

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SELECTED JUVENILE OFFENDERS LIVING IN  
SEDGWICK COUNTY KANSAS

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in Criminal Justice.

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family members  
who all have motivated me to strive for the best in all I do

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

This study details the life stories of three former juvenile delinquents currently living in Sedgwick County, Kansas. The participants who are now adults reported extensive criminality and involvement in the juvenile justice system as juveniles. The study utilizes a qualitative collective case study methodology. A corollary purpose of the study was to determine if findings could be couched in Robert Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory. Data analysis subsequently revealed six common themes among participants that presented challenges for their desistance from criminality as juveniles. These themes are: (1) lack of parental control, (2) living in a high crime community, (3) experiencing school failure, (4) displaying early signs of delinquency through aggression, (5) substance abuse, (6) and having a desire to obtain money. Moreover, the results suggest that these themes taken in constellation with one another seemed to be salient in their criminality as juveniles. Finally, the results demonstrated several sources of strain in participants' lives at the time of their offending. Therefore, the results of this study in part can be explained by General Strain Theory.

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## LIST of ABBREVIATIONS

D.L.	Drivers Licenses
D.U.I	Driving Under the Influence
G.E.D	General Education Diploma
GST	General Strain Theory
IRB	Institutional Review Board
JDF	Juvenile Detention Facility
JIAC	Juvenile Intake and Assessment
OJJDP	Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
SRO	School Resource Officer
SRS	Social and Rehabilitation Services
NFL	National Football League

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As an undergraduate in the Applied Behavioral Science (ABS) department at the University of Kansas, I was made well aware of the serious issue pertaining to juvenile delinquency. My area of concentration in ABS was juvenile justice. This tract offered a valuable educational experience by presenting opportunities to work in the juvenile justice field. As a part of the ABS curriculum, all seniors in the juvenile justice area of concentration were required to partake in a senior practicum in which students were hired as interns for the Social and Rehabilitation Services Department (SRS) of Kansas. As interns with SRS, students served as truancy officers for area school districts. In addition, practicum students taught a “social skills” class to youth housed inside a local detention facility. With hopes of decreasing these youth’s delinquent behaviors, interns taught youth lessons on topics such as how to reject peer pressure, how to accept negative feedback from authority figures, and effective ways to settle disagreements. All in all, it seemed as if the youth learned quite a bit from the class. However, I think I am the one who benefited most from this experience.

Even with a solid educational foundation regarding juvenile delinquency, I knew very little as to why some youth go down the wrong path. Going into the juvenile detention facility for the first time, I had the preconceived notion that these youth were children that differed from the normal population. I thought that these were children who were innately bad, lacked discipline,

and would care little about me or the “social skills” I was going to attempt to teach them. To my surprise, the majority of the youth were very respectful and desirous to learn these skills that would keep them out of trouble. I can recall countless days in which youth were so caught up in learning the skill being taught that the session well exceeded the time allocated to teach the lesson. Thus, the real teaching began after I went through my designed lesson plan. The roles were reversed, the youth became the teachers and I became the student.

It was during this time that I began to better understand these youth. Through my interactions with them, the students demonstrated their desire to learn, hard work ethic, and commitment to change for the better. Additionally, the youth were very interested in my college experience. After learning that I was a collegiate athlete, many of the youth instantly connected with me. Several youth shared aspirations of one day going to college and also competing in college athletics. It was at that time that I realized that these youth who society labeled as “juvenile delinquents” were not bad kids at all. Rather, the majority of them had made bad decision(s) and came from rough backgrounds. Furthermore, all of the youth I encountered were very intelligent young people and eager to change; however, they kept getting into trouble. This experience left me wondering what set these youth down the road towards delinquency. Even though every youth’s road to criminality differed, I still wondered if there were any underlying factors that a large amount of juvenile offenders share.

Upon graduating from the University of Kansas, I had aspirations of pursuing a higher education. After visiting Wichita State University, I saw that their master’s program in criminal justice was the best fit for me to further my education. The only problem was that I had several unanswered questions regarding juvenile delinquency. This became an issue because the master’s program was geared towards studying the criminal justice system as a whole. However,

once enrolled in the master's program, I was made aware of the thesis option. With the desire to closely examine all the ins and outs of juvenile crime, I decided to gear my research towards better understanding juvenile delinquents. I hoped that through research, I would be able to highlight some of the previously overlooked variables that are common among juvenile delinquents. Understanding juvenile delinquents is the first step in combating juvenile crime. I truly believe that juvenile delinquency can be reduced with the effective rehabilitation procedures and proper crime fighting tactics. However, before designing these techniques and procedures, the lives of juvenile delinquents must be fully investigated; interested parties should be made well aware of some of the leading causes of juvenile delinquency.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to examine the criminality of three former juvenile delinquents in order to understand what factors were common threads in their lives and may have lead them down the path towards delinquency. Specific themes that emerged from the data such as each youth's home life, substance abuse, pro-social influence (mentors), school attendance, and the like were investigated. Through the use of a qualitative collective case study methodology, this study explored the factors that may have led participants into criminal offending from the perspective of the participants themselves. A corollary purpose of the study was to explore if these participants offending can be couched in Robert Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory. This study is unique in the sense that it was a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with three young men (participants) ages 20, 21, and 23 respectively who reported extensive involvement as offenders in the juvenile justice system from the ages of twelve through eighteen.

Through in-depth interviews, the researcher closely examined participant's juvenile offending and delinquency practices and the factors that may have lead them into this lifestyle. In essence, the researcher constructed their stories in this study. Each participant reported that they had spent time under the supervision of the Sedgwick County Juvenile Authorities. This included incarceration in the juvenile detention facility and being supervised on juvenile probation. Limited research has been conducted in Sedgwick County employing qualitative analysis techniques where the researcher attempts to construct the factors that center on juvenile offending through juvenile offenders themselves. Thus, the current study will provide rich descriptions of themes that seem to underpin these three participants' general life stories as they pertain to their juvenile criminality.

#### Research Questions

This study explored the following research questions: what are some of the leading causes of juvenile delinquency; why do certain youth become juvenile offenders while others do not; what motivates juvenile offenders to commit crimes; and are there any common themes amongst juvenile delinquents that steer a large amount of youth to criminality? These questions are the basis for investigations in the current study.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

As a society, it is often assumed that juveniles are not capable of engaging in serious criminal activity. From this perception we neither expect children to be criminals nor anticipate crimes to be committed by young offenders (Sternberg, 2005). Instead of labeling young offenders the same way as adult offenders, the juvenile justice system redefines them as juvenile delinquents. This change in terminology represents a different set of attitudes, beliefs, and guidelines in regards to how to handle young offenders. The juvenile justice system tends to give young offenders the least possible punitive label, penalties are often less harsh compared to adult sanctions, and treatment/rehabilitation is emphasized over punishment. Nevertheless, with the motto “adult crime, adult time,” it is apparent that society’s perception of the juvenile offender is starting to change (Lawrence, 2010).

Spiking in the 1980’s, juveniles have been engaging in a large amount of serious and violent crimes. This may be why many juvenile courts in the past three decades have ruled in favor of waiving serious juvenile offenders to the adult criminal court system. Regardless of how one believes juvenile offenders should be addressed, juvenile delinquency leaves interested parties with several unanswered questions. Questions such as why some youth go down the wrong path and how the criminal justice system can properly rehabilitate troubled youth come to mind. Thus, in order to properly address the situation at hand, agents of the juvenile justice community must fully understand all the ins and outs of juvenile delinquency.

## The Scope of the Problem

### National Statistics

Although national crime statistics from the past few decades display a steady decline in juvenile delinquency, juvenile crime is still a major concern for law enforcement agencies and communities that they serve across the nation. This may be partly due to the fact that juveniles account for a large percentage of the U.S. population. In fact, census data display that 75 million people in the United States are 18 years old or younger (U.S. Census, 2010). This means that roughly 24% of the total U.S. population is comprised of juveniles. With such a high percentage of the American public being minors, it is evident why the actions of this group have such a great impact on the entire nation. Nevertheless, many people do not realize the large amount of criminal activity juveniles engage in and the magnitude in which it affects the populace. Crime statistics collected by The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) highlight the severity of the issue at hand.

OJJDP estimates that there are roughly 70,800 juvenile offenders committing crimes across the United States on any given day (OJJDP, 2011). With this only being an estimation based off of known and reported crimes, juvenile delinquency may be more of a serious issue than many realize. What is evident is the severity in which juvenile crime affects the economy. Research shows that law enforcement agencies in 2009 reported that there were 5,803.7 juvenile arrest per 1,000, 000 people. Research also shows that there is a projected 49,112 juveniles housed within a public (local or state) facility each day (OJJDP, 2011). Highlighting the large amounts of tax dollars and government resources that are allocated to combat juvenile crime, the estimated cost to house a juvenile offender in a locked facility is \$240.99 a day (Sickmund,

2011). Thus, juvenile delinquency affects everyone in some way due to the expensive tab that tax payers must cover.

Furthermore, when citizens think of criminal offenses committed by juveniles, they often presume them to be minor crimes such as school yard fights, petty thefts, and small acts of vandalism (Lawrence, 2010). However, recent crime statistics demonstrate a variety of rather serious offenses that youth are engaging in. A recent report conducted by the OJJDP, found that juveniles accounted for 417,000 arrests of property crimes in 2009 alone. That same report revealed that juveniles were responsible for 317,700 theft/larceny arrests, 74,800 burglary arrests, and 19,900 motor vehicle arrests (OJJDP, 2010). In addition to property offenses, juveniles are committing a high rate of serious criminal offenses against persons. In fact, a report conducted by the United States Census Bureau found that juveniles were responsible for 4,800 aggravated assault cases and 4,000 forcible rape charges in 2010 (Census, 2010). Additionally, data obtained from the FBI revealed that juveniles were responsible for 925 murders in 2010 (Puzzanchera, 2012). Thus, these statistics suggest that juvenile delinquents are not only participating in a high rate of criminal activity, but are also engaging in extremely serious and violent crimes.

#### Sedgwick County Statistics

With a metropolitan population of just over 500,000, Sedgwick County's juvenile population size (25.5%) was statistically proportional to the national juvenile population size (24%) (Beason, 2012). Also following the national trend, juvenile crime in the county has been on the decline for the past several years. In fact, the 2012 Benchmark Report demonstrated a steady decline in juvenile crime dating back to 2007. The annual report conducted by Sedgwick County's Juvenile Corrections Advisory Board displayed that the county had a total of 3,079



youth intake cases in 2011. This is nearly a 21% decrease in cases from 2007. However, it is important to note that intake cases are not only comprised of juvenile offenders, but also abused and/or neglected children. Nevertheless, the benchmark report demonstrated that there was a large amount of youth sent to intake for criminal offenses. The report indicated that in 2011 alone, 509 juveniles were sent to intake for felony offenses. Charges filed against these youth were felony violence charges (261 youths), non-person felony charges (128 youths), and drug felony charges (67 youths). Additionally, 2,317 youth were sent to juvenile intake for misdemeanor offenses. Charges filed included minor non-person misdemeanors (1,422 youths), minor drug offenses (534 youths) and mid-level person misdemeanors (361 youths). Minor non-person misdemeanors were classified as offenses such as criminal property damage (< \$500) and theft (<\$1,000). Minor drug offenses were crimes such as possession of drug paraphernalia and possession of marijuana. Finally, mid-level person misdemeanors offenses included minor incidents of assault and/or battery (Beeson, 2012).

Furthermore, “the early involvement” section of the 2012 Benchmark report specifically examined intake cases for youths between the ages of 10 and 13. Data from the report displayed that 13 ten year olds, 45 eleven year olds, 145 twelve year old, and 297 thirteen year old were sent to intake in 2011. It is important to remember that not all children sent to intake were criminal offenders. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that children who were thirteen year old had the highest levels of intake cases among all ages in not only 2011, but also each of the four years prior. Thus, these statistics suggest that large quantities of area youth are engaging in criminal activity at a very young age.

Nonetheless, efforts from Sedgwick County’s juvenile correction personnel have made an impact on the juvenile crime rate in the area, especially on recidivism rates among juvenile

offenders. At 15.2 %, recidivism rates among juvenile offenders are down nearly 3% from 2010 and 5% from four years earlier. Additionally, numbers are down in many other categories, including felony arrest rates (30% decrease), intake cases filed (17% decrease), and serious misdemeanor arrests (19% decrease) from the year before (Beeson, 2012). Even with lower crime rates, data suggest that juvenile delinquency is a serious issue in Sedgwick County. This is why qualitative investigations are sorely needed into the path many juvenile offenders take towards delinquency. In order to continue decreasing juvenile crime and better help troubled youth in the area, all aspects of delinquency must be identified and properly addressed.

## The Juvenile Offender

### Defining a Juvenile Delinquent

The general definition for a juvenile offender, also referred to as a juvenile delinquent, is a child who “has violated any local, state, or federal law” (Lawrence, 2010). Depending on each states statute, the exact age for an offender to be considered a juvenile delinquent varies. The state of Kansas specifically defines a juvenile offender as a person between the ages of 10 and 18 who commits a misdemeanor or felony (K.S.A 38-2302). Even though there are extreme cases in which a youth may be waived to adult court, the majority of juvenile offenders are under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court. This method of treating juveniles differently than adults has not always been in practice. In fact, before the 1800s, the juvenile justice system dealt with juvenile offenders in the exact same manner as adults. Deviant youths were handled in the adult criminal justice system and were sentenced the same as adults; thus, they had to do time in adult facilities (Lawrence, 2010). However, after successful juvenile rehabilitation measurements were administered by various juvenile institutions in the early to mid-1800s, society’s perception of

how to treat juvenile delinquents began to change. As a result, the juvenile justice system was established in 1899 and included a separate court system and correctional facilities solely for juvenile offenders (Lawrence, 2010). From this point on, juvenile delinquents were viewed more as children who needed proper supervision and direction than criminals. This is why the juvenile justice system emphasizes treatment and rehabilitation over punishment (Lawrence, 2010).

Today, it is commonly perceived that adolescence is a period characterized by rebellion and experimentation which results in problematic behavior (Steinberg, 2008). Nonetheless, there is a fine line between typical deviant behavior expressed by the majority of teens and serious criminal activity conducted by juvenile offenders. Mosby's Medical dictionary illuminates this distinction by defining the term deviant behavior to refer to any "actions that exceed the usual limits of accepted behavior and involve failure to comply with the social norm of the group" (Atrophy, 2009). Therefore, deviant behavior expressed by this group may not necessarily be illegal, but differs from the social norm. Adolescents who engage in this type of behavior maybe thought of as troublesome, but should not be labeled as a juvenile delinquent. Thus, it is the youth who come into contact with the criminal justice system that alarms members of society.

#### Adolescent Limited Offender vs. Life-course Persisters

According to Terrie Moffitt, a renowned adolescent psychologist who did extensive work studying juvenile delinquents in the early 1990s, rebellion is part of the "typical teenager experience" (Moffit, 1993). In his article, titled *Life-course-persistent and adolescent limited offender: A developmental taxonomy*, Moffitt outlined two "pathways" youths often take during adolescence. The first pathway he postulated was that of "adolescent-limited offenders." As noted above, adolescent-limited offenders were described as teenagers who engaged in temporary forms of "deviant behavior." Though their behavior may be viewed as anti-social and

unacceptable to the rest of society, Moffit perceived these adolescent's behavior to be proximal and specific to their particular stage of development (Moffit, 1993). Nevertheless, Moffit did not refute the possibility that deviant behavior expressed by these youths could potentially manifest into illegal behavior. In fact, Moffit highlighted the point that criminal behavior was experienced at its highest level during adolescence. Peaking around age 17, Moffit presumed that the majority of juveniles began to desist from their criminal behavior in their late teens, and they continued to do so throughout their development (Moffit, 1993). Thus, these youth eventually matured out of this stage to become law-abiding citizens as adults.

Moffit (1993) labeled a small group of youth as "life-course persisters." Moffit distinguished this group from the other in that these adolescents did not desist from their criminal behavior as they aged. Instead, juveniles in this group continued to engage in criminal behavior to later becoming adult offenders. In addition to these findings, Moffit also discovered a correlation between age and the seriousness of the first offense. Closely resembling Patterson's Early Onset Theory (1998), Moffit found that life-course persisters were youth whose first criminal offense was often at a very young age and serious in nature (Patterson, 1998). He professed that criminal activity conducted by this group of youth often progressed into more serious acts as they aged, leading them to become the worst amongst criminal offenders as adults. Thus with this perspective, youths who fall into the "life-course persisters" category are lifelong criminals. Why some adolescents behave in this manner remains uncertain, but Moffit highlighted the different behaviors seen in typical adolescents and serious juvenile offenders.

## General Environmental Causes of Juvenile Delinquency

### Peer Influence

Despite the fact that juveniles may appear to be just as intelligent and cognitively developed as adults, their ability to regulate their behavior accordingly is still adolescent. Recent work done by a professor of Psychology, Laurence Steinberg, found that adolescents do not fully understand how to deploy their cognitive skills until their late teenage to early adult years. Steinberg found that at the same time when a young person is going through physical changes as a result of puberty, his or her brain is also going through an extreme transformation. The brain is not fully developed until a person in their mid-20 and adolescences lend to social variables, such as friends, to help make everyday decisions (Steinberg, 2005). Moreover, research has found that adolescence is the period in which most begin to break away from principles instilled in them by their parents and develop their own set of values (Childs, 2010). Adolescents often then look towards their peers for social regulation.

When adolescents turn to their peers as a source of behavioral guidance, many encourage one another to participate in both deviant and illegal activities (Moffit, 1993). In fact, past criminological research has consistently found that juvenile delinquency is a group phenomenon, in that juvenile delinquents engage in a greater extent of criminal offenses while in peer groups (Cauffman, 2009; Childs, 2010; Gardner, 2005; Smångs, 2010; Southerland, 1947). Social learning theorist Edwin Southerland supports this claim in his theory known as the Differential Association Theory.

According to Southerland's (1947) Differential Association Theory, criminal behavior is thought of as a communal process in which one learns criminal behavior through social influence (Southerland, 1947). Southerland believed that offenders learned all the conventions of criminal

behavior from interacting with others around them. Specifically referring to juveniles, Southerland alleged that youth often learned criminal behavior from engaging in “intimate groups” (Southerland, 1947). He perceived members of these intimate groups to be companions such as family members, friends, and peers. Southerland believed that youth in these intimate groups not only taught fellow youth how to engage in criminal behavior, but also encouraged them to display similar behaviors. Thus, Southerland alleged an association with others in their group is often what led youth to participate in illegal activity.

Various studies have supported Southerland’s theory by also finding that adolescents are more likely to engage in problematic behavior while in groups. In fact, results from a study conducted by Gardner and Steinberg (2005) found that juveniles were prone to increased risky behavior when paired with peers. Using 116 young teenagers (ages 13 to 16), 145 adults (ages 18-25), and 95 adults (24+) in the study, participants were asked to play a game called “chicken” on a computer. The objective of the game was to see how close one could get to driving through a yellow light before the light turned red. If a participant was in the street while the light turned red, they would likely be struck by oncoming traffic. Each participant completed the computer game once by themselves, then again with the assistance of a peer. Evaluating the risks one was willing to take, researchers found that when paired with another person, young teenagers (ages 13 to 16) were more likely than any other age group to take the greatest risk (Gardner, 2005).

Another study conducted by the National Institute of Health examined juvenile delinquents trends in joining various social groups in relation to crime. The study found that early to middle adolescence is a time period marked by youth joining various cliques and crowds (Cauffman, 2005). These groups are often large in size and diverse. The later years of adolescence is when youth typically organize into intimate peer groups. These groups are often

smaller in size and share common values. As an adolescent enters into adulthood they began to weaken their bonds with peers (Cauffman, 2005). Coincidentally, crime patterns follow the same trend. Youths normally begin engaging in moderate offenses at the beginning of adolescence and continue to do so into their late teenager years, only to desist as they become adults (Siegel, 2007). Therefore, these findings suggest that there may be a correlation between peer group involvement and criminal activity.

#### Weak Parent-Child Relationship

A positive parent-child relationship plays a critical role in teaching children how to control their behaviors. Most children learn how to properly interact with others, develop their work ethic, and construct their set of morals and values from their parents' guidance (Lawrence, 2010). Many studies have shown that an effective parent-child relationship may serve as a deterrent towards a youth's participation in criminal activity. Travis Hirschi (1969), a famous criminologist from the mid-1950s, conducted extensive research that closely examined this phenomenon. In his scholarship, known as the Social Control Theory, Hirschi proposed the idea that social bonds connect youths to various individuals and institutions. Hirschi outlined four components of social bonds that he perceived to serve as a deterrent to juvenile crime: "attachment," "commitment," "involvement," and "belief" (Hirschi, 1969).

For relevance to the current study, focus will remain on the attachment element. Using this element, Hirschi discussed how a positive parent-child relationship aided a youth's process of developing a proper set of social skills. Hirschi believed that a child who had a strong and stable bond with their parents were less likely to break social norms. Hirschi supposed that these youth were likely to refrain from engaging in problematic behavior because they were aware of appropriate conduct from interacting with their parents. Furthermore, Hirschi professed that if

children do not respect the authority of their parents, they may then be hesitant to respect the authority of other adult figures in their lives. Rules and regulations set by teachers, law enforcement agents, and members of the community would mean little to these children because they would not fear any of the consequences. Therefore, Hirschi's work highlighted the importance of an effective parent-child bond in preventing juvenile delinquency.

### Home Structure

A long line of research dating back to the 1950s has found that many juveniles who engaged in fairly substantial levels of criminality were being raised in single parent households. Commonly referred to as the "broken home syndrome," children who come from single-parent households often engage in a higher amount of anti-social and illegal behavior compared to their peers who grew up in two-parent households (Nye, 1958). In one study conducted by Glueck (1950) found that close to 60% of all juvenile delinquents come from broken homes.

Additionally, McCord (1982) discovered that over half of all men convicted of serious crimes were raised in single-parent households. These statistics suggest that there may be a correlation between living in a single-parent household and criminal activity. It is uncertain exactly why many children who come from these homes often engage in high amounts of criminality; however, numerous articles have investigated this phenomenon and uncovered very notable findings.

A study conducted by Brown and Demuth (2004) found that parents who ran a household by themselves experienced difficulty in controlling their children's behavior. This was believed to be caused by sparse parental supervision and resulted in children having more opportunities to engage in illegal activity. Thus, a lack of control and supervision was perceived to be correlated to increased incidences of delinquency. Furthermore, research conducted by McCord (1991)



highlighted the critical role each parent plays in their children's lives. McCord used 232 delinquent and non-delinquent youths for the study. Baseline data was conducted when participants were teens. A follow up analysis was taken twenty-five years later. Results from the study confirmed McCord's hypothesis that juvenile offenders who grew up in households without a father's presence were more likely to become adult offenders. In fact, not having a father present in their lives increased the probability of study participants becoming adult offenders by 23%. Additionally, King (1994) found that fathers make a unique contribution to the well-being of their children. Even if not permanently housed with their children, King discovered that a father's consistent visitation and economic support decreased the chances of their child becoming a criminal offender. Thus, fathers play a critical role in deterring youth from engaging in criminal activity.

#### Communal Influence

The social environment (i.e., community, neighborhood, household, etc.) in which one resides play an important role in regards to influencing various beliefs, values, and behaviors for members in that area. It is one's social environment that often shapes behaviors that are considered appropriate or inappropriate. In many situations, this is a positive aspect of the community in that certain attitudes promote law abiding behavior while discouraging illegal activity. Conversely, some neighborhoods endorse the exact opposite; these communities often have their own set of beliefs and values that differ from neighboring bodies. Many of the behaviors that are viewed as intolerable in one part of the city may be the accepted norm in another part (Alkon, 2008).

Professor David Hummon (1990) of Albany State University coined the term "community ideology" to further explain this phenomenon. Hummon defined the term

community ideology to refer to “a system of beliefs that uses conceptions of the community to describe, evaluate, and explain social reality” (Hummon, 1990). Community ideology is what outlines acceptable behaviors, establishes what behaviors that will be rejected, and creates a general perception of the community’s identity. Thus, the community’s ideology is what governs which behaviors are socially acceptable for residents of that community.

Professor of sociology Andrea Leverentz (2012) conducted a qualitative study that further examined this phenomenon. Leverentz collected data on citizens who lived in two different communities in the Boston area. These areas were both characterized as low income and high violence/crime areas. After conducting interviews with several members of the community who lived in these neighborhoods, Leverentz found that a citizen’s perceptions of their environment were indeed affected by the community’s ideology.

One resident of Boston mentioned in an interview how young people in the area were not interested in expanding their minds and going to other places. Instead, she felt that youth in the community just did what they needed to do to survive the best way they knew how. This often resulted in youths engaging in illegal activity. Another resident discussed how the main reason youth were not able to excel in her community was due to a lack of government support, especially in the local school district. She believed that the local educational system was ineffective because the government failed to meet the needs of local youth. As result, it was not uncommon for children to drop out of school and turn to a life of criminality.

This section offered a variety of environmental explanations regarding potential causes of juvenile delinquency. Although there is a continual list of plausible rationales for youths involvement in crime, illustrating the variables above gave readers a concentrated investigation

on some of the leading premises. The next section will examine the General Strain Theory in order to obtain a theoretical understanding of juvenile delinquency.

### Theoretical Underpinning

It is difficult to claim that one theory adequately explains the cause for all juvenile delinquency cases. This study draws from the work of criminologist Robert Agnew to illustrate how the General Strain Theory can serve as a plausible explanation for juvenile delinquency. The General Strain Theory, which is a subset of the Social Structure Theory, asserts that “strain” in people’s lives is what often leads them to engage in criminal activity (Lawrence, 2010). For the purposes of this study, “strain” will be defined as the various types of struggles in people’s lives that keep them from achieving their goals. Several theorists of the past have examined different forms of “strains” and how they may impact a youth’s criminal behavior. The following section describes the origins of the Strain Theory and how it has evolved into the General Strain Theory.

#### Theory of Anomie

The Strain Theory derives from earlier research conducted by Emile Durkheim (1893) on the Theory of Anomie. In Durkheim’s classic work, *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim postulated how social change and/or social crisis often occurred as a result of a breakdown of rules for behavior. Durkheim coined the term “anomie” to refer to this phenomenon. Durkheim argued that when a society is in a state of anomie, traditional beliefs and rules are no longer valued (Durkheim, 1893). As a result, people begin to engage in inappropriate behavior as a way to obtain their own desires. Robert Merton (1957) applied this idea to criminology and proposed his own theory of anomie. Commonly referred to as the Strain Theory, Merton illustrated in his

work how people often engage in illegal activity when they are deprived of the opportunity to satisfy their desired goals through legal means. The lack of ability to obtain a desired goal is referred to as a “strain” and is what Merton believed is the cause of criminal behavior (Merton, 1957). Moreover, Merton felt that because everyone does not have an equal opportunity to achieve legitimate financial success, some people turn to illegal activity. Thus, Merton (1957) believed that the drive for financial success set the stage for anomie and is what fuels criminal behavior in the United States.

### The General Strain Theory

Criminologist Robert Agnew expanded on work done by Merton and created his own theory. Known as the General Strain Theory, hitherto referred to as GST, Agnew identified four sources of strain which he perceived that, when experienced by a youth, often leads to delinquency. The first source of strain is a “failure to achieve positively valued stimuli” (Agnew, 1992). Closely resembling ideas from Merton’s Strain Theory, Agnew also alleged that a breakdown of access to desired goals often leads youth down a path towards delinquency. Agnew believed this source of strain was present in any occasion in which youth aspire for something they desire (i.e. wealth and popularity), but lacked the legitimate means necessary to obtain it (Siegel, 2007). An example of such an occurrence is when a youth who does not have enough money to buy the clothes that their peers wear would shoplift to obtain that item. Hence, the act of shoplifting was stimulated by a limited access to their desired goal and the only opportunity they saw to obtaining it was through an illegal act.

The second source of strain Agnew identified was a “disjunction of expectation and achievement” (Agnew, 1992). This source of strain appears when youth compared themselves to others who are doing better financially and/or socially than they are. Youth then engage in

criminal activity in order to obtain the items or status that others have. An example of this is an adolescent who is economically disadvantaged (i.e. family is on welfare) observes the nice cars, clothes, and access to money that gang members have. Gang members then may illuminate the fact that the youth is poor and encourage him to join their gang. Believing that there is no other option to acquire economic surplus, it is believed that that youth may join a gang and engage in criminal activity as well. Thus, Agnew posits that an involvement in illegal activity was highly probable when youth had expected goals that they were unable to attain legitimately.

Next, Agnew identified a “removal of positively valued stimuli” as a source of strain (Agnew, 1992). This source of strain occurs when juveniles experience an anticipated or unanticipated loss. An example of such loss could include a divorce resulting in a parent moving away, the death of a loved one, or a family member being sentenced to an incarceration period. Agnew argued that criminal behavior often followed these experiences because adolescents want to prevent further loss, attempt to retrieve what was lost, and/or seek revenge against those who were responsible for their loss (Lawrence, 2010). Thus, Agnew believed that a removal of valued stimuli is a precursor to criminal activity.

The last source of strain, Agnew postulated, is a “presentation of negative stimuli” (Agnew, 1992). This occurs when youth are presented with an unpleasant or distressful event. Examples of such situations are when children are sexually abused by someone, neglected by their guardian, or when they are victim of any other crime. Even instances in which no crime has been committed could result in this source of strain. A youth’s house burning down is an example of this. Agnew believed that many youth respond to these situations by engaging in delinquent activities such as fighting, school truancy, or abusing illegal substances. Therefore,

investigating how negative stimuli affects a youth's behavior may be pivotal in formulating a rationale for juvenile delinquency.

The current study utilized the GST to examine which components of the theory were present in participants' lives during their adolescent years. This method not only allowed the researcher to test truths within the GST, but also illuminated the effect that various sources of strains had on participant's engagement in delinquent activity. Thus, examining participants' real-life stories provided interested parties with a practical depiction of how strains affects juvenile delinquents involvement in crime.

#### Limitations of Past Research

Utilizing information obtained from past research is a critical step when designing any study; studying juvenile delinquency is no exception. Researchers must not only attain information from past work, but also acknowledge faults within these studies. This section will discuss one major limitation of past research, the dearth of qualitative research that investigates juvenile criminality. A great deal of the published empirical studies is framed as quantitative investigations. Although there are many benefits to using this methodology, numerous boundaries are created when researchers solely rely on quantitative data to study juvenile delinquency. This segment will highlight those boundaries and conclude with a discussion of how this research will encompass a methodology that will attend to the issue of concern.

The goal of quantitative research is to test a hypothesis. This is done through the use of "hard data" in the form of numbers that are constructed in a statistical analysis (Nueman, 2012). In quantitative research, the first step is to identify or create a testable variable. Researchers then implement various methods of testing in order to analyze any observed change. Results from

quantitative research provide readers with an organized analysis of truths pertaining to a certain hypothesis with statistical support. Thus, quantitative research is a valuable method, because it is needed to adequately study various aspects of juvenile delinquency. Nevertheless, solely relying on quantitative research in the study of juvenile delinquency creates a number of issues

One problem that arises when using a quantitative methodology is that results are often difficult to interpret. Since many readers may not be familiar with statistical terminology, only a small amount of people are able to fully understand findings of quantitative research. Even if readers are accustomed to statistics, implications from a study may be difficult to comprehend when applied to a social phenomenon. Take for instance, the “null hypothesis” may reject or fail to reject statistical significance, but what does that really mean in regards to a social phenomenon? Interested parties are not permitted with an understanding of how a social phenomenon by viewing the statistical significance level. Furthermore, as previously stated, the main objective in quantitative research is to test a hypothesis. In order to for this to occur, researchers have to identify or create a testable variable (Neuman, 2012). This cultivates into a matter of concern when trying to uncover an unknown phenomenon. If a variable is unidentified, it cannot be observed, tested, or analyzed. Thus, quantitative research may not shed full light on how certain stressors or “strains” impact the lives of juvenile delinquents.

An example of this can be seen in Baron’s (2004) study of homeless youths living in cities across the nation. Using a quantitative approach, Baron found that homeless youths who were juvenile delinquents identified with eight of the ten sources of strains that researchers presented to participants (Baron, 2004). Though this study provided readers with notable information, the article did not include opportunities for study participants to offer additional information pertaining to personal strains in their lives. Instead of allowing youth to identify

their strains, researchers displayed a list of common strains to participants in order to conduct their statistical analysis. This method is ineffective because there may have been various strains that were not listed by researchers, yet had an immense impact on the participants' criminal behavior.

The potential of missing various strains is highly probable due to the fact that Hollist, Houghes, and Schaible (2009) found that juveniles often experienced a variety of strains that are not viewed as disheartening to others of an older generation. Hollist et al. found that adults are often unable to view certain circumstances from a youth's perspective and as a result misinterpret various events as strains. Thus, it is likely that there were several strains that were not apparent to researchers, but had a great impact on participant's delinquent behavior.

The approach that will be utilized in the current study to address the issues mentioned above is a qualitative methodology. This methodology will allow the researcher to become fully immersed in the data. Rather than relying on hard data, information will be obtained by the researcher through interviews on various occasions. The researcher will ask several open-ended questions to prompt conversation. However, interviews will be led by participants. The researcher will encourage participants to talk freely and will only ask questions to begin a conversation or seek further clarification.

Additionally, implications from the study will be extracted from common themes that arose during interviews. This may then allow interested parties with the opportunity to view results in an easily understood manner, while also allowing readers to apply their own interpretation to the overall findings. Although there are several other limitations from past research that the current study will not address, implementing a qualitative methodology will assist in improving the overall knowledge regarding the life of a juvenile offender.



CHAPTER 3  
METHODOLOGY  
Research Design

In criminal justice and criminology many research questions require a qualitative approach. Quantitative approaches alone may not be sufficient for researchers attempting to understand the complexities of crime and the criminal justice system. The current study employed a collective qualitative case study method in which multiple in-depth interviews were conducted of three former juvenile offenders who are currently not in custody. The purpose of qualitative research is to provide a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon or problem. Therefore, the emphasis in qualitative research is to use thick, rich description to uncover patterns in data, and to give voice to the participants, while maintaining flexibility as the research develops (Creswell, 2007).

Qualitative research entails providing an understanding of why something occurs or exists rather than how it occurs or exists. It seeks to explore and understand a phenomenon to make sense of a person's or group's reality or perceptions of an issue (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research is concerned with the process of how something happens and not merely the outcome. An important objective is to gain an understanding of how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and realities (Berg, 2001; Corbin, 2008; Lincoln, 1985).

Furthermore, a collective case study was employed as the specific qualitative approach for the purposes of this study. Collective case study research is a procedure in which the researcher explores a program, an event, an activity, or a process of one or more individuals (Creswell, 2007). The case(s) are typically bound by time and activity, and researchers typically collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures (Stake, 1995). Thus,

only a small number of participants (3-5 people) are normally observed when using this approach.

### Participants

For this study, the researcher conducted multiple in-depth interviews of three young adult males whose current ages are 20, 21, and 23 respectively. Participants were selected to participant in the study making use of criterion sampling and snowball sampling. Criterion sampling is a strategy in which participants are selected to partake in a study because they all have experienced a similar phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The phenomenon of interest for the current study is persons who had experienced life as a juvenile offender. Thus, each participant had to meet three specific criterions: (1) the participant must have been raised in Wichita as a juvenile, (2) he must have experienced extensive involvement in the juvenile justice system as an offender during his juvenile years, (3) and he must be 18 years or older at the time at which the study was being administered. The condition of having participants being 18 years of age or older was due to requirements established by the institutional review board that the researcher was governed by.

Furthermore, the researcher employed a sampling strategy known as snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a technique in which the researcher first identifies an individual of interest to be used in the study. Once that participant agrees to be a part of the study, the researcher then asks that person to recruit other possible participants who meet the appropriate criteria (Creswell, 2007). For the current study, an individual of interest could not be identified. Instead, the researcher identified one individual who served as a gatekeeper in order to begin the snowball process. A gatekeeper is a person who does not participate in the study, but has access to others

in the community who match the requirements needed to partake in the research. The gatekeeper would then recruit people to participate in the study. The gatekeeper used in the current study was a 35 year old Hispanic female who coordinated various events for at-risk youth throughout Wichita.

Once a participant was introduced to the researcher by the gatekeeper and signed the waiver-consent form (see Appendix D), interviews began. When interviews were completed, the researcher then asked participants to identify other individuals who might participate in the study, thus continuing the snowball process. Furthermore, it is important to note that all participants partook in the study on a voluntary basis. No tangible incentives were given to the participants or gatekeepers by the researcher to partake in the study. Likewise, gatekeepers did not offer any material to participants for participating in the study. Each participant agreed to participate merely because he or she wanted to offer viable information pertaining to the path taken that leads towards juvenile delinquency.

### Interviews

During interviews, the researcher asked participants several open-ended questions which focused primarily on their delinquent experience (see page 92 for attached interview questions). The objective was to glean enough descriptive information to construct their experiences and to see if they could be couched in Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory. Additionally, the researcher asked specific questions, looking to explore when each participant first began offending, how his experience was while incarcerated as a juvenile, and what he had done or was currently doing to stay out of trouble today.

The number of times each participant was interviewed varied according to the participant. Participants were interviewed as many times as necessary in order to fully flesh out their offending characteristics and factors that led up to said offending. Interviews ceased once the researcher felt that each participant had met the point of data saturation. Data saturation is defined by Parahoo (1997) as the point at which no new data emerge. Thus, the amount of interviews administered before reaching this point was dependent upon participants. The number of interviews the researcher conducted with each participant ranged from meeting a participant only once to interviewing one subject six times. Similarly, the amount of time each subject was interviewed varied. The shortest interview lasted just over 30 minutes long, while the longest interview lasted for 2 hours.

### Setting

The current study was conducted in Sedgwick County, Kansas. Sedgwick County is comprised of a metropolitan population of just over 500,000 people. Sedgwick County is demographically heavily populated by Caucasians (72.4%). However, the county is widely diverse with a large percent of Hispanics (16.4%) and African Americans (12.6%). Economically speaking, the average income for a family is just below the national average (\$50,221) at \$47,709 (Beason, 2012). Wichita is the largest city in the county. Viewing Wichita specifically, it is home to 383,085 people. Demographically speaking, the majority of residents are Caucasian (64.6%), while also having a large portion of residents being either Hispanic (15.3%) or African American (11.2%). Economically, Wichita's median annual family income is \$44,405 (Census, 2011). Thus, Wichita, along with the entire county, is economically and ethnically diverse.

The researcher and participants chose the time and location to meet for interviews. The researcher often suggested where the first meeting would occur. Initial meetings were conducted in the researcher's campus office, a university conference room, and participants' homes. After the preliminary meetings were conducted, the researcher and participant(s) jointly agreed upon a time in the upcoming weeks to meet again. Follow up meetings occurred at a local Burger King restaurant, a restaurant located in a downtown businesses cafeteria, and participants' houses. Emphasis for meetings was placed upon finding a location in which the participant felt most comfortable.

### Procedure

The procedure used for data analysis in this study was Inductive Thematic Analysis. In essence, Inductive Thematic Analysis is an analytic process that entails reading through data, identifying themes in the data, coding those themes, then interpreting the structure and content of the identified themes (Guest, 2013). As noted, this study will make use of in-depth interviews of three participants who reported significant involvement in the juvenile justice system from the ages of 12 through 18. Each interview was recorded. After each interview, the researcher transcribed the tape recording(s) and completed an interview memo. Thus, the transcriptions and memos became the raw data for analysis. Data analysis was carried out as follows:

1. The researcher first comprised textual data by transcribing audio-taped recordings of interviews with participants.
2. The data was then systematically reviewed in line-by-line units. Relevant information was separated from irrelevant information, and all relevant information was condensed into units.

3. Emerging themes from those units were then coded and the researcher made memo notes to further examine apparent themes in future interviews with participants.
4. The researcher then investigated the emerging themes by asking participants specific questions to grasp a better understanding of a perceived theme.
5. This process was then repeated until information reached the point of data saturation at which time interviews ceased.

### Data Collection

After receiving approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher began conducting interviews. Interviews began on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012 and ended on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013. All participants were interviewed in person. The participants were contacted by the researcher via telephone in the following months after formal interviews ceased in order to clarify certain information obtained in prior interviews.

### Trustworthiness of Data

#### Member Checking

Member checking is a validity check process in which participants of a study verify the information that was obtained (Creswell, 2007). This procedure provided participants with an opportunity to correct errors of fact or of interpretation that the researcher may have done in the study. In order to ensure that the information presented in the current study was in accordance with each participant's real life experience of delinquency, the researcher provided participants with a copy of the case study that was based off of their life. Participants then highlighted various elements of their delinquent experience that they wished to be further illustrated in the study and informed the researcher on information that they wanted omitted. The researcher then

made the appropriate modifications to the study. Those changes are exhibited in the current study.

Furthermore, the researcher interviewed Linda Rodriguez, the mother of brothers Michael and Richard Rodriguez in the study. Linda Rodriguez confirmed that both of her children's criminal history and delinquent experience were accurately depicted in the study. Thus, Linda served as an additional participant in the member checking procedure. Additionally, Linda was able to point out several early signs of delinquent behavior that she had witnessed while her sons were growing up. This assisted the researcher's attempts to trace back to the participants' first signs of juvenile delinquency.

#### Expert Reviewer

In order to further ensure validity in the findings of the current study, the researcher utilized Reggie Jackson as an expert reviewer. Mr. Jackson is an expert in the field of criminality in that he has an extensive criminal history dating back to his days as a juvenile delinquent in the late 80's. Now a community activist, Mr. Jackson's experience as a juvenile delinquent permitted him with knowledge pertaining to some of the leading causes of juvenile delinquency. Focusing on factors such as a delinquent's family structure, involvement in extra-curricular activities, and benefits from engaging in criminal activity, Mr. Jackson offered several rationales to explain youth's involvement in juvenile delinquency. Additionally, Mr. Jackson examined findings of the current study to investigate truths within the results. Labeled as "Expert Reviewer Report," an account of the interview with Mr. Jackson may be viewed in appendixes section (see page 88).

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

Over the course of four months, the researcher interviewed three participants for a combined total of approximately fifteen hours of audio tape recordings. During this time period, the researcher not only obtained information regarding each participant's delinquent experience, but also developed much rapport with the participants. It was because of this rapport that the researcher was able to delve deeply into each participant's personal life and uncover inimitable data regarding their experiences. Thus, the following section provides an exclusive description of each participant's life. In order to protect the identities of the participants, they were assigned a pseudonym.

#### *Gang Membership: "Everybody you know has gotten down"*

Originally from El Paso, Texas, 21 year old Lorenzo Gonzales had spent the majority of his life in Wichita, Kansas. Lorenzo moved to Wichita with his mother and three siblings at six years of age. Prior to moving, Lorenzo lived in El Paso with his mother, father, three full biological siblings, and two half siblings. After withstanding years of emotional and physical abuse from her husband Lorenzo's mother, Maria decided to take her children elsewhere. With very few options on where to go, Maria decided to move to Wichita. Once settled in, she soon found work at local factory where she worked long hours. Her main objective was to provide the best life that she could for her children. Lorenzo and his siblings were well aware of the sacrifices that their mother made for them and greatly appreciated it. Listen to how Lorenzo describes it:



We didn't live great, but you know we didn't live poor, my mom always did what she could to put good food in our stomach you know and good clothes, no clothes that looked bad-- And my mom, there is everything I could say about my mom you know. I am a momma's boy. I love my momma to death. She does everything she can for me. Even though she did everything she could do for me, I was always the rebellious child. I always would go out and get into trouble.

Lorenzo began schooling in Wichita and from day one he was thought of as the class clown. Although his intentions were good hearted, in that he was solely trying to make his classmates laugh, his behavior often resulted in him getting into trouble; he was constantly sent out for his disruptive behavior. However, it was not until he was in fourth grade that he began getting into serious trouble. Lorenzo recalled the first time he was suspended from school was for fighting. He acknowledged that he was the aggressor during the incident and that he left his opponent in bad shape. Fighting was not an uncommon occurrence for Lorenzo. He had a bad temper and was quick to fight anyone who upset him. When asked why he got into fights so frequently, Lorenzo responded by stating:

Pretty much trying to be hard you know, let everyone know that I was tough. I pretty much got that mentality when I was six, eight, and nine [years old]. My older brother before he left was like my idol. My dad wasn't there, so whatever my brother did, I did. So when he started gang banging, I did. I like how it made him look, like people feared him, and his clique had his back. That's what kind of pushed me into it too. So, I was gang affiliated young, so I just started getting into more [trouble].

Lorenzo's oldest brother Kevin was in a gang and constantly involved in illegal activity. The police were aware of Kevin's gang affiliation and were frequently at the Gonzales' household. After several failed attempts to control Kevin's behavior, Maria was left with no other option but to send him out of the area. Kevin was sent to live with his grandmother in Mexico. Moving worked out well for Kevin because he never got into any more trouble in Mexico. Conversely, the move resulted in Lorenzo's increased involvement in gang activity. Here is how Lorenzo describes it:

Um, when he [Kevin] left to Mexico, I pretty much just felt like I had to be the next level up. If somebody came to the house and try to do something you know, I can't be no punk, I can't let shit happen you know. That is pretty much made me get into the gang more. Like I tried to be more harder, get my stripes up you know.

Lorenzo joined a local gang at the age of thirteen. In order to become an official member of the gang, he had to be "jumped in." This initiation process included being beaten up and stomped on by several gang members. Once officially in the gang, Lorenzo began to engage in many of the same activities that his brother had been doing before he moved away. In particular, Lorenzo started selling marijuana; he quickly became a key marijuana distributor for his gang. Because he was only thirteen years old, senior gang members' figured that the police would not suspect a young kid to be selling. Nevertheless, the police soon caught on to their operations. One day, school officials were notified by a student that Lorenzo had marijuana with him and was planning on selling it. The school resource officer (SRO) was then contacted and performed a search of Lorenzo's locker. The SRO found a large quantity of marijuana individually

packaged for distribution inside of Lorenzo's locker. That same day, Lorenzo was pulled from class and arrested for possession of marijuana with the intent to sell.

Due to the seriousness of this offense and Lorenzo's overall increase in delinquent activity, school officials decided to expel him for the remainder of that school year. Lorenzo was then placed in an alternative school for the rest of the year. However, this punishment had little effect on his behavior. Lorenzo continued to engage in illegal activity with his gang and was arrested on numerous occasions following his first arrest. In fact, Lorenzo estimated that he was arrested somewhere between ten to fifteen times as a juvenile for crimes such as battery, possession of marijuana, probation violation and school truancy. As a result, he was regularly under the supervision of the juvenile justice system. Lorenzo says verbatim:

Ever since I started going to JIAC [Juvenile Intake and Assessment Center], I had been in out [of detention], on probation, in the shelter, on house arrest. There wasn't a year when I was straight here [at home]. I even spent a couple birthdays in jail.

During this period, Lorenzo's school performance worsened tremendously. Lorenzo hardly ever attended school and on the seldom times he did go, he did not pay attention. The only aspect of school that he enjoyed was art class. Lorenzo had always been a gifted artist and displayed his talent in art class. However, he did not attend school regularly enough to receive a passing grade that supported his skill. Thus, like all of his other courses, he also failed art class. In addition to having little interest in school, Lorenzo was faced with the constant fear of being harmed by rival gang members every time he walked to school. Members of other gangs in the area knew who Lorenzo was and were aware of the route that he took to school each day. Thus,

commuting to and from school put him in constant danger of being attacked. Here is how Lorenzo describes his experience:

Yeah, everybody you know has gotten down [joined a gang] and everybody gets jumped. So sometimes we would walk home [from school] in bulks and then they [the rival gangs] would come in two car loads and come [explicit] with us.--You get out of school and other gangs be waiting trying to jump us, we would always get jumped or stuff like that.

With the ever-present fear of being attacked and his overall disinterest in academics, Lorenzo felt school was useless. As a result of this attitude, Lorenzo began skipping school regularly. Lorenzo's mother tried tirelessly to force him to go to school, but nothing she did was effective. Maria knew that ultimately Lorenzo was going to do whatever he wanted to do and there was little that she could do to stop him. In effort to encourage Lorenzo to engage in something constructive with his time, Maria allowed Lorenzo to drop out of high school seek employment. However, this was his last chance to remain at home. Lorenzo's mother presented him with the ultimatum of getting a job or being kicked out of the house. So as a result, Lorenzo quickly found a job at a local fast-food restaurant. Although employed, Lorenzo's main priority was being in a gang. When not at work, Lorenzo continued to engage in criminal activity with his gang. He was so devoted to his gang that he did not fear putting his life on the line merely to represent his gang's name.

(Lorenzo): I was walking home from kicking it and a bunch of crips at a house was like "what it is cuz" and bull shit. I pretty much hit him up [threw his gang signs and cursed at them] by myself and I didn't really care back then. I was like "fuck you all" and kept walking. Then they came up behind me and I got hit

[punched] and sticked [stabbed]. I tried to get up and [got] sticked [stabbed] again.

From this altercation, Lorenzo had several deep lacerations. Lorenzo immediately informed his gang what happened. He thought the other gang members would become upset and retaliate. However, to his surprise nothing was done. It was at that time that Lorenzo realized what little value he was to his gang. This was not the first time that that his gang did not “have his back.” Lorenzo felt that he had sacrificed a lot for his gang over the years, yet had received nothing in return. From that day on, Lorenzo’s attitude towards his gang began to change; he saw little value in their practices and lifestyle. Furthermore, Lorenzo was closing in on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and knew that if kept up offending, he would eventually end up in adult prison. The thought of going to prison frightened Lorenzo and he was not willing to do any more time for his gang.

Additionally, it was around this time that Lorenzo met the love of his life, Clarissa. After meeting through mutual friends, Lorenzo and Clarissa began dating. This relationship was the most serious that he had ever been in and he was not willing to throw it away for his gang. The following verbatim quote taken from an interview with Lorenzo illustrates this:

Yeah, before I met her, I would be the kind of guy who you would look at me wrong, I wouldn’t give a [explicit]. I would walk up to you and hit you in your face. I don’t care who you are or whatever. It’s just, she pretty much just has been my good side to my evil side you know. If I hadn’t been getting into much fights or into much trouble, it was because of her. She pretty much helped keep me out you know.

Clarissa was the only person that Lorenzo would wholly obey. So when she told him to stop getting into trouble he did. It is because of this relationship that Lorenzo finally decided it was time to get out of the gang lifestyle. He left the gang by simply losing contact with its members. Due to his inactivity the gang realized that he was no longer “down” and respected his decision by refraining from inflicting harm on him. Although Lorenzo is no longer in a gang, he is still on the wrong side of the law. In fact, Lorenzo was arrested the week before I met with him for driving without a license. He was detained for four days in the county jail for this offense.

Even with his struggles to be completely out of the system, Lorenzo is optimistic that his future will be brighter than his past. Currently, Lorenzo primary interest is doing what is best for him and his girlfriend. He now uses his relationship with Clarissa as motivation to refrain from getting into trouble. Today, Lorenzo aspect of life is completely changed; he now seeks different avenues to take his life on, rather than gang banging. Lorenzo says:

Yeah, I tried to like leave the gang stuff. I am trying to find a career now you know. There is really nothing else to do with being stupid because you know you have to find your career and your profession or just be a bump. That’s why I want to try to find my career and be an artist. Because there really isn’t nothing else in life you know.

### *The Boxer*

Michael Rodriquez, a 20 year old Hispanic male, grew up in a household comprised of himself, his mother, and four siblings. Michael is the middle child of five; he has an older sister (age 23), an older brother (age 22), and two younger brothers (ages 16 & 18). Michael and his

siblings all have different fathers and none of the children have a close relationship with their biological father. Michael's mother, Linda Rodriguez, was the sole provider of the household; thus, she had the responsibility of feeding five mouths by herself. Earning approximately \$35 an hour, Linda had a good paying job and was able to fully support her family and even had a little extra. Linda stated that she "spoiled" her children while they were growing up. However, things suddenly changed when Michael's mother was unexpectedly laid off at work.

In order to make ends meet, Linda quickly picked up work at various jobs in which she was overly qualified for and under paid. Even though Linda was able to put food on the table, her reduced income put an economic strain on the family. Linda was unable to provide her children with all the accessories that they had been accustomed to in the past. Noticing these changes, Michael's oldest brother, Richard, decided to take matters into his own hands. Soon after Michael's mother lost her job, Richard began selling marijuana, to make extra money. Michael was fascinated with how easy it was for his brother make to money. However, Michael did not have the right connections to get begin selling marijuana. Nevertheless, he still engaged in delinquent activity.

When Michael was thirteen old, he stumbled on an interesting technique that started out as just something fun to do. A neighborhood friend claimed to know how to break into a car without making a sound; all he needed was a car starter plug and a hammer. Michael's friend then demonstrated to him how he could smash a car starter plug into little pieces and then use the fragments to shatter a car window. Once shattered, all that was left to do in order to gain full access into the car was to slightly push the window in; it was that simple. Michael became fascinated with this procedure and decided try it out for himself. To his surprise, it worked just as easy as his friend said it would.

At first Michael would break car windows just for fun. He and a group of friends would go out on the weekend and break several car windows, but would never actually enter the car. However, that soon changed when he learned how to remove a car stereo from a vehicles dashboard. Michael quickly put this skill into practice and became an expert car burglar. Michael explained in elaborate detail how he broke into cars and removed stereos in less than thirty seconds. This then turned into easy money for Michael because he was able to sell stolen car stereos to others in his neighborhood the following day for around three hundred dollars. Even though breaking into cars was a simple way to make a lot of money, Michael did not do it very often. He was only in middle school and had very few expenses. However, unforeseen to Michael, several aspects of his life were soon to change, including his need for more money.

When Michael was thirteen years old, his oldest brother Richard was involved in a serious situation that had an affect everyone in his family. While burglarizing a local residence with a group of friends, one of the boys Richard was with shot and killed the homeowner. Although Richard did not pull the trigger, his involvement in the burglary made him an accomplice to the murder. Richard was charged and found guilty of first degree murder in juvenile court. As a result, he was given the juvenile life sentence; he was to remain in a locked state juvenile detention center from age sixteen until he turned twenty-three.

This ordeal was difficult for Michael because he was very close to his brother. Richard was not only Michael's older brother, but also his idol and best friend. Michael looked up to Richard and did not know how he was going to be able to go through the rest of his childhood without him around. Furthermore, the court process was expensive for the Rodriquez family. Michael's mother had to spend thousands of dollars on legal expenses and court fees. Thus, this incident caused the Rodriquez family go into more of an economic struggle than before.



As a way to make money during this time, Michael began burglarizing more frequently. Michael stated that he and a group of friends started breaking into cars almost every single weekend and even stole cars occasionally. Michael stated that he only stole cars when they found the keys inside of the car while they were burglarizing it. Michael and his friends would then take the car to a secluded location and stripped it of everything valuable. Michael continued to break into cars regularly until he was eighteen years old. During this time period, Michael estimates that he broke into over forty cars and was never caught by the authorities.

In addition to auto burglaries, fighting was a key component of Michael's juvenile delinquent experience. In fact, fighting is what initially got him into the juvenile justice system. The first time that Michael was arrested was when he was fourteen years old. His arrest stemmed from an incident at a Wichita middle school. After being called a "bitch" during an argument, Michael became very upset and lost his temper. He started hitting the other person repeatedly and severely injured him. Once the fight was broken up, Michael was arrested and charged with battery. This was just the beginning of Michael's long history of juvenile criminality. Michael was arrested on numerous other occasions for crimes such as possession of a firearm, battery, driving without a license, and several probation violations.

Michael's educational experience was unique in that he attended high school for four years, yet never received a diploma. He had failed too many classes throughout high school to be eligible for graduation by the time his senior year came around. Michael attributed much of his academic failure to his own lack of effort, but also believed some blame should be placed upon his teachers. Michael felt that many of his teachers viewed him as a trouble maker and did not make an honest effort to help him when he struggled on a subject. This resulted in Michael's reluctance towards asking his teachers for help when he needed it. However, Michael was

determined to graduate high school his senior year. He began to pay attention in class and passed all of his classes. Unfortunately, it was too little too late. He was unable to make up for all the classes that he had failed previously. Michael even tried to come back to school for a fifth year to receive his diploma, but the school principle would not allow him. Listen to how Michael describes it:

You know I even tried to go back to school that next year [after his senior year], I knew all I had to do is pay attention and then I could graduate, but the principle wouldn't let me. He was like your eighteen, about to be nineteen. You are too old. You can't enroll. I was like what? I seen my cousin that same day walking through the hallway, and he was twenty-three. I was about to say something to the principal, but I didn't want to call him [his cousin] out. I wasn't going to put him out like that. So that kind of messed me up. It sucks because I know if I would have been able to get through it, I would just breeze through it and now I could have been done.

Michael was very athletic and loved participating in sports. However, due to his poor academic performance, he was rarely eligible to participate in scholastic athletics. Fortunately for Michael, he found a sport that was not school-affiliated that he really enjoyed; that sport was boxing. Michael was introduced to boxing through a local boxing coach who took an interest in him when he was 10 years old. From day one of practice, Michael displayed natural talent and a drive to excel. As the years went on, Michael continued to box and perfected his skill. When asked what he gets out of boxing, Michael responded by stating "it's just I think boxing clears my mind. If I am having problems with anyone in my family, I just like throw my head phones on and poof." Thus, boxing served as positive way for Michael to release his aggression and use

his energy constructively during his adolescent years. Despite the positives that arose from Michael's participation in boxing, he also encountered trouble through the sport. The following excerpt from an interview with Michael illustrates this trouble.

(Researcher): So tell me about the incident that occurred at the gas station. What happened?

(Michael): Well I guess we went to the gas station and some guy was looking at me. And I was like "man, what you looking at?" Then I hit him through the [open car] window. He was like "man, take it easy" and I was like "man, fuck you!" I don't remember none of this [because he was intoxicated]. I guess the dude ended up putting me into a headlock or something and uh, yeah so I guess somehow I got out and hit him like three times, he fell. I had boots on, big boots on. I started kicking him in the face. I don't know why. Then I got back in the car, I guess I got back out and yeah went at him again. Well the cops get there and I guess I was just hopping up and down, looked over at the cops [aggressively] and they tased me.

By the time the emergency personnel responded, the damage was done; the victim was seriously injured and had to be transported to the hospital by ambulance. Officers on the scene were aware that Michael was a boxer and forwarded that information to the district attorney. As a result, Michael was charged and convicted of aggravated battery, which is a felony. Michael had just turned 18 a couple months prior to the incident, so he was charged as an adult. He is currently still on probation from this altercation.

Despite the negative effects Michael encountered through boxing, it was one of the more positive elements of his childhood. Many of the personal attributes he acquired through boxing

were applied to other aspects of his life. Boxing taught Michael how be self-disciplined, develop a solid work ethic, and create goals that can be achieved through legitimate means. Most importantly, boxing provided Michael with a positive male role model. Michael's father left soon after he was born and never established a relationship with his son. Fortunately, Michael had another man to guide him along the way, his coach. From driving him to boxing tournaments across the country to giving him advice on personal matters, his coach was always there for him. Michael still boxes and he knows that his coach has helped him get to where he is today and Michael plans on rewarding him through his advancement in boxing. Michael is well aware of all that his coach has done for him and greatly appreciates it.

Michael is working hard to pursue a professional boxing career. Turning professional is not an unrealistic goal by any means. In fact, he just recently competed at the U.S. National Boxing Tournament. Unfortunately, he lost a hard fought match in the quarterfinals, but had beat several professional fighters along the way. His skills have greatly improved and garnered him attention of many professional sponsors throughout the country. The opportunity to turn professional is right in front of him and he intends to pursue it with the best of his abilities. A lot of his drive to excel is based off of self-motivation. However, he now has more incentive to succeed because he is not only responsible for one person anymore. When Michael was eighteen years old, his girlfriend became pregnant. Even though this was not planned, Michael was ready for the challenge. Unforeseen to Michael, he had another surprise in store. Seven months into his girlfriend's pregnancy, he was informed that he actually already had a child:

I found out about her [his oldest daughter] after she was born. I was expecting my daughter that lives with me now in a few months, when my friend called me

and said my ex-girlfriend had a baby that was mine. So I knew one was pregnant then found out about the other one a little after.

Thus, in a two month span, Michael went from not having any children to being the father of two daughters. Nevertheless, Michael embraced the situation and has grown up quickly. He not only had to find a way to support his family, but also knew it was time to throw out many of his old bad habits. Michael knows that getting into any legal trouble would result in time away from his family and a setback to his boxing career.

Even though Michael has ceased his criminal behavior and taken up the responsibility of being a father, he is still not completely out of the criminal justice system. In fact, Michael is currently on probation for a felony aggravated battery conviction. Additionally, Michael's driver's license is suspended and he owes over \$2,000 in court fines and ticket costs. Furthermore, he is currently on house arrest for a propitiation violation. Michael is currently working as an electrician, but is looking for a more stable job. With a felony on his record and no high school diploma or G.E.D, it is a hard for him to find a decent paying job. He is now in the process of obtaining his high school diploma online. Through it all, Michael continues to make progress towards a professional boxing career. If things go as planned, Michael will start boxing professionally in a few months. Although his lifelong goal is so close to becoming a reality, Michael knows his true obligation is supporting his family. Michael now thinks about what will be best for his daughters before taking any actions. When asked where he sees himself in the future, Michael responded:

On top...you know. If I set my mind to it [I can do it]. It's just like this probation; I am going to get done with that, my boxing I am going to be good with that. My school, you know right now I am kind of struggling, but I am going

to get it done. Everything I said I am going to do I am going to get it done.

Getting married and taking care of my kids, that's number one. But just getting things done.

*Burglary gone wrong: "we didn't know a gun was involved"*

Richard Rodriguez is a 23 year old Hispanic male who grew up in Wichita, Kansas.

Richard is the second oldest child of five. He has one older sister and three younger brothers, one of whom is Michael Rodriguez from the story above. Although Richard and Michael grew up in the same household, they had very different experiences during their adolescent years. One thing that they did both have in common was an extensive history with delinquency. Richard had a long stint of engaging in delinquent activity and much of his problematic behavior was displayed at a young age.

From his early days of schooling, Richard was labeled as the bad child and was constantly in trouble. Most of the trouble that he got into was because he had problems controlling his anger. Richard would frequently go into full-blown temper tantrums and become violent. An example of this can be seen in an incident that occurred when he was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and attending a private catholic school. After being told to be quiet by his homeroom teacher, Richard became upset. He did not like how his teacher spoke to him, so he responded by saying "bitch, you aint my mom." He then proceeded to flip his desk over and kick his teacher in the shin. As a result of this incident, Richard was suspended from school. Richard continued to display similar types of behavior and was eventually asked to switch schools. His mother enrolled him in a public school where he continued to engage in problematic behavior and soon advanced into delinquent activity. Richard began smoking marijuana at age 11 and continued to

so until age 16. He was introduced to marijuana by some older youth in his neighborhood who did not think that he would smoke. Thus, in order to prove them wrong, Richard “took a hit.”

By the time Richard had reached age 15, he was completely out of control. He smoked marijuana frequently. He would stay out of the house until the wee hours of the night, and skipped school all most every day. There was nothing Richard’s mother could do to control him. Richards’s mother eventually gave up trying to force him to go to school and allowed him to drop out during his sophomore year of high school. It was around that time that Richard found out that his girlfriend was pregnant with his child. After his child was born, Richard decided to move out of his mother’s house. At first he stayed at his girlfriend’s house, but then decided to move elsewhere. Richard moved into an apartment with a friend and began living what he referred to as the “fast life.” This lifestyle consisted of drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana, and partying non-stop.

In order to support himself during this time, Richard began engaging in high levels of illegal activity. His main source of income came from stealing car stereos and selling marijuana. Richard estimated that he made over \$3,000 from these activities in a week alone.

Not too long after being out on his own, Richard joined a street gang. Richard enjoyed being in the gang because of the camaraderie, protection, and easy access to monetary surplus that was provided to its members. Richard quickly became fully immersed in the gang life style and participated in various criminal activities with other gang members. It was while partaking in felonious activities with fellow gang members that the inevitable happened; Richard found himself in a situation that would change his life forever. Richard explains:

Yeah, it just started someone called me and wanted us to break into this house.

They said that they had hell of money [in the house]. Now you have to remember

I was doing crazy stuff, breaking into people's houses and stuff. So, I was like yeah I am down, whatever we can do this. Me and my partners was ready to go do this. We didn't know that there was a gun involved at all until we got there and seen it [when his friend pulled it out] and I was like WOW! Don't use that. We got there [and] the dude [the homeowner] was in there and the guy was resisting like no no, he tried to swing at one of my boys while we were doing it and uh, he ended up getting shot. We didn't take nothing, we didn't leave with nothing. As soon as he got shot, we left.

In a frantic panic, Richard decided to call his mother. However, when she answered the phone he was unable to speak. He hung up and tried to call several more times, but again he was unable to say anything. Richards's mother new something was wrong and began to worry. She then attempted to call Richard herself, but he did not answer. Richard and his partners drove to a friend's house to hide and recuperate. All of his friends were antsy and unsure of what to do next. It was then that reality struck in; Richard began to worry more and more about the seriousness of the victim's injury. Richard did not see the actual shooting occur and did not know how bad the homeowner was injured, which was extremely troublesome to him. Listen to how Richard describes it:

I was wild that night. I was really paranoid that night when we got home. I just kept flipping to the news. I was constantly clicking to the news, like every two minutes. So I would go back and go back [to the news channels], but nothing ever popped up. And then we got picked up.

(Richard): I didn't know if he got shot in his heart or what. And then, uh the police came up and told us what was on the arrest warrant [it said 1<sup>st</sup> degree



murder]. We were like really? No way, we didn't kill anybody. They just took us downtown, booked us in and started the process from there.

After three motions for all the minors in the case to be tried as adults, each youth decided to accept a guilty plea to the juvenile charge. The person who had pulled the trigger was 18 years old, thus was sentenced to life in prison. However, Richard and the other minors were given the juvenile life sentence. They were to remain in the state juvenile detention facility until age 23. Richard was 16 years old at the time. Before being escorted out of the court room, the judge had one last closing remark to say to him. The judge's final words to Richard were that he was a "menace to society and would never amount to anything." Struck by the judge's harsh words, Richard left the courtroom with the feeling that his life was over. He was angry about the whole situation. Richard explains the emotions he was feeling:

I was uh stressed, depressed, angry. I had tons of anger, tons and tons of anger. I would blow up on anyone. Staff, nurses, anyone; I didn't have nothing to lose. Even people who were trying to help me. I looked at them like they ain't doing the time, I am. So how are you going to help me, I have to do this five and half years, not you guys. So if I had any emotion, the most I was angry.

Richard experienced disciplinary problems during his first two years inside of the facility. He was frequently reprimanded for violations such as possessing illegal contraband, arguing with staff, and fighting. The sanctions that Richard received for breaking facility rules were ineffective on him because he felt that he already had the worst punishment possible. Even the threat of having more time added to his sentence did not deter him from getting into trouble. It wasn't until Richard turned 19 that he began to change his outlook on his sentence. One day a guard noticed how much trouble Richard was getting into and told him "to do the time, and not

let it do him.” The guard then proceeded to tell Richard how he needed to make the best out of his situation and move on rather than self-destruct. This conversation had an immense impact on Richard’s behavior. Listen to how Richard explains it verbatim:

I wasn’t doing my time, I was letting it do me. So once I hit about nineteen is when I really was like, look, you have nothing to prove to anybody anymore. This is what you are in jail for - this is how much [time] you have already done. You don’t have to prove nothing to nobody. Nobody in here means nothing to you. I came in here by myself and I am going to leave by myself. I remember when I turned nineteen, that’s when I started to go positive and leave all the negative.

Richard developed new outlook on his situation. Although he had three more years remaining on his sentence, Richard realized that he had several opportunities that he could take advantage of. Take for instance the chance to earn his high school diploma. Given the fact that Richard dropped out of high school at age 15, he more than likely would not have gone back to earn his diploma. However, the detention facility had an accredited school on site. After making up his mind to earn his diploma, Richard excelled in all of his courses en-route to become the first person in his household to graduate high school. Richard soon found himself enjoying a number of activities that allowed him to stay out of trouble and develop a number of skills that will be useful once released. Richard explains:

Even though I was in a bad situation, being in jail, I took a lot out of it. Like I learned skills [such as] textile, sowing stuff, like I had built a bed frame, [I] built the head board out of wood and all. I worked in the commissary and landscaping, I learned a lot of skills in there I didn’t think I would have learned. I just thought I would go to jail, do time and whatever. I came up with skills, my high school

diploma, I would have never had my high school diploma if would I have not of gotten tagged. But you know getting incarcerated help me in a lot of ways. It changed my look on life.

Richard now had a new outlook. His main focus was on how to acquire as many skills as possible with his remaining time. With his release date nearing, Richard found himself experiencing an extreme amount of anxiety. Richard had been in the facility for just over five years and understood how the system worked; he knew how to be successful in the detention facility. Nevertheless, Richard feared that he would not be able apply the same principles once released. He did not want to let himself or his family down. However, once realizing his fear, he embraced it and decided to make a commitment to himself. Richard made a promise to himself that he would stay out of trouble when he was back in Wichita. After five and half years behind bars, Richard was released. What follows is an exchange between the researcher and Richard regarding his release from the detention center.

(Researcher): So can you tell me the feeling you had when the gates popped open and you knew you were leaving?

(Richard): I was happy, sad, just a bunch of emotions erupted at once. But most of everything, I was happy I was free from that place I had been in, that held me down for so long, and uh, I came out a whole new person. If you could go back and talk to any of them people at the facility that know me from the time I was there, they would tell you that I was a different person than who I was when I came in.

Richard was released early on “good-time” and back home with his family just in time for his 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday. He celebrated his first birthday outside of detention by hanging out with a

couple of friends who took him out to eat and then he had a little get-together thrown by his mother later on in the evening. She cooked a meal and invited Richard's closest friends and family over to celebrate his release and birthday. From his experience behind bars, Richard developed a stronger appreciation for his family. Through the entire ordeal, his family was there for him. As a result, he no longer desired to live the "fast life," but instead wanted to use his second opportunity to make his family proud.

Now that he is back home in Wichita, Richard sees the sky as the limit. The opportunities for him to be successful are out there, and he knows that all he has to do is go accomplish them. He is currently considering furthering his education by attending college and majoring in businesses. He eventually would like to own his businesses. In the meantime, Richard knows that his main duty is raising his son properly. He wants to insure his son does not travel down the same path during adolescence as he did. Thus, in order to be around for his son, Richard must stay out of trouble and he has the full intentions to do just that. When asked where he saw himself in the future, he stated the following:

I want to travel, I want to take my son, and if I have more kids, I want to travel so I can see that there is way more out there than just Kansas. There are so many more opportunities out there for a young kid. I know that there are still more opportunities for me you know. I am still young. I want to just enjoy life, enjoy my freedom. I am not incarcerated no more, I don't have to walk with my hand behind my back or go to sleep when they tell me or wake up during their time and eat their nasty food. You know I am home, I missed out on five and a half years of my life, my son's life, and my families. I just think it is time to just you know. You can't make up for the past but you can look towards the future.

## Common Themes

This study flushed out six collective themes that were common among participants' juvenile delinquent experiences. These themes are: (1) lack of parental control, (2) living in a high crime community, (3) experiencing school failure, (4) displaying early signs of delinquency through aggression, (5) substance abuse, (6) and having a desire to obtain money. Since this is a collective case study, discovering the common themes is a crucial component. It is important for the researcher to be able to identify the overlapping themes that seemed to have contributed to each participants' engagement in criminal activity in order to understand how these factors affect troubled youth. These themes are discussed in detail in the following chapter (see page 54). Interrelated with the six collective themes are several underlying factors. These factors are underpinnings of the collective themes identified above and are presented in the outline below.

### Home structure:

- Large family
- Household ran by single mother
- Delinquent siblings

### Parent-child relationship:

- Strong maternal bond
- Mother was unable to control children's behavior through punishment
- Inconsistent relationship with father

### Peer groups/friends:

- Delinquent peer group of friends
- Associated with older guys
- Gang affiliated

### Role Models growing up:

- Idolized older brother who was a gang member
  - Michael Rodriguez & Lorenzo Gonzales

- Neighborhood gang members
  - Thought neighborhood gangsters were prestigious because they had a lot of money

Academic performance:

- Was known as the class clown
- Constantly in trouble at school
- Dropped out of high school/did not have enough credits to graduate

Community influence:

- Lived in a predominately Hispanic community
- Lived in a high crime/gang community
- Lived in a middle to low income neighborhood

Social economic status/source of income:

- Families economic status was part of the lower-middle class
- Engage in illegal activity for a source of income
  - Sold marijuana, stole car stereos, and broke into houses to make own money

First/Early signs of delinquent behavior:

- Signs of serious anger issues dating back to early elementary school
  - Was suspend from school for a physical altercation by the 4<sup>th</sup> grade
- Began smoking marijuana at a young age (between ages 11 &12)

Detest in criminal activity:

- Turning point in criminal activity between the ages of 18 and 19
  - Reasons all varied:
    - Got into a serious romantic relationship
    - Birth of child
    - Nearing the release from state detention

Current situation:

- Still involved in the criminal justice system
- Desires to reach financial stability through legitimate means
- Currently seeking employment

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Emerging Themes

In an effort to flesh out prevalent information for the study, the researcher formulated lists of themes that were believed to have contributed to each participants' delinquent experience. These themes emerged from two methods. The first method was a question and answer scheme. The researcher simply asked participants what factors they felt led to their involvement in criminal activities, and participants responded by pointing out various components of their childhood. The second method utilized field notes to record reoccurring factors that arose in conversation during multiple interviews. The researcher started this procedure by writing down any characteristics that were suggested from the participants' accounts during initial interviews. If those factors reemerged in later interviews, the researcher highlighted that element as a possible factor centering on their delinquency. Both methods assisted the researcher in identifying several components of the participants' lives that are believed to have been precursors to their involvement in crime. After extracting themes from interviews, the researcher clumped data into different categories. A list of the themes that emerged from this process is presented in the appendixes section (Appendix A) and is labeled as "Emerging Themes Lists."

#### Collective Themes

As demonstrated in the results section, there is a continual list of overlapping themes amongst participants' juvenile delinquent experiences. Now that several common factors have been identified, the next step is to examine how these themes impacted participants' engagement in criminal activity as a youth. Using information obtained in interviews, the following section

will highlight six themes that appear to have contributed greatly to each participants' juvenile delinquent experience.

### Theme 1: Lack of Parental Control

When viewing the home structure of all the participants, it is interesting to note many similar characteristics. Each participant came from a large, single-parent household that was run by their mother; none of their fathers were consistently in their lives. As a result, participants indicated having feelings of animosity towards their fathers. In fact each participant stated that their father was either never around or was only present when they were in trouble. The following are statements participants made describing their relationship with their fathers.

(Lorenzo): Um, my father, I can't really explain much because it was really on off, every time I would go see him was when I was in trouble and my mom would force me to go stay with him.

(Michael): He was never around—something happen and he just left. I know he came back when I was nine. My mom got him a job and everything and he was here for like a week then [he] just left. That was the first and last time I have ever seen him.

(Richard): We are really not to close, we are a bit distant. He didn't really get into my life for twenty one years. He tried, but he was really in and out of my life. When I got incarcerated at sixteen is when he really started trying to get involved in my life, but I kept pushing him away, I felt like it was too late. Like I am sixteen years old and in trouble, and now you want to be part of my life?



Conversely, each subject demonstrated that they had a strong bond with their mothers. Participants commonly referred to themselves as “momma’s boys” or “momma’s favorite” when asked to describe their relationship with their mothers. However, a strong bond between participants and their mothers was not enough to deter them from criminal activity. Participants stated that after being sent to the principal’s office or apprehended by authorities, their mother’s sanctions had little effect on their behavior. Lorenzo Gonzales illustrates this point by stating the following:

(Lorenzo): I pretty much stopped going [to school] my junior year going into senior year.

(Researcher) How did your mom take that?

(Lorenzo): She was mad, because I use to always gyp school and stuff, she would try and punish me, but I would just take the punishment and do it [skip school] again.

An interview with Linda Rodriquez, the mother of study participants Michael and Richard Rodriquez, during the member checking process shed light on many of the struggles associated with being a single mother of delinquent youth. Without a father around, mothers were responsible for being the economic provider, parental supervisor and disciplinarian. With multiple children in the household, it was difficult for mothers to exercise parental control. This may be why each participant had siblings who were also involved in criminal activity. Charges that participants’ siblings were arrested for included: a felony drug charge, aggravated battery with a deadly weapon, and 1<sup>st</sup> degree murder. Thus, results indicate that participants grew up in households without a father present and with siblings who were also juvenile delinquents.

## Theme 2: Living in a High Crime Community

Information obtained from interviews displayed that crime was prevalent in each participant's community, as all were involved in gang activity. Living in a low to middle class Hispanic community with a high ratio of gang membership may be in part why each participant was gang affiliated as a juvenile. Participants indicated that they joined gangs in order to receive protection, prestige, and access to money. The conversation between Lorenzo and the researcher further illustrates the dangers of living in community heavily populated with gangs.

(Researcher): So are gangs what cause most of the shootings here?

(Lorenzo): Yeah, well it is starting to get a lot more gang related. Everyone wants to just have that name [of being a gangster] you know. They want to be with somebody else [for protection] and things get messed up.

(Researcher): So was it dangerous being in a gang?

(Lorenzo): Yeah, pretty much, I don't know--there was guns and knives being tossed around you know, you get out of school and other gangs be waiting trying to jump us, we would always get jumped or stuff like that, pretty much just gang stuff.

Participants indicated that, once in the gang, they partook in high rates of criminal activity. Participants stated that they would engage in activities such as smoking marijuana, breaking into cars, and getting into fights frequently once becoming gang affiliated. Thus, these findings suggest that living in a high crime area and having a prominent gang population attributed to the participants' engagement in criminal activity.

### Theme 3: Experiencing School Failure

Another collective theme that emerged from interviews with participants was experiencing academic difficulties in school. All participants stated that they struggled to understand information as well as their peers, which resulted in low grades. Many of their school difficulties can be attributed to their problematic behavior and lack of effort; however, some blame can also be placed on teachers. Participants stated they felt that once they were labeled as a “problematic child,” teachers showed little interest in teaching them, which gave them another reason to dislike school. Presented below are accounts given by participants regarding this phenomenon.

(Michael): Yeah sometimes you could kind of tell when your teachers want you to do well or those who don't really care. Those teachers who didn't care, they didn't want you around. I always needed help, but I didn't like asking for help. The teachers I liked were the ones who noticed I needed help and would help me even without me asking.

(Richard): Yeah, I think I was always pointed out as the trouble maker, I was always getting sent to the office, having to call my mom telling her I am getting kicked out of school or suspended. So yeah, they [the teachers] pointed me out as a trouble maker.--I kind of felt like they picked on kids like me. Like they looked at some kids and was like ok, these are the trouble kids, so we ain't going to focus on them. We know that they don't care about school so whatever. I would show up late to class or fall asleep they would never be like 'hey you need to get up' or

anything, they just left me alone. So really, I just felt like they [the teachers] was slacking you know. Like they treated kids differently who were there to learn.

As a result of their academic struggles, each participant either dropped out of high school or failed to earn enough credits to graduate. Only one participant later went back to school to receive his diploma. In the months following their exit from school, each participant engaged in an increased amount of criminal activity. This led the researcher to believe that there may be some correlation between failure in school and juvenile delinquency.

#### Theme 4: Early Signs of Delinquency through Aggression

Each participant demonstrated early signs of delinquency far before they began engaging in actual criminal activity. Information obtained from interviews showed that each participant was suspended while in elementary school and arrested in middle school. Each participant had been suspended from school by the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Moreover, participants each displayed that they had a short temper, thus causing them to engage in fights frequently. In fact, fighting was a key component in participants' delinquent experiences because it was the first incident that each participant was suspended for. The following statements made by participants illustrate this point.

(Lorenzo): I was getting into trouble a lot, the first time I had gotten suspend, I was in fourth or fifth grade.

(Researcher): Do you remember what it was for?

(Lorenzo): [He laughs] for fighting, I don't even remember what it [the fight] was for. We got in a fight and the boy had some bruises around his neck, so I pretty much got suspended-- I have always had a lot of anger, so you could say that that

pushed me towards that more, just so I could always get in a fight and relieve my stress.

(Researcher): Do you remember the first time you got into trouble at school?

(Richard): Uh, it was my kindergarten year. I was running around a Lego table, and uh, I had tripped and fell and busted my lip. I had gotten mad and started flipping tables and throwing tables everywhere, going crazy. I think I got suspended for a day or two, and that was my kindergarten year. -- I think fourth grade was the next time [he was suspend from school]. I had kicked my teacher, she had asked me to be quite. -- I was like "bitch you ain't my mom" then I just flipped my desk over. She tried to grab me and take me to the office and I kicked her in her shins. They kicked me out that day; they didn't want me there no more because I was always in trouble.

Fighting was a key factor in participant's delinquent experience in that each subject was suspended from school and arrested on numerous occasions. Participants stated that they often looked for fights and were quick to fight anyone who disrespected them. Thus participants' early signs of aggression continually effected their involvement in delinquent activity throughout adolescences.

#### Theme 5: Substance Abuse

Another component of delinquency that was present in each participants juvenile offending days was substance abuse; participants all began using drugs at a very young age. In fact, information obtained through interviews revealed that each participant smoked marijuana for the first time between the ages of 11 and 12. Participants mentioned that they began smoking

marijuana early on due to peer pressure administered to them by older peers. After experimenting with marijuana for the first time, participants quickly became persistent users.

Richard Rodriguez demonstrates this occurrence in the following dialogue with the researcher:

(Researcher): So when was the first time you ever officially broke the law? Like the first time you did something and didn't get caught for it?

(Richard): Does doing drugs count?

(Researcher): Yeah.

(Richard): Ok, that was when I was eleven. That was the first time I have ever experienced drugs. It was weed and I was eleven.

(Researcher): So how did you get introduced to it?

(Richard): I was hanging out with this older guy, and he came up to me [with marijuana] and was like do you want to smoke it? I was kind of like, well he is doing it, so I want to try it. I really didn't start smoking heavy until I was thirteen. By then I was coming home all day every day, high. My mom would be like you're high. I would be like no I am not, and she would be like yeah you are. Well thirteen is when I really really started getting into smoking weed. So from there until I was sixteen and was incarcerated [he smoked marijuana].

Other study participants had similar experiences with marijuana as Richard. As a result of their involvement with marijuana, participants reported being arrested for crimes such as possession of drug paraphernalia, possession of marijuana, and possession of marijuana with the intent to sell. Additionally, participants mentioned that their drug abuse escalated from marijuana to other forms of substance abuse such as drinking alcohol, mixing prescription pills

and ingesting cocaine during their teenage years. Thus, early experimentation with marijuana served as precursors to participants' future involvement in crime and substance abuse.

#### Theme 6: Desire to Acquire Money

The last theme that emerged from interviews with participants was a desire to acquire money. This was a vital component of all participants delinquent experiences in that it was present at the initial stages of their involvement in criminal activity and continued to be the driving force throughout the course of their delinquency. The following segment will illustrate how each participant's pursuit to obtain money led to their involvement in juvenile delinquency.

Participant Lorenzo Gonzales's mother worked in a factory and was able to cover all the necessities that her children needed, but was unable to afford much else of anything. In an effort to obtain items such as nice clothes, new shoes, and electronics, Lorenzo joined a gang. Once in the gang, Lorenzo started selling marijuana. This enabled him to afford the things that he previously could not when he solely relied on his mother's income. Lorenzo enjoyed this lifestyle and was not deterred by the threat of being kicked out of his mother's house, getting arrested, or becoming a victim of gang violence. Instead, Lorenzo continued to sell drugs and engage in other delinquent activities until the age of 18.

Michael Rodriguez did not begin to engage in serious criminal activity until his mother lost her job. Michael had learned how to break into cars when he was 12, but only did it for fun. However, when his mother lost her job, Michael started breaking into cars to steal car stereos in order to sell them to make money. It wasn't until the arrest of his older brother Richard that Michael hastily increased his offending behavior. The arrest of his brother put the Rodriguez family in more of an economic strain than before due the fact that Michael's mother was

responsible for covering Richard's attorney expenses and court fees. With the need to obtain his own source of income, Michael began offending at a higher rate than ever before. The following quote dialog between the researcher and Michael illustrate this point.

(Researcher): Do you think it was result of your brother going to jail? Did you need to get more money?

(Michael): Yeah, when he was around he always had money. You wouldn't imagine how much money he had for being only sixteen. Anytime he needed something we just went to him and he would be like here. When he got arrested I was like man I ain't gonna get no job. So I wanted to get money anyway [he could]. I can steal something or steal something to sell, I was gonna get money

Finally, Richard Rodriguez desired to be completely independent from his mother at a young age. As a result, Richard moved out of his mother's house and began living the "fast life" at age 15. In order to support himself during this time period, Richard joined a street gang. Once in the gang, Richard sold marijuana, stole car stereos, and burglarized homes. Richard was so driven to acquire money that he did not realize the potential consequences that could arise from his actions. Thus, just like the other participants, his engagement in criminal activity was motivated by a pursuit of money. Richard's pursuit of money is supported in the following statement he made in interview:

Once I turned fourteen I started doing my own thing, making my own money, I stopped trying to come to her [his mother]. I wanted to grow up too fast, I seen everybody else do it [make money illegally] so I was like I want to do this. I want to things by myself, I don't what to go to momma. Everybody be like your momma support you and I wanted to be like na, I support myself



## Theoretical Discussion

A corollary purpose of the current study was to examine truths within Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST). Beginning with the roots of the GST grounded in Emile Durkheim's Theory of Anomie, many parallels between the current study and the GST may be observed. This section will highlight those similarities and illustrate which aspects of participants' stories is represented in the GST. This section will conclude by identifying a critical component of the current study that was not illustrated in the GST.

### The Theory of Anomie & Strain Theory

Emile Durkheim illustrates in his Theory of Anomie how society is in a state of anomie when there is a breakdown of rules and values (Durkheim, 1893). Durkheim believed that while in this state, individuals engaged in inappropriate behavior with little regard to how their actions may impact others. Robert Merton then expanded this phenomenon to incorporate criminality in his theory known as the Strain Theory. Merton postulated in his theory how criminals are often driven to commit crime because of a lack of opportunity to obtain their desired goal(s) through legitimate means (Merton, 1957). Merton believed that people's main desire is economic surplus, and when they were unable to attain it legitimately, they leaned towards criminal activity.

With one of the collective themes identified in this study being a desire to acquire money, the findings coincide with Durkheim's and Merton's beliefs. Each participant demonstrated that their initial rationale for engaging in criminal activity was for financial gain. Lorenzo Gonzales wanted to be able to afford the things that his mother was unable to buy him (expensive clothes, nice shoes, etc.), Michael Rodriguez yearned to make money during a time of financial strain that his family was going through, and Richard Rodriguez longed to be able to fully support

himself on his own. Thus, ideas postulated in The Theory of Anomie and Strain Theory appear to be true in regards to the findings of the current study.

### The General Strain Theory

Robert Agnew's GST identified four sources of strains that he believed contributed to a youth's engagement in criminal activity. As mentioned in the methods section, the four sources of strains were a "failure to achieve positive valued stimuli," "disjunction of expectation and achievement," "removal of positive valued stimuli," and a "presentation of negative valued stimuli." Each source of strain was present in participant's stories; however, the impact of the strain in regards to their delinquent behavior varied amongst participants. The following paragraphs of this section illustrate several aspects of participant's lives that coincide with a source of strain identified in the GST.

Three of the strains illustrated in the GST appeared to have had a vast influence on Lorenzo Gonzales' delinquent experience. The first source of strain came in the form of a "failure to achieve positive valued stimuli." With Lorenzo's mother being the sole provider of a full household, it was often difficult for her to afford very many accessories for her children. There were a number of items (i.e. new sneakers, video games, etc.) that Lorenzo wanted, but was unable to afford on his mother's budget. Thus, in order to obtain money to purchase the objects that he yearned for, Lorenzo sold marijuana. Making a large profit from his sales, Lorenzo was then able to buy whatever he wanted. Moreover, resembling the "disjunction of expectation and achievement" source of strain, Lorenzo desired have the objects that gang members in his area had. Lorenzo knew that neighborhood gang members engaged in illegal activities such as auto burglaries, home burglaries and selling drugs to make money and felt that it was acceptable to also engage in similar activities for monetary surplus.

A “removal of positive valued stimuli” was the source of strain that seemed to of had the greatest effect on Lorenzo’s delinquent experience. The “removal of positive value stimuli” came from the departure of his brother when his mother sent him to live with his grandmother in Mexico. Lorenzo and his brother were very close, so one may see how this event would be troublesome to a 12 year old boy. Lorenzo responded to this situation by engaging in an increased amount of delinquency. In the year following his brother’s move, Lorenzo joined a gang, was arrested on numerous occasions, and was expelled from school. This was just the start of his long road through juvenile delinquency.

Michael Rodriquez’s delinquent experience was endorsed by two events that can be viewed as sources of strains. The first event was when Michael’s mother lost her job. Prior to this point, Michael and his siblings were accustomed to living a comfortable life; they were able to afford whatever they wanted. In fact, Michael’s mother stated that she felt as if she “spoiled” her children while they were growing up. However, when Michael’s mother lost her job, she was no longer able to purchase much of anything outside of the necessities her family needed [i.e. rent and groceries]. The family was forced to live on a much tighter budget. Thus, this experience can be thought of as a “removal of previously valued stimuli” source of strain. Michael responded to this situation by increasing his participation in criminal activity in order to make a profit. It was at this time that Michael began stealing car stereos to make money.

Moreover, Michael mentioned that he did not began engaging in criminal activity on a regular basis until soon after his older brother Richard was incarcerated. Michael and Richard were very close, so it is understandable why the arrest of his brother was disheartening and can be viewed as a “presentation of negative stimuli” source of strain. Like Lorenzo Gonzales, Michael responded to losing his brother by increasing his engagement in criminal activity. In

fact, in the months following his brother's arrest, Michael stated that this was the time period in which he engaged in the highest amount of criminal activity. He broke into cars almost every weekend and got into several fights at school.

Finally, Richard Rodriguez's delinquent experience had three sources of strains that appeared to have impacted his involvement in criminal activity. The first source of strain was the loss of his mother's job. When Richard's mother lost her job, he did not want to accept the fact that he had to live off of much less. Thus, similar to Michael Rodriguez, this incident served as a "loss of previously valued stimuli" source of strain for Richard. As a result of this incident, Richard began to find his own way to make money through illegal activity. Richard sold drugs and stole car stereos to make his money during this time period. Moreover, following the "disjunction of expectation and achievement" source of strain, Richard associated himself with a crowd that was much older than him. He found great value in the lifestyles of his older friends and wanted to live the same way as they did. Soon after acquiring this desire, Richard moved out of his mother's house and began to live the "fast life". It was living the "fast life" that ultimately placed Richard in the situation that led to his arrest.

The last source of strain that impacted Richard's delinquent experience was when he received his sentence for 1<sup>st</sup> degree murder. Richard valued his freedom and felt as if his life was over when he was notified of his sentence. Thus, this event can be viewed as a "removal of previously valued stimuli." Richard responded to this source of strain by becoming angry and getting into trouble frequently. Richard stated that his first two and a half years of detention were plagued with receiving reprimands for getting into fights, arguing with staff members, and possessing contraband.

Findings from the current study displayed several components of the GST as prevalent in participant's recollections of their delinquent experience. Thus, the GST seems to hold several truths. Nonetheless, certain elements of participant's delinquency were not discussed in the GST. In fact, the GST fails to reference one major component of participant's experiences that each indicated played a key role in their delinquent past. That component was participant's aggression and willingness to fight.

Participants in the study indicated that they often engaged in physical confrontations because of their natural feelings of aggression. Participants stated that they had always had problems controlling their anger, which resulted in them getting into fights frequently. Participants stated that they would fight people simply because they looked at them funny or said something they did not agree with. As mentioned previously, fighting was a major component of every participant's delinquent experience because it was what each participant was suspended for the first time at school. Conversely, there is no source of strain that contributed to their decision to fight. They were involved in fights merely because of their aggression. Thus, this displays the fact that there are certain aspects of delinquency that are not identified in the GST.

Although the GST did not mention any information about fighting, this theory may still be viewed as a viable explanation for participants' involvement in juvenile delinquency. In fact, a large number of the themes illustrated in the appendixes "Emerging Themes lists" section closely resembled the sources of strains identified by Agnew in the GST. Now that a sound and suitable theory has been identified, the next component of this study will offer suggestions as to what measures can be implemented to decrease juvenile delinquency. This will be covered in final chapter of the current study.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

#### Practical Implications

By utilizing the accounts of three former juvenile offenders, the researcher's intentions were for readers to attain a better understanding of the life of a juvenile delinquent. The results of the study demonstrated how certain elements of participants' lives had an immense impact on their offending behavior. Now that that has been established, the next step is to see how information obtained in the current study may be applied in practice. The following section will use the results of this study to suggest various measures that can be done in effort to decrease juvenile delinquency in the future. Many of these methods are already in practice; however, gearing them towards juvenile delinquency may yield imperative outcomes in the fight against juvenile crime.

When examining the home-structure of each participant in the current study, it is interesting to note that all came from large families in which the fathers' were not present. Mothers were then left with the sole responsibility of being the nurturer, homemaker, parental supervisor, and breadwinner for the entire family. Along with these elements, the absence of a father in the home created a need for an adequate male role model in the youths' lives. Instead of having father figures, youth were raised looking up to local gang members as their role models. Participants indicated that they could have used an adequate male role model in their lives to deter them from engaging in crime.

As a way to attend to this issue, a mentorship program that connects families of juvenile offenders with suitable mentors from the community should be put in place. All mentors should pass a screening process that includes a criminal background check to ensure that youth are not

being paired with criminals. Once the screening process is complete, mentors should be trained on how to guide troubled youth to appropriate behavior. Lessons on social skills such as how to accept negative feedback and resist peer pressure, and how to address authority figures properly should be presented to youth by mentors. This may help youth develop the appropriate social skills needed to stay out of trouble. Additionally, mentors should be aware of government assistance programs that families who they come into contact with may be eligible for. This may help reduce some of the economic strains in single-parent households.

Moreover, the mentorship program staff should recruit a pool of mentors that are demographically proportional to their cliental of youth. Although not imperative, it would be helpful to have the potential to match youth with mentors who come from similar situations as they do. Findings of the current study displayed how youth living in the inner city are often unaware that there are legitimate means to achieving financial success. Developing relationships with successful law-abiding citizens, who share similar demographics may give youth a new perspective on what it means to be successful. Youth may then be influenced to stay in school, maintain good grades, and refrain from engaging in criminal activity in order to accomplish similar success as their mentors. Finally, the mentorship program should also include the siblings of the juvenile offender. As the findings of the current study demonstrate, youth who have other delinquent siblings often gravitate towards becoming juvenile offenders themselves. Thus, having mentors also meet with the siblings of juvenile offenders may help deter the cycle of crime in that family.

An example of a mentorship program in Wichita that employees many of the ideas above is the Positive Pathways Program (also known as P3) ran by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Wichita. This program specifically targets youth between the ages of 14 to 24 who are involved in the

juvenile or adult criminal justice system. With the goal of reducing crime by enhancing positive outcomes for youth, this program utilizes members of the community to serve as mentors for incarcerated or recently released youth. Mentors must pass a background check prior to meeting with youth. Once the background check is cleared, mentors meet with youth once a week at either the facility in which they are housed in or at a youth's home if they are currently out of custody. The main goal of the program is for mentors to encourage youth to stay out of trouble. Additionally, the program seeks to find youth employment opportunities, offers ways to further their education, and provides information on drug/alcohol treatment program, all of which are set in place to create avenues for success for local youth. This program encompasses many elements that adhere to some of the leading causes of delinquency identified in this study. Thus, the P3 is an excellent program that should be utilized in the fight against juvenile delinquency in Wichita.

Keeping in mind the stories postulated by participants of the current study, youth in inner-cities need more opportunities for employment. Participants stated that instead of having employers at street corners, they were often met by drug dealers. Youth would then join gangs, steal car stereos and sell drugs because that was the only viable opportunity they saw. This is why it is important for inner-city youth to see that there are legitimate ways to obtain financial success. Thus, having a career fair during the summer in the inner-city may be helpful.

The career fair should have three components. First, several businesses that employ teenagers for temporary summer work (i.e. summer painters) and part-time work (i.e. fast-food restaurants) should be present to offer youth an opportunity to make money legitimately. There are several employment opportunities for teens (ages 16+) to obtain, but many inner-city youth are unaware of this. This method will help youth receive information about immediately available employment opportunities. Secondly, personnel from professional careers should be on



hand to inform teens about their cooperation's. These business men and women should tell youth what they do, what their salary is, and how they got to where they are today. This may help develop ideas of possible careers that the youth may want in the future. Finally, recruiters from area colleges should be present to give youth information about their institutions. Several participants in the study stated that they did not have aspirations to go to college because of the cost. They were unaware of financial aid and scholarships that they may be eligible for. Thus, the career fair along with the other suggestions offer above may present youth with ample avenues to engage in non-delinquent activities as youth and develop skills to remain as law-abiding citizens as adults.

Lastly, teachers should be trained on how to deal with troubled youth appropriately. As identified in the current study, many teachers fail to meet the needs of problematic children in their classes. Findings of the current study displayed that participants felt that teachers gave up on them once they were labeled as a juvenile delinquent. Teachers did not employ the necessary amount of effort to assist youth in various subjects that they struggled in. Although a child may be disruptive in class and show very little interest in learning, teachers should be made aware of how to deal with these youths. Their display of problematic behavior may be a cry for attention, signal for help, or response to being unsure of a particular school subject. Training seminars centered on how to deal with and/or identify troubled youth in their classes may be pivotal in the fight against juvenile delinquency. If teachers can properly attend to the educational needs of juvenile delinquents in their classes, youth may remain in school, experience less academic struggle's and stay out of legal trouble.

## Limitations

While conducting the current study, the researcher encountered four limitations that need to be addressed. Those limitations are trouble recruiting study participants, difficulty maintaining communication with participants, lack of time in the field with the participants, and a lack of knowledge regarding the Hispanic culture. Each created a number of complications for the researcher and were difficult to overcome. Implementing procedures that attend to these limitations will permit future studies to experience less difficulties and further advance in knowledge pertaining to juvenile delinquency. Thus, this section will illuminate these limitations and offer suggestions to attend to the reasoning behind the complications.

The current study was designed in the winter of 2012, and data collection was set to begin during the summer months of that same year. Although the researcher received IRB approval to begin interviewing participants on May 22, 2012, the researcher's first interview for the study was on September 20, 2012. Thus, it took the researcher nearly five months to find willing participants to partake in the study. Much of the difficulty in recruiting participants stemmed from the researcher not having any connections with former juvenile offenders in the Wichita area. In an effort to recruit participants, the researcher visited various gas stations, barbers shops, and convenience stores, but came up empty handed. It was not until the use of a gatekeeper that the researcher was able to find willing participants. The gatekeeper was able to provide the researcher with several participants who met the criteria needed to partake in the study and showed interest in being interviewed. Thus, future researchers should utilize gatekeepers during the initial stages of the study to recruit participants. This may greatly decrease the time allocated to searching for potential participants.

The next limitation that arose during the course of this study was inadequate communication between the researcher and participants. Communication problems were first apparent during the initial stages of the interview process. In fact, several potential participants were lost in the study due to this issue. Take for example, two participants who were introduced to the researcher by a gatekeeper in July of 2012. Both men agreed to partake in the study and exchanged contact information with the researcher. However, after failing to find a suitable time to meet for three consecutive weeks, the researcher lost all contact with both participants. One participant's phone line was disconnected, and the other possibly moved out of the area. The researcher then had to start the recruiting process over and look for other participants. Similar occurrences happened on numerous occasions. If the researcher was unable to meet with a potential participant soon after he spoke to him, the participant was often nowhere to be found.

Furthermore, communication problems were also present during follow-up interviews with participants who had previously been interviewed by the researcher. Often times, weeks would go by in which the researcher was unable to contact participants to schedule interviews. Participants were frequently unreachable due to obligations such as G.E.D. classes, childcare duties, meetings with probation officers, and inconsistent work schedules. Participants would often not answer the phone or return calls from the researcher when they were busy. This interruption in communication impacted the study by decreasing the number of interviews the researcher had with participants. The researcher had outlined several months for data collection prior to interviewing participants. Conversely, communication issues delayed the schedule, and the researcher was forced to compromise the originally planned timetable.

In effort to meet revised schedule demands, the researcher began calling participants and planning interviews to be conducted that same day. If both parties could agree on a time to

meet, the researcher drove to the participant's house and conducted the interviews there. This procedure proved to be more effective than scheduling formal meetings before hand. There were even a few instances in which the researcher simply left a message on a participant's voicemail and drove to his residence. If the participant was there, the researcher interviewed him. The researcher repeated this practice several times until reaching the point of data saturation. Thus, future studies should employ this method from the beginning. Although it may seem unprofessional to set up an interview on short notice or show up unannounced, this procedure reduced the potential for schedule conflicts and minimized communication difficulties.

Another limitation of the current study was the lack of time spent in the field with participants. As stated previously, interviews were conducted at various locations including a university campus, local restaurants, and at participants' houses. Only a small number of interviews were conducted while participants were in their natural environment. However, it seems as if the richest data came from interviews when participants were at their homes. Participants felt at ease to speak about their criminal past without the fear of anyone else hearing. Additionally, family members and/or friends who were also at the residence during interviews were able to chime in about various elements of participant's delinquent experiences. Furthermore, interviewing participants in their community allowed participants to refer to different aspects of their neighborhood to recall past events. For example, Michael Rodriguez pointed out the neighborhood where he first began stealing car stereos and also a local gas station where he got into a serious fight. Observing participants in their community permitted the researcher to attain a better general understanding of participants' lives. Thus, future researchers should devote substantial time to engage in interviews in participants natural environments.

Lastly, the current study exhibited a lack of knowledge regarding the Hispanic culture. As mentioned in the methods section, the study used a Hispanic gatekeeper to recruit participants. The gatekeeper predominantly worked with Hispanic youth in the community and is why she introduced the researcher to former juvenile offenders who were all Hispanic. Since the study was interested in the life stories of juvenile offenders, focus was not placed upon a certain ethnic group. The researcher did not examine any studies on ethnicities and was unfamiliar with the Hispanic culture. Thus, the researcher was unable to determine if certain common themes amongst participants were intertwined because of their ethnical background or because of another factor. In an effort to attend to this issue, future researchers should utilize an expert reviewer who is the same ethnicity as participants. By offering a cultural understanding, the expert reviewer may help identify certain elements of youth's ethnicity that affect their delinquency that was previously overlooked.

### Conclusion

The results of the current study indicate that juvenile offenders are not innately bad people; rather, it is more that they often lack opportunities to prosper. Instead of being met with opportunities to excel, youth are often presented with avenues to commit crime. Additionally, various strains in youths' lives often gear them towards criminal activity. Thus, implementing procedures that attend to these strains may be pivotal in the fight against juvenile delinquency. In order for change to occur, everyone must do their part. From community members to law enforcement officials, there is something that we all can do. Even if only a small handful of youth are deterred from becoming juvenile offenders, it will all be well worth it. Deterring one youth away from juvenile delinquency results in lifelong benefits for that youth, their family, and the community in which they live.

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## APPENDIXES

## Appendix A

### Emerging Themes Lists

Participant: Lorenzo Gonzales

#### Criminal Record

- Juvenile arrest record:
  - Battery, possession of marijuana with intent to sell, probation violation, driving without a D.L.
- Adult arrest record:
  - Estimates that he has been arrested around five times as an adult
    - All for traffic violations

#### Home structure:

- Large family
- Broken-home-syndrome
  - Household ran by single mother
    - Father lived out of state and was only in the picture when he got into trouble.
- It was difficult for a single-mother to supervise all of her children
  - Criminal siblings
    - Older brother was in a gang
    - Older half-sister (fathers daughter) was in prison for a felony drug offense

#### First/Early signs of delinquent behavior:

- Signs of serious anger issues dating back to early elementary school
  - Suspended for the first time in 4<sup>th</sup> grade for fighting
  - First time that he was arrested was for fighting was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade
- Began smoking marijuana in 6<sup>th</sup> grade
  - Arrested for selling marijuana at school in 6<sup>th</sup> grade

#### Delinquent peer group/friends:

- Delinquent group of friends in elementary school
  - Joined a gang in 6<sup>th</sup> grade
  - Associated himself with an older group of friends who were involved in criminal activity as a teenager

#### Older brother being sent away

- Idolized older brother who was in a gang
  - Wanted to be like his older brother and engage in the same criminal activity as he did
    - Desired to show neighborhood gang members that he was as tough as his older brother
  - Believed he needed to become the man of the house

- felt that he had to protect his family after his brother was sent to live with his grandmother

#### Negative role models

- Neighborhood gang members
  - Thought neighborhood gangsters had prestige because they had a lot of money and respect

#### Academic performance:

- Was known as the class clown and was frequently in trouble for behavioral problems
- Failed the majority of his classes
- Skipped school regularly
- Dropped out of high school during his junior year

#### Dangerous community:

- Grew up in a predominately Hispanic community
  - Lived in a high crime area
    - Highly infested by gangs
    - Desired to join a gang for protection and prestige

#### Economic strain:

- Families economic status was part of the lower-middle class
  - Sold marijuana to make his own money

#### Detest in criminal activity:

- Turning point was at age 18
  - Got into a serious relationship with a girl
  - Fear of incarceration in adult prison

#### Current situation:

- Today:
  - Wants to become a tattoo artist
  - Currently seeking employment
  - Plans on marrying Clarissa (longtime girlfriend)
- Still involved in the criminal justice system
  - Was last arrested a few days before I interviewed him for driving without a D.L.

## Appendix A (continued)

Participant: Michael Rodriguez

### Criminal Record

Juvenile arrest:

- Curfew violation, battery, burglary, possession of a firearm, probation violation, driving without a D.L.

Adult arrest:

- Aggravated battery, driving without a D.L.

### Home structure:

- Large family
- Raised in a single mother household
  - None of his siblings fathers were consistently in their children's lives
    - Hard for his mother to control all of her children
      - Older brother was recently released from state juvenile detention for 1<sup>st</sup> degree murder.
      - Youngest brother is currently in the county jail for his role in a drive by shooting
- Family lived in a part of town that was mainly comprised of Latino's

### Early signs of delinquent behavior:

- Had problems controlling his anger
  - Began fighting in 4<sup>th</sup> grade
- Early substance abuser:
  - Smoked marijuana for the first time at young age (age 12)
  - Drank alcohol for the first time in middle school

### Idle hands

- Began breaking into cars just for fun. Did not steal to make money at this time

### Delinquent peer group/friends:

- Associated with an older peer group who were also his older brothers friends
- Had a core group friends (3 to 4 youth) who he committed burglaries with
  - Michael was the leader of the group
- Gang affiliated
  - Was in a gang in middle school, but stopped after his sophomore year of high school

### Academic performance:

- Struggled in school
  - Did not pick up on certain subjects as quickly as his peers

- Felt as if most teachers labeled him as a troublemaker and did not give him the help and attention he needed to succeed
- Did not graduate high school
  - Completed high school, but did not have enough credits to receive his high school diploma at the end of his senior year

#### Criminal community ideology:

- The community he lived in was a high crime area that supported his engagement in criminal activity
  - Learned how to steal a car stereo from people in his neighborhood
  - Could sell items to others in his community who knew they were stolen

#### Boxing

- Began boxing at a young age (10 years old) and still boxes today
  - Positives:
    - Provided Michael with a positive role model/father figure through his relationship with his coach.
    - Boxing has served as a way for him to channel his aggression into something positive
  - Negatives:
    - Trained him to become a better fighter for street fights
      - Has been arrested for aggravated battery because of his boxing abilities

#### Loss of his mother's job:

- Family was part of the middle class for the majority of his childhood.
  - Michael's mother lost her job and the family started to have financial problems when he was around 13 years old
    - Sold items he obtained from auto burglaries to compensate for the loss

#### Loss of his brother due to incarceration

- Was best friends with his older brother Richard
  - Became upset when Michael was notified that his brother was going to be away for a long time
    - Started breaking into cars frequently
    - Was arrested three times in the year following his brothers arrest

#### Economic strain

- Fighting his brothers case in court was financially difficult for the Rodriguez family who were already going through an economic struggle
  - Michael began breaking into cars in order to make money during this time period and continued to do so until he turned 18

#### Reason for detest in criminal activity:

- The birth of his two children when he was 18
  - Adapted a new sense of responsibility
    - Incarceration now meant time away from his children

Current situation/future goals:

- Raising his family is his number one priority
- Seeking success through legitimate means:
  - Pursing a professional boxing career
  - Taking online classes to obtain his G.E.D
  - Currently employed at a temporary job, but hopes to find stable work in the near future.
- Still gets into trouble because of traffic violations and does not have a D.L.



## Appendix A (continued)

Participant: Richard Rodriguez

### Criminal Record

- Juvenile arrest:
  - Curfew violation
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Degree murder
- Adult arrest:
  - Currently on the run for a parole violation

### Home structure:

- Large family
- Household ran by single mother
  - Father lived in Wichita, but was never consistently in his life
    - Came back in the picture when Richard was arrested for murder. Richard felt that it was too little to late
  - Had delinquent siblings
    - Younger brother, Michael Rodriguez, had an extensive criminal record as a juvenile
    - Another younger brother is currently on trial for his involvement in a drive-by shooting

### First/Early signs of delinquent behavior:

- Had a problems controlling his anger at a young age
  - Was suspended for the first time in Kindergarten for kicking his teacher
- Began smoking marijuana at age 11
  - Became a heavy marijuana smoker by age 13 and continued to smoke until he was incarcerated at age 16

### Delinquent peer group:

- Associated with an older group of friends
- Joined a gang when he was 15
  - Currently still in a gang

### Loss of his mother's job

- Mother lost her job and the family began to have financial problems
  - Stole car stereos and sold marijuana to make his own money

### Desire for independence/ live the "fast life"

- Did not like having to abide by his mother's rules
- Felt that he could make enough money through engaging in illegal activity to fully support himself
- Believed that he was an adult after having a child at age 15 and wanted to find his own way

### Anger that stemmed from being arrested

- Was upset that he was involved in the murder case
- Felt that his punishment was harsh
- Took great offense to the judge's final comment stating that he was "menace to society and would never amount to anything"
- Was hostile at others who tried to offer a helping hand and/or advice because they could ultimately not do anything to reduce his incarceration sentence

### Academic performance:

- Had good grades while he attended a private elementary school until 4<sup>th</sup> grade
  - Got into trouble frequently for disrupting class
- Grades began to fail while attending a public middle school
  - Teacher labeled him as a trouble maker and did not pay him any attention
- Dropped out of school during his sophomore year of high school
- School inside of the detention facility:
  - Teachers motivated him to work hard
  - Maintained good grades
  - Received his high school diploma
    - First in his family to graduate high school

### Community environment:

- Lived in a part of town that was heavily populated by Hispanics
  - Had a high crime/gang population
- Juvenile detention facility (where he lived from age 16-22)
  - Had to abide by a very strict daily schedule
  - Had good social workers, friendly guards, and motivated teachers
    - Encouraged him to succeed

### Reason for detest in criminal activity:

- Had a conversation with a guard who told him to make the best of his situation and "not let the time do him", but instead do the time
  - This occurred at age 19
  - Realized that he had the potential to be successful through legitimate means

### Current situation/future goals

- Living with his mother in Wichita
- Currently seeking employment
- Has aspirations of obtaining a degree in business
- On probation for a year after his release date
  - Currently on the run from the authorities after receiving a traffic violation that broke the terms of his probation

## Appendix B

### Expert Reviewer Report

From decades of being involved in the criminal justice system as an offender, Mr. Jackson is well aware of all that is entailed in criminal activity. Not only does Mr. Jackson have knowledge pertaining to his own criminal experience, but he also has read various scholarships that offer a rationale for criminal activity. Thus, Mr. Jackson's assessment of the current study should be viewed with great respect. Presented below is Mr. Jackson's personal inquiry in regards to the findings of the current study.

When presented with the results from this study, Mr. Jackson agreed with majority of its findings; nevertheless, he also refuted several of its components. Take for instance the broken home-syndrome. When asked if coming from a single-parent household without a father present was a key component of juvenile delinquency, Mr. Jackson stated that "there were a lot of kids who did grow up without no dad and ended up as good kids—even though I had a dad, I still did the things that I did. I sold drugs, stole car radios, jipped school, smoked weed, all of that stuff." Thus, Mr. Jackson disagreed with the broken home-syndrome serving as one of the leading causes of juvenile delinquency. He believed that there was a stronger characteristic of a youth's life that led them to become an offender. That characteristic was a desire to find something to identify with.

Closely resembling Travis Hirschi's (1969) "attachment" element of the Social Bond Theory, Mr. Jackson stated that youth often engaged in criminal activity because they "desired to lose their identity to something." In particular, Mr. Jackson believed that youth often joined gangs so that they would feel as if they were a part of something that was greater than

themselves. Mr. Jackson further illustrated this point by stating that everyone in society has this desire and athletes, police officers and church attendees were all examples of this. The only difference between those people and criminals is that criminals join gangs as their social group and their method of operation is engaging in illegal activity.

Furthermore, Mr. Jackson agreed with principles established in Durkhiem's Theory of Anomie (1893) and Merton's Strain Theory (1957) by stating how people often commit crimes because of a lack the opportunity to obtain money legitimately. Mr. Jackson illustrated this principle by discussing how he got into drug dealing.

I remember the first time I got some dope on my hands, I seen some dude getting money and I was like let me go over and holla at him; so I did. He gave me a little dope and shit, it wasn't much. I sold it, the other piece, I was about to sell it and the police came and I got scared and threw it you know, but that was my first experience with drugs. It was literally, just literally somebody doing me a favor. It's like if someone would have came and said hey, I got a job for you that offers minimum wage plus a dollar, I would have taken that too you know. But [that] opportunity wasn't there, but the opportunity to get dope [to sell] was.

When asked if experiencing a strain was a leading cause of youths involvement in criminal activity, Mr. Jackson responded by stating "of course, of course. That's the main reason for anything you know." Thus, he agreed with Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory. Mr. Jackson then went on to tell a story about the time he was shot to reiterate this point. Growing up, Mr. Jackson was a talented athlete and had aspirations of playing college football. He even dreamed of one day playing professional football in the NFL. He knew that the odds were against him of actually make it to the NFL because of the high level competition it entails to get

there; nevertheless it allowed him to dream of one day becoming economically stable. However, that all changed when he was shot in his knee. Resembling Agnew's "loss of previously valued stimuli" source of strain, Mr. Jackson realized that his dream of one day going to the NFL was no longer possible, so he began looking for other ways to obtain financial success. Mr. Jackson was also employed at a local McDonalds at this time and was unable to work as a result of his injury. Presented below is Mr. Jackson's illustration of how being shot transitioned him to becoming a drug dealer.

(Researcher): How old were you when you got shot?

(Mr. Jackson): Fourteen or fifteen. Then I got shot when I was still working at McDonald's, so I couldn't work during that time. So when I couldn't work [I still needed money]. That's when I started really hustling. Selling dope and shit. So when it was time to go back to work, I didn't have no need for it. I was like man, ok I am making more money now than I was when I was working, so I rather just keep doing this, and make more money before I was working. I know what you are supposed to crawl before you can walk, but if someone done fed you caviar instead of sardines and you have the taste for it, it has hard to go back to sardines. So that is basically what happened. I just continued selling dope, and I thought I would just get a nice car and everything that they [the local drug dealers] all had, but instead I ended up in prison.

All in all, Mr. Jackson agreed with the findings of the study. He saw truth within the overall findings, but felt the implications of the study would not have that great of an impact on youth. He believed that in order combat juvenile delinquency, young offenders have to decide for themselves to change. They must look within their own situations and have personal aspirations

to refrain from their past live style. Nonetheless, Mr. Jackson believes that providing youth with opportunities to achieve success through legitimate means is a vital tool to combat juvenile delinquency.

## Appendix C

### General Interview Questions

1. What is your age?
2. What race/ethnicity do you consider yourself?
3. Describe your household growing up
  - a. Did you grow up with both parents in the home?
  - b. Do you have any siblings?
  - c. Describe your relationship like with your parents and siblings (if any).
4. How would you label your families socio-economic status growing up?
5. Describe your educational background.
  - a. Have you or will you be receiving your high school diploma or GED?
  - b. Did you get in trouble a lot with teachers, principals, and/or other school personnel?
6. Describe the first time you that you remember committing a crime.
  - a. How old were you?
  - b. What was the crime?
  - c. Were you with another person(s)
7. Describe your first run-in with the law
  - a. What happened?
  - b. Where you taken into custody?
8. Describe the first time you were arrested?
  - a. How long were you detained/incarcerated for?
9. Do you feel that you had peer pressure to engage in criminality as a juvenile? If yes, explain.
10. If you were taken into custody, explain your experience while inside of the juvenile detention facility.
11. Describe how this experience changed your behavior.
12. Did you re-offend again once released?
13. Explain the main turning point in your life that got you on the right track and contributed to your desistance in criminal behavior.

## Appendix D



You have volunteered to participate in a study that describes factors that center on your offending when you were a juvenile. You are one of three participants that have volunteered to be interviewed about your juvenile offending. The interview will be audio taped. The interviewer will ask you a series of questions related to your juvenile offending and factors leading up to your offending. For example, one question that you will be asked is to describe your relationship with your family members such as your mother and father. Another question will ask you to describe the first time you committed a crime. The interview will take place in the researcher's office (319 Lindquist Hall – Wichita State University). There will be no one else present during the interview. Again, the purpose of the interview is to describe your juvenile offending and factors leading up to said offending.

You will not be asked to provide your name or other identifying information at any time during this interview. However by your volunteering it is recognized that you have advised the researcher of your name. Your identity will be protected and will remain confidential. Your identity will be disclosed only with your explicit permission. Participation in this interview and subsequent interviews is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Wichita State University.

There are no anticipated risks involved in this research. If you agree to participate in the study, and if at any time during the interview you feel overwhelmed, emotionally distressed, or uncomfortable answering any questions for any reason, you are free to withdraw from the study without penalty. The benefits of this study may improve and enhance our current understanding of factors leading to juvenile offending. Furthermore, the research has the potential to positively impact fundamental juvenile justice practice when dealing with juvenile offenders.

**Compensation or treatment:** Wichita State University does not provide medical treatment or other forms of reimbursement to persons injured as a result of or in connection with participation in research activities conducted by Wichita State University or its faculty, staff, or students. If you believe that you have been injured as a result of participating in the research covered by this consent form, you can contact the Office of Research Administration, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

If you have additional questions regarding this study, you can contact the principle investigator - Dr. Michael Birzer, Professor, School of Community Affairs, 316 Lindquist Hall, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas, 67260-0135, or [michael.birzer@wichita.edu](mailto:michael.birzer@wichita.edu). If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research



Administration @ Wichita State University, Wichita Kansas, 67260-0007, telephone (316)978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read and understand all the information provided and that you have voluntarily decided to participate.

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix E



**Date:** May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012

**Principal Investigator:** Michael Birzer

**Co-Principal Investigator:** George Ebo

**Browne Department:** Community Affairs,

**Box 135 IRB Number:** 2721

The University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your research project application entitled:

**“A qualitative study of selected juvenile offenders in Sedgwick County Kansas”**

and approved the project according to the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. As described, the project also complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

Please keep in mind the following:

1. Any significant change in the experimental procedure as described should be reviewed by the IRB prior to altering the project.
2. When signed consent documents are required, the principal investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity.
3. At the completion of the project, the principal investigator is expected to submit a *final report*; the form is attached.

Thank you for your cooperation. If you have any questions, please contact me at ext.

6945. Sincerely,

Terry Behredt, Ed.D.  
Chairperson,

**IRB No.: 2721**

**Due Date: 5/22/13**

**PI: Michael Birzer**

**Co-PI: George Ebo Browne**

**Final  
Report  
For  
Research Involving Human Subjects**

**I certify that the study entitled:**

**“A qualitative study of selected juvenile offenders in Sedgwick County Kansas”**

was conducted as described in the approved protocol; and

1. That I will retain records of informed consent of my subjects for at least three (3) years after the subjects’ participation.

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Signature of Investigator

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Date