participant separately from the institutional psychological/individual evaluation sheet, which was provided by the Arad Penitentiary, Romania and the Buzias Re-education Centre, Romania.

## 5.3. Study Design and Procedure

The design of the present study is a correlational and explorative one, where the association and differences between different levels of social support, education and anti-social behaviours (i.e. lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history) were analyzed. The studied variables were: social support (0 – no social support; 1 – minimal social support; 2 – appropriate/optimal social support), education (0 – no education, 1 – low education, 2 – medium education, 3 – appropriate/optimal education) and anti-social behaviours, i.e. lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history (0 – no criminal history, 1 – existent criminal history).

For the first and second hypotheses a correlational design was used, having as dependent variables the following ones: social support, education and anti-social behaviours (i.e. lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history). For the third hypotheses, a non-experimental design was used, having as independent variable the social support and as dependent variables the level of education and anti-social behaviours (i.e. lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history).

The How I Think Questionnaire (HIT; Barriga et al., 2001) was administered to the participants in a paper-pen format. The participants were given an informed consent consisting in an agreement of participation to the research, a short description of the aim of study and an assurance on the

confidentiality of the collected data. The institutional psychological/individual evaluation sheet was accessed through a written request addressed to the representative of the institutions where the study took place (i.e. the Arad Penitentiary, Romania and the Buziaş Re-education Centre from, Romania).

## 6. Findings

Besides all the scores of the above mentioned questionnaire, the scores for the Anomalous Responding scale were also calculated, in order to control for the sincerity of the responses given to the HIT Questionnaire (Barriga et al., 2001). If the score to the Anomalous Responding scale was higher than 4.00, then the protocol is suspect in terms of sincerity of the answer; if the score was greater than 4.25, then the protocol was disregarded. The mean value for the Anomalous Responding scale in our sample (N = 47) was 2.99, which indicates that the participants offered sincere answers to the items of the questionnaires.

*Hypothesis 1:* There will be a negative association between the assessed Social Support (SS) and anti-social behaviours (i.e. lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history) in juvenile delinquents.

In order to verify our hypotheses we used Spearman correlation to calculate the associations between social support and lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history. It was found that social support had a negative association with the anti-social behaviours in young delinquents, such as  $r = -.514^{**}$  (stealing),  $r = -.437^{**}$  (physical aggression),  $r = -.398^{**}$  (criminal history),  $p < 0.01$  and  $r = -.296^*$  (lying),  $r = -.313^*$  (opposition defiance),  $p < 0.05$ . These results indicate that as one variable (i.e. social support) is at a high level, the other variables (anti-social behaviours) are at a lower level and vice versa.

*Hypothesis 2:* There will be a positive association between the assessed SS and education level in juvenile delinquents.

In order to test the second hypothesis, Spearman correlation was used to calculate the association between social support and education. It was found that the variable social support had a strong positive correlation with the level of education in juvenile delinquents,  $r = .397^{**}$  (stealing),  $p < 0.01$ . Also, the data indicate that when the variable (social support) had high scores, the same was the case for the variable level of education. Similarly, when the variable social support had low scores, the same was the case for the variable level of education.

*Hypothesis 3:* There will be significant differences at the level of lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance, criminal history and the level of education between the juvenile delinquent groups with different levels of social support (0 – no social support; 1 – minimal social support; 2 – appropriate/optimal social support).

In order to test the third hypothesis, the mean values were separately calculated for each group regarding the variables of lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance, criminal history and the level of education.

**Table 01.** Descriptive statistics for the level of education, criminal history, opposition defiance, physical aggression, lying and stealing between the groups with different levels of social support

Social Support		Education	Criminal history	Opposition defiance	Physical Aggression	Lying	Stealing
No social support	M	.67	.83	3.99	3.68	3.83	3.84
	N	12	12	12	12	12	12
	SD	.778	.389	.985	1.032	1.314	1.118
Minimal social support	M	1.25	.50	3.60	2.63	3.28	2.56
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16
	SD	.775	.516	.911	.854	.793	1.243
Appropriate/optimal social support	M	1.47	.32	3.20	2.44	3.07	2.03
	N	19	19	19	19	19	19
	SD	.697	.478	.898	.872	.999	.816

M = Mean; N = Number of subjects; SD = Standard Deviation

As it can be observed (Table 01) in the comparison of the means regarding lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance, criminal history and education between the delinquent groups with different levels of social support, it is shown that as the level of social support becomes higher so does the means for the education variable. When the mean values for the level of social support become higher, the mean values for stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history became lower. In order to verify if the registered differences are statistically significant an ANOVA test was performed. The results indicate that there are statistically significant differences regarding education ( $F = 4.393$ ,  $p = .02$ ), criminal history ( $F = 4.441$ ,  $p = .02$ ), physical aggression ( $F = 7.423$ ,  $p = .00$ ) and stealing ( $F = 11.011$ ,  $p = .00$ ) between the groups with different levels of social support.

## 7. Conclusion

The preliminary data of this study indicate that juvenile delinquents with higher levels of SS have a higher level of education and lower levels of anti-social behaviours and criminal history. The results confirm the first and second hypotheses, which stated that there will be a negative association between the assessed SS and the anti-social behaviours (i.e. lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history) in juvenile delinquents and that there will be a positive association between the assessed SS and the education level in the juvenile delinquents. The findings indicate that the higher the level of social support becomes, the higher become the level of education, whereas the levels of lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance and criminal history become lower.

The third hypotheses was partially confirmed, i.e. which stated that there will be significant differences in regards to the levels of lying, stealing, physical aggression, opposition defiance, criminal history and education between the delinquent groups with different levels of social support (0 – no social support; 1 – minimal social support; 2 – appropriate/optimal social support). The obtained results indicate that the higher the level of social support grows, the lower is the level of criminal history, physical aggression and stealing, whereas the level of education becomes higher.

In this light, social support can represent an important factor for education and for the prevention or rehabilitation of anti-social behaviour. As it is stated in literature (Cullen, 1994; Wright, Cullen, &

Miller, 2001; McConnell, Breitreuz & Savage, 2011; Kort-Butler, 2010; Cullen & Wilcox, 2013), social support offered by family and friends can guide individuals towards education and can motivate them to live a pro-social life without engaging in delinquent behaviour. If we take into account juvenile and young individuals who are at the beginning of their adulthood, one can conclude that without the proper support and backup, they can be influenced to engage in crime because there are no significant persons to guide them into the right direction. If these individuals find themselves in difficult situations (i.e. poverty or social disadvantage), they can search for alternative means to overcome these situations. Without the right support, these alternatives most probably can be represented by anti-social acts.

The results of this study are promising and relevant in opening the possibility to study furthermore the variables that are linked to anti-social and delinquent behaviour and to determine which variables are more relevant in discouraging young individuals to engage in criminal behaviours. In this light, one can determine what kind of rehabilitation and prevention programs are more efficient in addressing the anti-social and delinquent behaviour.

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