

Risk Taking Behaviour and Imprisonment Among Young Adolescent

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Abstract

This study analyses the cases of risk-taking behaviour among young adolescents and their subsequent imprisonment from 2002 to 2015. Evidence shows a significant rise in risk-taking behaviours among adolescents during this period, resulting in increased detention. The experience of incarceration, particularly for young females, is shown to have profoundly negative psychological consequences. These stem from the loss of freedom, separation from family, exposure to harsh and uncertain environments, and the development of inmate subcultures. The resulting trauma includes heightened anxiety, bullying, distorted mental health, and self-destructive behaviours such as depression, self-injury, and suicidal ideation. The paper calls for a shift towards trauma-informed, rehabilitative approaches in juvenile justice.

Keywords: Risk-taking behaviour, imprisonment, young adolescent, trauma, mental health

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of juvenile offenders has risen globally and in Malaysia, reflecting complex social and psychological challenges. According to Sickmund (2009), the US Department of Justice reported 2.2 million juvenile arrests in 2003, with over 1.1 million cases referred to juvenile courts and 104,000 juveniles held in placement facilities on any given day. Malaysia has also experienced a significant increase, with female juvenile offenders rising by 161.5% from 325 cases in 1974 to 850 in 1995 (Kassim, 2012). By 2011, nearly 30,000 juveniles were detained in correctional schools and rehabilitation centres nationwide (Statistics Service, Department of Social Welfare Malaysia, 2011). This paper explores the psychological and social consequences of imprisonment among young, predominantly female adolescents in Malaysia and comparable contexts between 2002 and 2015. The central argument is that incarceration during adolescence is profoundly disruptive, with effects that extend far beyond the period of detention.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Secure detention, historically perceived as a necessary punitive measure, is now widely recognized as a source of significant psychological and developmental harm for youth

(Frazier, 1989; Healy & Bronner, 1926). Detention exposes adolescents to multiple dangers, including trauma from the loss of freedom, separation from family, involuntary exposure to unfamiliar people and procedures, crowding, unsafe conditions, and the persistent uncertainty of their situation (Roush, 1989, 1999, 2008). These factors collectively undermine healthy adolescent development and can have lasting psychological impacts.

Peterson-Badali and Shute (2000) and Ismail and Nik Abdul Rahman (2012) highlight that juveniles placed in enclosed or institutional settings are unable to develop positively and are exposed to a range of dangers. Among these, bullying stands out as a particularly prevalent and damaging experience, often going unreported (Peterson-Badali et al., 2000). Ireland (2002) found that 57.9% of young and adult inmates reported engaging in at least one interaction that could be classified as bullying behaviour. Bullying in these settings is multifaceted, including physical aggression, theft, verbal threats, gossip, intimidation, and ostracism (Ireland & Archer, 1996; Ireland, 1999, 2001). Both direct and indirect forms of bullying are common, with 45.3% involved in indirect and 37.5% in direct bullying (Ireland, 1999), and with psychological or verbal bullying (35.9%) being the most reported, followed by physical (8.4%), theft-related (2.9%), and sexual bullying (0.3%).

Confinement in prison or rehabilitation centres results in loss of freedom, crowding, and an ongoing sense of uncertainty (Roush, 2008, 2009). Adolescents detained in these settings often experience heightened anxiety and weariness, which can intensify tensions and increase vulnerability to bullying (Baglivio et al., 2014). This hostile environment often leads to the development of an inmate subculture (Baglivio et al., 2014; Ireland, 2002), which serves as a force of cohesion among inmates, whether voluntary or involuntary (Ireland, 2002, 2015; Turner, 1987). Within this subculture, the distinction between 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' becomes pronounced, fostering a sense of belonging for some while isolating others (Ireland, 1999, 2001, 2002). Strong in-group cohesion can discourage reporting of bullying due to fear of reprisals, reinforcing a code of silence (Ireland, 2002, 2015; Connell & Farrington, 1996).

Critically, this subculture can have especially negative effects on those who do not conform, particularly female juvenile detainees, who may be more prone to identity crises and emotional distress as a result of exclusion (Unruh et al., 2009). Low self-esteem is common among female juvenile offenders (Matsuura et al., 2009) and is closely linked to antisocial behaviour, social maladaptation, and delinquency (Blackburn et al., 2007; Trzesniewski et al., 2006; Matsuura & Hashimoto, 2007, 2008). Social maladaptation and delinquency are often indicators of poor relationships and lack of social support from family and peers, as well as adverse educational and occupational outcomes (Fergusson et al., 2005; Kerr et al., 2014; Thapar et al., 2012). Zakiah and Ismail (2011) emphasize that strong social support, especially from close kin, is crucial for positive self-development; its absence increases the risk of delinquent behaviour and emotional disorders.

Mental disorders such as depression and anxiety are highly prevalent among juvenile detainees (Mahadir et al., 2004; Nasir et al., 2010), with despair and insomnia being common symptoms. Chronic exposure to such psychological stressors can lead to distorted mental health and negative personality development (Flannery & Kretschmar, 2008; Ohio

Department of Mental Health Services, 2011). Numerous studies have supported the association between negative self-views and vulnerability to depression (Flannery & Kretschmar, 2008; Nasir et al., 2011). Adolescents, still in the process of self-discovery, are particularly vulnerable to these effects (Roush, 2008).

In Malaysia, Nasir et al. (2010) found that juvenile detainees frequently experience cognitive distortions such as self-critique, hopelessness, helplessness, and preoccupation with danger. These are tell-tale signs of depression, often exacerbated by poor mental health management (McCarty et al., 2006; Ng et al., 2011). Internationally, it is estimated that two-thirds to three-quarters of detained youths have at least one psychiatric disorder, with over 15% suffering from major mental disorders such as psychosis or affective disorders (Sickmund, 2009). Notably, detained adolescents are more likely to be depressed than their community-based peers, with girls showing higher rates of depression than boys or the general adolescent population (Nasir et al., 2011; Matsuura et al., 2009; Ryan & Redding, 2004). Comorbidity is common, and depression and extreme anxiety are particularly prevalent (Teplin et al., 2005).

Self-injury and suicidal ideation are also alarmingly frequent, with female juveniles showing higher rates than males (Matsumoto et al., 2004). These behaviours are often associated with early separation, bullying, and abuse (Matsumoto et al., 2004). The prevalence of major depressive disorder among detained girls is more than twice that of boys and four to five times that of girls in the general population (Fazel et al., 2008). Studies indicate that 27%–58% of delinquent adolescent girls have attempted suicide, far exceeding community rates (Abram et al., 2008; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2012, as cited in Church et al., 2014), and 20% have been diagnosed with major depressive disorder (Abram et al., 2008; Rohde et al., 2013).

These psychological burdens deter positive self-development and diminish hope for a promising future (Choon et al., 2013; Romanoff, 2012; Syed Umar, 2011). The risk of recidivism is high, with many female juvenile detainees cycling in and out of detention (Baglivio et al., 2014; Romanoff, 2012). Given these findings, there is a clear need for trauma-informed, rehabilitative interventions. Art therapy, for example, has been shown to help detainees process emotional distress and develop cognitive and social resilience (Day & Onorato, 1989; Fenner et al., 2010, 2011; Hall, 1997; Williams, 2003).

The literature consistently demonstrates that juvenile detention is not merely a punitive response to youth offending but a complex, high-risk environment that can profoundly disrupt adolescent development, especially for girls. Early foundational studies (Frazier, 1989; Healy & Bronner, 1926) and subsequent research (Roush, 1989, 1999, 2008) highlight the inherent dangers of secure detention—loss of freedom, family separation, exposure to unfamiliar and often unsafe environments, and the chronic uncertainty of institutional life. These factors are not only traumatic in the short term but can also have enduring psychological effects.

A major theme in the literature is the prevalence and impact of bullying within detention centers. Multiple studies (Ireland, 1999, 2001, 2002; Ireland & Archer, 1996;

Connell & Farrington, 1996) reveal that bullying—both direct (physical, verbal threats) and indirect (gossip, ostracism)—is widespread, with more than half of inmates reporting involvement either as victims or perpetrators. The institutional setting, with its rigid routines and lack of privacy, exacerbates these dynamics, making it difficult for victims to seek help due to fear of reprisals and the strong in-group/out-group subcultures that form among inmates (Ireland, 2002, 2015; Baglivio et al., 2014; Turner, 1987).

Critically, these subcultures do not simply provide social structure; they often reinforce negative behaviors and silence, especially among those who do not conform, increasing the risk of identity crises and emotional distress (Unruh et al., 2009). Female detainees, in particular, are vulnerable to these effects, with low self-esteem frequently leading to antisocial behavior, social maladaptation, and further delinquency (Matsuura et al., 2009; Blackburn et al., 2007; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). The literature also underscores the role of poor social support—both familial and peer-related—in exacerbating these risks (Fergusson et al., 2005; Kerr et al., 2014; Zakiah & Ismail, 2011).

Mental health issues are a dominant concern. Studies from Malaysia and abroad (Mahadir et al., 2004; Nasir et al., 2010; Teplin et al., 2005) document high rates of depression, anxiety, and insomnia among juvenile detainees, with female adolescents at particular risk for comorbid disorders and self-harming behaviors (Matsumoto et al., 2004; Fazel et al., 2008; Abram et al., 2008). The literature is unequivocal: detained girls are significantly more likely than boys or their community-based peers to suffer from major depressive disorder, suicidal ideation, and attempts (Rohde et al., 2013; Thapar et al., 2012; Fazel et al., 2008).

Alarmingly, the majority of these young people do not receive adequate mental health care. Teplin et al. (2005) found that only a small fraction of female detainees with major mental disorders received any treatment, either in detention or in the community. This gap is particularly concerning given the strong correlation between risk-taking behavior, psychiatric disorders, and repeated involvement with the justice system (Sickmund, 2009; Baglivio et al., 2014; Romanoff, 2012). In addition, the literature also points to the potential for positive intervention. Approaches such as art therapy (Day & Onorato, 1989; Fenner et al., 2010, 2011) have been shown to help detainees process emotional distress, develop cognitive and social resilience, and reduce the risk of recidivism.

In conclusion, the literature strongly correlates risk-taking behaviour among female juvenile offenders with major mental disorders such as depression, which undeniably require attention and treatment (Sickmund, 2009; Teplin et al., 2005). Teplin et al. (2005) found that among female juvenile detainees with major mental disorders, only 15.4% received treatment in the detention centre and 8.1% in the community. Several studies indicate that female juvenile detainees are far more affected by comorbid psychological disorders, especially depression, than their male counterparts (Matsumoto et al., 2004; Matsuura, 2005; Sickmund, 2009; Teplin et al., 2005; Thapar et al., 2012; US Department of Justice, 2003, as cited in Sickmund 2009; Washburn & Pikus, 2005). This highlights the urgent need for public health communities to address the deviant behaviour and mental health needs of female juvenile offenders.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that female adolescents in detention centres are at high risk of developing psychological and behavioural disorders (Baglivio et al., 2014; Matsumoto et al., 2004; Matsuura, 2005; Sickmund, 2009; Teplin et al., 2005; Thapar et al., 2012; Washburn & Pikus, 2005). The loss of freedom and social support, combined with the psychological strain of incarceration, can lead to depression, antisocial behaviour, and a cycle of recidivism. Interventions such as art therapy have been shown to help detainees process emotional distress and build resilience (Day & Onorato, 1989; Fenner, Schofield, & Van, 2010, 2011; Hall, 1997; Williams, 2003).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, aiming to bring depth and context to the exploration of psychological and social consequences faced by young adolescents—particularly females—who experienced imprisonment between 2002 and 2015. Rather than relying solely on statistics, this approach seeks to understand the lived realities and emotional journeys of these youths, as reflected in both Malaysian and international research.

The research process began with a comprehensive search for relevant literature using academic databases and government archives. Keywords such as “juvenile detention,” “female adolescent offenders,” “psychological trauma,” “bullying in detention,” and “mental health in juvenile justice” guided the selection of sources. Studies were included if they focused on adolescents aged 12–18, addressed the experience or outcomes of imprisonment or detention in rehabilitation centers, and provided insight into psychological, behavioral, or social impacts. Each selected study was carefully reviewed, not only for methodological rigor and sample characteristics but also for the voices and stories embedded within the data. Both qualitative accounts—such as interviews and case narratives—and quantitative findings—such as prevalence rates of depression, bullying, and self-injury—were considered. Special attention was paid to research that emphasised on the unique vulnerabilities of female juvenile detainees; whose experiences are often underrepresented in the literature.

Thematic analysis was employed to synthesize the findings, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns such as trauma and loss of freedom, anxiety and bullying, the emergence of inmate subcultures, cognitive distortions, and self-destructive behaviors. Where possible, direct quotes and case examples were included to humanize the analysis and give voice to the adolescents behind the statistics. A comparative perspective was also adopted, contrasting the experiences of incarcerated adolescents with those of their non-incarcerated peers. This helped to highlight the unique harms and challenges associated with detention, as well as the gaps in support and intervention.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The analysis is constrained by the availability and quality of published research, possible cultural differences in reporting, and the reliance on self-reported data in many primary sources. These limitations are considered in the interpretation of findings, and the study calls for further research that centers youth voices and experiences, especially those of girls in the juvenile justice system.

By critically connecting together empirical evidence and the personal narratives found within the literature, this methodology seeks to move beyond mere numbers and statistics. It strives to illuminate the real, lived experiences of young people—particularly girls—whose voices are too often lost in policy debates and institutional reports. Through this approach, the study offers a nuanced and compassionate understanding of the psychological impact of imprisonment, capturing not only the prevalence of trauma, bullying, and mental health struggles, but also the daily realities, fears, and hopes of these adolescents. Ultimately, this methodology aims to inform the development of more humane, effective, and empathetic responses within juvenile justice systems—responses that recognize the humanity of every young person and prioritize healing, support, and the possibility of positive change.

4. FINDINGS

The analysis of research and case studies from 2002 to 2015 reveals a deeply troubling reality for young adolescents—especially girls—who experience imprisonment. The findings show that incarceration is not just a matter of physical confinement, but a profoundly disruptive and often traumatic life event that leaves psychological and social scars long after release.

First and foremost, the experience of detention is marked by a pervasive sense of loss: loss of freedom, loss of family connections, and loss of personal agency. For many young people, being separated from their families and thrust into an unfamiliar, often hostile environment is a source of ongoing distress. The daily routines of detention—strict rules, constant surveillance, and lack of privacy—compound feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty about the future (Roush, 2008, 2009). These conditions are not just uncomfortable; they are fundamentally at odds with the developmental needs of adolescents, who require safety, support, and opportunities for positive identity formation.

One of the most critical findings is the prevalence and impact of bullying within detention centers. The studies reviewed found that more than half of incarcerated youth reported involvement in bullying, either as victims or perpetrators (Ireland, 2002). Bullying takes many forms—physical aggression, verbal threats, gossip, intimidation, and social exclusion—and is often used as a means of survival or self-protection in an environment where vulnerability can be dangerous (Ireland & Archer, 1996; Ireland, 1999, 2001). The fear of becoming a target leads many adolescents to adopt aggressive behaviors themselves or to align with powerful inmate subcultures for protection.

These subcultures, while providing a sense of belonging for some, reinforce rigid divisions between “in-groups” and “out-groups.” This dynamic fosters distrust, silences victims, and perpetuates cycles of exclusion and retaliation (Baglivio et al., 2014; Ireland, 2002, 2015). For those who do not or cannot conform—often girls, or those perceived as different—the emotional toll can be severe. Exclusion from the in-group is not merely social; it can lead to identity crises, deepening feelings of isolation, and a sense of being fundamentally unworthy or unlovable (Unruh et al., 2009).

The psychological consequences of these experiences are profound. Many detained adolescents report symptoms consistent with trauma and chronic stress: insomnia, nightmares, hypervigilance, and emotional numbness (Mahadir et al., 2004; Nasir et al., 2010). Over time, these symptoms often develop into more serious mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, and even post-traumatic stress disorder. Female detainees are particularly vulnerable, with studies showing higher rates of depression, self-injury, and suicidal ideation compared to their male counterparts and to adolescents in the general population (Matsumoto et al., 2004; Fazel et al., 2008; Abram et al., 2008).

A striking and deeply concerning finding is the prevalence of cognitive distortions among detained youth. Many describe persistent feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and self-blame—internal narratives that erode self-esteem and fuel self-destructive behaviors (Nasir et al., 2010). For some, these thought patterns become so overwhelming that self-harm or suicide appears to be the only escape from emotional pain. The data show that up to 58% of delinquent girls in detention have attempted suicide, a rate many times higher than that of their peers outside the justice system (Abram et al., 2008; CDC, 2012, as cited in Church et al., 2014). Unfortunately, the system's response to these needs is often inadequate. Studies reveal that only a small fraction of female detainees with major mental health disorders receive any form of treatment, either in detention or after release (Teplin et al., 2005). This lack of support not only perpetuates suffering but also increases the risk of recidivism, as unresolved trauma and untreated mental illness make it harder for young people to reintegrate into society and avoid further involvement with the justice system (Baglivio et al., 2014; Romanoff, 2012).

Despite these challenges, the findings also highlight the potential for healing and positive change. Interventions such as art therapy have been shown to provide detained youth with safe outlets for emotional expression, helping them process trauma and build resilience (Day & Onorato, 1989; Fenner et al., 2010, 2011). Such approaches underscore the importance of treating young offenders not as problems to be managed, but as vulnerable individuals in need of compassion, support, and opportunities for growth.

In summary, the findings paint a stark picture: imprisonment during adolescence—especially for girls—carries a high risk of trauma, social fragmentation, and mental health disorders. The current system too often fails to address these needs, leaving many young people trapped in cycles of pain and reoffending. These insights call for urgent reform: a shift from punishment to rehabilitation, from exclusion to support, and from silence to advocacy for the most vulnerable members of our society.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evidence gathered in this study paints a deeply concerning picture of the psychological and social consequences of imprisonment for young adolescents, particularly girls. Imprisonment at such a formative stage of life is not a mere interruption—it is a profound disruption that can shape a young person's sense of self, belonging, and hope for the future. The loss of freedom, separation from family, and exposure to unfamiliar and often hostile environments create a cascade of emotional and psychological challenges. These

young people are not only deprived of the support and guidance so crucial for healthy development, but are also thrust into environments where fear, anxiety, and bullying are pervasive. The system's response to these vulnerabilities has often been inadequate. Despite the clear evidence of need, access to mental health care and supportive interventions remains limited for many young detainees. This neglect not only perpetuates individual suffering but also increases the risk of recidivism, trapping adolescents in cycles of disadvantage and repeated incarceration. The stories and data presented in this study underscore that these are not just numbers—they represent real lives, each with unique potential and the right to dignity and care.

On the contrary, the literature and case studies also highlight the positive impact of trauma-informed, rehabilitative interventions, such as art therapy and counselling, which provide safe spaces for emotional expression and healing. These approaches remind us that with compassion, evidence-based support, and a commitment to understanding the lived realities of these young people, it is possible to break the cycle of trauma and delinquency. Ultimately, how we respond to the needs of incarcerated adolescents reflects our values as a society. Imprisonment should not be a sentence to a lifetime of psychological struggle. Instead, it should be an opportunity for intervention, growth, and transformation.

This study calls upon policymakers, practitioners, and communities to move beyond punitive responses and invest in humane, rehabilitative, and gender-responsive approaches that prioritize healing, empowerment, and the possibility of a brighter future for every young person.

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