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Understanding Juvenile Delinquency in District Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Understanding Factors Involved in Offending and Reintegration Challenges for Youth on Probation

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Abstract

Most research into children in conflict with the law in Pakistan focuses on legal processes and factors that place these individuals at risk. Few studies have focused on how males on probation in certain areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa see their offending behaviors and their needs for reintegration. To understand the factors that males on probation in District Malakand associate with offending behavior, the challenges faced by young people after engaging with the justice system and what they feel would be useful in helping them.

15 males on probation in District Malakand responded to semi-structured interviews, conducted in Pashto between July and August 2026. Participants were purposefully sampled by the probation department of the district. Notes were taken of the interview and translated into English. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used to analyses the data.

Eight themes emerged from the interview data. These included: peer groups and a sense of belonging, boredom, lack of structure and use of social media, financial issues, reliance on family and a desire to be independent, issues with education and employment, stigma and isolation, anxiety and difficulty expressing feelings and wanting support and a second chance. Participants described their situations,

rather than causes. They requested support with education, training, advice, structure and equality. As this is a retrospective analysis causation cannot be demonstrated.
These results provide insight into a local situation that can be used to provide support in Malakand, specifically in providing skills, education and positive activities to reintegrate into the community respectfully. However, the sample size was extremely small and participants were obtained through the probation service meaning this may not be generalizable.
Keywords
Juvenile Justice, Probation, Reintegration, Qualitative, Peer Influence, Stigma, Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

1. Introduction

Children entering the justice system can be influenced by many different factors including peer groups, family situations, education, opportunity and how institutions and communities respond. Research has shown that many interacting factors contribute to youth offending behaviors. An umbrella review has found associations with individual, family, school and social factors but this doesn't mean that they are responsible for any particular individual's offending behaviors (Ayano et al., 2024). Peer influences can be a complex factor to consider as youth can be influenced by their friends, be drawn to similar peers and spend time unsupervised together (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Hoeben et al., 2016; McGloin & Thomas, 2019).

Financial issues and lack of opportunity can be a factor. General Strain Theory suggests that negative experiences and inability to achieve valued goals can lead to stress. However, this does not mean that those living in poverty or unemployment will commit crimes (Agnew, 1992). Engagement with the justice system can create stigma and exclusion when considering future opportunities. This will depend on the individual situation (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951). These theories have been used as sensitizing concepts in this study. This cannot be used to diagnose participants or show causation due to the retrospective nature.

The Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA) of 2018 provides a statutory framework for dealing with juveniles in Pakistan. This includes juvenile courts, legal aid, diversion, juvenile justice committees, probation reports, confidentiality and rehabilitation (Government of Pakistan, 2018). Although there is a law in place this does not necessarily mean it is being applied correctly. A recent qualitative study of 20 former juvenile probationers in District Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa found there was confusion about the purpose of probation, little engagement from probation officers and little support with rehabilitation (Hussain et al., 2025). This provides useful context to the provincial situation and is a good reason to investigate local practices. However, it cannot be assumed this is the case in Malakand.

This study was conducted in District Malakand. There is little research into the views of probationers in this area. Due to restrictions of accessing juveniles in detention, participants were obtained through the probation services. Therefore, this study only represents the views of those that could be accessed through this method. This study aimed to understand how participants viewed the factors involved in their offending behaviors, the impacts they have faced and what support they think would help.

The contributions of this study are minimal. It is an exploratory study looking at 15 males on probation in one district. It does not look at risk factors, how well the JJSA is being implemented, diagnose mental health conditions or estimate recidivism. It does however provide participant views in their context which can be used to inform further research.

Research Questions

- What social, economic, educational and family factors do participants associate with their offending?
- What reintegration challenges do participants face with education, employment, family, community acceptance and emotional wellbeing?
- What support do participants feel would be useful to prevent further engagement with the justice system and help their reintegration?

2. Literature Review

2.1 multi-level factors involved in youth offending

Most current explanations of juvenile delinquency focus on risk and protective factors. A review of previous research found associations between youth offending and substance use, previous delinquency, psychopathology, adversity, parental control, abuse, parent-child attachment, bullying and peer influence (Ayano et al., 2024). However, this is a pooled analysis of many studies and does not indicate any causation for any of the participants. The literature has been used to inform the questions but cannot be used to diagnose participants.

Peer groups can be a factor as adolescence is a time for learning socially, associating with others and establishing status. Research looking at peer contagion has shown that behaviors can be positively reinforced within groups. Reviews have found associations between delinquency and peer delinquency and lack of supervision (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Hoeben et al., 2016). Selection and influence can occur together meaning this cannot be simplified to bad friends. When looking at participant responses of wanting to fit in this can be seen as a situational factor.

Strain theories focus on negative experiences and lack of goal achievement. General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992) can be used to understand frustrations and lack of access to valued items. However, care must be taken not to assume deprivation is a sufficient explanation for offending behaviors.

2.2 Reintegration, education and stigma

Probation means reintegration into the community. This can involve reintegration into family, education, employment and relationships within the neighborhood. Participants in the Dir study described having little communication and little support with rehabilitation meaning there may be a gap between what probation is supposed to do and how it actually affects youth (Hussain et al., 2025). This provides useful context within the province but does not indicate whether probationers in Malakand receive similar services.

Education and vocational opportunities can be a factor for reintegration. Participants emphasized the importance of gaining qualifications, practical skills and employment. This supports the argument for providing accessible education and skills. However, this study did not test any programs and therefore cannot show whether vocational education reduces recidivism.

Recommendations should be based on participant needs.

Labelling theory focuses on the impact of society labelling someone. Participants described feeling concerned that people would remember or judge them due to their case. Some participants described feeling isolated from social situations. This shows they expect to be judged but does not indicate how often they are discriminated against by employers, schools or community members. Stigma shouldn't be over emphasized as this is documented but the feelings of concern and isolation are real.

2.3 Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

The JJSA 2018 provides specific provisions for children friendly justice and rehabilitation (Government of Pakistan, 2018). Research and debate have occurred around how legal protections and probation services are applied in Pakistan. The Dir study is relevant as participants were probationers from the same province. This showed there was issues with communication, lack of engagement from probation officers and low support with rehabilitation (Hussain et al., 2025). However, this study looked at former probationers from a different district.

2.4 Gap in research

Overall, the literature provides general information on youth offending, peer groups, strain, societal reactions and juvenile justice policies. However, it would be useful to have a local study looking at the views of males on probation in Malakand. This is because the legal context and services will vary depending on location. This study aims to address this issue through interviews. However, the sample size was small and participants were obtained through the probation service. This means care must be taken when interpreting the findings.

3. Theoretical Framework

Three theories were used to help interpret the data. Social Learning Theory focuses on observation, imitation and reinforcement. This can be useful when considering wanting to fit in with peers and difficulty resisting suggestions (Bandura, 1977). General Strain Theory focuses on negative experiences and lack of goal achievement. However, it does not imply that those living in poverty will commit crimes (Agnew, 1992). Labelling Theory focuses on the impact of being labelled deviant by society. (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951). These theories were not seen as competing explanations and participants were not expected to fall into these categories. The analysis remained descriptive.

4. Method

4.1 Design

An exploratory qualitative design was used. Semi structured interviews were conducted with youth on probation in District Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These were conducted privately between July and August 2022. Juveniles in custody could not be accessed meaning participants were limited to those that could be obtained through the district probation department.

4.2 Participants

15 males participated. All were single and unemployed. 14 participants had no formal education or completed qualifications. One participant had attended school. Age details were obtained for 14 participants, 7 were 17 and 7 were 18. 14 participants had no formal education or completed qualifications. One participant had attended school; however, the level was not recorded.

Participants were purposefully sampled. The researcher approached 15 potential participants. It was made clear that participation was voluntary.

Age and Legal Status: 7 participants were 18 years old. However, their age at the time of the interview and legal reasons for probation orders were not recorded

4.3 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in Pashto. Notes were taken with consent. These were translated into English. In a setting provided by the probation department district Malakand some of the juveniles were having guardians at the time of interview.

4.4 Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used to analyses the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This involved familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming and writing-up.

5. Findings

Eight themes were identified based on the 15 interview transcripts. Below are examples for each theme. The figures are descriptive. The study explored participants' perspectives regarding their experiences, circumstances associated with their involvement in offending, reintegration challenges, and the support they considered necessary for their future.

5.1 Participant Characteristics

All participants were male, single and unemployed. 14 participants had no formal education or qualifications and 1 had some level of schooling .14 participants had their age recorded, 7 were aged 17 and 7 were aged 18. Peer influence was the most common theme. Participants speaking about this. Nine participants discussed boredom and social media. Seven participants discussed financial concerns. Eleven participants discussed family and wanting independence. All 15 spoke about concerns around education and work. Nine participants discussed stigma and withdrawal. Thirteen participants spoke about being worried or demoralized. Ten participants spoke about hoping to receive support.

5.2 Belonging & Peer Influence

Participants expressed that they considered their friends to be important people and often struggled to say no due to wanting to belong. One said:

"I spent a lot of time with my friends and often went along with their decisions as I wanted to belong"

“Za ma der wakht da khpal malgaro sara tero, ao kala kala ba me da haghoy pa faislo amal kawa, zaka che ma ghwakhte che haghoy ma khpal malgary oganri”

I often struggled to say no as I wanted to belong with my friends"

J06

Ma ghwakhte che malgari me omani zaka kho kala kala rata da haghoy na enkar kol sakht o

Some also mentioned feeling pressured to fit in or just go along with the crowd. Another stated:

"Sometimes I just went along with the crowd"

J15

“Kala kala ba me pa khpla faisla na kawa, balke da hagwi khabara ba me manala”

When reflecting back, J07 stated they listened to their friends "who didn’t always give good advice". Two participants didn’t mention friends at all and spoke more about how people reacted to their cases. Therefore, many participants valued their friendships but this doesn’t indicate causality.

5.3 Boredom, Free Time & Social Media

Nine participants mentioned they had little to do or used social media. Seven mentioned they had little to do and six mentioned using social media. One stated:

"I often get bored as I don't have much to do during the day"

J03

"Za ba der wakht stare kedam, zaka che pa warz ke ba me da kolo dpra der zyat ba wazgar om"

Another noted they used social media often as they didn't have much else to do and met friends:

"Often I use social media and meet friends as I don't have much else to do."

J14

"Ma ba der wakht social media karawalo ao da khpalo malgaro sara ba me katal, zaka che nur sa kar mi na o"

J03 and J07 mentioned comparing themselves to others online. No specific social media platforms were mentioned and no direct causation was mentioned.

5.4 Financial Concerns

Seven participants mentioned they were concerned about money. One mentioned:

"I often felt I couldn't afford the things the other boys had"

J02

Ma ba der wakht daase ehsaas kawalo che za da noro halakano pa shan sheyan na sham akhistalay.

Another mentioned they were concerned about money in the home:

"Money issues affected my family and I often worried about how we would manage our expenses."

J13

Maali stonzo zama pa koranay bande asar karray wo, ao za ba der wakht pa de khabara khfa om che da kor kharche ba tsanga pora kom

No participants explicitly mentioned they committed an offence due to poverty. From the summary of the interviews, we cannot determine if the financial concerns occurred before or after the offence. This theme should be viewed as a reported situation.

5.5 Family Dependency & Independence

Eleven participants mentioned they relied on their family or felt like a financial burden. One mentioned:

"I sometimes feel guilty as my family have to pay for my needs"

J05

Kala kala rata da gunah ehsaas kegi, zaka che koranay me zama zarooriyat pora kawai

Another mentioned they felt uncomfortable as their family had to pay for their personal needs and wanted to contribute:

"I feel uncomfortable when my family have to pay for my personal needs as I want to contribute to the family expenses."

J09

Kala che koranay me zama shakhsiy zarooriyat no za narahata keegam. Zma khwakhsha da che za ham da kor pa kharcho ke khpala

Another mentioned they wanted to learn a skill and earn some money so their family wouldn't have to provide all their needs:

"Ghwakhum che yaw hunar ezda krum ao paisay wogatam, tsu koranay me zama tol zarooriyat pora kom"

The interviews focussed on support and financial dependency rather than family structure so no information was given about family dynamics.

5.6 Education, Qualifications & Work

All participants mentioned concerns around education, skills or work. All were unemployed. One mentioned:

"I don't have any formal qualifications so it is difficult to find work"

J02

Za rasmi taleemi sanaduna nshta no zaka rata da kar mundal sakht di.

Another mentioned:

"I don't have any education or professional skills so it seems difficult to find a job."

J04

"Ma sabaq na di wele nu d waji naokari mundal gran di rata"

This shows they are concerned about their lack of qualifications and barriers to employment. The majority of participants didn't have much formal education so we cannot attribute this to them being involved with the justice system. Many also expressed they were concerned they would struggle to reintegrate due to their case history. This is discussed below.

5.7 Stigma & Reputation

Nine participants mentioned they were concerned about how they were viewed. One mentioned:

"I felt uncomfortable meeting people as I thought they would remember my case."

J04

La khalqo sara pa ledo ke ba narahata wom, zaka che fikr me kawalo che haghoy ba zama case yad lari"

Another mentioned:

"Sometimes I didn't want to meet people as I didn't want to answer questions about my past. It made me feel isolated."

J10

Kala kala ba me la khalqo sara leda katal na kawal, zaka che na me ghwakhthal che da khpal teer pa ara swalono ta jawab warkram. Da kar ba za yawaze krum.

Most of these comments were around expecting to be judged, concerned about reputation and avoiding others. No specific instances of discrimination from employers, schools or members of the community were mentioned**.**

5.8 Worried & Uncertain Feelings

Thirteen participants mentioned they were worried, demoralized or uncertain. One mentioned:

"I often felt sad, worried and uncertain about my future. It was difficult to talk about how I felt."

J05

Za ba der wakhta khapa aw andekhman wom, ao da khpal rat pa ara ba ډاډه na wom. La noro sara da khpalo share kawal rata

Another mentioned:

"In difficult times I felt demoralized and it was difficult to talk about my problems."

J12
Pa sakhto wakht ke ba nahile kedam, ao da khpalo pa ara khabare kawal rata gran wo.
These are the participants' own feelings. As no diagnostic tool was used, we shouldn't label these as clinical depression or anxiety disorders.

5.9 Support & Fresh Start

Ten participants mentioned types of support they would find helpful. One mentioned:
"I would like to have access to vocational training so I can develop practical skills."
J14
Ghwakhtam che maskhasi rozane ta lasrasi aw da maharat da zda kray
Another mentioned:
"Vocational training, sport and community programs could help young people spend their time in a better way."
J08
Maskhasi rozana, warzish aw da tolane kawalay jawanan ؤ ta da wakht teerawalo kha barabare.
Another emphasized how important it was to have someone to listen and guide:
"It would help young people with similar issues to have someone to listen and guide."
J05
"za ghwaram che der khalaq d yaw shan msle sra waoram"
Another mentioned:
"I want to improve myself and not be defined by my mistakes."
J10
"za ghwaram chez an behtar km"
Little was mentioned about the probation supervision so we cannot determine how effective or good it was.

6. Discussion

This exploratory study has outlined how 15 male probationers in District Malakand felt about committing offences and the challenges they faced. They mentioned wanting to belong with their peers, having free time, financial concerns, relying on their family, barriers to education and work, expected stigma, worrying feelings and practical needs. The information provided was complex and couldn't be simplified down to one reason. Also, as the data was retrospective, we cannot determine when the situations occurred in relation to the offence. This means we can interpret the findings from the participants' perspective.

The comments about peers align with social learning theories. They wanted to belong with their peers and struggled to say no. This links with other research looking at peer influence and free time (Bandura, 1977; Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Hoeben et al., 2016). However, we cannot determine if the behavior started with their peers or if they sought out like-minded friends. Two participants didn't mention friends at all to remind us that peer influence isn't universal. Overall, this shows they have positive peer and activity environments.

The financial concerns and lack of job opportunities can be linked to general strain theory. This looks at pressures from negative experiences and blocked goals (Agnew, 1992). No participants mentioned they

committed an offence due to poverty. We cannot determine what occurred first. However, we can see they are living with financial dependency and lack of qualifications. Future research should look into structural disadvantages they faced prior to their justice contact.

Social media was mentioned as a way to pass the time and compare lifestyles. We cannot determine causation as this is different to exposure, comparison, interaction and behavior. The stigma was around expected judgement and avoidance. Labelling theory is a useful perspective however we didn't measure how the community reacted and how this impacted their work and education (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951).

Participants mentioned they would like vocational training, education, guidance, sport and fair treatment. This can give some local priorities to consider when planning services. This fits with a rehabilitative approach to probation however we didn't evaluate any programs. The study in District Dir also found there were communication and rehabilitation issues within probation. This suggests we should investigate further into service access within the districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Hussain et al., 2025). This is suggestive only.

Implications for Practice & Policy

Probation services and community organizations could look into referring young people to non-formal education, vocational training, apprenticeships, mentoring, sport and confidential psychosocial support within their local resources and with legal protections. Any program should be co-designed with young people and evaluated to ensure they are accessible, acceptable and produce positive outcomes. Probation services should ensure young people are recruited and supervised in a way that ensures they are doing it voluntarily and their information is kept confidential. Communities should avoid labelling young people due to one interaction with the justice system. This stems from the participants' priorities and the overall rehabilitative approach.

7. Limitations

As this sample only included 15 male participants from one district it cannot represent all young people in conflict with the law in Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or Pakistan. As participants were recruited via probation services this may have influenced who was included and how they felt they could answer. Young people in detention, females, those not on probation and family members weren't included. There was no control group or follow up so we cannot determine

8. Conclusion

Male youth on probation in District Malakand have mentioned several overlapping concerns. They mentioned wanting to belong with their peers, having free time, financial concerns, relying on their family, lack of education and work opportunities, expected stigma, worrying feelings and wanting practical support and a fresh start. The findings don't show any specific situation caused them to commit an offence. However, they mentioned they would like education, practical skills, guidance, positive activities and fair treatment. This can inform local responsive probation support however effectiveness should be evaluated.

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