

Conclusion and recommendations

8.1 Introduction

This chapter serves as a conclusion on the study as a whole. This research project was initiated in order to determine significant factors contributing to youth offending in South Africa. In order to meet this purpose, certain aims were set out. The aim was broken down into primary and secondary objectives, which served as a guide for this study. The first objective was to determine the significant factors that proved conducive to the commission of crime by youth offenders. The second objective was to:

- Consult current literature sources with regards to factors contributing to youth offending as well as theoretical explanations pertaining to youth offending.
- Conduct an empirical study by means of in-depth interviews with incarcerated youth offenders to ascertain factors which contributed to their criminal behaviour.
- Establish whether the findings of the empirical study correspond with other research findings as indicated in literature on youth offending and
- Explain the criminal behaviour of the youth offenders involved in this study.

These objectives will be discussed and analysed to establish if they have been achieved in this study and to which extent they are valid for this research project. Suggestions will be made in terms of meeting the needs of current and future offenders with the aim of primary prevention for youth offending in South Africa. Recommendations for further study will be briefly discussed as well.

8.2 Secondary objectives

In order to achieve the primary objective, the secondary objectives had to be met. These objectives will now be discussed.

8.2.1 Literature review

A literature search was conducted before attempting the empirical study. Understandably, the literature needed to bear relevance to this research project. The literature review aided the researcher in planning an interview guide for the interviews with the offenders. It was through the literature search that the researcher was able to look at established and researched risk factors and based on these draw up an interview guide.

The researcher experienced no problem in finding information which relates to youth offending, a lot of information was sourced on risk factors and youth crime. Sources were found in the form of books, newspaper articles and articles on the internet. There were some sources that stood out for the researcher as being pertinent for this particular study, in terms of their capacity to identify risk factors. In this regard the book edited by Bezuidenhout, C and Joubert, S and Bezuidenhout, F.J bore a great deal of relevance to this study as both books covered risk factors extensively, particularly risk factors that are applicable to South Africa. The results of Mkhondo's study with convicted youth offenders also reinforced the results from this research project. Perhaps the most appealing of all the sources researched was the newspapers in South Africa. Not only are the articles mentioned in this study pertinent for this research project but they also serve to verify the findings of this study as well. The researcher is aware that an early publication of Yablonsky (1988) was used and that there exists the chance that the information is dated. However, the researcher included this information (in section 2.5.4) as it was felt that the results of the study conducted by Yablonsky still bear relevance today.

8.2.2 Methodology/Empirical study

8.2.2.1 Research approach

A qualitative research approach was utilised in this study. Given the title of the study the best application for this study had to be qualitative in nature. For this purpose, the researcher used in-depth interviews as a means of collecting the required information. In-depth interviews are

distinctive within the qualitative framework and underlie qualitative research. The validity of this research as a qualitative study lies in the fact that the offenders supplied their own subjective opinion and perception of social reality, thus indicating that their information is laden with emotion and hence the richness of content and quality in this study.

A quantitative approach could not have worked for this study as the offenders would have battled to complete questionnaires characteristic of this approach. Offenders did not complete their schooling and thus their understanding of the questions within a quantitative questionnaire would be minimal and as a result the richness of information required for this study would have been lost.

8.2.2.2 Research goals

Two goals were set out in chapter one: a descriptive and explanatory goal.

The findings from this study are able to describe and supply an overview of the offender's circumstances at home, at their respective schools and their immediate social environment. The explanatory goal comes to the fore when theoretical explanations are presented as a means of explaining the offender's advancement into the realm of criminal activities.

8.2.2.3 Data collection

Making use of the case study, meant that each offender was considered individually whilst obtaining a description of the offender's family, school, and community background. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used in this regard. The semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to deviate from the topic at hand, to ask for clarification or elaboration of specific information. It also allowed the researcher to probe the offender for sensitive information, this information was divulged as the researcher had established rapport with the offenders. Fortunately, the interview setting was such that it allowed for an uninterrupted interview with no time limits on the interviewer or offender.

An interview guide was used in conjunction with the semi-structured interview. The interview guide was compiled after an extensive literature search, the information derived from the literature search aided the researcher in choosing appropriate and relevant themes from which to ask questions.

The importance of the pilot study must be reiterated. When executing the pilot study, the researcher gained insight with regards to the length of the interviews, the necessity for a follow-up interview and the opportunity to refine interviewing skills such as probing. This trial run provided the researcher with an indication of the validity of the questions in the interview guide. In other words, were the questions able to yield the necessary information for a successful and comprehensive study? The pilot study gave the researcher the opportunity to become familiar with the jargon typical of the coloured youth, ensuring thus that rapport would be established quicker in the main study.

The main study included all the alterations made as a result of the trial run/pilot study. A great deal of information was divulged by the offenders; information that was not only detailed but rich in content as well. The researcher was able to capture offender's comments pro quo. Some of the offenders supplied the researcher with a written account of their lives, excerpts of which were used in the main study, thus reinforcing the qualitative value of this study.

8.2.2.4 Theoretical framework

Using the criminal event as theoretical framework proved effective for this study. Conducting face-to-face interviews with the youth offenders provided the researcher with the opportunity to gather detailed information with regards to the offenders' lives. Specific reference is made to the fact that the researcher was provided information (by the offenders) concerning the precursors to the crime, the criminal act/transaction and the aftermath of the crime. The researcher, therefore, benefited from utilising the criminal event framework as first hand information was supplied by the offenders regarding the three components of the criminal event, this being done during the aftermath of the offenders' criminal act/transaction.

8.2.2.5 Data processing

The data was arranged in accordance with the themes of the interview guide and within the criminal event framework. Factors that were perceived to be predominant in the offenders' criminal activities were highlighted and discussed. The researcher was able to draw a correlation between the findings of the pilot and main study as well as with literature findings. Therefore, the literature findings supported the results of this study.

The researcher was able to maintain objectivity throughout this study. Despite the offenders' remorseful demeanour, the researcher did not lose sight of the aggravating circumstances of the offenders. Specific reference is made to the offenders' age (table 6.1), their history of substance abuse (table 6.12), their involvement in gangs (table 6.15), their history of re-offending (table 6.16) and the weapons used in their crimes (table 6.17).

Various theories were utilised as a means of explaining the behaviour of the offenders, these theories were chosen due to the findings of the empirical data. The theoretical explanations were indicated as interdependent just as the significant factors were found to be interdependent. Poor bonding (Hirschi) in childhood led to poor attachment and commitment to social institutions. The deterioration of these bonds during adolescence (Thornberry) led to further detachment from social institutions and conformity. The weakened bonds and attachments to social institutions entailed that the youth offenders affiliated themselves with delinquent and criminal peers and friends. Through these affiliations the offenders learnt for the first time of more deviant and criminal behaviour (Sutherland). The aforementioned evolution into the world of criminal activities was facilitated by the social environment that the youth offenders found themselves in (Shaw and McKay) of which socio-economic conditions and criminal subcultures (Cloward and Ohlin) were predominant. The researcher is aware that some of the theories are dated (as indicated in chapter seven). However, elements of the theoretical explanation, with particular reference to learning and social bonding are included in recent integrated theories. The social development theory by Weiss and his associates for example, is based on the social control theory amplified by social learning and structural modelling (in Hunter & Dantzker 2002:142). Braithwaite's reintegrative shaming theory (in Hunter & Dantzker 2002:143) argues that offenders with strong social bonds are more likely to ignore deviance and return to conventionality. Carrabine, Inganski, Lee, Plumer and South (2004:63) elaborate further that sanctions imposed on a youth by significant others hold more weight than sanctions imposed by the law. Finally, the integrated theory proposed by Elliott, Huizinga and Anderton holds that tension within the family and school context results in weakened bonds to conventional society; this endorses stronger bonds with delinquent and criminal peers (in Hunter & Dantzker 2002:144).

8.3 Primary objective

The main objective and purpose of this study is to ascertain the *significant factors* that contribute to youth offending. Hence, the main

objective reflects on the title of this study. The catalyst for this study began as a thought that developed into a research problem that is applicable to the field of criminology. World wide, societies are divided into different economic stratum and across these strata one finds individuals who commit crimes. Having said this therefore, one cannot define offending; specifically youth offending; as hailing from a poor socio-economic background. Many people find themselves in the same situations regardless of race, why then do some individuals persist or turn to crime while others abide by the law of the state? This problem proved to be the catalyst for this study and hence the title, to establish (through qualitative research) and therefore understand which factors proved to be dominant in their influence on youth who commit crimes.

Examining the significant factors allows the researcher to present a history of the offenders' lives to the reader. Within the family, the absence of a father figure, single-parents, family criminality, parents abusing substances, family violence and poor socio-economic status were found to be significant. Within the school setting, lack of academic achievement, substance abuse and negative peer associations were found to be significant. Finally, within the community of the offender, gang involvement was found to be significant.

The aforementioned factors are those that were predominant and influential in the commission of crime by the youth offenders in this study. The importance of risk factors' correlation to prediction and criminal behaviour cannot be denied. In this regard, Lab (2000:134) claims that there is a new trend in identifying who will commit crime based on the identification of risk factors that are related to deviance and criminal behaviour. Lab continues by stating that the identification of risk factors does not assume resultant delinquency and crime, rather recognising risk factors provides an indication of who may commit crime.

8.4 Recommendations

In this section the researcher wants to highlight certain issues and make recommendations with regards to the prevention and control of youth offending.

- High-risk families need to be identified and assisted. This applies particularly to social workers, psychologists and teachers (the latter need to be properly trained in order to correctly identify high-risk families). Individuals who are in contact with children and adolescents must be able to recognise families in trouble; in

particular, attention must be paid to families with poor socio economic conditions, known incidents of domestic violence, single-parent families and where parents abuse substances. These factors have been discussed in previous chapters as playing a contributory role in youth offending. The researcher wants to make it quite clear that the presence of these factors does not necessarily indicate that children will turn to crime. However, one cannot ignore the fact that these aforementioned issues are not conducive to a stable and happy family environment. Children and youth are in their formative years of life where the learning of norms, morals and socially acceptable behaviour takes place and where the adolescent internalises this learning as a permanent element of his/her personality. The adolescent needs to adopt life skills that will assist him or her in avoiding negative influences and the value of perseverance in difficult times. The youth must be given an opportunity to become a secure, well-balanced adult. As professionals in the field of social sciences we must use our discretion to help the children today in order to secure their future tomorrow. Hence, the researcher's recommendation that high-risk families need to be identified with the aim of primary prevention of youth offending.

- The school plays a key role in the prevention of youth offending. In this regard, educators need to be trained in order to properly identify youths at risk of turning to crime. It is equally important to provide a safe environment for the young learners in our society. In other words, the Department of Education must ensure that the schools in South Africa are such that they ensure uninterrupted and proper learning for the youth. Safety at schools needs to be addressed, learners are unable or unwilling to attend a school that is rife with gang activity and violence.
- Preventing youth offending is pointless if we are unable to control youth offending as such. The researcher strongly recommends that the government provides funding for halfway houses for released youth offenders. The fact that the youth have committed crimes indicates that there was a lack of learning in terms of conventional behaviour or that the offenders' communities are breeding grounds for crime. It would be unwise therefore to release youth offenders into the same environment or circumstances that contributed to youth offending in the first place. A halfway house provides the youth offender with the opportunity to learn and adopt new morals and conventional behaviour and at the very least give the youth offender an improved possibility of resisting crime on returning to the same

environment and circumstances that contributed to the youth's criminal behaviour in the first place.

- Finding employment for youth offenders should be considered as a means of preventing recidivism. The researcher is not suggesting that lack of employment is the single-most important contributing factor for the commission of crime. One must be realistic, however, and acknowledge that a lack of income does play a role in criminal behaviour. If we are able to supply youth offenders with the opportunity of earning an income, then perhaps the attraction of committing crime and the financial benefits thereof might be reduced. Giving a young offender the chance of earning a legal income might restore some sense of self-worth and assist in the learning of socially acceptable behaviour. Essentially, the researcher feels that we should show the youth offender the other side of the coin so to speak and that there is a conventional way of earning money with the added benefits of boosting one's self-worth.
- When looking at various treatments and forms of prevention for youth offending, one cannot ignore the importance of a criminologist's contribution. The criminologist recognises risk factors, comprehends trends and patterns of youth offending, and applies pertinent theories to explain criminal behaviour.

Lawson and Heaton (1999:77) assert that there are two ways in which to deal with youngsters and crime: preventing the youth from offending and supporting and helping youngsters who are trying to stop. Research findings (in Lawson & Heaton 1999:77) suggest that the following factors should be focussed on:

- Strengthening families, for example; specific measures for single-parent families, parent training and family centres and support groups.
- Strengthening schools, for example; compiling strategies to prevent truancy, developing practical measures to improve family-school relationships.
- Harnessing sources of social control within the criminal justice system, families, schools, and neighbours.
- Preparing young people for fully independent and responsible adulthood.

8.5 Suggestions for further study

Further research is necessary in order to remedy social issues that play a contributory role in youth offending. It would be naïve to believe that research will eradicate social factors that are conducive to youth offending. However, the possibility remains that if research is conducted on worthwhile causes, the likelihood of recidivism might decrease. The researcher suggests that in-depth research be conducted on programmes presented to incarcerated youth offenders, particularly, programmes that deal with life skills and learning conventional behaviour. The gist of this suggestion is that imprisoned offenders need to be involved in programmes that are indigenous to their culture and belief system. This means that cultural and social issues pertinent to the offender's specific culture need to be addressed in a specific programme. The aim would be to equip the youth offender with life and resiliency skills needed to survive social issues relevant to his/her culture and environment. In this regard, the following excerpt corroborates the researcher's suggestion "*...greater success can be expected of prevention programs that explicitly maximize the adaptive fit between persons and environments. To do this requires sensitivity to the personal; history, cultural context, and life stage of the participant*" in (Hoge 2001:295).

OK! IF I LEAVE THIS PLACE I WANT TO ACHIEVE MY GOALS I WANT TO TELL YOUNG GUYS OUTTHERE THAT THE TIME YOU SPEND IN PRISON IS NOT THE END OF YOUR LIFE BUT A NEW BEGINNING WITH THE HELP OF GOD. I WANT TO PROVE NOT JUST TO MY COMMUNITY BUT THE COUNTRY THAT NO ONE IS TO BAD TO START UP FRESH I WOULD LIKE TO FINISH MY SCHOOL & BE A VERY INDEPENDENT YOUNG MAN I WANT TO LIVE MY LIFE TO THE FULLIST TO HELP GUYS OUT THERE TO SHOW THEM THAT DRUG & ALCHOL ARE NOT THE WAYS OUT JUST THE SAME WITH VOILENCE YOU DONT NEED A GANG TO BE A MAN (YOU NEED SELF ASTEAM TO BE THE BEST THAT YOU CAN BE.) EVERY DAY I ASK GOD TO GIVE ME STRENGTH TO MOTTOVADE MYSELF TO HELP OTHERS WITHOUT GOD YOU WILL NEVER ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS I WOULD LIKE TO PROVE NOT JUST TO MY FAMILY BUT MY FRIEND THAT ARE STILL IN GANG TO LOOK AT WHAT THEY ARE DOING BEFORE ITS TO LATE.