

DEFINING BEHAVIORAL AND DELINQUENCY ISSUES

The differences between behavioral and delinquency issues can be difficult to define, and often these definitions overlap. Acting-out behaviors can escalate as children become older and move into their adolescent years. Stealing, fighting, lying, truancy, and destruction of property are all behaviors that can escalate over time and eventually become defined as delinquent and illegal.

Conduct and/or behavior disorders have been associated with other diagnostic disorders, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The child with ADHD has symptoms of overactive motor response, short attention spans, and impulsivity. Often, these early characteristics set the stage for later acting-out behaviors, which, if not addressed through intervention, can come to be defined as delinquency. The best way to prevent behavioral issues from growing into delinquency issues is through early intervention that targets children who are most at risk for delinquency—namely those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although it is sometimes questionable to utilize a medical diagnosis (e.g., ADHD) in situations where familial and environmental factors play such a major role, recognizing some common behaviors, such as those attached to a particular diagnosis, can aid the social worker in selecting appropriate interventive methods.

CAUSES OF BEHAVIORAL AND DELINQUENCY ISSUES

The causes of behavioral and delinquency issues have perplexed social work practitioners and researchers for years. Multiple theories of causal factors exist, including inherent predisposition, biological factors, problems during early childhood development, and negative community and family influence, to name a few. With little agreement on causal factors, treatment and prevention have become just as difficult to determine as the etiology; however, the primary focus of research and intervention has more recently been on the family environment and adolescent development (Scherer & Brondino, 1994). Other studies have found family structure, poor parent-child bonding and affection, poor parental monitoring, and family discord to have high correlations with delinquent behavior. Accordingly, this research clearly encourages the development of preventive types of programs that address at-risk children in at-risk families.

PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

In order to work effectively in behavioral and delinquency cases, the child welfare social worker must understand the processes and procedures of two significant societal institutions, the child welfare system and the court system. The initial processing for all delinquent children usually begins in the juvenile court system. The juvenile court controls entry of juveniles into the justice system