

# Prosocial Attitudes of Juvenile Delinquencies

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*The study analyses the prosocial behaviour in juvenile offenders' life, their family background and the social interactions. The article reviews the various theories of crime, the concept of prosocial behaviour and the important studies on the social life of offenders. The research comprises of also quantitative and qualitative features. In addition to a questionnaire about prosocial patterns, a semi-structured interview was performed during the study. The interview was done with 107 Hungarian young men between the ages of 14-21. Fifty-five of them are currently serving time in government detention facilities, 52 persons belong to the control group. The results show that the prisoners recognize positive social attitudes, but they are less able to implement them in their behaviour.*

**Keywords:** *prosocial behaviour, juvenile offenders, theories of crime, prisoners*

Juvenile crime is a social problem, consequently, social sciences carry out considerable research on this topic. The tests and theories about juvenile delinquency can be divided into two groups: there are studies which investigate the offender's family, relationships and socialization levels, while other researchers have increasingly focused on the personality.

Criminal development often originates from family dysfunction and abortive social environment. The criminality rate is high in economically disadvantaged areas and communities, where the lack of integration into society is a risk factor, and the approval of delinquency is high.<sup>2</sup> Juvenile offenders often come from uneducated, large families living in poverty, spend their free time purposelessly and are susceptible to violent actions.<sup>3</sup>

These young people have difficulties to meet social expectations, so their prosocial attitude is presumably immature. The current research studies the appearance of the positive social attitudes in offenders' life and analyses the variables which have an effect on the prosocial behaviour.

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2 Gönczöl et al. (1996)

3 Gönczöl et al. (1996)

## The theories and research areas of prosocial behaviour

Social behaviour is primarily determined by the individual's values and capabilities. We distinguish between prosocial (promotes the development) and antisocial (blocks the development) behaviour.<sup>4</sup> The prosocial behaviour is a broad definition because it covers all forms of interpersonal support. It is commonly defined as assistance,<sup>5</sup> but it can be the ability of cooperation,<sup>6</sup> the kindness and the generosity towards others.<sup>7</sup>

Although there has been a growing interest towards the research of prosocial behaviour since the 1990's, the behaviour of adolescents is still not extensively studied.<sup>8</sup> The articles argue that prosocial behaviour is determined by the ability of sympathy and moral judgment, which, in an optimal case, develop over the years in young adults.<sup>9</sup> Penner's theory about prosocial personality<sup>10</sup> says that there are two main aspects of supporting attitude. The first is empathy, which involves prosocial thoughts, feelings and responsibility to others. The second aspect is helpfulness, which is the act itself, when the person experiences discomfort in case of failure to help. Penner developed the Prosocial Personality Battery, which measures prosocial behaviour and its two aspects. The subscales of Other-oriented Empathy are Emphatic concern, Ascription of responsibility, Other-oriented moral reasoning, Perspective taking, Mutual-concerns moral reasoning. The Personal distress and the Self-reported altruism scales belong to Helpfulness.

Socialization largely determine the social competence in adolescence. The relationship with parents and friends have a huge impact on prosocial behaviour.<sup>11</sup> The parents' educational methods, monitoring style, expectations and the family's emotional, supporting environment will form the adolescence's social skills and the prosocial behaviour as well.<sup>12</sup> A safe and caring atmosphere at home and a positive relationship with parents help young people to develop the prosocial patterns.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, peer relationships are also an important factor in studying prosocial behaviour, because it becomes more and more dominant in puberty. The effect of stable friendships on prosocial patterns prevails over self-esteem and moral development.<sup>14</sup> The juvenile shows more prosocial gestures in romantic relationships and in intense friendships.<sup>15</sup>

4 Radnóti (2006) 105–20.

5 Bierhoff (2002)

6 Wentzel–McNamara (1999) 114–125.

7 Carlo et al. (2003) 107–134.

8 Fabes et al. (1999) 5–16.

9 Fabes et al. (1999).

10 Penner L. A. (2002) 447–467. Source: <http://www.med.wayne.edu/fam/faculty/pdfs/30itempsbkey.pdf> (Prosocial Personality Battery), Penner et al. (1995)

11 Carlo et al. (2007) 301–324.

12 Carlo et al. (1999) 133–147.

13 Wu et al. (2008) 1600–1624.

14 Carlo et al. (1999)

15 Fabes et al. (1999)

## Juvenile crime and prosocial behaviour

The spread of juvenile delinquency has increased the interest in prosocial and antisocial behaviour in psychology. Prosocial behaviour is directly related to crime rate, because its optimal development can protect the adolescents from destructive lifestyle. During moral socialization, the child experiences distress, which helps to develop the ability of empathy, the sense of guilt and sympathy, which are the foundation of prosocial behaviour.<sup>16</sup> Prosocial patterns are largely determined by the environment; therefore, this ability can be improved after adolescence as well.

Juvenile crime is often the result of dysfunctional and abusive families.<sup>17</sup> A child from a dysfunctional family is vulnerable and often has anger, moreover, he/she is unable to learn the prosocial norms.<sup>18</sup> In these families the emotional needs are neglected, the help for socialization, the awakening of cultural interest, parental supervision are not or only partly fulfilled.<sup>19</sup> The quality of family bond largely determines the quality of the above mentioned psychological functions. Emotional and physical abuse negatively affects self-esteem, self-concept, and the quality of other relationships; furthermore, these adolescents are often introverted personalities.<sup>20</sup>

Many researchers say that the warm, intimate family atmosphere, the parental attention and monitoring, and the high quality communication can greatly help to reduce crime rates.<sup>21</sup> Parental support and positive parent-child relationship play an important role in the development of prosocial values. It is important that the parent should give an emotional support to a child.<sup>22</sup> According to Kerezsi,<sup>23</sup> juvenile offenders – who have a dysfunctional relationship with their parents and have no support from their family – have a lack of empathy and prosocial skills.

## Friends, prosocial skills and crime

In addition to the incompetent or negative parental behaviour, there are other interpersonal deficits (e.g. lack of friends and peer relationships), which affect the development of adolescents.<sup>24</sup> When the attachment to peers is weak, the risk of deviance increases.<sup>25</sup> The pastime activities and the expectations to the future are important predictors of subsequent prosocial or antisocial behaviour. The structured and supervised time with peers (for example a hobby, school/club membership, volunteers or prosocial actions, etc.) have positive effects, whereas, the unstructured and meaning-

16 Kökönyei (2007) 325–356.

17 Robertson et al. (2008) 755–771.

18 Herczog (2008) 79–88.

19 Hegedűs (2010)

20 Kökönyei-Várnai (2007) 224–269.

21 Jonas et al. (2007) 229–245.

22 Ardelet-Day (2002) 310–349.

23 Kerezsi (2007) 36–54.

24 Beaver-Wright (2007) 640–664.

25 Parti (2008).

less pastime (truancy, alcohol consumption, disobedience, etc.) often lead to problematic behaviour.<sup>26</sup>

## Hypotheses

The main topic of this research is the appearance and the determining factors of the prosocial behaviour of juvenile offenders and of the control group. The research formulates the following hypotheses:

1. The offenders and non-offenders have different family background<sup>27</sup> and friend relationships.<sup>28</sup>
2. Prosocial thinking also appears in the juvenile offenders' personality, but the delinquent's prosocial actions will be significantly different from the non-offender group.<sup>29</sup>
3. The emotional support of the family, the intimate communication with the family<sup>30</sup> are associated with higher prosocial skills.
4. Parental monitoring and supervision, and the consistent implementation of family rules support the development of prosocial behaviour.<sup>31</sup>
5. Higher prosocial skills are associated with friendships based on trust.<sup>32</sup>

## The method

During this research we interviewed juvenile offenders, who spend their punishment in a detention facility or in prison, and who committed a crime as an adolescent (i.e. they were under the age of 18 at the time of the crime). The control group is composed of nearly the same number and same age young men. The research included qualitative and quantitative methods.

Hundred-and-seven young men were interviewed during the study, 55 are young offenders and 52 are in the control group. Fifty-one delinquencies and 49 persons from the control group completed the tests, consequently, the study examined 100 young men. The persons are adolescents (aged 14-18) and young adults (18-21 years old). The juvenile offenders are in two institutions: The Regional Juvenile Prison Institute in Pécs, Hungary (22 persons) and The Detention Center in Aszód, Hungary (29 persons). They are mainly convicted because of theft and robbery. The control group members were students of vocational training or a technical college in Szekszárd, Hungary at the time of the research.

The subjects filled out a questionnaire, and they participated in a face-to-face interview. The interview was quantified later in the study.

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26 Jacobs et al. (2004) 423-456.

27 Ardel-Day (2002); Kökönyei (2007).

28 Beaver et al. (2007).

29 Boxer et al. (2004) 7-23.

30 Butler et al. (2007) 721-738.

31 Ardel-Day (2002); Hegedűs (2010); Kökönyei (2007)

32 Parti (2008)

## Interview

The study consisted of a semi-structured interview with the adolescents. The questions were related to family characteristics, to friendships and relationships with peers, to leisure time, to the vision of their future and to the manner of their crime. The questions concerned family communication (the content and quantity of conversations, the level of trust), family support (assistance in problematic situations, help to decide, care, common leisure time) and parental monitoring (control, family rules and constraints). The test score of friendship is based on the relationship with their peers, and how the person evaluates the common pastime, the level of trust and assistance.

Based on the topics, we created a questionnaire, which enables the validation and quantification of the recorded interviews. After reading the answers for the interview questions, the interpreters evaluated the conversations on a five-point Likert scale. Two independent interpreters weighed the interviews to support objectivity.

## The questionnaires

The interviewed persons had to fill out a questionnaire, which had three major parts. The first section recorded the demographic parameters as the age, the educational level and the family structure. The second part assessed the level of social support and the third part examined the prosocial personality and prosocial and sympathetic behaviour. The questionnaire was short and it is composed of simple questions, supporting the understanding and answering process.

The questionnaire measuring social support was developed by Zimet et al.<sup>33</sup> and consists of 12 items. The interviewed person judges the feelings towards his family, the support of friends and the existence of a trustful person in his life on a seven-point Likert scale. Prosocial Personality Battery are created by Penner and colleagues<sup>34</sup> and assesses the prosocial patterns and actions. The instrument consists of 30 items. They consist of two main dimensions: Empathy (Emphatic concern, Ascription of responsibility, Other-oriented moral reasoning, Perspective taking, Mutual-concerns moral reasoning, it measures the prosocial way of thinking) and Helpfulness (Personal distress, Self-oriented altruism, it measures the prosocial actions). People with high score on the Empathy scale are characterized by strong prosocial attitudes and Helpfulness shows the number of prosocial actions.

The two questionnaires were developed in English; their adaptation to Hungarian was part of this research. As the first step, I translated the items to Hungarian, after that an independent person translated the Hungarian version to English. The third step was comparing the original and the reversed items, which was followed by the construction of the final Hungarian version.

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<sup>33</sup> Zimet et al. (1988) 30–41.

<sup>34</sup> Penner et al. (1995) 2002.

## The procedure

The participating institutions provided a separate room for the interviews, where the conversations took place in a relaxed and quiet environment. The questionnaire was filled out individually or in groups (8–10 persons) depending on the institutions. During the individual conversations, the young people had the opportunity to discuss the questionnaire items. The individual interviews were conducted in a separate room between the interviewer and the subject, ensuring the atmosphere for a more direct conversation. The average time to fill out the questionnaires was 15–20 minutes and the interviews lasted 25–30 minutes.

## The results

The evaluation of the answers was done with the SPSS 17 statistical program.

The subjects were on average 17.58 years old. Sixteen percent of juvenile delinquencies had not completed the eighth grade of school (the elementary school in Hungary lasts 8 years), 60.8% had a degree of elementary school and 7.8% had graduated from high school. The parents of 58.8% of offenders were divorced and only 19.6% of young men were living in a household with both parents. 29.4% of them live in a foster home, while 2% were with foster parents. The control group's members were on average 18.58 years old and 79.6% of them had a degree from the elementary school. 67.3% were living with both parents and 2% (one person) lived with foster parents.

## Reliability and validity of tests

In the research, we examined first the reliability of the methods. The acceptance level is 0.7 or more Cronbach alpha's value. The following table shows these values:

*Table 1. The values of Cronbach alpha*

Methods	Cronbach alpha
Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ)	0.874
SSQ – Family Dimension	0.894
SSQ – Friendship Dimension	0.865
SSQ – Other person Dimension	0.790
Prosocial Personality Battery (PPB)	0.755
PPB – Helpfulness Dimension	0.545
PPB – Empathy Dimension	0.727
Semi-structured interview	0.928

The table reveals that the reliability is 0.7 or higher expect of one dimension. The Helpfulness Dimension of Prosocial Personality Battery is less than the acceptance level, this dimension contains the personal distress and the altruistic actions. Consequently, the results of this scale should be treated with care.

We compared the Social Support Questionnaire with the interview parts related to the support (family care, family support, communication with friends and support of friends). The Family Dimension of the test correlated at  $p < 0.01$  significance level with the family care (0.501) and family support (0.485). The Friendship Dimension also showed a strong correlation with caring friends (0.484,  $p < 0.01$ ), the communication of friends (0.405,  $p < 0.01$ ) and the support of friends (0.533,  $p < 0.01$ ). These correlations show that the standardized measuring device (Social Support Questionnaire) and the interview conducted during this study measure the same values; therefore, the interview is an appropriate tool for statistical calculations.

### **Testing of the hypotheses**

The study compared the offender and non-offender groups in prosocial patterns, family characteristics and friendship. The main question of the research was whether the prosocial behaviour is determined by the same factors by offenders and non-offenders. The statistical analysis was carried out in three steps.

First, the differences were analysed between the two groups in the dependent (prosocial patterns) and independent variables (family, friends), then we analysed the correlation between the dependent and independent variables. In the third step, we analysed the positive or negative correlation between the variables applying linear regression analysis.

Independent sample T-test was used to explore the differences between the offenders and the control group. The method samples the averages of the variables in the two groups. Afterwards it compares the two group parameters with each other, and it investigates the significant differences between the offender and non-offender sample. The results are in the following table:

*Table 2. The offenders and the non-offenders – the results of the independent sample T-test*

Dependent variables	The level of significance (differences between the groups)
Family support	$p=0.000^*$
Family communication	$p=0.003^*$
Parental monitoring	$p=0.000^*$
Friendship	$p=0.000^*$

\*:  $p < 0,01$ : 99% significance level

The above, independent variables show a significant difference between the offender and non-offender groups. Depending on the quantified interview scores, we identify lower scores of the juvenile offenders (Table 3). The biggest difference is in the parental monitoring.

*Table 3. The scores of the independent variables in the interview*

	Offenders	Non-offenders
Family support	3.18	3.96
Family comm.	2.92	3.64
Parental monitoring	1.61	3.31
Friendship	2.79	3.65

Regarding the dependent variable, the prosocial personality, we see less significant differences. Most of the dimensions of the Prosocial Personality Battery are not significantly different, the results of the independent sample T-test was the following:

*Table 4. Differences in prosocial patterns*

	Offenders	Non-offenders	Level of significance
Other-oriented moral reasoning	3.24	3.70	0.005***
Self-oriented altruism	2.63	3.01	0.02**
Mutual-concerns moral reasoning	3.45	3.75	0.06*

\* $p < 0,01$ : 99% significance level

\*\* $p < 0,05$ : 95% significance level

\*\*\* $p < 0,1$ : 90% significance level (tendency)

The table reveals that the offenders show a significantly lower value of Other-oriented moral reasoning, prosocial actions and Mutual-concerns moral reasoning.

We examined the correlation between the dependent and the independent variables. The calculation considered the criminal past to identify the relationship between the family characteristics, the friendship and the prosocial behaviour. The partial correlation analysis shows the following results:

Table 5. The values of partial correlation between the prosocial behaviour and the dependent variables

	Family comm.	Family support	Par. monitoring	Friendship
Prosocial patterns	p=0.029**	p=0.000*	p=0.009*	
Prosocial behaviour	p=0.027**	p=0.002*	p=0.038**	p=0.015**
Asc. of Responsibility		p=0.092***	p=0.054***	
Perspective taking	p=0.062***	p=0.043**		p=0.009*
Emphatic concerns	p=0.002*	p=0.001*	p=0.006*	
Mut-con. moral reasoning		p=0.077***		p=0.057***

\*p<0,01: 99% significance level

\*\*p<0,05: 95% significance level

\*\*\*p<0,1: 90% significance level (tendency)

The table shows the significant correlation between the variables. These results show strong correlation between the family characteristics and the prosocial attitudes. The Family support is the most important variable, which is significantly correlated with each dependent variable. Especially the Emphatic concern shows strong correlation with family characteristics (p<0.01 significance level).

After the partial correlation, we examined the hypothesis that the independent variables are not only related to prosocial attitude, but they have a significant effect on it. Linear regression analysis was used to analyse this effect. (In the explanatory model we examine whether the independent variables affect the behaviour of a dependent variable.) The aspects of prosocial attitude were one by one measured in the analysis, whereas the independent variables were always linked together in the calculation.

The results of the linear regression analysis show that the effect of the Family communication vanishes, only Family support and Parental monitoring have significant effect on the dependent variable. Parental monitoring has an effect on the Ascription of responsibility and the Other-oriented moral reasoning, but this connection vanishes in the partial correlation analysis (i.e. when we consider the past criminal behaviour) (see Table 5). However, Family support has an effect on prosocial patterns (behaviour and attitudes). The Friendship dimension affects the scores of the Ascription of responsibility, the Perspective taking and the Mutual-concern moral reasoning.

## Conclusion

The present study analysed the connection between juvenile delinquency and positive social behaviour. The hypotheses were related to prosocial attitude and associated factors, which affect the behaviour of young offenders and non-offenders, and how the

factors determine prosocial attitudes and behaviour.

In summary, young offenders come from dysfunctional families, and they do not receive the appropriate care and attention at home. Their parents, even if they seemingly support their children, are unable to perform their parenting role and responsibilities. They fail to supervise their children's everyday life and their educational principles are inconsistent. The statistical results show that family care and support can greatly promote the development of prosocial attitude.

A well-functioning family is able to develop empathy, it underlines the theory that parents serve as a model for the child and their relationship determines the future social relations.<sup>35</sup> Parental monitoring teaches social responsibility and moral thinking. Socialization in the family and parental monitoring may help to accept and respect general social standards and to develop a sense of social responsibility. Although juvenile offenders are able to adopt prosocial patterns, they are less likely to implement them in practice. Interestingly, although friendships are significantly affected by family socialization, they are also able to override the behaviour learnt at home.

In contrast, the above mentioned correlation between parental monitoring, family support and friendship suggests that the strong relationship between variables and prosocial behaviour can be a result of early family atmosphere and standards, as family is the dominant socialization factor in the child's life. The significance of family cannot be neglected, even if the family broke up or the child had to go to foster care.

In summary, both family relations and adolescent peer relationships define prosocial behaviour. Nevertheless, they do not exclusively determine the behaviour. Next to socialization and social conditions, individual personality plays an important role in the development of prosocial patterns, therefore, these aspects should be considered at the research as well.

Although many international and national research analyse juvenile delinquency, many questions are unanswered about prosocial behaviour and young offenders. In this study, we focused on social conditions and prosocial behaviour, which can be improved even after adolescence; therefore, it is an important research area. However, other factors affect both prosocial behaviour and criminal behaviour. Therefore, the personality should be considered when answering questions such as why a young person from a well-functioning family commits crime, or how a person with dysfunctional family background can adopt to the social norms. An important result of this study is that prosocial behaviour is part of the offenders' personality, so focusing on the improvement of this feature can reduce crime rate and can help these young people to integrate to society. This research helps to understand that these young offenders are criminals, but also victims at the same time, who seek for adequate help.

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35 Clarke (2003)

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## ABSZTRAKT

### ***Fiatalkorú bűnelkövetők proszociális viselkedésének jellemzői***

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A kutatás a fiatalkorú bűnelkövetők proszociális viselkedését vizsgálja a családi háttér és a szociális kapcsolatok szempontjából. A cikk röviden áttekinti a bűnözés különböző elméleteit, a proszocialitás fogalmát és a fiatalkorú bűnelkövetők szociális kapcsolataival foglalkozó fontosabb kutatásokat. A vizsgálat kvantitatív és kvalitatív elemeket is tartalmaz. A proszocialitást felmérő kérdőív mellett egy félig strukturált interjú is szerepel a tanulmányban. Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a fogvatartotknál is megjelenik a proszocialitás mint pozitív társas attitűd, azonban a viselkedésükben kevésbé képesek érvényesíteni azt, mint a nem bűnelkövető fiatalok.

**Kulcsszavak:** fiatalkorú bűnelkövetők, proszociális viselkedés, bűnözési elméletek, fogvatartottak