

Hayden, C., Nguyen, H., Twigg, L. (2017, forthcoming) Explaining the offending behaviour of young people on educational programmes incarcerated in educational institutions in Vietnam, *Youth Justice*.

Abstract

This article is based on original research in Vietnam and is focused on explaining the offending behaviour of young people on educational programmes incarcerated in educational institutions. The primary research includes a self-report survey of young people in custody (n=2,009) in the four national educational institutions as well as interviews with young people (n=98) and staff (n=34). The research concludes that the interaction of problematic family circumstances; community based issues – specifically on-line gaming; as well as individual disposition; within a context of the problems created by rapid socio-economic change, explains the offending of these young people.

Key words: Vietnam, young offenders, incarceration, educational institutions, explanations

Introduction

Youth crime is popularly perceived to be a growing problem in Vietnam (Thanh Nien News, 2013a; Vietnam News, 2015) but there is relatively little research that examines the perspectives of young offenders themselves. Specifically, there is a lack of larger scale survey research. The overall aims of the current study were to profile a particular incarcerated population in Vietnam (those on educational programmes in educational institutions) and to identify the issues and circumstances ('factors') in their lives that might explain their offending. The broader purpose of the study was to inform the response to youth crime in Vietnam through a better understanding of young people's perspectives, as well as those of the staff working with them. This incarcerated population includes young people aged 12 to 18 who have been

convicted of several offences (often theft, sometimes public order) and young people who are too young to go to prison and have committed serious offences (such as rape and murder). Educational institutions are one of three types of response to youth offending in Vietnam. The other responses are: prison (for serious/very serious offences) and for less serious offences community based interventions (these cater for around 80% of young offenders).

Sending young people to educational institutions is only used as a last resort if, after receiving education and support within the community from local authorities, they re-offend more than once and are homeless or vagrant (the latter two circumstances are not reasons for incarceration). Educational and vocational training are the two main activities in these institutions. Educational activities aim to address literacy problems and get young people up to the age appropriate level of education. Vocational activities vary, for example - learning to be a barber, tailoring and working with machinery. We did not include young people doing vocational activities in the survey in the current study because they did not gather together in large enough groups or in circumstances that would make the survey feasible.

There has been a growth of counselling in educational institutions in recent years, with a focus on young people understanding how to lead a better life on release. Young people, aged 18 years and under, do not have their offence(s) recorded as a criminal history. However, there are no Vietnamese programmes (equivalent to resettlement programmes in countries like the UK) that aim to help with basic needs - such as housing, work and further training - when young people leave custody.

The research is primarily based on a self-report survey (n= 2,009) completed by young people on educational programmes in the four national educational institutions. The survey was

followed by interviews with young people (n=98) and staff (n=34) in the same institutions. The purpose of the interviews was to investigate young people's views in more depth about the most important factors that they thought explained their offending and to compare this with staff perspectives. This article presents the overall results from the survey and interviews with young people and staff. It sets out to provide both a profile of the factors associated with young people's offending and an interpretation of how this links to key theoretical explanations.

Cox (2012:17) argues that '*global criminology has largely overlooked Vietnam*' and there is very little empirical research that seeks to document, understand and explain youth crime in the Vietnamese context. A key reason for this relates to gatekeeping and access to data and field research in Vietnam, which requires permission from the relevant government body. Other issues include the potential barriers of language and cultural (mis)understanding in conducting the research and making it more widely known afterwards. The current study was led by a Vietnamese academic. The research was supported by a three year government grant to study for a PhD in the UK and approved by the Ministry of Public Security in Vietnam.

The content of the survey instrument uses items from the questionnaires used in The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (ESYTC, 2003) and in the Communities that Care (CtC, 2003) initiative. The research took an integrated approach (see Smith and McVie, 2003) to the explanation of youth crime which fits well with the multiple issues and circumstances covered in the questionnaire survey instrument.

The article starts by providing a brief background to the context of Vietnam and reviews key evidence and research on youth crime in Vietnam. The next section outlines the relevance of

key criminological theories in relation to the current study. The rest of the article focuses on reporting, discussing and concluding on the findings from the original research.

The Vietnamese Context

Vietnam's judicial system is based on Civil Law and since 1945 has been influenced by Russia. In 1945, Hồ Chí Minh declared an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (independent from French colonisation), which was recognized by the fellow Communist governments of China and Russia. France relinquished any claims to territory in Vietnam in 1954. A judicial system based on Civil Law gives preference to statute law or law that is already written and codified. Vietnam ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 and was the first Asian country to accept the Convention (Vietnam was also the second in the world to do so) (Pham, 2016). The age of criminal responsibility in Vietnam is 14, although those aged between 14 and up to 16 years only bear criminal liability for serious crimes (committed intentionally) and extremely serious crimes. Young people under 18 years who offend are treated under different provisions and have lighter penalties than those aged 18 and over (Pham, 2016).

Vietnam is one of the world's five Communist one-party states and it is also one of the world's fastest growing economies (Cox, 2012). Since the mid-1980s (accelerating in the early 1990s) Vietnam has undergone a range of socioeconomic and structural reforms (referred to as 'renovation' or 'doi moi') which have moved the country away from a centrally planned economy, towards a more liberal market economy and consumer society (Nguyen, 2006; King et al, 2008). These changes have led to some contradictions between the ideology of a Communist state and the changes brought about by a market economy (Nguyen, 2006). Renovation ('doi moi') abolished the state subsidy system that provided for key needs, such as education, employment, housing and healthcare. Increased levels of unemployment and

poverty followed these reforms. Added to these changes, fast economic growth has led to a major movement of population - from rural towards urban areas, which has meant massive changes to the lives of many citizens. The speed and nature of change in terms of the rapid development and concentrated location of businesses is illustrated by two statistics: as a result of Renovation more than 70% of state employees moved into private business (as either owners of new enterprises or as employees); and, 40% of private enterprises are located in two cities: Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (King et al, 2008:793).

This rapid development in urban areas has led to increasing inequality between both individuals and regions (King et al, 2008). People in agricultural areas have been displaced causing millions of people to become unemployed. In response, adults (and some children) tend to go to the city to seek employment, mostly in manual jobs. Parents often leave their children behind to live on their own or under the supervision of others (such as grandparents and other relatives) because they cannot bring them to the cities as the cost of living is higher and they cannot afford to provide for them. Thus, rural parents are often unable to support their families unless they move away to seek employment in the cities, but in so doing they are forced to leave their children and other family members at home.

More broadly, rapid development has caused tension between the demands of work and family, with parents having less time for their children, even in wealthier families. As a result, some children are neglected whilst others are seen as 'over-indulged' by their parents. Lack of parental (or wider family) care and control leads to some children running away from home either to find work or to leave their family circumstances behind. This often results in homelessness and very precarious living arrangements in the cities they are running to. Lack of parental supervision is perceived to be a problem and is linked with young people spending

a great deal of time playing on-line games (Thanh Nien News, 2015). Use of the internet is growing very fast in Vietnam and is almost universal with the 15-24 year-old age group, compared with around a third of the whole population. Although most of those accessing the internet do so at home, about a quarter do so in internet cafes or shops (Cimigo, 2011).

In traditional Vietnamese culture the family is considered to be the ‘nuclear’ feature of society, and both the central and starting point for creating a strong society. This belief in the importance of a strong bond between family members is influenced by the ideas of Confucianism. According to this philosophy, the family environment is the first ‘school’ in which children learn about the world. It follows that, the ‘dysfunctional’ family (in which there is relationship breakdown and/or lack of care and supervision from parents) is a key explanation of youth crime in Vietnamese culture (Ho, 2002).

Officially children are considered to be a ‘source of happiness for every family’ in Vietnam, therefore their protection and welfare has priority in social policies. An illustration of the way children are referred to by the state can be found in Instruction No. 38-CT/TW on improving education, protection, and care for children:

Children are the source of happiness for every family, they are the future for the entire Nation, [they] will continue contributing and protecting the Fatherland, therefore they need to be protected, educated and cared for (Vietnamese Politburo, 1994).

In keeping with these sentiments, the Vietnamese Criminal Justice System has a different emphasis compared with countries in the West. The emphasis in Vietnam is on welfare and rehabilitation, rather than justice. The 80% of young offenders who are helped within their

community are often expected to acknowledge how they have harmed their community, as part of their sanction (Cox, 2010). At first glance this may appear to be based on a restorative justice approach and indeed key proponents of ‘re-integrative shaming’ (such as Braithwaite, 1989) acknowledge the influence of Asian policing and educational practices in the development of restorative approaches. However, the reality appears to be more complex, both because of the widespread practise of self-criticism in Vietnamese society; and because of the way the process might be managed and experienced. Cox (2010) found that whilst UNICEF officials in Vietnam praised the use of self-criticism, young people on the receiving end reported a very different experience because of the way the process was managed, so that the shame experienced was not necessarily ‘re-integrative.’ The apparent focus on ‘welfare’ may also be deceptive in terms of how families and communities may respond to young people who break the rules or criminal law (see Cox, 2012).

Youth Crime in Vietnam

In Vietnam, popular, political and academic concern about youth offending has been evident for some time (Cox, 2010, 2012; Ho, 2002; Nguyen and Trinh, 2000; Nguyen, 2004; Pham, 2016; Thanh Nien News, 2013a; Vietnam News, 2011, 2015). Young people under the age of 18 account for 25% of the overall crime rate in Vietnam and 34% of the total population (of about 90 million people) is under 18 years old (Pham, 2016). Official data shows that most youth offending is committed by those aged 16 to 18. Official data also provides evidence of an increase in youth convictions from 11,538 in 2000 (in Cox, 2010) to a peak of 14,785 young people in 2013 (Department of Crime Statistics and Information Technology, Supreme People’s Procuracy 2014). Overall, since 2007 the number of convictions has fluctuated at around 13,000 per year providing a very low official youth crime rate of 15 per 100,000,

compared with between 1,220 and 2,180 per 100,000 in England and Wales in recent years (MoJ, 2012).

However, world comparison on the rate of imprisonment (adult and youth) shows the rate in Vietnam to be similar to England and Wales - at 154 people per 100,000 (148 in England and Wales); and slightly higher than the world rate of 144 people per 100,000. Vietnam is at the higher end of the overall range in Asian countries, in terms of imprisonment rate per 100,000 (Walmsley, 2015).

Available commentary and explanation in Vietnam reveals that a range of social problems are believed to be important in explaining youth crime. For example, Thinh (Director of the Hanoi-based Institute for Population Research and Social Work) reports that family based issues such as divorce, domestic violence, gambling and adult criminal behaviour are present in 80% of juvenile cases (quoted in Thanh Nien News, 2013a). This latter view often inter-relates with comments about the effects of a rapidly changing society:

Vietnamese society has been changing too fast, and it has become a consumer society. This results in greater greed and human desire. Meanwhile, adults are role models for children, so they need to set good examples if they want their own children to become good people. Unfortunately, today's adults have too many problems themselves. Corruption, excessive drinking, immorality and gambling by adults have a negative influence on teenagers (Vietnam News, 2011: para 5).

Rapid technological development, particularly of the internet and on-line games, are believed to have contributed to an increase in youth crime. In addition, traditional relationships at home, school and the workplace are being challenged (Vietnam News, 2015: para 1 and 2).

So, an over-arching explanation for the increase in crime in Vietnam in recent years is the pace of social change, related social problems and criminal opportunities; as might be expected both from an historical analysis and comparison with what has happened in other countries such as Britain (see Cox, 2012) and because of the effects of globalisation (Muncie, 2005). Commenting on the explanatory tension between psychological and sociological explanations of criminal behaviour in relation to the post-war rise in crime in the West, Smith and McVie (2003:171) argue that:

...it seems more likely that expanding criminal opportunities and weakening community and family controls caused the post-war [ie post 1945] rise in crime, rather than an increase in the proportion of individuals who were highly impulsive, or otherwise criminally inclined.

This perspective has been influential in the current study.

Individual responsibility and psychological explanations for youth crime are an important consideration in the Vietnamese context, where the tendency towards self-criticism has already been noted (Cox, 2012; Pham, 2016). The broader context of Buddhist beliefs is also useful in understanding why traditional elements in society might focus on the individual. In the words of Thien (permanent vice president of the Viet Nam Buddhist Sangha):

All crimes are traced back to three common traits of human psychology: greed, anger and delusion. The stronger these grow, the more serious crimes people commit (Vietnam News, 2011: para 4).

It was anticipated in this study that the explanations for youth crime in Vietnam might also share some similarities with what has been found elsewhere in the world. Overall, the research adopted a standpoint where a number of compatible theories were chosen on the basis that they were likely to be relevant to the wider public and political discourse in Vietnam and the limited research evidence available. Further, the type of empirical research planned (essentially a national survey of a particular incarcerated population) was based on a range of factors established by research evidence that was susceptible to more than one explanation.

Integrated approaches to the explanation of youth crime recognize that crime is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon with multiple causes. Integrating a variety of factors (individual, social and community circumstances, economic context) into a coherent structure can help to overcome the problems of studies that focus on only one part of the overall ecology of how young people live. A problem with research that focuses on people exposed to a particular circumstance (such as poverty, school exclusion or family breakdown) is that not all people exposed to such circumstances commit crime. Integrated theories recognize that multiple social and individual factors interact dynamically in relation to how individuals behave. It follows that research needs to consider a wide range of factors in an individual's life in order to understand how this might relate to their behaviour. Multi-factor theories integrate a range of variables into a cohesive explanation of criminality (see for example, Farrington and Welsh, 2007).

There is some limited research evidence that young people in Vietnam, like anywhere else in the world, are exposed to the influence of peer groups, specifically when involved in offending behaviours (Ho, 2002; Nguyen, 2004). Moreover, popular discourse suggests that the influence of on-line games (specifically as a social activity in public places catering for this interest) has emerged as a new subculture (see for example Cohen, 1956) for Vietnamese youth in recent years (Thanh Nien News, 2013b, 2015). On-line games help create the conditions which bring young people together in a social situation that is part of a group identity. This group identity is explicitly apart from the influence of family and adults in authority and for about 25% of young people (based on home internet data, Cimigo, 2011) is likely to occur outside the home in internet cafes and gaming stores. Attempts to restrict and license games (Thanh Nien News, 2008, 2013b) were not successful due to the ability of young people to access games outside those licensed within Vietnam, the problems of enforcement and the pressure from Vietnamese businesses.

The broader developing public and political discourse about ‘youth’ and specifically ‘youth offending’ in Vietnam shares characteristics with the West. In this respect it is important to acknowledge that rising youth crime in Vietnam can be seen as part of a familiar historical pattern, characterised by rapid social change and adult fears about the freedoms of young people, as well as concerns about specific social problems that may have become more visible (Cox, 2012). In a rapidly changing and developing society, such as Vietnam, the gap in understanding across the generations (Nguyen, 2005), as well as the inequality across the country and between social groups suggested that subcultural (Cohen, 1956) and control theories (such as Hirschi, 2002) may also be of particular relevance to the current study. So, in sum the research was informed by specific elements of sociological and psychological

research, using an integrated approach that is compatible with the pragmatist epistemology of the research.

Methodology

The primary research started with a self-report cross sectional survey (n= 2,009) conducted with young people on educational programmes across the four national educational institutions. The survey was followed by interviews with young people (n=98) and staff (n=34) that set out to provide more in-depth qualitative data, as well as different perspectives. Survey questions were developed in four main domains: individual characteristics, family circumstances, schooling and community circumstances, in line with much of the research on ‘risk factors’ or ‘adversities’ that are associated with youth offending elsewhere in the world (for example Farrington and Welsh, 2007); and by taking account of Vietnamese and South East Asian research (for example Le and Wallen, 2005) and contemporary public discourse (for example Thanh Nien News, 2008, 2013a, 2013b; Vietnam News, 2011, 2015). Most of the survey questions were replicated or adapted to the Vietnamese context and were selected from The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (ESYTC, 2003) and Communities that Care (CtC, 2003) questionnaires. These latter survey instruments are very long (the ESYTC survey has 10 themes across 44 sides, the CtC survey has 141 items packed densely across 8 pages) and were not suitable in their entirety for the young people in the current study, most of whom had no high school education. Additional questions about on-line gaming were developed and piloted with young people prior to the main survey taking place because this issue was thought to be of particular relevance in Vietnam. In total the 73 items (over 7 pages) in the questionnaire were grouped into five themes: family, school and education, neighbourhood, drugs and the media and individual characteristics (along with the offences committed).

The lead researcher and another researcher (both Vietnamese) were on hand to assist young people who needed help with understanding questions or completing the questionnaire. Interviews with young people and staff were based on a single question: young people - *what do you think is the most important issue ('factor') that explains why you have committed crimes?*; and, staff - *what do you think is the most important issue ('factor') that explains why young people (in this institution) have committed crimes?* In practise most interviewees talked about more than one issue.

The research was approved by the University ethics committee¹ and access to the four institutions was given by the Ministry of Public Security in Vietnam. It was made clear that the lead researcher was acting only as a researcher (and was not associated with the Ministry) and was also subject to the ethical oversight and supervision of a UK University. Young people were given the option of another activity if they did not want to take part in the survey and all face-to-face interviewees were volunteers. Questions about offending and the nature of offences committed were very general, so there was no opportunity for young people to further incriminate themselves.

The 73 questions included 63 explanatory variables in relation to circumstances associated with the crimes committed by the young people surveyed. Principal Components Analysis was used to combine variables that were collinear (see Field, 2005), this produced 12 new variables or components across three domains (family, school, community, drugs and media). The Chi-square test was used to investigate association between factors, age and type of crime. Interview data was analysed using content and thematic analysis.

¹ REC reference: 13/13:18, FHSS, University of Portsmouth, UK.

It is recognised that self-report surveys of youth crime and victimisation have been criticised in relation to their reliability (see for example Smith and McVie, 2003). However, the young people in this study had already offended enough times to be incarcerated, this was verifiable. Our primary focus in this part of the study was on young people's perception of factors in their lives that they saw as important in explaining their offending.

The research sample (n= 2,009 young people) included 1,938 males (96.5%) and 71 females (3.5%). Gender differences are not the main concern of the research presented here and are referred to only where significant differences were found. Rather, the current article centres on presenting and explaining the overall patterns of factors associated with offending across the four institutions and comparing the perceptions of the staff and young people interviewed. Most of the sample (84.6%) were aged between 15-18 years, with the rest being under 15 years of age. Most (91%) were from the majority (Kinh) ethnic group with the rest belonging to minority ethnic groups. Over half (55%) came from rural areas, around a third (34.1%) from urban areas, with the rest (10.9%) indicating other types of area (such as suburban and coastal). Less than 5% of the young people had a high school education but there were big differences in level of education across the four institutions: for example those educated to only elementary school level ranged from 8.3% to 76.2%.

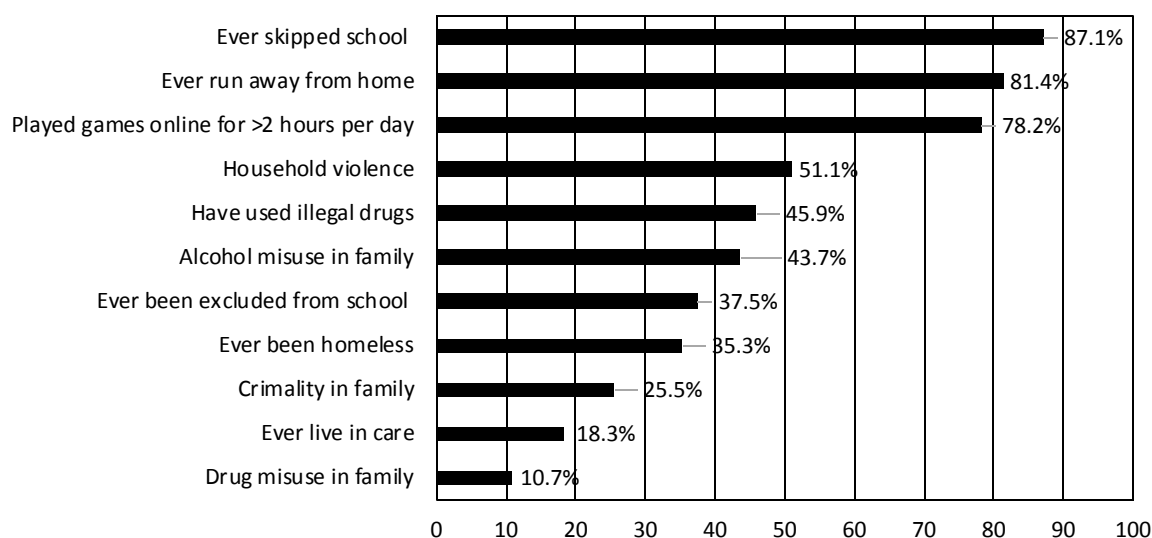
Overall, theft was the most common crime (72.9%, 1,374 of the 2,009), then public order offences (20.5%, 386); the rest were convicted of serious crimes (6.6%, 124). A small proportion of young people did not indicate the main type of offence which had led them to be in the educational institution (6.2%, or 125 of 2,009).

Key findings

The key findings in this section focus on the results of the survey in relation to the circumstances ('factors') of young people prior to their incarceration that might explain their offending. These circumstances are then illustrated by quotes from interviews with staff and young people. Interview data is also used to compare staff and young people's perspectives on the relative importance of particular explanatory circumstances.

Prevalence of problematic circumstances prior to incarceration (survey data)

Some circumstances (or 'factors') were very common, as illustrated in Figure 1: ever skipped school (87.2%); ever run away (81.4%); ever played games on-line (78.2%). Indeed all these young people playing games on-line, reported doing so for more than two hours a day prior to entering the educational institution. Other common issues included: household violence (51.1%); illegal drugs use (45.9%); alcohol misuse in the family (43.7%); exclusion from school (37.5%); and, homelessness (35.3%). In around a quarter of cases (25.5%) young people reported that there was criminality in their family. Nearly a fifth (18.7%) had lived in care at some point before they were incarcerated (foster or residential care). Around a tenth (10.7%) of respondents reported drug misuse in their family of origin. There were differences by gender in the prevalence of some of these issues; particularly in relation to household violence: with the female prevalence (71.5%) being much higher than males (51%) in the study. Also, a higher proportion of females (92.8%) had 'ever run away from home', compared with males (80.9%).

Figure 1: Prevalence of problematic circumstances*

*Survey, N=2,009

Associations between types of crime and circumstances before incarceration (survey data)

There was a different pattern of associations between circumstances (or 'factors'), types of crime and their relative importance. After family-related circumstances, the survey showed that on-line games were an important factor associated with theft amongst young offenders in Vietnam. Homelessness and family problems (such as alcohol misuse) were also associated with theft. These issues were likely to compound the financial problems of young people who do not have ready access to the financial support of a family but need and want money, both to meet their subsistence needs as well as to play on-line games.

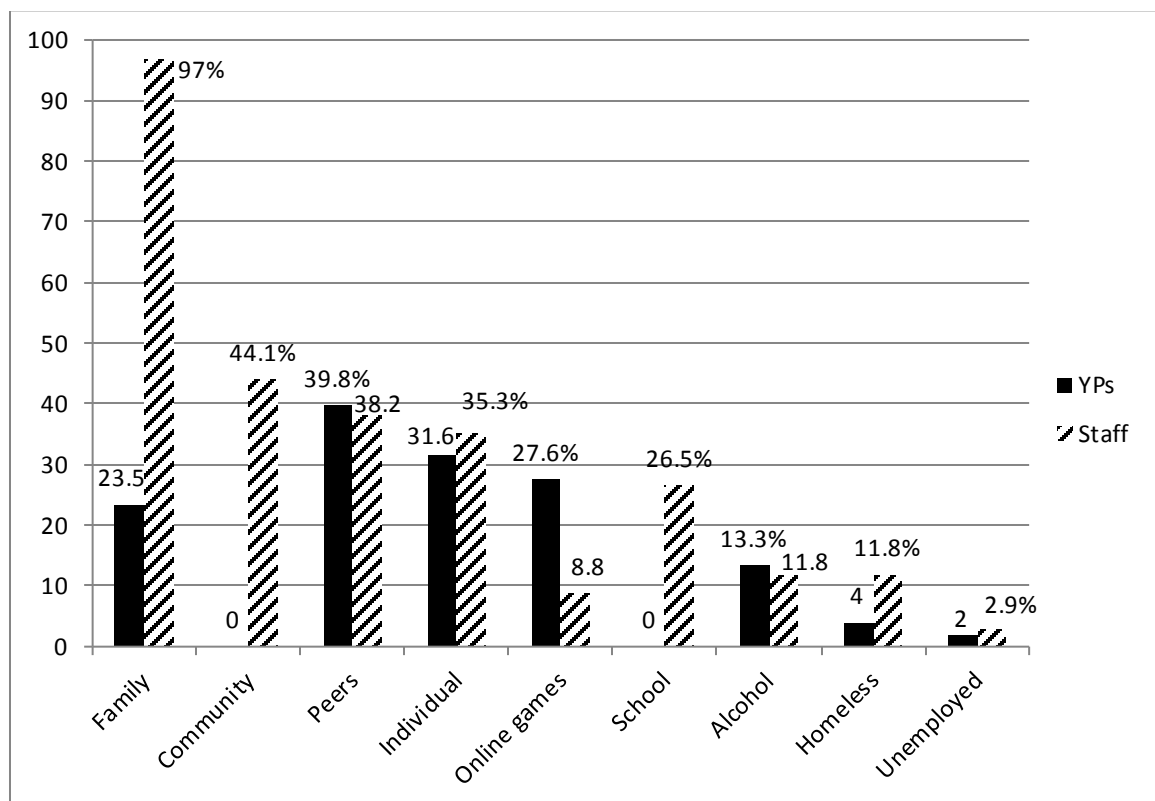
Public order offences (eg offensive or aggressive behaviour in a public place, often associated with alcohol use) were about three times more likely to be committed by 18 year olds, than other ages overall. Interestingly, being influenced by criminal acquaintances also increased the likelihood of this type of crime, suggesting that they often involved a group of young people or peers, who may have known each other or live in the same community or neighbourhood.

Those who committed serious crimes (6.6%, 124) – such as rape murder and robbery - were in the younger age group (12 to 14 years old), which is consistent with youth justice policy in Vietnam, whereby this age group is sent to educational institutions (rather than prison). It was not possible to explain these crimes from the data collected in the current study.

Explaining youth offending – comparing interviews with young people and staff

Interviews with young people (n=98) and staff (n=34) focused on gaining more insight into their perceptions of the most important factor that related to offending behaviour. Figure 2 illustrates the most important factors highlighted by young people and staff during interviews. There are considerable differences when the views of staff and young people are compared.

Figure 2: Perceptions of the most important factors that explain youth offending: comparing young offenders and staff*



*Interviews, N= 98 young people; N= 34 staff

The most striking difference is: the extent to which staff focused on family issues and problems (97% or all but one of the 34 staff interviewed) in comparison with young people (23.1%). Where family problems were mentioned by young people they were severe, as the following quotes illustrate:

'My father got drug addicted. He often demolished everything in the house and used violence toward my mother and to us in order to get money for drug use. That made me feel upset and I became disheartened. I didn't want to go to school anymore. I spent more time with friends to hang around and play [games].'(Male, age 17)

'My mum died early, my dad was too busy at work; no one took care of me.'(Female, age 13)

Staff described young people as typically living in families in which relationships had broken down or in which there was poor parenting (characterised by neglect, lack of supervision and care, and/or too much indulgence). Staff often emphasised that the family was the fundamental foundation for young peoples' development. This perspective emphasised that without an appropriate level of supervision and care from parents, young people are more likely to offend in Vietnam, as is the case in the UK and elsewhere (Farrington and Welsh, 2007). The concept of 'too much indulgence' is not an issue typically highlighted in Western research on youth offending. Cultural difference may explain the strong emphasis in staff interview responses, in terms of the focus on the responsibility of the family for the behaviour of young people, illustrated in the following quotes:

'The role of family is the most important. We cannot blame peer influences for young peoples' behaviours. Without family supervision and care, young people will certainly follow their peers.' (Staff)

'Parents are too busy to take care of their children.' (Staff)

Staff and young people's perceptions also diverged in relation to the importance of community based issues and schooling. Whilst nearly half (44.1%) of the staff interviewed highlighted the importance of community-related problems and around a quarter (26.5%) thought school related issues were key in explaining young people's offending, no young people highlighted these issues. Staff talked about the socio-economic differences between provinces, regional differences, availability of 'unwholesome' activities in the community such as gambling, drugs and heavy drinking; as well as the neglect of local authorities when young people were released from the educational institutions.

'...most of those [...] released from the [educational] institutions were not accepted by family and community; consequently, when they have the opportunity to gather with negative peers, they will easily go back to delinquency.' (Staff)

Staff also talked about early school dropout and exclusion from school as important influential factors related to the development of offending behaviour. This is well evidenced in wider research and again is suggestive of some similarities between Vietnamese youth and young people elsewhere in the world (Le et al, 2005).

On-line gaming provides a specific context for young people in Vietnam, particularly in relation to the practise of playing games in commercial facilities (rather than at home), where the cost of financing this gaming is extremely difficult for many young people. As noted earlier, the survey found that a considerable proportion of young people (78.2%) reported that they spent two hours or more a day playing on-line games and over a quarter (27.6%) of interviewees thought gaming was an important influence on their offending. In contrast, only three staff (8.8%) mentioned on-line games. In the following quote a young person describes themselves as ‘game addicted’, although they also clearly connect this with parents not spending much time with them:

‘... I think [being] game addicted is the cause of my offending behaviour, since my parents did not spend much time to take care of me.’ (Male, age 14)

One of the three members of staff highlighting gaming as one of the most important influences on youth offending said:

‘Gaming has a considerable impact. For playing games, young people need both time and money. The more they play the more money they need. If they don’t have enough money to cover the expense, they will steal it.’ (Staff)

The responses of staff and young people were very similar in relation to the relative importance of peer group influences and individual factors. Many young people (39.8%) tended to blame peer group influence (characterised as peer enticement or peer imitation) or themselves (31.6%) for their behaviour. For those who focused on peer group influence, most cases involved activities such as gathering in public places and drinking alcohol, hanging around in shopping

centres or on-line gaming facilities, and so on. Those focusing on themselves as individuals, talked about personality and individual temperament; such as their own aggressive behaviour, inability to control their temper, or desire to try new things:

'I felt school is not for me. I hang out and play [games] just because I want to..... I follow friends only when I think it is right...' (Male, age 18)

'I used drugs because I want to try new things, to see how it's like, but once I got involved, I cannot get out of it...' (Male, age 18)

A member of staff offered a similar perspective:

'Young people have the desire for self-expression, with the addition of enticements from their peers.....This is a major cause for crime.' (Staff)

Although family problems are mentioned in interviews with young people, it was clear that from their perspective they were not considered to be as important as peer group influences and personal problems, although parents being 'too busy' or absent was frequently mentioned. The influence of alcohol was most often highlighted by those who had committed public order offences. Alcohol, homelessness and unemployment were less frequently mentioned as the most important factors relating to youth offending: staff cited homelessness (11.8%) as an important factor more frequently than young people (4%).

There are two main explanations for the differences in issues highlighted by the survey and interview findings, and between young people and staff: the differences in method applied; and, the differences in understanding and perception of offending behaviour of young people and staff. The questionnaire survey illustrates the prevalence of potentially adverse

circumstances of a particular incarcerated population, prior to their incarceration. The interviews with young people and staff focussed on their experiences and perceptions and what they wanted to talk about.

The difference in understanding and life experience between young people and staff will have influenced how they perceived the relevance of particular factors. During interviews young people would often refer back to bad experiences they had in their earlier life. They would describe the impacts of negative influences and circumstances but did not necessarily make the link between them and their offending. Most young people (when asked to rate the relative importance of different factors on their offending) referred to a particular event related to a particular factor (for example, the death or drug addiction of a parent). Staff, on the other hand, could draw on their professional experience and were able to generalize about issues and circumstances that they saw as associated with youth offending. Overall they tended to see the young offender as a 'special' child who needed proper care and supervision rather than as a criminal in need of rehabilitation (illustrating the primarily welfare orientated nature of the Vietnamese approach with young offenders). Overall, staff tended to explain youth crime in terms of influences on the young people, rather than the individual characteristics of the young people themselves.

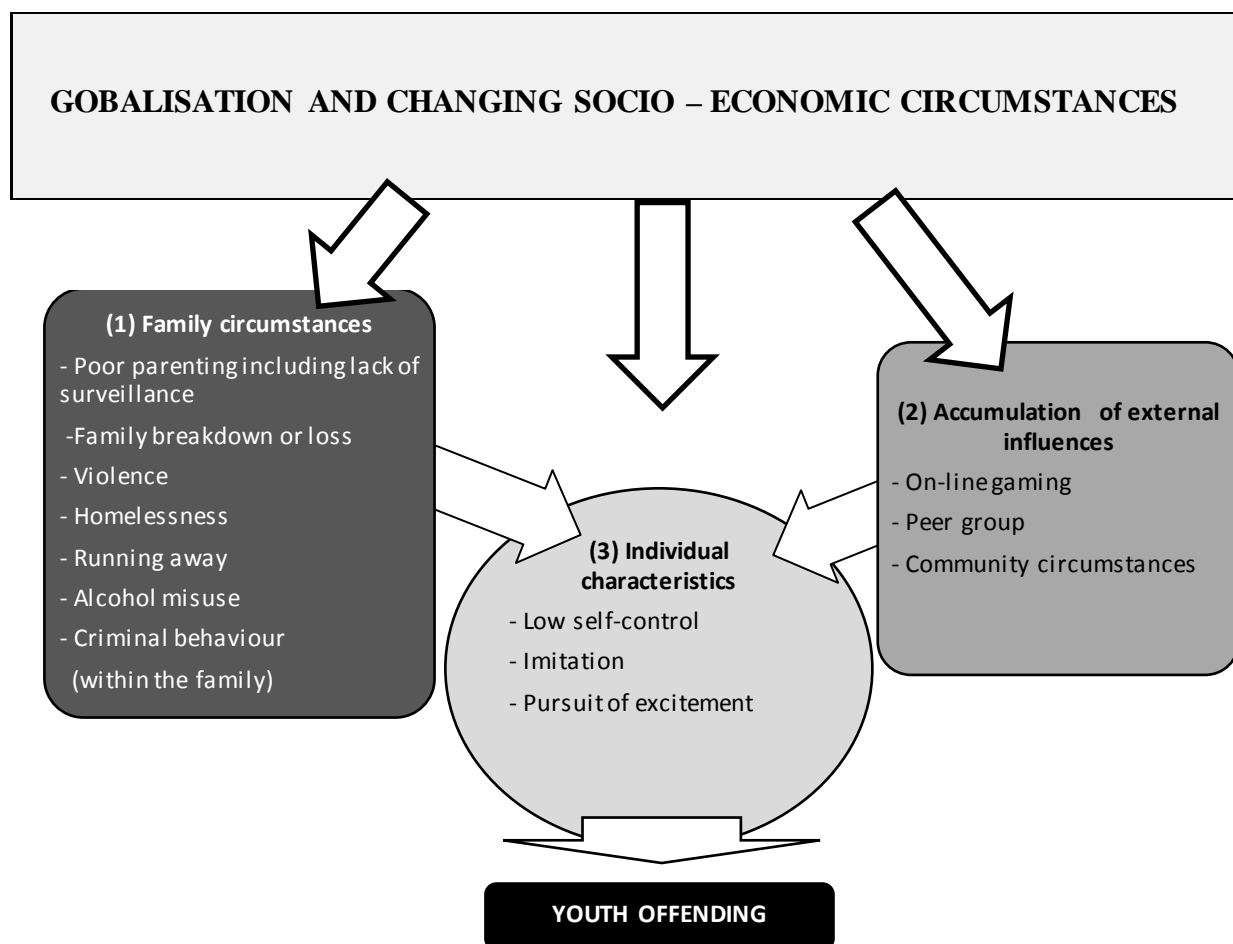
Discussion

The findings suggest that an accumulation and interaction between a number of key domains (or groups of factors) explain young people's involvement in crime in Vietnam. The three most important domains are:

- (1) *Family circumstances*: such as poor parenting and lack of supervision, family breakdown and loss of a parent, alcohol misuse in the family; criminal behaviour within the family and violence which is likely to be related to running away from home, and homelessness; and
- (2) *An accumulation of external factors* (external to the family and individual): such as on-line gaming, peer group influences, and community circumstances; and
- (3) *Individual characteristics*: such as low self-control, imitation, and pursuit of excitement.

These domains are framed by the wider processes of globalisation and socio-economic circumstances in a rapidly changing society. The relationship between these three domains and youth offending in Vietnam is summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The relationship between different factors, context and youth offending in Vietnam



Overall, family circumstances represent the most important influence on the offending behaviour of the young people in this study. This is because the circumstances and problems in the families of origin of these young people helped to make them vulnerable to accumulating external influences, such as on-line gaming as well as negative peer group and other community circumstances. These in turn interacted dynamically with individual characteristics that are common factors for young people getting into trouble anywhere in the world. The wider socio-economic circumstances and forces of globalisation add to a context where young people were exposed to activities and aspirations that require potentially limitless funds. The importance of family circumstances in explaining youth offending is not only supported by wider research evidence (Farrington and Welsh, 2007; Smith and McVie, 2003) but also specifically in Asia (Le et al, 2005). The significant role of the family in traditional Vietnamese culture, is illustrated in the interviews with staff, and is also consistent with explanations of criminality provided by control theorists (such as Hirschi, 2002). Within the interviews with young people problematic emotional connections and relationships with parents were often referred to, although they did not necessarily see this as a key explanation for their offending behaviour. Specifically, the lack of a bond with parents was evident in many cases and may have led to a low stake in conformity and an acceptance of delinquent peers or exposure to negative influences through on-line gaming or other activities. In many cases the family was literally unable to provide support, or even a home for a young person, this increased their vulnerability to other influences (external factors).

The key external factors in this study included on-line gaming, peer group influences, and community circumstances. These factors often interacted dynamically. The involvement of young people with their peer group and its effects on their behaviour has been illustrated by earlier research in Vietnam (Le et al, 2005). In Vietnamese culture, individuals tend to adhere to the group by following group norms and behaviours. Therefore, it is likely that the greater the number of

delinquent peers young people have, the greater the likelihood that they will offend. To some extent, this explanation is consistent with subcultural theory (Cohen, 1956) which argues that the involvement of 'outcasts' (such as those who are excluded from school) with similar peers can often create subcultural behaviours that may be associated with offending. So, the estrangement from family and school, homelessness and precarious living circumstances, alongside being involved in an on-line gaming subculture that requires constant funding helps create the mix of influences that led to theft as the most common crime committed in this study. The influence of group identity in the case of gaming with a peer group is explicitly apart from the influence of family and adults in authority. Furthermore, the loosened attachment between members of society, due to rapid industrialization and social change, means that the traditional power of social condemnation is reduced, possibly increasing other influences. This absence of parental control alongside an activity that requires potentially unlimited resourcing also provides support for control theory (Hirschi, 2002) in explaining some aspects of youth crime in the Vietnamese context.

The significant influence of the reported individual characteristics or desires of young offenders in this study include: low self-control, imitation, and the pursuit of excitement and desire for material possessions. Although these issues were not part of the questionnaire survey, they were mentioned in the interviews with both young people and staff as one of the main reasons for offending. Around a third of both staff and young people interviewed shared a similar view that personal issues or problems were one of the most important factors that explained youth offending in Vietnam. This latter focus is indicative of the self-criticism encouraged within Vietnamese culture. A focus on individual characteristics in some ways supports the general theory of crime that bases its explanation on low self-control, which can also be considered to be a reflection of poor parenting (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). According to this theory,

young people make their personal 'choice' of behaviours without concern for the long term consequences. But the young people interviewed in this study had very little control over how to meet their personal or even basic needs, which in turn made them vulnerable to offending as a way of meeting these needs. This explanation is consistent with other findings in this study in relation to family circumstances (such as violence and alcohol misuse in the family), with the majority of young people having run away or been homeless at some time prior to their incarceration.

Conclusions

Overall, the research shows that three broad domains are, in combination, most associated with youth crime for young people in educational institutions in Vietnam: family circumstances, external factors (as in external to the family) and individual characteristics or desires. However, the wider socio-economic circumstances in Vietnam are key to the interpretation of the current research. The processes of industrialisation and urbanization in Vietnam have resulted in changes to many aspects of everyday life, which have led to the loosening of social and family bonds. Integration into the global economy (including tourism) means that the globalisation process is also contributing to rapid social transformation. This situation provides more opportunities for criminal activity and tends to accentuate the differences between generations and traditional forms of social control. Accordingly, the key theoretical explanations that appear to best fit the research findings are: overall - the social development model and general theory of crime; and - specifically control and subcultural theories.

In considering the response to the issues identified in this study, it is reasonable to admit that some issues cannot be resolved in the short-term and need to be part of longer term government policy in relation to socio-economic development and the provision of welfare to address issues

of inequality, poverty and the negative impacts of urbanization and globalization. For Vietnam, as a country focussed on economic development, responding to the side-effects of this process may seem overwhelming. Addressing the broader circumstances in which young people offend requires major socio-economic improvements and the development of social programmes, including measures to control the pace of migration from rural to urban areas. Focusing on improving child welfare by reducing poverty and particularly the number of homeless children; as well as providing adequate educational provision and basic health care, still requires much effort and will need support from outside Vietnam (including from international organisations such as UNICEF or PLAN², that are already involved in the country). Developing specific responses to the family-based issues presented in this study is a major undertaking.

However, particular issues identified in this study such as the influence of on-line gaming, do provide the opportunity for more specific and targeted responses, since this was one of the most common issue associated with theft. It follows that the findings presented in this research suggest that community governance of game/internet stores should be strengthened. However, creating alternative social venues for these young people is also needed, alongside ensuring their more basic needs are met (food, shelter, a means to obtain a legitimate income). The strengths of the existing community-centred approach to most youth offending behaviour should continue and improve, in order to ensure that welfare is at the heart of the response to young offenders in Vietnam. Penal policy reform in late 2015 has confirmed the need for change in sentencing young people, with even greater focus on redirecting young people who break the law away from the official criminal justice system. In future years it is reasonable to hope that the number of young people sent to the educational institutions, that form the basis for this study, will decrease.

² SEE: <http://www.unicef.org/vietnam/> <https://plan-international.org/vietnam>

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