

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Structure or Relationship? Rethinking Family Influences on Juvenile Delinquency in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** A broken family structure and poor family relationship are seen as contributing to delinquent behavior in different ways. Despite Malaysian society being strongly focused on family values, there have been significant increases in the rates of both divorce and single-parent families. Thus, there is the question of whether these changes in family structure are a contributing factor to the increasing rate of juvenile delinquency seen in recent years. This study aims to examine the relative influences of family structure and family relationship on juvenile delinquent behavior in Malaysia. A sample of 196 juveniles from two rehabilitation centers in Malaysia participated in this study. The study finds that there are no significant correlations between family structure and juvenile delinquent behavior. The data show that a significant percentage of juveniles are not from broken families. Most, however, do experience a poor-quality family relationship.

**Keywords:** Malaysian juvenile, delinquent behavior, family structure, family relationship

The family is seen as an important factor contributing to juvenile delinquency. In this paper, a family is defined as “a long-term group of two or more people related through biological, legal or equivalent ties and who enact those ties through on-going interaction providing instrumental and/or emotional support” (Canary & Canary, 2013, p. 5). This definition indicates that the family consists of two different dimensions: its structural composition and processes of interaction.

An intact family structure is defined as two biological parents living with their children, with every member of the family playing a particular role in providing financial, security, and emotional support

to reinforce the cohesion and stability of the family. Various scholars in previous studies have emphasized the important relationships between family structure and juvenile delinquent behavior. They discovered that adolescents in intact or two biological-parent families committed the fewest kinds of antisocial behavior, and are thus assumed to experience fewer emotional or behavioral problems than those living in single-parent or other types of family structures (Wells & Rankin, 1986, 1991; Amato, 2001, 2005; Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; McKee, 2012; McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013).

In comparison to families containing two biological parents, single-parent families faced constraints in terms of financial and emotional support, which may affect the children's behavioral and cognitive outcomes (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). In brief, in terms of children's emotional well-being, academic performance, physical health, and behavior, some researchers found that single parents were unable to function as effectively as two biological parents (Langton & Berger 2011; Fomby & Bosick, 2013).

However, the impact of family structure on children's behaviors is a highly debated topic in the study of delinquency. A number of research studies have considered the key factor influencing delinquent behavior to be a poor family relationship as opposed to a broken family structure. They indicated that parental self-control, parenting skill, parenting style, and parenting supervision play a more important role in protecting children from delinquency (Nye, 1958; Baumrind, 1978, 1991; Phillips, 2012; Meldrum, Connolly, Flexon, & Guerette, 2016). After looking at the different aspects of the family process, family forms were not found to be a statistically significant predictor of adolescent delinquency. Researchers therefore emphasized that the aspects of parental monitoring and family relations were critical to the prevention of behavioral problem among adolescents (Fosco et al., 2012).

Is family structure or family relationship the most important factor impacting on adolescents' behavior? This is an enduring question in the study of delinquency. In comparison to Western countries like the United States, there is relatively little research available on family and delinquent behavior in Asian countries. Malaysian society places great emphasis on the importance of the family. The family is considered the basic unit of society, and is one of the most important aspects of Malaysian education and culture. Students are taught to maintain strong responsibility, attachment, filial piety, and discipline within the family.<sup>1</sup> However, the problem of juvenile delinquency in Malaysia has not dissipated.

#### *Family and Delinquency in Malaysia*

Juvenile delinquency, also known as teenage crime, is defined as criminal acts committed by young

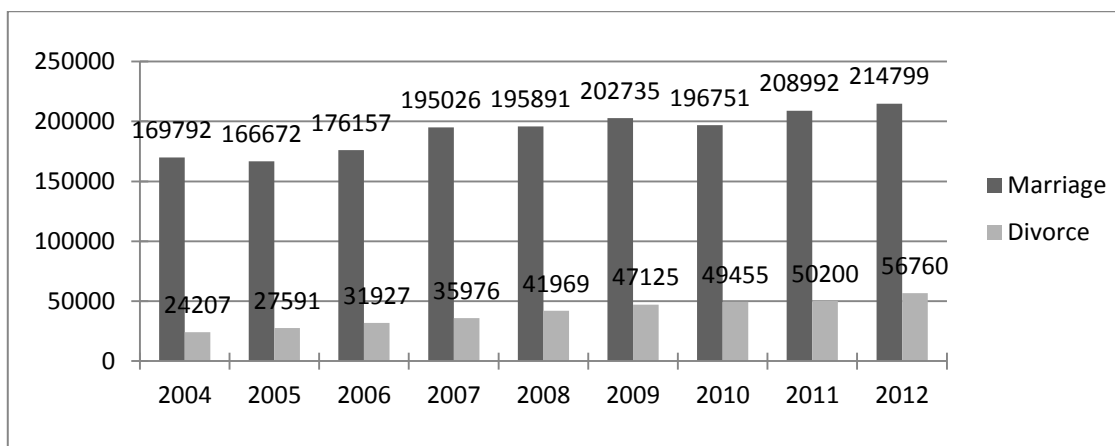
people. In Malaysia, according to the Prison Act 1995, a juvenile or young offender is defined as "a prisoner who is under the age of 21 years" (Kassim, 2005, p. 196). The rate of juvenile crimes showed a sharp increase between the years 2012 and 2013. Police statistics showed that "juveniles involved in crime totalled 7,816 cases in 2013 as compared to 3,700 cases in 2012" (Desiree, 2014, par. 1). In general, at the early stage, younger juveniles tend to be involved in breaking minor social norms, such as smoking, drinking, truancy from school, and vandalism. Entering adulthood, there is a pattern in which they commit more serious crimes, such as petty theft, graffiti, car theft, burglary, and even violent offences including rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

In light of these alarming statistics, the Malaysian government has adopted a tough approach on the issue of reducing and preventing juvenile delinquency. The government views the decline of family values as one of the main factors contributing to Malaysia's current social ills (Stivens, 2006). The traditional or nuclear family is the predominant family arrangement in Malaysia, although the extended family still exists. However, Malaysian family structures have evolved in line with the country's pattern of economic development, modernization, and urbanization over the past few decades. A rising divorce rate is one such change. From 2004 to 2012, the divorce rate in Malaysia doubled (Boo, 2014). Figure 1 shows the rates of marriage and divorce in Malaysia.

The data also show a doubling in the number of female-headed households, from 444,000 in 1980 to 895,000 in 2000 (Hew, 2003; Evans, 2011). Some have commented that

This rise in single-parent households is an important and not well-accepted change in the family structure of an Asian country... This change in family structure has been blamed for some of the social problems in the society, for example, delinquency of children and emotional stress of women. (Evans, 2011, p. 2)

However, there is little empirical evidence on the relationship between family structure and delinquency in Malaysia. This therefore gives rise to the question of whether change in family structure is a factor contributing to juvenile delinquency in Malaysia.



Source: Boo (2014).

**Figure 1.** The rate of marriage and divorce in Malaysia from 2004 to 2012.

## Literature Review

### *Family and Juvenile Delinquency Theories*

The study of delinquency always focuses on why and how juveniles violate laws or social norms. The family is one of the most important socialization agents, and thus it has a far-reaching influence on young people’s behavior. Many popular juvenile delinquency theories, such as differential association theory and social control theory, place primary importance on the family. However, there are two different perspectives from which to discuss the impact of family on children’s behavior. On the one hand, the family structure perspective emphasizes family composition, while on the other hand, the family process perspective concentrates on relationships or interactions among family members.

### *Family Structure*

Structural-functional theory outlines four main functions of the family—sexual relations, reproduction, economic support, and socialization—that can be fulfilled only by two biological parents (Parsons & Bales, 1955). This theory has far-reaching implications for research on the relationship between family and adolescent behavior.

Wells and Rankin (1991) analyzed and reviewed previous studies, concluding that the single-parent

family had a consistently negative impact on delinquency. Zeiders, Roosa, and Tein (2011) conducted research on Mexican American families. Their findings also tended to support that juveniles in single-parent Mexican American families showed higher levels of behavioral problems than juveniles in two-parent families. The quality of the parent–child relationship was also less influenced by family structure in this study.

These previous studies found a higher level of behavioral problems among children from an unstable family structure, which had negative effects on various aspects of adolescence, including poor behavior and cognitive outcomes (Berger & McLanahan, 2012; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001), emotional well-being (Magnuson & Berger, 2009; Langton & Berger, 2011) and early sexual behavior (Lenciauskiene & Zaborskis, 2008). According to these studies, the single-parent family structure is always related to poverty and unstable financial status. For example, single parents bear the additional stress of financial hardship because their families are usually dependent on their single income. When parents struggle to earn a living, this tends to have negative effects on parenting practice, which in turn affects children’s development. In view of this, it is widely assumed that there is an inverse relationship between family socio-economic status and delinquency. Family socio-economic status should

thus be a factor in determining delinquent behaviors among young people.

### *Family Process and Family Relationship*

In contrast to structural explanations, not all researchers found relationships between family structure and problem behavior in adolescence; for example, Kurdek and Sinclair (1988) found family process variables to be more reliable predictors of adolescent psychological adjustment (self-reports of global severity of psychopathology, goal directedness, and school-related problems) than family structure alone. In another study, Ram and Hou (2003) examined the effects of changes in family structure on the emotional, behavioral and cognitive outcomes of young children, finding that key family processes have more effect on young children's emotional and behavioral outcomes than family structure. Barfield-Cottledge (2015) also concluded that the family attachment is more significant than family structure in predicting substance use in adolescence.

The perspective of family process is not new within the study of family relationships and delinquent behavior. Nye (1958) argued that the parenting process was more important than family structure as the key factor in juvenile delinquency. His study is still regarded as an important milestone in delinquent studies, and his findings have been supported by a number of studies. Phillip's (2012) study on 278 adolescents concluded that family process played a more important role in adolescent well-being, stating "family structure was not related to the indicators of well-being," and "between family process and family structure, it is a family process that matters more" (p. 108–109). A study by Falci (1997) also supported the family process perspective. His finding indicated that "family process variables explained more variation in children's psychological well-being than family structure, background variables or mother's psychological well-being" (p. 48). Sokol-Katz, Dunham, and Zimmerman (1997) also concluded that there was a statistically significant relationship between family attachment and deviant behaviors, but that family structure was not significantly related to delinquency. The family process approach assumes that children's behaviors very much depend on the

quality of the parent-child relationship but not the family structure.

In terms of Malaysian family studies, Baharudin, Krauss, Yacoob, and Tan (2011) found no tendency towards antisocial behavior among adolescents from single-mother families; rather, the results indicated what happens within the family system itself, that is, family processes, as being more important than the children's family structure.

The family process perspective focuses on interactions among family members, such as parenting skill, parenting style, parenting supervision, parent-child relationship, family cohesion, and family value. It demonstrates that good-quality parenting will prevent young people from engaging in delinquent acts, and that only ineffective and neglectful parenting will increase the risk of delinquency among young people.

Nasir, Zamani, Khairudin, and Shahrazad (2011) demonstrated that family was related to juvenile self-concept and self-esteem in Malaysia. Baharudin et al. (2011) also studied antisocial behavior among adolescents from single-parent families. However, there has been scant research examining the effects of family structure and family processes on juvenile delinquency in Malaysia. Most previous studies have focused on the delinquent behavior of Western juveniles, seldom discussing this in the context of Malaysian juveniles. Since Malaysian society is strongly influenced by "Asian values," in tandem with religion and traditional culture, the effects of family structure and family process may not be the same as in Western countries.

### **Methods**

This study used the self-report method for measuring the relationship between family and juvenile delinquency in Malaysia. Data were collected between 2013 and 2015. A total of 200 juveniles from two rehabilitation centers in Malaysia participated as the respondents for this study. The questionnaire consists of three sections: (a) respondents' demographic details; (b) a record of respondents' delinquent behavior; and (c) respondents' family relationship. After excluding incomplete or invalid questionnaires, a total of 196 valid questionnaires were used for data analysis.

Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and ANOVA were used to explore the relations between delinquent behavior, family education, family socio-economic status, family structure, and family relationship. In this study, demographic features included age, gender, educational level, home location, and length of time spent at the rehabilitation center. The five important variables in this research are “delinquent behavior,” “family structure,” “family education,” “family socio-economic status,” and “family relationship.”

To identify the family structure, parental marital status and household pattern are the most important survey items. Family structure is measured by four dummy categories: (1) intact family (married biological parents); (2) divorced family (single-mother family, single-father family, mother-stepfather family, father-stepmother family); (3) separated families (parents have not stayed together, one parent has died); and (4) other (both parents have died, staying with relatives).

This study will examine the relationship between family socio-economic status and delinquent behavior among Malaysian juveniles. Family socio-economic status in this study is classified as one of the following: (1) lower class; (2) middle class; or (3) upper class. This designation explains the parents' occupational status and family's financial stability.

#### *Education of the Father/Guardian*

The father or guardian's educational level may also influence the quality of parental behavior. This study took the educational level of the father/guardian as one of the family factor variables in juvenile delinquency. In this study, the educational level of father/guardian could be: (1) never attended school; (2) primary school; (3) secondary school; or (4) college and above.

#### *Family Relations*

Six questions were used to measure the family relationship: “I seldom talk to my parents,” “My parents are very busy,” “My parents neglect me,” “I spend more time with friends than family,” “I find it difficult to communicate with family,” and “My friends know me better than my parents do.” These items attempt to measure family attachment, child–parent communication, and family involvement among respondents. Responses were coded 1 for “Yes” and 0 for “No” for each of the six questions, with the scores then summed to obtain a total score. All of the questions reflect negative thinking about family relationship, thus a higher score indicates a poorer-quality family relationship.

#### *Delinquent Behavior*

The level of delinquent behavior among the juvenile respondents was measured by the number of deviant acts in which they engaged. The study used a questionnaire containing 17 delinquent acts, with each act dichotomized (0 = no, 1 = yes) and summed. If a respondent had ever engaged in deviant behavior, he would select yes and get one point; otherwise, he would choose no and get zero points for that item. The higher the score, the greater the level of delinquent behavior committed by the respondent. A higher score also indicates a higher level of aggression or delinquency.

The data obtained were analyzed using SPSS to describe all the variables and investigate the impact of family factors on juveniles. The internal consistency of the items was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. In this data set, Cronbach's alpha was equal to 0.793, thus the reliability of the survey questions is acceptable.

## Results

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=196)*

		Frequency	%
Ethnic	Malay	177	90.3
	Chinese	4	2.0
	India	10	5.1
	Other	5	2.6
Religion	Islam	178	90.8
	Buddhist	3	1.5
	Hindu	11	5.6
	Christian	3	1.5
	Other	1	0.5
Age	15 years	14	7.1
	16 years	33	16.8
	17 years	45	23.0
	18 years	53	27.0
	19 years and above	51	26.0
Gender	Male	175	89.3
	Female	21	10.7
Education	Never went to school	20	10.2
	Primary School, Years 1–3	8	4.1
	Primary School, Years 4–6	20	10.2
	Secondary School, Forms 1–3	96	49.0
	Secondary School, Forms 4–5	51	26.0
	College and above	1	0.5
Place of Residence	Rural	88	43.9
	Urban	89	45.4
	Town	17	8.7
	Felda (newly developed areas for rural poor)	2	1.0
Time living at rehabilitation centre	1–3 months	10	5.1
	4–6 months	12	6.1
	7–9 months	12	6.1
	10–12 months	12	6.1
	1 year and above	150	76.5

The demographic characteristics of the population sample are summarized in Table 1. More than 90% of respondents were Malay (90.3%) and Muslim (90.8%), followed by Indian (5.1%), Chinese (2.0%) and others (2.6%). Of the respondents, 89.3% were male, and

10.7% female. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 21 years, with 18 being the age of the majority (27.0%) followed by 19 years and above (26.0%), 17 years (23.0%), 16 years (16.8%), and 15 years (7.1%). In terms of education level, a majority of respondents

had attended secondary school, 49.0% had achieved a lower-secondary level of education (Forms 1–3), with 26.0% of respondents having attended higher secondary school. However, 10.2% of respondents had never attended school, and only 0.5% had a college level of education or higher. The data also revealed that respondents came from various areas—45.4% from urban areas, 43.9% rural, 8.7% in towns, and only 1% from FELDA.<sup>2</sup> A total of 76.5% of respondents had spent more than a year at the rehabilitation center, with 6.1% having been there for a period of 10 to 12 months. The figure for stays of both 7 to 9 and 4 to 6 months was also 6.1%. Only 5.1% of respondents had been in a rehabilitation center for a period of 1 to 3 months. The data show that the majority of respondents were secondary school students who engaged in criminal activities. The majority of respondents had attended some vocational training or psychological therapy at a rehabilitation center for quite some time prior to answering the questionnaire.

Table 2 shows the types of delinquent behavior engaged in by respondents. According to records, the most common acts of delinquency engaged in by juveniles in Malaysia are stealing (75.0%), smoking (92.3%), school truancy (81.1%), drug abuse (66.3%), bullying (51.0%), and illegal street racing (*Mat Rempit*) (60.7%). All these deviant behaviors have a knock-on effect in terms of them leading to further juvenile delinquency. For instance, smoking (92.3%), school truancy (81.1%), and alcohol use (66.8%) are associated with the increasing rate of juvenile delinquency. These delinquent behaviors are always interrelated. School truancy is “often referred to as a gateway crime” (Trujillo, 2006) because it can have a negative effect on students. It may increase the exposure of students with low self-esteem to risky environments that include bullying and gangsters. Another example is aggressive behavior among illegal street racers (*Mat Rempit*). There is a tendency for these individuals to be involved with stealing, drug abuse, and gangsters. However, the percentage of juveniles accused of killing (20.9%) and rape (21.4%) is relatively low.

The higher the number of delinquent acts engaged in by a respondent, the higher his score, thereby indicating a higher level of aggression. The research data also

show the mean number of delinquent acts engaged in by respondents to be 7.43, indicating a high general level of delinquent behavior among respondents.

The data in Table 3 indicate respondents’ family backgrounds. The variable of parent marital status is used to categorize respondents’ family structures: (1) intact family (married biological parents); (2) divorced family (single-mother family, single-father family, mother-stepfather family, father-stepmother family); (3) separated families (parents have not stayed together, one parent has died); and (4) others (both parents have died, staying with relatives). The results show that 68.4% ( $n = 134$ ) of respondents live with both biological parents, 21.9% ( $n = 43$ ) of respondents have experienced parental divorce, and 4.1% ( $n = 8$ ) come from families in which the parents have separated for one of a number of reasons. A total of 5.6% ( $n = 11$ ) of respondents either lived with other people or their parents had died. This therefore indicates that a majority of respondents were not from broken families, but rather came from intact families.

Family socio-economic status is another aspect that is closely related to family structure. The broken family structure is always associated with poverty and tends to have a disruptive effect on parenting and increase the probability of adolescent delinquency. Thus, delinquent juveniles have always been assumed to come from lower-class families. In the item of “family socio-economic status,” 69.9% ( $n = 137$ ) of respondents are from middle-class families, followed by 25.5% ( $n = 50$ ) from lower-class families, with the lowest percentage, 4.6% ( $n = 9$ ), from upper-class families.

Previous studies also assumed parental level of education would have an impact on the parents’ marriage. It was considered that parents with higher levels of education would have greater awareness of their marriage relationship. Thus, parents’ education level is another aspect related to family structure. The results show that 69.9% ( $n = 137$ ) of respondents’ fathers/guardians had attained a secondary school education, followed by 17.3% ( $n = 34$ ) with a primary-level education, 6.6% with a college education or above, and only 6.1% ( $n = 12$ ) of fathers/guardians having never attended school.

In contrast to many other studies, the results of this study demonstrate that the majority of juveniles come neither from broken nor lower-class families.

**Table 2**  
*Types of Delinquent Behavior Engaged in by Respondents (N = 196)*

	Frequency	%	Min	Max	Mean	SD
			1	10	7.43	3.14
1 Stealing	147	75.0				
2 Purse-snatching	49	25.0				
3 Smoking	181	92.3				
4 School truancy	159	81.1				
5 Robbing	41	20.9				
6 Raping	42	21.4				
7 Killing	13	6.6				
8 Baby-dumping	3	1.5				
9 Drug abuse	130	66.3				
10 Glue-sniffing	64	32.7				
11 Broken house	94	48.0				
12 Vandalism	89	45.4				
13 Suicide attempt	17	8.7				
14 Bullying at school	100	51.0				
15 Drinking alcohol	131	66.8				
16 Gangster	77	39.3				
17 Illegal street racing ( <i>Mat Rempit</i> )	119	60.7				

**Table 3**  
*Family Structure, Family Socio-economic Status, Father/Guardian Education Status (N = 196)*

Variables	Group	Frequency	Percentage
Parent marital status	Intact	134	<b>68.4</b>
	Divorce	43	21.9
	Separately	8	4.1
	Other	11	5.6
Family socio-economic Status	Lower class	50	25.5
	Middle class	137	<b>69.9</b>
	Upper class	9	4.6
Education of father/guardian	Never went to school	12	6.1
	Primary school	34	17.3
	Secondary school	137	<b>69.9</b>
	College or above	13	6.6



**Table 4**  
*Family Relationship (N = 196)*

Rate	Frequency	Percentage	Std. Deviation	Mean
.00	2	1.0	1.35	3.175
1.00	15	7.7		
2.00	55	28.1		
3.00	44	22.4		
4.00	43	21.9		
5.00	29	14.8		
6.00	8	4.1		

Table 4 shows the quality of respondents' family relationships. The questionnaire measured family attachment, child-parent communication, and also respondents' family involvement. The scores for each question were added together to obtain a total score indicating the respondent's family relationship. All of the questions are negative statements, meaning a higher score indicates a poorer-quality relationship. The mean score for respondents' family relationship was 3.175, indicating that, on average, respondents have poor-quality family relationships.

To explore the relationship between delinquent behavior and family factors, Pearson's (r) correlation

coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between delinquent behavior, family structure, family relationship, family socio-economic status, and father/guardian's education status. The data shown in Table 5 indicate there is no significant relationship between delinquent behavior and family structure ( $r = -.038$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As shown in Table 5, the data indicate that delinquent behavior is also not significantly related to family socio-economic status ( $r = .105$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In terms of education, the results show that delinquent behavior is significantly related to father/guardian education status, but the correlation is weak ( $r = -.193^{**}$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, the results indicate that delinquent behavior is significantly related to a strong level of family relationship ( $r = .542^{**}$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Among the family factors, the results show that family structure is related to family socio-economic status; however, the correlation is weak ( $r = -.296^{**}$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The data also indicate that family socio-economic status is significantly related to a moderate level of father/guardian education ( $r = .304^{**}$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Overall, there is a strong correlation between delinquent behavior and family relationship in this case study. The increasing level of aggressive delinquent behavior among respondents is correlated with a poor quality of family structure. However, the results show that family structure is not related to delinquent behavior.

**Table 5**  
*Bivariate correlations (Pearson's) between delinquent behaviour and family structure, family relationship, family socio-economic status, father/guardian education status (N= 196)*

	1	2	3	4
1 Delinquent behaviour	-	-	-	-
2 Family structure	-.038	-	-	-
3 Family socio-economic status	.105	-.206 <sup>**</sup>	-	-
4 Father/guardian education	-.193 <sup>**</sup>	-.133	.304 <sup>**</sup>	-
5 Family relationship	.542 <sup>**</sup>	-.032	.045	.005

<sup>\*\*</sup> Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 6***ANOVA Analysis, Family Structure, and Family Relationship by delinquent*

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Family structure	Between Groups	7.209	3	2.403	.240	.868
	Within Groups	1918.929	192	9.994		
	Total	1926.138	195			
Family relationship	Between Groups	585.132	6	97.522	13.745	.000
	Within Groups	1341.006	189	7.095		
	Total	1926.138	195			
Family socio-economic status	Between Groups	40.786	2	20.393	2.088	.127
	Within Groups	1885.352	193	9.769		
	Total	1926.138	195			
Father/guardian education	Between Groups	81.343	4	20.336	2.105	.082
	Within Groups	1844.794	191	9.659		
	Total	1926.138	195			

Finally, this study used one-way ANOVA to compare the effects of various family forms and the quality of family relationship on the delinquent behavior of juveniles in Malaysia. The result at the  $p < .05$  level indicates that family relationship has a significant effect on delinquent behavior among juveniles in Malaysia [ $F(6, 189) = 13.75, p = 0.000$ ]. However, the result at the  $p < .05$  level suggests that family structure has no significant effect on delinquent behavior among juveniles in Malaysia [ $F(3, 192) = 0.24, p = 0.868$ ]. Family socio-economic status [ $F(14, 181) = 1.11, p = 0.349$ ] and father/guardian education [ $F(4, 191) = 2.10, p = 0.082$ ] also showed no significant effect on delinquent behavior among juveniles in Malaysia at the  $p < .05$  level.

## Discussion

The family factor is particularly important in predicting adolescent delinquency. Many studies have shown family structure to be strongly associated with juvenile delinquent behavior.

However, parent-child relationship should also be taken into account as another main factor influencing

juvenile behavior. Many studies on the impact of family on juvenile delinquent behavior have been conducted in the United States and other Western countries. However, countries may have different results due to cultural differences. For instance, in South Korea, "parents put relatively greater efforts than Western parents into monitoring children's behaviour and disciplining their misbehavior" (Yun & Walsh, 2011, p. 446). The field of delinquency studies needs to be enriched with more cross-cultural research and empirical testing on the theories of family and delinquent behavior.

In contrast to the perspective of family structure, this research has found that 68.4% of juvenile respondents come from intact and not broken families. They remained with their two parents when they engaged in crime. This result is quite consistent with figures provided by the Prison Department of Malaysia in 2004, indicating that among "the 2,964 juveniles who are serving prison sentences only 571 (19.3%) come from broken homes while 2,393 (80.7%) of them have families" (Kassim, 2005, p. 201.) The findings in this research are quite different from those seen in Western countries, indicating that juveniles from

broken families typically have significant engagement in criminal behavior. The results of this research demonstrate that there is no significant relationship between family structure and juvenile delinquent behavior ( $r = -.038, p < .001$ ), and also no significant relationship between family structure and family relationship ( $r = .032, p < .001$ ).

There have been no consistent conclusions reported in previous studies in terms of the relationship between family socio-economic status and youth behavior (Defoe, Farrington, & Loeber, 2013; Seccombe, 2000; Legleye, Beck, Khlal, Peretti-Watel, & Chau 2012). Agnew, Matthews, Bucher, Welcher, and Keyes (2008, p. 177) argued that “economic problems have a nonlinear effect on delinquency.” In this study, the majority of respondents are from middle-class families, with only 25.5% from lower-class families. The results indicate that the families of a majority of respondents are not under any heavy financial strain, and this is therefore not the main factor contributing to delinquent behavior or family conflict. The results in Table 4 show that delinquent behavior is not significantly related to family socio-economic status ( $r = .105, p < .001$ ), and family socio-economic status is also not related to family relationship ( $r = .045, p < .001$ ). However, this research has found that family socio-economic status is related to family structure ( $r = -.206^{**}, p < .001$ ). Thus, the findings of this research are quite consistent with those of previous studies, in that two-parent families are able to provide better financial support.

Although some research findings have suggested family education level is related to the stability of marital status and the quality of parent–child relationships, father/guardian education level in this research is related to neither family relationship ( $r = .005, p < .001$ ) nor family structure ( $r = .133, p < .001$ ). However, there is a weak relationship between family education and delinquent behavior ( $r = -.193^{**}, p < .001$ ) and also a moderate relationship with family socio-economic status ( $r = .304^{**}, p < .001$ ). Overall, the results indicate an unclear acute effect of family education on adolescent delinquency.

Based on the results in Tables 5 and 6, this research supports the perspective that family relationship has the greatest impact on adolescent delinquency. Using the Pearson correlation coefficient ( $r$ ), a strong link can

be seen between family relationship and delinquent behavior ( $r = .542^{**}, p < .001$ ). The results of one-way ANOVA testing also reveal a significant effect of family relationship on delinquent behavior [ $F(6, 189) = 13.75, p = 0.000$ ]. There are various dimensions of family relationship, including parental supervision, child–parent communication, family commitment, family attachment, and family involvement. These factors will seriously influence the behavior of young people. With good interactions between family members and efficient parental monitoring, children are able to develop a high level of well-being regardless of their family structure. In other words, poor-quality family relationships, as indicated by neglectful parenting, low family commitment, and poor communication can act to encourage young people to turn to delinquent behavior even if they are from an intact family structure. It has been found that 63.2% of respondents have poor-quality relationships with their families (a score on family relations  $\geq 3$ ). This proves that a poor family relationship is more important than a broken family structure as a key determinant of juvenile delinquency in Malaysia.

## Conclusion

Overall, the research results show that the majority of respondents come from relatively stable family structures. They have grown up in intact families and remained with their parents. Most of their fathers or guardians have attained a secondary school education. In terms of financial status, a majority self-identified as middle class. However, a majority also considered themselves to have poor family relationships. These research findings lead us to rethink the problem of juvenile delinquency in Malaysia.

Since the majority of respondents in this study were Malay or Muslim (as Malay is also Muslim in Malaysia), we need to understand the definition of family in the context of Malay society. The definition of family in the context of Malay society is ultimately based on the Islamic religion. According to Islam, a family is a group of people consisting of a husband, wife, and children who are bound by marriage (i.e. the nuclear family), and also includes parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and their children,

as well as uncles and aunts with their children (i.e., the extended family). Marriage in Islam is an *ibadah* (worship) and a lawful sexual relationship between a man and a woman, reinforced by the rights and duties of family members (Jamil Osman, 2016).

In Malaysia, students study their roles, harmonious relationships, and responsibilities in the family from primary school onwards. The Malaysian government also plays a vital role in strengthening the family institution. For example, a project called Rumahku Syurgaku (My Home My Paradise) was introduced by the Islamic Centre and became an annual event for Muslim families to develop a happy family (Hassan, 1993; Stivens, 2006, Jamil Osman, 2016).

The strength of the value placed on the family, combined with official state authority discourse, may be important factors underpinning respondents' perceptions of their family structure in Malaysia. However, the processes of industrialization and modernization have also had a great impact on the family relationship. Recent labor force statistics<sup>3</sup> have shown that women accounted for 4,017.3 million of the employed population, and about 61% of working women were married, which may also indicate that dual-career families are now a common phenomenon in Malaysia (Hashim & Omar, 2004; Abdullah, Noor, & Wok, 2008). This dual-earner family may influence parenting supervision and the family relationship. Based on the findings of this research finding, we should be more concerned with the quality of family relationships as a way of preventing or overcoming juvenile delinquency.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, please refer to moral education textbooks for secondary schools in Malaysia published by the Ministry of Education Malaysia and The Institute of Language and Literature (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka).

<sup>2</sup> FELDA areas, which are managed by Federal Land Development Authority, are resettlement areas for the rural poor.

<sup>3</sup> Labour force statistics, Malaysia, 2010. Available at [http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download\\_Labour/files/BPTMS/ringkasan\\_perangkaan\\_2010.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Labour/files/BPTMS/ringkasan_perangkaan_2010.pdf) [Accessed 6 October 2012].

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