

Assessment of Children Involved in Crime and Reintegration into Society Practices in the Context of an Empowerment Approach: The Case of Turkey

Hamza Aydemir (Corresponding author)
Çıldır Vocational School Department of Social Work, Ardahan University
75000, Ardahan, Turkey
E-mail: hamzaydemir23@gmail.com

Abstract

Today, the phenomenon of children involved in crime has become one of the common social problems of all societies, regardless of their level of development. Faced with this growing problem, states are developing legal regulations and policies based on the best interests of children at national and international levels. The reintegration and rehabilitation of children involved in crime into society is one of the most important areas of work in the discipline of social work. Social service professionals intervene at the micro, mezzo and macro levels, from the reasons why children turn to crime to judicial processes and supervised release programmes. This study examines two educational programmes for children involved in crime in prisons: the Individualised Rehabilitation System and the Ardıç Psychosocial Support Intervention. The aim of both programmes is to understand the causes of deviant behaviour and reintegrate the child into society, while observing the principle of the best interests of the child. The educational and psychosocial support models implemented were evaluated within the framework of the empowerment approach to social work. In this context, it was emphasised that empowering practices such as motivation development, awareness raising, problem-solving skills, and cognitive restructuring play an important role in increasing children's social adjustment.

Keywords: Children involved in crime, Empowerment approach, Psychosocial Applications

DOI: 10.7176/JEP/16-11-21

Publication date: October 30th 2025

1. Introduction

The family is the most important social institution forming the basis of society, and children are at the heart of this structure. Building a healthy and strong society depends on raising well-educated, critically thinking and psychologically balanced individuals. Therefore, children's physical, emotional and cognitive development must be supported from before birth. The principle of the best interests of the child should be a primary guide in all policies and practices (UNICEF, 2023). Approximately 2.2 billion children live worldwide (UNICEF, 2023). In Turkey specifically, children constitute 26.5% of the total population as of 2023; this corresponds to approximately 22.2 million children (TÜİK, 2024). For this segment, which constitutes a significant portion of the population, it is imperative that inclusive and comprehensive policies are implemented in the areas of health, education, social services and justice. However, in developing countries, factors such as poverty, migration, parental neglect, inequality of opportunity in education, substance abuse and social violence increase the risk of children being drawn into crime (Çağlar, 2025). A similar trend is observed in Turkey, where there has been an increase in the proportion of children drawn into crime. For this reason, preventive social policies are being developed that strengthen cooperation between state institutions, civil society and academic circles. Historically, the first systematic studies on children drawn into crime began in Turkey in the early years of the Republic. A study conducted at Izmir Prison in 1927 emphasised the need to establish juvenile courts and increase educational measures (Akyüz, 2002). Today, with the understanding of a child-specific justice system, "protective" and "rehabilitative" measures are being implemented with a more holistic approach. Today's rapidly changing socio-economic conditions increase the likelihood of children encountering risk factors. Therefore, protecting children from negative environmental influences and helping them acquire healthy social adaptation skills is a social responsibility (McKinney, 2014). The phenomenon of children being drawn into crime should be addressed as a social rather than an individual problem; preventive policies should focus on empowering children. In this context, the "empowerment approach" used in social services supports the reintegration of children into society by increasing their sense of self-efficacy, belonging and control (McKinney, 2014; Çağlar, 2025).

2. Children and Delinquency

The concept of "*child delinquency*," referred to in Turkey as "*the delinquency of minors*," is defined in Western sources as "*juvenile delinquency*." This definition encompasses most of childhood and adolescence (Polat, 2000). According to Uluğtekin (1991), in legal terms, children are individuals under the age of 18 who are preparing to become individuals in society. Individuals who have reached the age of eleven but not yet reached the age of sixteen are defined as minors, while individuals who have reached the age of sixteen but not yet reached the age of eighteen are defined as children. Juvenile delinquency is defined as the occurrence of unlawful situations accompanied by antisocial tendencies in accordance with this rule. According to another definition, juvenile delinquency is the violation of the law by people below the age of legal responsibility in various types of crime (Barker, 1988). Crimes committed by children differ from those committed by adults in many ways. The concept of delinquency in childhood is difficult to explain with definitions such as "the crime indicated by the law, the person who commits this crime is also a criminal," as stated in classical criminal law. This is because when juvenile delinquency is considered more deeply, it is clear that it is not only a legal problem but also a psycho-pedagogical and social phenomenon. The most significant feature that distinguishes juvenile delinquency from crimes committed in adulthood is that it involves the formation of personality. The developmental stages known as childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age are not sharply separated from one another. These developmental periods consist of processes in which emotional, social, economic, and cultural factors play a role (Yavuzer, 2009).

When examining studies on juvenile delinquency, it is seen that rather than looking at juvenile delinquency conceptually, they focus on the factors that cause children to commit crimes. When these studies are examined, the reasons why children are drawn into crime can be grouped into three categories: biological, psychological, and sociological approaches.

1. Biological approaches argue that children who break the law have hereditary disorders, endocrine imbalances, and brain pathologies.
2. Psychological approaches focus on the psychological pathologies of deviant individuals.
3. Sociological approaches are theories that attempt to explain changes in crime rates through social structure. As with adult crime, systematic explanations for the causes of juvenile delinquency are provided through sociological theories. From a sociological perspective, deviant behaviours that are fundamentally distinct from non-criminal forms of adaptation are considered a product of the social environment.

Sociological approaches, which have a different perspective from biological and psychological theories, focus more on social structure. For example, family structure, relationships within the family, and the role of the family in juvenile delinquency are discussed. According to these approaches, effects may vary depending on differences in social factors, and behavioural patterns may develop accordingly (İçli, 2004).

2.1. Reasons Leading Children to Crime

In his ecological model (1986), Bronfenbrenner argued that the situation of being driven to crime during childhood and adolescence cannot be assessed solely on the basis of the child's individual and characteristic features; rather, the relationship between micro, mezzo and macro systems and other systems must also be taken into account.

The ecological approach is based on the groups we belong to as individuals and our interactions with these groups. For social workers working within this approach, the aim should be to assess the harmony between the individual and their environment and to tailor the intervention to suit the individual and their environment in order to increase this harmony.

The ecological approach has four main components:

- 1) Microsystem: Groups we are part of on a daily basis; home, workplace, etc.
- 2) Mesosystem: Systems formed within microsystems; neighbours, community, etc.
- 3) Exosystem: Institutions and organisations that do not directly affect individuals; public institutions, civil society organisations, etc.
- 4) Macrosystem: Situations belonging to our culture; our beliefs, political ideologies, etc.

The ecological model uses both a holistic and multi-perspective approach to examine problems, enabling an in-depth analysis of the interactions between children who are drawn into crime and their culture and environment. In this regard, ecological theory plays an important role in explaining the reasons why children are drawn into crime (Paşlı, 2017).

A review of the literature on psychosocial risk factors that push children and young people into crime reveals quite different dynamics. These include: exposure to violence at home or in the community, domestic violence, substance and drug abuse, cognitive deficiencies in terms of utilising one's abilities, poor peer relationships, lack of attention from the family, and children raised by a single parent (Işık, 2006).

3. Psychosocial Models Applied in Turkey

The involvement of children in crime, seen as one of the major problems of our society and the globalising world, primarily affects the family, the smallest building block of society, and subsequently contributes to the deterioration of society in later stages. It therefore holds an important place in public policy. This problem, which causes disruption to public order, has necessitated the search for solutions both globally and in Turkey. One of the mechanisms for solving this problem is known to be the reintegration of children into society. At this point, the training, psychosocial assessments, follow-ups and end-of-process monitoring that are implemented will guide us.

3.1. An Alternative Model Applied in Prisons for Children Drawn into Crime: The Individual Rehabilitation System (BİSİS)

The Individualised Rehabilitation System is based on three fundamental elements: risk, need and suitability. The concept of risk, the first element of the Individualised Rehabilitation System, refers to the likelihood of a child involved in crime causing harm to themselves or others. Risk factors are divided into two categories: static risk factors and dynamic risk factors. Factors that cannot change over time, such as the child's past criminal history, *are static*, while factors that can change over time, such as the child's approach to crime, emotional state, and substance use, are dynamic factors. There are eight main risk factors that are decisive for criminal behaviour. These are: antisocial attitudes, antisocial friends, history of antisocial behaviour, antisocial personality traits, problematic situations at home, difficulties at work or school, problematic daily activities, and substance use (Ögel, 2014).

The second element of this system is need. The needs of children drawn into crime are divided into two categories: criminological and non-criminological. Criminological needs are identified as antisocial personality traits, substance use problems, low problem-solving skills, impulsivity, and anger control problems, while low self-esteem, financial problems, or depression are identified as non-criminological "needs". The third and final element of the Individualised Rehabilitation System is suitability. The suitability element refers to the consideration and structuring of individuals' learning styles, cognitive abilities, and values in intervention strategies (Ögel, 2014).

In addition to these, there are three separate sections that make up the system. These begin with determining the risk and needs categories of the child involved in crime, followed by planning and implementing education and rehabilitation programmes tailored to the identified risks and needs. The final stage is the evaluation phase, which follows the implementation of the education and rehabilitation programmes. The risk assessment encountered in the first stage of the BİSİS application is presented with the ARDEF (Research Assessment Form). The questions in the ARDEF form are asked to the child to assess both risk and needs. In the second stage of the BİSİS system, the results of the ARDEF form are used to develop measures and rehabilitation methods to be applied to the child involved in crime. The final phase of the BİSİS system involves the evaluation of the rehabilitation efforts implemented and the efforts to mitigate risk. BİSİS is "a model that self-monitors through continuous measurement and evaluation, in which a separate assessment is made for each child, the improvement process to be carried out in the penal institution is planned and implemented, and the necessary rehabilitative environment is created for the implementation of a programme specific to the convict". This system consists of an Individualised Rehabilitation Programme based on the universal fundamental conditions of rehabilitation: security and discipline, respect for human dignity, and a full activity programme. "The inmate's admission to the institution, observation and classification, institutional life, rehabilitation activities, family participation in the process, administrative practices, and release process are carried out in accordance with the Individualised Rehabilitation Programme." The BİSİS programme can also be viewed as a case management programme. Within the scope of this programme, personnel selected from among those who have received group leadership and pedagogical training spend their entire working hours with the children involved in crime for whom they are responsible. In addition to their rehabilitation duties, the personnel responsible for children involved in crime also fulfil the duties of preventing possible peer bullying or abuse situations that may arise among children, by participating in psychosocial support programmes applied individually or in groups, providing educational support, sporting activities, and skills that can be used in their daily lives (<http://www.cte.adalet.gov.tr/Home/SSSorularDetay>).

Another component implemented within the Individualised Rehabilitation Programme is the rehabilitative environment. The fundamental aim of the rehabilitative environment is not to create a perfect environment. It is to provide a calming and supportive environment that can prevent frustration, aggression, disappointment and loss. In a sense, the rehabilitative environment creates an "ambiance" within the institution. It is possible to say that it has developed a system with standards, independent of the institution's employees. In the rehabilitative environment, it is important to provide the necessary environment for the implementation of individualised rehabilitation plans in prisons. Creating suitable spatial conditions for rehabilitation includes training staff, ensuring specialisation among staff, establishing close communication with the families of prisoners, carrying out institutional planning, establishing participatory management, conducting evening and weekend activities, and providing economic and social support to the children of prisoners (Ögel, 2014).

Although the individualised improvement system identifies children's primary needs in terms of psychosocial support and analyses appropriate intervention plans, this may be insufficient in preventing children from re-entering the risk group in later periods. At this point, it may be more appropriate to identify children's risk factors and then strengthen them in these areas of risk. Incorporating a strengthening approach into the individualised improvement system may contribute to children's psychosocial development in later stages.

3.2. ARDIÇ Psychosocial Support Intervention Programme for Children Involved in Crime

The ARDIÇ psychosocial support programme intervention is implemented as a two-stage intervention plan. This model, which can be implemented through individual and group work, consists of four separate programmes. These are: Personality Development Programme, Positive Anger Management Programme, Smoking, Alcohol and Substance Abuse Programme, and Safe Behaviour Programme (I Am Here).

A- Personality Development Programme: This programme mainly includes children with a higher tendency to commit crimes. The programme content includes impulse and anger control training, establishing discipline and planning in life, and particularly preventing self-harming behaviour. It is a type of training provided individually by psychosocial support personnel.

B- Towards Good Anger Management Programme: This programme is primarily aimed at children at high risk of harming themselves or others. The aim is to raise awareness among children about the negative consequences that may arise if they do not control their anger. At this point, the positive aspects of the results that may arise when methods and techniques for controlling anger in moments of anger are applied are also discussed. It is implemented as group work.

C- Smoking, Alcohol and Substance Abuse Programme: This programme includes children who have a history of drug and alcohol use and are experiencing problems in this regard. The programme aims to rehabilitate these children in terms of substance and alcohol use. It is implemented through group work.

D- Safe Behaviour Programme (I'm Here): The main objective of this programme is to steer children's behaviour in a safe direction and to enable them to express themselves in a healthier way. The Safe Behaviour Programme, which aims to support basic life skills, seeks to reduce the likelihood of children reoffending after their release. It is implemented through group work (<https://cte.adalet.gov.tr/Home/SayfaDetay/ardic-programi>).

4. Power and Empowerment Approach

One of the most important aims of social work practice is to strive to enable clients to gain control and power over ongoing events in their lives and to implement practices based on this foundation. While struggling with powerlessness or the inability to obtain resources to meet their desires or needs, the social worker becomes involved in empowerment processes (Teater, 2015). The settlement movement, particularly the work of Jane Adams, nineteenth-century women's associations in the United States, and African American social reform associations all provide evidence for a power-based approach. In social work, however, empowerment theory is relatively new and incorporates elements from various social sciences such as political science, psychology, sociology, and economics (Lee & Hudson, 2011). Teater (2015) states that, while the empowerment approach fundamentally examines the mutual dependence and interaction between the individual and the environment, it can be applied in collaboration with individuals, groups, communities, and society.

4.1. Power

The concept of power is widely used in our daily lives, but it is a concept that is difficult to define in terms of both its literal meaning and its theoretical framework. Within these theoretical analyses, the concept of power is evaluated differently from different perspectives, which makes it impossible to arrive at a single meaning for the word we are analysing. When evaluated psychologically, models of power relate to an individual's ability to achieve their own goals and include the following:

- 1- Skills: Communication, assertiveness, effectiveness, etc.

- 2- Personal Characteristics: Sexual attractiveness, family or status-related circumstances, respectability, charisma, etc.
 - 3- Role: Manager, inspector, auditor, etc.
 - 4- Attitudes: Self-confidence, self-belief, willingness to take risks, etc. (Thompson, 2016).
- Having power (to achieve our goals) is having potential (Thompson, 2016). In this context, power is one of our most important values, along with analysing ourselves and planning within our responsibilities.

4.2. Empowerment Approach

Empowerment as a concept offers a perspective aimed at establishing connections between individuals and the realities of life, while empowerment as a process grants the individual control over their environment and the conditions surrounding them. Within this framework, the approach holds an important place in the context of the social work profession and discipline. It has emerged as a reaction to all other approaches that accept the philosophy of achieving success together with the individual, rather than for the individual, while perceiving the individual as a passive entity in the problem-solving process (Yıldırım, 2014). The term empowerment reflects helping people gain control over their life circumstances, obtain the necessary information and resources, develop their ability to take action and make decisions to gain greater self-confidence, and regulate their social and political environment (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2003). Empowerment can be used synonymously with highlighting the strengths possessed by individuals, families, groups, organisations, and communities, increasing, developing, and supporting these strengths, and increasing their power and control over their lives by making their own decisions (Duyan, 2012).

After all the definitions mentioned above, empowerment can be explained as follows: empowerment is an approach that eliminates the feelings of powerlessness experienced and felt by individuals within themselves, brings out the power hidden within the individual, provides the individual with a critical perspective in approaching problems, enables them to defend their own rights, and is based on the right to determine one's own destiny (Erbay, 2019).

When considered in the context of social work, the empowerment approach can be used in many different applications. Thompson classifies some of these situations as fear, low self-esteem, pressure from others, anxiety, conflict, suffering, grief, living in debt, mental health problems, learning difficulties, and alcohol or substance use (Thompson, 2016).

In the empowerment-based approach, there is no time limit for working with clients; the interventions applied may also change after the client has been assessed and the systems requiring change have been identified. The empowerment approach can also be useful as one of the various methods used in working with clients (Teater, 2015). Sheafor and Horejsi (2003) have identified several points for social workers to successfully implement the empowerment approach:

- The social worker must believe that individuals can change by working together and that they can achieve the necessary socio-political change at this point.
- The social worker must accept that the client is the only expert on their own life and their current situation.
- Social workers should assist clients in developing self-confidence and self-respect.
- Social workers should enable clients to feel their personal power by supporting them, particularly in decision-making processes, and allowing them to do so.
- The social worker should help the client understand the reasons behind the feelings of powerlessness they experience.
- The social worker should encourage the client to seek out learning opportunities that will help them understand the people, organisations and systems that affect them.
- The social worker should help the client identify potential sources of power that they can use to improve their situation.
- When the client feels empowered and capable, the social worker should support them in using their existing power in a planned and disciplined manner to achieve the desired change.
- The social worker should be aware that empowerment can be used for all clients in any setting.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the main issues that comes to mind when considering crime is children who are drawn into crime. Children who are drawn into crime cause great harm both to themselves as individuals and to society. This situation is becoming increasingly worrying as the rate of children being drawn into crime increases every year. Legal regulations alone are not sufficient to prevent this situation. measures taken by the legal system alone may

not prevent children from being drawn into crime again. It is necessary to give more space to multidisciplinary work that should be implemented in this area, and for fields such as social services, psychology, health, and law to come together with a common goal to work towards minimising the rate of children drawn into crime. Long-term plans should be prepared within this scope. In order to understand children who are drawn into crime, it is first necessary to look at the reasons why they are drawn into crime. When looking at these reasons, it should not be forgotten that children are very susceptible to being influenced, both physically and biologically. Although the reasons why children are drawn into crime are varied, the main reasons include family, peer group, school, drugs and alcohol, and socio-economic factors. When addressing these reasons, it is important not to look at them individually in the solution process. It should not be forgotten that there may be more than one reason why a child is drawn into crime and that these reasons may be interrelated.

This study focuses on the basis for applying the empowerment approach, one of the social work approaches, and its integration into psychosocial education models applied to children drawn into crime. The empowerment approach focuses primarily on the strengths of the individual, the group and the community. According to the empowerment approach, the negative experiences (traumas, illnesses, etc.) that a person has undergone and the struggles they face at certain stages of life can be debilitating, but the empowerment approach reverses this situation and presents the person with a new challenge.

In this context, social service practices should be integrated with both psychology and sociology and incorporated into psychosocial support programmes. According to this research:

- Juvenile delinquency is a social problem in Turkey.
- Legislation has been enacted and agreements signed at national and international levels regarding juvenile delinquency, which has emerged as a social problem.
- We must not view juvenile delinquency as an individual phenomenon. This is because children's involvement in crime is a multifaceted phenomenon.
- When children who have been drawn into crime enter the justice system, the fundamental goal should be to reintegrate the child into society.
- The social work profession and its practitioners play a major role in the process of reintegrating children who have been drawn into crime back into society.
- Social services work with children who are considered disadvantaged and have been drawn into crime, and are directly involved in the rehabilitation processes of these children.
- When examining the literature and the field, although social work practices hold an important place within the justice system, they are not sufficient.
- Social work theories and methods should be used more extensively within the justice system, particularly in rehabilitation processes.
- Models that can be directly applied to children who have been drawn into crime within social work theory and methods should be included in the list of in-service training.

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