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NEIGHBORHOOD FACTORS AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY IN NORTH MACEDONIA

1.02 Review Article

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of the neighborhood as a risk and protective factor in the involvement of children in delinquent behavior. The neighborhood constitutes one of the most influential environments in the social shaping of children and, under unfavorable circumstances, can become a risk factor that promotes their tendencies towards delinquent behavior, an aspect that we have addressed in this study. This scientific paper, through a combined quantitative and qualitative methodology, analyzes children's perceptions, their experiences and the social environment in which they grow up, to identify elements of the neighborhood that may influence their tendency towards delinquent behavior. The study sample includes 540 primary and secondary school students, aged 14-18, and 15 children who were issued the measure of "referred to correctional-educational institution" in North Macedonia, who were surveyed with measurement instruments adapted for the purposes of the study.

The study findings indicate that disorganized and disadvantaged neighborhoods constitute an important risk factor for children's involvement in delinquent behavior. Quantitative results revealed a positive and significant correlation between problematic behaviors in the neighborhood and children's tendency to commit criminal offenses, suggesting that exposure to environments where deviant behavior is evident and/or a high presence of criminal offenses increases the probability of delinquency. Qualitative data from interviews with children confirmed this relationship, indicating that peer influence, the acceptability of deviant behavior in the neighborhood, and easy access to illegal substances encourage their involvement in delinquent acts, while criticism or lack of support from neighbors often proves insufficient to prevent these behaviors.

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This study highlights the need for community-level interventions and increased social support in high-risk neighborhoods as essential to reducing child delinquency and creating a safer and more supportive environment for children.

Keywords: child delinquency, substance use, neighborhood effects, neighborhood relationships, risk factors

1. Introduction

All children have the potential to engage in delinquent behavior. Research shows that there are various risk factors that influence the appearance of these behaviors in children, some of which are closely related. This study examines the relationship between neighborhood factors and neighborhood relationships, and how these factors may promote children's involvement in delinquent behavior.

There is no single path to delinquency; the presence of certain risk factors increases youth's chances of breaking the law, while interactions between these factors can amplify their impact. On the other hand, protective factors can help reduce this risk (Shader, 2004).

One of the key aspects is to understand the influence of neighborhood characteristics and social processes within it on children's behaviors and their tendencies towards delinquency. Chung and Steinberg (2006) define neighborhood structure as “the sociodemographic or constituent characteristics of communities (eg, employment levels)”, while neighborhood social processes as “the social organization of the community” (eg, social connection between neighbors).

The neighborhood constitutes one of the most influential environments in the social shaping of children and, under unfavorable circumstances, can become a risk factor that encourages their tendencies towards delinquent behavior. Environments characterized by poverty, high criminality, lack of support structures and the presence of deviant behavior create conditions that significantly increase the likelihood of delinquent behavior in children. In these circumstances, children are more easily exposed to the influence of problematic peers, negative behavioral patterns, and opportunities to engage in illegal activities, making the neighborhood a key determinant in shaping their behavior.

In addition to identifying the neighborhood as an important risk factor for the emergence of delinquent behaviors among children, this study aims to provide practical recommendations that

can be implemented by parents, educational institutions and neighborhoods to create a more supportive and safe environment for children.

2. Neighborhood factors as a source of risk for children's delinquency

Studies so far show that the environment where children grow up has a great influence on the development of delinquent behaviors. Disadvantaged neighborhoods, characterized by poverty, lack of educational and social resources, high crime and weak social control, create an environment where the risk of involvement in criminal activities is increased. Understanding these factors is essential to analyze child delinquency and to propose effective preventive interventions.

Crime and delinquency thrive especially in high-poverty neighborhoods, thereby increasing the risk of involvement in serious crime for all children living in those areas (McCord et al., 2001). According to social disorder theory, these neighborhoods offer young people limited educational, social, and physical opportunities. Schools have lower quality, fewer youth organizations, and limited opportunities to develop new skills or connect with positive adult role models compared to more affluent neighborhoods (Fagan & Wright, 2011). According to Herrenkol et al. (2000), children who have delinquent friends and have easy access to narcotic substances are more predisposed to be involved in violence between the ages of 10, 14 and 16 years.

These places, known as "delinquency areas", are characterized by a mixed and mobile population, mainly from poor families who often depend on various aids for food, clothing or money. Criminal acts, such as theft and similar, are learned by children at an early age, because they become part of everyday life in the neighborhood, while young people are encouraged by the people who benefit from these small acts (buying the goods that the children steal) by trying to imitate their "heroes" - the older criminals in the neighborhood, in the future, it seems, committed more serious criminal acts. (Perkins & Lenroot, 1943).

Although there is debate among researchers on the role of personal and environmental factors, most agree that "children who grow up in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty and crime are at greater risk of engaging in serious criminal activity (McCord, Widom & Crowell, 2001). Chung and Steinberg's (2006) results show that the poor social organization of the neighborhood affects delinquency indirectly, but through the way of parenting and deviant behaviors of peers. According to them, the social ties of the community can have positive and

negative influences on the youth and the social processes of the neighborhood should be understood in a broad way, especially when talking about the developmental risk of the youth living in disadvantaged areas. In this context, the study by Jang and Johnson (2001), based on data from the National Youth Survey in the USA, shows that living in a neighborhood with a high level of perceived social disorder is an important risk factor for adolescent drug use. Disordered neighborhoods create an environment that enables the initiation, development, and continuation of substance use, as these areas reflect a lack of social control and fewer restrictions on deviant behavior. Shaw and McKay (1942), note that high crime rates are associated with neighborhoods that are characterized by high resident mobility, ethnic heterogeneity and low economic status, community disorder, and weak social control and social support. There is a long tradition in criminology that links child delinquency to the characteristics of the neighborhood they live in. Disadvantaged neighborhoods are associated with child delinquency because: (1) they have more social control weak; (2) create tension without providing legitimate ways to manage it (McNeeley & Wilcox, 2015). The results showed that individuals living in neighborhoods with a higher concentration of offenders were more likely to commit violent or other crimes (Airaksinen et al., 2021). Crum et al. (1996) found that disadvantaged neighborhoods, with low income, lack of resources, poor housing conditions, unemployment, and high crime, expose youth more to drugs. In their longitudinal study, high school students reported how often they were offered drugs, and those living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods reported more frequent drug offers compared to those in better-off neighborhoods.

The results of a study showed that exposure to violence is particularly problematic for young people and that measures to prevent substance use and violence must also address the extent and consequences of victimization. As in other research, it was found that the direct effects of collective efficacy are limited compared to individual factors, while the benefits of living in neighborhoods with greater cohesion and controls are not the same for everyone or in every situation (Fagan et al., 2015). Prevention strategies based on social disorganization theory aim to mitigate the negative impacts of poverty and neighborhood structural problems. As changing economic conditions, such as increasing employment and income, present long-term challenges, the most feasible approaches focus on changing community norms towards delinquency and strengthening cooperation among residents for its prevention (Fagan & Lindsey, 2015)

Neighborhoods can act as a risk or protective factor for children's delinquency. Poverty, high crime and lack of resources increase risk, while social cohesion, community support and

strong neighborhood can reduce the chances of deviant behaviour. The overall effect depends on the balance between these elements of risk and protection. Studies show that environmental, social, and economic factors in disadvantaged neighborhoods create a cycle of risk for children, exposing them more to delinquency and substance use. Lack of social control, economic tensions, norms that tolerate deviant behavior, and negative examples of adults combine to influence their behavior.

3. Methodology

Since information related to sensitive topics is often missing from secondary sources, it requires direct collection through surveys or face-to-face interviews with individuals (Lensvelt-Mulders, 2008). For this reason, a combined methodological approach was used in this study, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The qualitative data served to deepen and explain the results derived from the quantitative part of the research.

3.1 Quantitative and qualitative study sample

The sample of this study consists of a total of 540 students. Of them, 65 are ninth grade students of primary schools, while 475 are high school students from the cities: Debar, Kichevo, Kumanovo, Ohrid, Skopje, Gostivar, Struga, Prilep, Strumica and Tetovo. Among all participants, 57% are female and 43% male, with an average age of 16.2 years. According to ethnicity, 76% are Albanian, 13% Macedonian, 5% Turkish, while 6% declared themselves as others. For the qualitative part of the study, children involved in criminal offenses, who were issued the measure of "referred to correctional-educational institution – Tetovo", were deliberately selected. Because participation was voluntary, 15 children agreed to take part in the interviews; all were male.

3.2. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in May–June 2022 in secondary and primary schools, after obtaining prior institutional permission. In initial meetings, school principals were informed about the purpose of the study, administration procedures, and class selection criteria, ensuring that the identity of schools and students would remain completely anonymous and confidential. Student participation was voluntary and ethical standards for the protection of their dignity and privacy were respected. Semi-structured interviews with children were conducted in November 2022, after

obtaining permission from the Directorate for the Execution of Sanctions, after reviewing the research instruments and procedures. The director of the institution and the head of the sector were informed about the purpose of the study and the content of the interviews, ensuring the standards of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

3.3. Study instruments

During the implementation of this study, the following instruments were used:

To measure the tendency for delinquent behavior, the questionnaire from Marshall et al. (2022) was adapted. The scale on illegal activities that occur in the neighborhood includes eight statements regarding: the presence of crime in the neighborhood, drug sales, beatings/fights, alcohol consumption, the spread of gambling, but also statements regarding neighbors, for which students stated how much they agree on a scale from 1 “Completely agree” to 5 “Completely disagree”. The highest sum of the points obtained in all statements and from the recoding indicate the presence of a tendency for delinquent behavior. The intercorrelation of the scale for the tendency to commit delinquent behavior through the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient resulted in a reliability of .715.

The qualitative study instrument that was used to verify and deepen the data obtained from the quantitative part was a semi-structured interview for children who were issued the measure of "referred to correctional-educational institution". The interview also included questions that aimed to assess the neighborhood/village as a risk factor for children's delinquency, such as: how safe they felt in their neighborhood or village, whether it was easy or not to find drugs or weapons in that environment, and how the adult neighbors reacted to their actions.

3.4. Study Results

3.4.1 Quantitative part of the study

In order to analyze the objectives of this study, the data collected in this study were processed through the SPSS statistical package. Correlation analysis and Pearson's coefficient were used to find the relationship between the degree of tendency for delinquent behavior in children and the neighborhood relationship.

Based on the delinquent behaviors that appear in the neighborhood where the children live, in Table 1 a significant positive correlation was found with the tendency for children to commit criminal offenses ($r=.299$, $p=.00$). The increase in inappropriate behaviors in the neighborhood is also associated with the increase in the tendency of children to commit criminal offenses.

Table 1. Relationship between the rate of criminal offenses and deviant behaviors in the neighborhood where children live

			Neighbors
Tendency to commit criminal acts	Pearson's coefficient		.299**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	Number of subjects		529
**. The correlation is significant at the $p<0.01$ level (2-tailed).			

Table 2 presents the results of the statements of the children participating in the study, regarding the deviant behaviors that appear in the neighborhood. Regarding the statement “there is a lot of crime in my neighborhood”: 26 (4.88%) children completely agree; 25 (4.69%) agree; 56 (10.51%) neither agree nor disagree; 134 (25.14%) disagree and 292 (54.78%) completely disagree. For the statement: there is a lot of drug sales in my neighborhood: 22 (4.13%) children completely agree, 25 (4.69%) agree, 36 (6.75%) neither agree nor disagree, 124 (23.26%) disagree and 326 (61.16%) completely disagree. In the next statement “there are a lot of fights/fights in my neighborhood”: 12 (2.32%) children completely agree; 44 (8.49%) agree, 59 (11.39%) neither agree nor disagree, 135 (26.06%) disagree and 267 (51.54%) completely disagree. In relation to the statement “this is a neighborhood where people are closely connected to each other”: 122 (23.19%) children completely agree, 201 (38.21%) agree, 137 (26.05%) neither agree nor disagree, 42 (7.98%) disagree and 24 (4.56%) completely disagree. For the statement “people in this neighborhood are trustworthy”: 126 (23.86%) children strongly agree, 203 (38.45%) agree, 139 (26.33%) neither agree nor disagree, 44 (8.33%) disagree and 16 (3.03%) strongly disagree. “My neighbors notice when I misbehave and let me know” was the statement with which: 85 (16.41%) children strongly agree, 140 (27.03%) agree, 121 (23.36%) neither agree nor disagree, 102 (19.69%) disagree and 70 (13.51%) strongly disagree. Regarding the statement “a lot of alcohol is

consumed in my neighborhood”: 16 (3.04%) children completely agree, 38 (7.22%) agree, 86 (16.35%) neither agree nor disagree, 161 (30.61%) disagree and 225 (42.78%) completely disagree. For the last statement “gambling is very widespread in my neighborhood”: 17 (3.20%) children completely agree, 32 (6.02%) agree, 66 (12.41%) neither agree nor disagree, 134 (25.19%) disagree and 283 (53.20%) completely disagree.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of statements regarding deviant behaviors occurring in the neighborhood

	Statements	Number of cases	Cases in %
There is a lot of crime in my neighborhood	I completely agree	26	4.88%
	I agree	25	4.69%
	I neither agree nor disagree	56	10.51%
	I disagree	134	25.14%
	I completely disagree	292	54.78%
There is a lot of drug dealing in my neighborhood	I completely agree	22	4.13%
	I agree	25	4.69%
	I neither agree nor disagree	36	6.75%
	I disagree	124	23.26%
	I completely disagree	326	61.16%
There are a lot of fights/ beatings in my neighborhood	I completely agree	12	2.32%
	I agree	44	8.49%
	I neither agree nor disagree	59	11.39%
	I disagree	135	26.06%
	I completely disagree	267	51.54%
	I completely agree	122	23.19%
	I agree	201	38.21%

This is a neighborhood where people are closely connected to each other	I neither agree nor disagree	137	26.05%
	I disagree	42	7.98%
	I completely disagree	24	4.56%
The people in this neighborhood are trustworthy	I completely agree	126	23.86%
	I agree	203	38.45%
	I neither agree nor disagree	139	26.33%
	I disagree	44	8.33%
	I completely disagree	16	3.03%
My neighbors notice when I misbehave and let me know	I completely agree	85	16.41%
	I agree	140	27.03%
	I neither agree nor disagree	121	23.36%
	I disagree	102	19.69%
	I completely disagree	70	13.51%
There is a lot of alcohol consumption in my neighborhood	I completely agree	16	3.04%
	I agree	38	7.22%
	I neither agree nor disagree	86	16.35%
	I disagree	161	30.61%
	I completely disagree	225	42.78%
Gambling is very widespread in my neighborhood	I completely agree	17	3.20%
	I agree	32	6.02%
	I neither agree nor disagree	66	12.41%
	I disagree	134	25.19%
	I completely disagree	283	53.20%

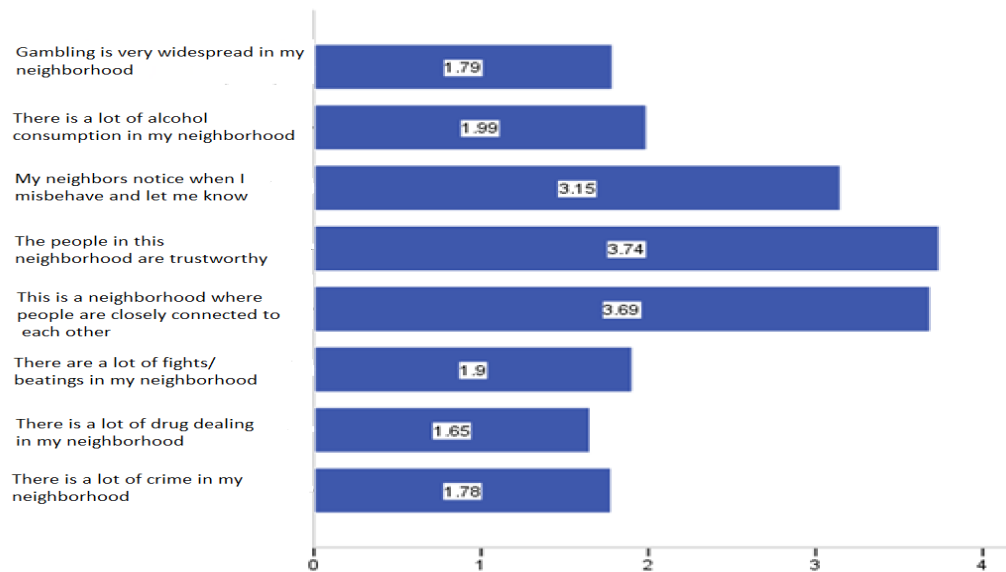


Chart 1. *Data on deviant behaviors occurring in the neighborhood*

3.4.2. Data from the qualitative part

To achieve the objective of this study regarding the exploration of the influence of the neighborhood as a risk factor for children's involvement in delinquent behavior, and to deepen the findings of the quantitative component, an interview was conducted with a sample composed of children in conflict with the law and institutionalized.

Living in disorganized and disadvantaged neighborhoods can have a direct and indirect impact on children's behavior. This impact is particularly related to children's relationships with their family and peers. In conditions where parenting is weak or unstable, children become more vulnerable to external influences, more easily forming connections with peers who exhibit delinquent behavior and criminal adults. Through interviews, we aimed to understand under what circumstances the neighborhood can influence children's behavior. Questions focused on the sense of safety, relationships with neighbors, community response to problematic behavior, and ease of access to illegal substances or tools in their neighborhoods. Most children reported that it was relatively easy to find drugs or weapons in their neighborhoods, often through peer networks. Some of them were even involved in selling substances for money, citing that this activity took place within the neighborhood group of friends. Although neighbors often criticized them for their illegal behavior, community criticism proved insufficient to prevent the spread of negative influences or to curb their involvement in illegal activities. The following are some of the statements of the children interviewed:

Case	Answer
1.	<i>"I had friends who were problematic everywhere. My neighbours spied on me because I stole even though they themselves had committed thefts. The reason was jealousy, because I was more capable than them."</i>
2.	<i>"When the police didn't believe me about the violence my father was using against us, I felt like no one loved me, and that's when I started hanging out with people in Manastir who stole, who sold drugs, who used drugs. I had a neighbor, when we would gather there to play football, they invited me to a party, I went. That neighbor was there, he asked me where I was from, we started hanging out and going to other cities, then I saw that they started using drugs, I was angry and I started drinking too, but very rarely, but I stole more, I started feeling addicted to stealing. I didn't do it for the money, the money wasn't important, but it was interesting to me when I stole."</i>
3.	<i>"It was very easy for me to get drugs. I knew those who sold drugs and I was able to get a few grams without money, they knew that I would pay them later. I sold drugs and with that money I made the payments. Only my father told me not to get involved in drug sales, but I didn't listen."</i>
4.	<i>"If you have money, you can easily find drugs. The neighbors didn't criticize us, because I lived further away in the mountains."</i>
5.	<i>"I used to find heroin from my neighbors and it was very easy to find."</i>

The rest of the children said the opposite of what the children stated above, namely they emphasized that neighbors criticized them for their actions and that it was not easy to find drugs/weapons in their neighborhoods, e.g.: "It was not easy to find drugs or weapons in the neighborhood. Neighbors criticized us when we did bad things."

Discussion and Conclusions

The study data, both quantitative and qualitative, confirm that the neighborhood plays an important role as a risk factor in the emergence of delinquent behaviors in children. Based on the deviant behaviors that appear in the neighborhood where the children live, our findings from Table 1 show a positive and significant correlation with the tendency to commit criminal offenses by children and the level of problematic behaviors in the neighborhood ($r=.299$, $p=.00$). This shows that the more pronounced the deviant behaviors are in the neighborhood environment, the higher the tendency of children to engage in delinquent acts. Meanwhile, interviews with children in conflict with the law illustrated that exposure to disorganized environments, easy access to illegal substances, and the influence of neighborhood peers constitute key factors that promote delinquent behaviors. Although criticism and disapproval from neighbors were present, they proved insufficient to curb children's involvement in illegal activities.

In line with a large body of research on the impact of neighborhoods, this study also reveals that there is a relationship between neighborhood characteristics and delinquency (Lim 2010). In the same direction, there is a tendency for children to commit criminal acts even when they live in neighborhoods that exhibit deviant behavior and/or a high incidence of committing criminal acts.

As children grow, their experiences outside the family and school also increase in frequency and territory. This happens because they increasingly spend time outside in the neighborhood or in more remote areas, frequented by both peers and adults. This has made it easier for them to obtain narcotic substances for trade and consumption, encouraged by other people. The areas where the children lived had high levels of poverty, crime, and ease in obtaining narcotic substances.

A similar study examined the relationships between neighborhood structural and social characteristics, peer group affiliations, and delinquency among a group of violent adolescents, with a sample of 488 boys aged 14-18, mostly from economically disadvantaged, ethnic minority youth living in urban communities. The results indicate that poor neighborhood social organization is indirectly related to delinquency through its links to parental behavior and peer deviance and this may lead to exaggerated risk patterns for children's delinquency (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). After the family, the neighborhood has an important influence on children, mainly neighborhoods that are places in the vicinity of the neighborhood where the children live. Those who have family conflicts and bad neighborhoods are more likely to be friends with delinquent individuals. A

disadvantaged neighborhood also has an impact on delinquent acts. If criminal and violent behaviors are present in a neighborhood, this mostly affects males in the society and leads them to delinquency (Masood & Ali, 2018).

Our findings are also supported by the study conducted with 179 adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system in a Midstern city, according to which adolescents who perceived adults in their neighborhood as supportive of prosocial values reported lower levels of delinquency, while adolescents who perceived a greater availability of drugs and weapons in their neighborhood reported higher levels of delinquency (Tompsett et al., 2014). Birckhead (2012) shows that poverty contributes significantly to child crime. Areas with high poverty rates tend to have higher rates of child delinquency. Children's homes registered in the United States courts are concentrated in low-income neighborhoods, associated with extreme levels of poverty, poor housing, minimal health care, overcrowding, and a severe lack of recreational facilities.

In every area, especially in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty and crime, it is necessary to provide safe and structured spaces for recreation and positive activities for children, strengthen the supervision of children in such environments, in order to channel their energy towards appropriate behaviors. Sports, artistic, musical and volunteer activities can neutralize the negative impact of the environment by giving children the opportunity to develop social and sustainable skills. This approach contributes to the prevention of delinquency and supports the positive development of children. It is also necessary to develop intervention programs for families and strengthen parenting, in order to reduce the negative impact of the neighborhood and prevent connections with delinquent peers and other adults. In summary, community-level interventions and increased social support in high-risk neighborhoods are essential to reduce child delinquency and create a safer and more supportive environment for children.

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ФАКТОРИ НА СОСЕДСТВОТО И ДЕТСКО ПРЕСТАПНИШТВО ВО СЕВЕРНА МАКЕДОНИЈА

Апстракт: Целта на ова истражување е да се испита влијанието на соседството како ризичен и заштитен фактор во вклучувањето на децата во деликвентно однесување. Соседството претставува една од највлијателните средини во социјалното оформување на децата и, во неповолни околности, може да стане ризичен фактор што ги поттикнува нивните тенденции кон деликвентно однесување, аспект кој го обработивме во ова истражување. Овој научен труд, преку комбинација на квантитативна и квалитативна методологија, ги анализира перцепциите на децата, нивните искуства и социјалната средина во која растат, со цел да се идентификуваат елементите на соседството што можат да влијаат врз нивната тенденција кон деликвентно однесување.

Истражувачкиот примерок опфаќа 540 ученици од основно и средно образование, на возраст од 14 до 18 години, и 15 деца на кои им била изречена мерката „упатување во воспитно-поправна установа“ во Северна Македонија, кои беа анкетирани со мерни инструменти адаптирани за целите на истражувањето.

Наодите од истражувањето укажуваат дека дезорганизираните и социо-економски попречените соседства претставуваат значаен ризичен фактор за вклучувањето на децата во деликвентно однесување. Квантитативните резултати покажаа позитивна и значајна корелација помеѓу проблематичните однесувања во соседството и тенденцијата на децата да извршат кривични дела, што сугерира дека изложеноста на средини каде што девијантното однесување е застапено и/или постои високо присуство на кривични дела ја зголемува веројатноста за деликвенција. Квалитативните податоци од интервјуата со децата ја потврдија оваа врска, укажувајќи дека влијанието на врсниците, прифатливоста на девијантното однесување во соседството и лесниот пристап до незаконски супстанции го поттикнуваат нивното вклучување во деликвентни активности, додека критиките или

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недостигот на поддршка од соседите често се покажуваат како недоволни за спречување на таквите однесувања.

Ова истражување ја нагласува потребата од интервенции на ниво на заедницата и засилена социјална поддршка во соседствата со висок ризик како суштински мерки за намалување на детското престапништво и создавање побезбедна и поохрабрувачка средина за раст и развој на децата.

Клучни зборови: детско престапништво, употреба на супстанции, ефекти на соседството, соседски односи, ризични фактори