



## Children and crime: A study on child perpetrators in South Sumatera, Indonesia

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### Abstract

One of the crucial social problems that require an urgent solution is the phenomenon of children as perpetrators of crime. This study elaborates on children as perpetrators of crime using Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, through the dialectic of habitus, capital, and field. The research was conducted from a phenomenological perspective, and to this end, the researcher directly met with 12 child offenders at LPKA Palembang, and 2 children in Kayuagung Prison, all of whom were boys. According to the study, the habitus is defined as the disposition to commit crimes, which in this context for child perpetrators, was associated with past experiences, parenting since childhood, as well as the results of environmental dialectics. Crime is also manifested in the capital - social capital in the form of networks with criminals, cultural capital in the form of the knowledge of the ins and outs of crime, and symbolic capital concerned with the desire to become a majorly respected criminal. Meanwhile, economic capital was regarded as the capital to be gained from the crimes committed. However, the hierarchical crime field illustrates the vulnerable position of child perpetrators, as they are often "used" by adults who are also involved in crime. The use of theory of practice in the context of children and crime is a new perspective that is still rarely used. Theory of practice not only turns this study into a descriptive one, but also gives due consideration to the power relations of the parties involved in the crime.

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### Introduction

The phenomenon of children's involvement in crime is considered an extremely crucial social problem in

several countries. Thus, it requires due consideration and in-depth investigation (Ochoa & Roberts, 2021). Roettger and Dennison (2018) claimed that if the crime culture is passed down across generations, then it could result in a social disaster, leading to several losses, posing a major threat to society, and exacerbating risks to the population, which includes the possibility of the lost generation. In America, finding solutions to prevent the emergence of crimes committed by children has even become part of a significant national agenda by

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formulating programs that can have long-term effects on children's lives in the future. Such an agenda was devised in consideration of data that showed a rise in criminal cases where children have been perpetrators, such as in cases of murder, kidnapping, robbery, assault, and also motor vehicle theft (Yoshikawa, 1995). This is in line with Vries et al. (2018) in the Netherlands, who also believe it important to focus on developing a strategic agenda to prevent the emergence of children as perpetrators of crime, so as to minimize the significant costs that may be incurred in the future due to a rise in such phenomena.

Researchers consider it important to identify, elaborate, and conduct studies with the theme of children and crime for two reasons. First, children are one of the vital components of social life, but in comparison to adults, the position of child perpetrators of crime is subordinate. Being one of the vulnerable groups, they are generally easy targets for violence and injustice (Ulya, 2016). Second, in Indonesia, the study of children in general, and particularly of child offenders, from a sociological perspective is still very limited (Djaya, 2020). According to Suyanto (2019) this has also been influenced by the presumption that children's problems are not important or serious, as they are all generally classified as domestic problems. This study was conducted to contribute to the enrichment of studies on children, crime, and deviant behavior.

This study explored the lives and experiences of child offenders, providing context for how the process, cognitions and behaviors of children take place, to identify the formation of the habitus. The habitus underlies one's actions associated with their history and past experiences, and is also the result of internalizing and externalizing a person with the environment and the structure surrounding it. Habitus refers to a collection of long-lasting character habits, traits, and behavioral habits possessed by all individuals in their daily life. It is also concerned with the ownership of resources (capital) for the children of perpetrators, in the crime field. This ownership of capital refers to how agents struggle and strategize to achieve their interests in the field (field of struggle). The field is an environment or space where the lives and worlds of criminals are then further elaborated. This dialectic of habitus, capital, and field then shapes practice (Swartz, 1997). According to Bourdieu (2000), these three aspects are not isolated, but instead, are interrelated as elements of the theory of practice, forming an important tool to study the ways in which social actions occur; in this context, crimes committed by children. Thus, this article focused on explaining the practice of crimes committed by the children of perpetrators.

## Literature Review

The use of Bourdieu's perspective in crime studies is still relatively new (Macit, 2018). Criminologists and researchers in the field of crime remain slow to adopt his ideas in the field (Shammas, 2018). As Bourdieu did not majorly address themes related to crime (Shammas & Sandberg, 2016), his works and theoretical propositions have attracted the attention of other researchers, and not many have focused on the specific theme of children and childhood in association with crime (Alanen et al., 2015). Thus, there exist very few studies that focus on the study of children, juvenile delinquency, and crime, with the theoretical perspective offered by Bourdieu, particularly the theory of practice.

Several studies do employ Bourdieu's framework of thinking, namely the theory of practice, such as: Ilan and Sandberg (2019); Lunney et al. (2011); Macit (2018); Moyle and Coomber (2017); and Yuniaty and Sutopo (2019). However, the aspects that distinguish this research from the previous studies are: (1) Variation of criminal cases by using boys as research subjects, as each child is unique with their own complexities; and (2) Boys who are serving a prison sentence as research subjects.

## Methodology

This research elaborates on the phenomenon, experiences, perspectives, and 'voices' of child offenders who have become research informants (subjects). Therefore, it is more suitable to use the descriptive phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the description of what was experienced, not on interpretive phenomenology, which focuses on the interpretation of symbols (Moustakas, 1994).

The informants in this study were 12 (twelve) children who were placed in LPKA Palembang, and 2 (two) children in Kayuagung Prison, Ogan Komering Ilir Regency, all of whom were boys. Informants were determined purposively, with various background cases, namely: murder, premeditated murder, motorcycle robbery that led to death, drug abuse, theft, motor vehicle theft, and other immoral crimes.

### Data Collection

Researchers collected data by meeting the research informants directly. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted so that the informants could

reveal themselves, the world, and their own experiences to the researchers. Prior to conducting the interview, the researcher prepared an interview guide as a data collection instrument. Observations were carried out by examining attitudes, behavior, actions, and social processes that had taken place between child offenders in LPKA, as well as between children and prison officers. The process of documentation was completed with data collection, in the form of videos, interview recordings, researcher field notes, interview transcripts, photographs, and online news relevant to the focus of the study.

### *Data Analysis*

In this study, data analysis refers to Creswell (2016), who describes a linear and hierarchical approach, built from the ground up. The analysis was carried out from the very beginning of the study, during the study, and during the phase when conclusions were being drawn. In the drafting of a research plan, the analysis had already begun in the process of formulating assumptions, followed by data collection, analyzing and interpretation of meanings and themes through descriptions, to finally produce conclusions. However, the application of this method is not entirely rigid, as the approach can be more interactive. Thus, the stages are constantly interrelated and may not necessarily take place in the manner and arrangement presented.

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## **Results**

### *Habitus as an Action Disposition*

Habitus is a product of the internalization of the structure of the social world. However, habitus also rejects determinism, departing from a structural perspective. It provides space for individuals to have and take into account their creative and strategic abilities, thus producing strategies that are objectively adapted according to the existing situation (Bourdieu, 2011).

For Bourdieu, habitus corresponds with something more complex and complicated (Bourdieu, 1977; 1990). "Habitus is a product of history, and produces individual and collective practices..." (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 82). This is also related to the history of the individual, and includes the background of the child's life. Most of the perpetrators' children came from the lower middle social class, with family backgrounds and parenting patterns that were not optimal for their growth and development. Often, these children also face problems in terms of education; they may be unable to keep up with

academic developments or lessons at school, labeled as troublemakers, resulting in them dropping out of school altogether. In addition to this backdrop, note that certain areas in South Sumatra Province are prone and permissive to crime (Runturambi, 2017). A culmination of these contextual details directly or indirectly contributes to the habitus of crime in the perpetrator's child. Criminal habits form into social values that are embodied by agents and generated through an enduring process of socialization and internalization of values, such that they settle into ways of thinking and patterns of criminal behavior that persist among human beings.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that the perpetrator's child always receives negative input during their life. Children also receive several positive parenting values, both from family (especially parents) and school. These values also include religious values. Children develop through multiple diverse and complex dispositions. The life of the agent in the field does intersect with other fields (Alanen et al., 2015). However, criminal acts have become a choice as a result of the internalization of externality and externalization of internality. As the manifestation of internalization of externality, the children determinedly consider crime as a solution, forced into acting out for a number of reasons, without thinking carefully about the consequences of the crime. Some children perceive crime as an act that violates the law, but decide to persist within the world of crime due to various reasons such as: the mounting hatred and desire to take revenge on the victim, self-defense, inability to avoid the influence of friends and the surrounding environment, and potentially even due to drug addiction (eventually stealing or even killing to buy and be under the influence of drugs). The crime field also provides more space and acceptance for children to prove their existence and assimilate into such an environment. This is prompted by their frustration, lack of acceptance, and inability to compete in the mainstream field, one of which overlaps with the field of academics. This is also why some of them consciously choose to enter the world of crime, aspiring to become "big criminals".

The child is not a passive figure in the existing social process, but is influenced and, at the same time, influences the social world. As a form of the externalization of internality, these children then reproduce and build their own criminal trails, either by themselves or with peer groups, lost to their own world and perception. For example, informant MR initially followed in the footsteps of his older brother, who had been involved in many mugging crimes. MR chose the same path as his older brother, as he considered joining the gang who used to steal things as part of proving his existence as a teenager

who was considered ‘cool’. However, MR possessed an individual narrative, separate from his brother. In this case, individuals develop their respective habitus according to their position in the social arena.

On the other hand, habitus consciously or unconsciously moves individuals to make choices while also limiting certain choices at the same time. Thus, there are individuals who have the urge to enter and be involved in crime, but on the other hand, there are also individuals who are not involved. The choice to “be part” or “not part” of the crime is attributed to the perception of the action as different from a mechanical response to an external determining structure. The existence of a person or group of people who are not involved in crime is also a result of this crime field, which also intersects with several other fields such as family, education, religion, and others. This, in turn, tends to affects an individual’s experience and reflexive capacity to think critically and comprehend risk better, thus leading them to choose not to be part of a crime.

### *Capital in Child Perpetrators*

Bourdieu defines capital as a resource that can secure one’s position in the social order (Moyle & Coomber, 2017). He divides capital into four categories, namely: economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1983; Swartz, 1997). Economic capital is the type of capital that is most commonly known and the easiest to convert in the form of wealth, money, income or financial means, as well as other sources and means of production that generate money. Meanwhile, social capital includes a number of social networks and relationships owned by agents. Through this close relationship between networks and social relations, “trust” is born. Symbolic capital includes the recognition of status symbols, prestige, authority, legitimacy, and the position of the agent (Seidman, 2013). Following this form, cultural capital can manifest in the form of the overall knowledge, understanding, and intellectual capacity of the agent. There are three forms of cultural capital, namely: embodied state, in the form of long-lasting disposition of the mind and body; objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.); and institutionalized state, a form objectification that must be set apart, as shall be observed in the case of educational qualifications - it confers entirely original properties to the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee (Bourdieu, 1983).

The criminal habit of the perpetrator’s child in this study is strengthened by the presence of capital, which is

categorized as social capital and cultural capital. Social capital is acquired during the daily social processes in the social environment and the world of friendship. The choice of network and environment of friendship tends to be based on reasons such as the parties feel they are “in the same boat”, or recognition of similarities in various aspects, such relatively similar learning abilities, parental background, economic life, tendencies (interests and hobbies), and habits. These help them feel ‘connected’ and allow them to communicate easily. In other words, they may have the same or similar habitus. In this context, social capital is a network with criminals; the entrance for children to get to familiarize themselves with the world of crime. From this network, trust is then built, so that children become part of the inner circle in the crime environment. Children of perpetrators network with bandits, robbers, suppliers of homemade firearms, social environments inhabited by sharp weapons makers, dealers and drug users, motorcycle robbers, gangs of robbers, recidivists, promiscuous individuals, smokers and alcohol users, fellow school dropouts and unemployed persons, friends from the same gang who are used to truancy and lack academic skills, and are addicted to online games or are often involved in brawls.

Another capital that plays a role in the phenomenon of children committing crimes is cultural capital. This capital is observed in the courage, knowledge of the field, and the intricacies of evil, all of which have become embodied by the state and the institutionalized state. Knowledge of the field refers to that of criminal actors, techniques, and methods of committing crimes (such as the characteristics of targets/prey for motorcycle robbery, mugging, and theft). Each day, the children observe people around them who work as robbers and commit other crimes, and then improve their courage and knowledge of crime, often even considering crime as a normal activity. Homemade firearms and sharp weapons that they themselves may have made embody the objectified state, as a form of cultural goods in crime. This capital is obtained in the daily life of children. Accustomed to making their own sharp weapons, and as the villagers work as craftsmen of sharp weapons for daily use (cooking), some children acquire a supply of homemade firearms from friends. Weak cultural capital often causes children to fail in committing crimes, get caught and serve out sentences of imprisonment. Thus, these factors of knowledge, experience, courage, and a thorough understanding of the crime field are very important for the success of actors in the field.

However, it is important to remember that these crimes are committed in an effort to stand out and due to an inability to compete or receive recognition from the

mainstream. The choice to enter the world of crime is often made to achieve success, fame, and social status, especially for those who feel frustrated and also experience social exclusion (Ilan & Sandberg, 2019). In this manner, some children want to become “big criminals” to gain recognition, assert their identity, and maintain self-esteem as part of symbolic capital. For the record, not all informants stated openly from the beginning that they wanted to pursue the world of crime or wanted to become criminals.

Meanwhile, considering that most of the child perpetrators come from the lower middle class, economic capital may perhaps be what children want to achieve through their crimes. While economic capital is most commonly known, and manifests in the form of wealth and sources of production, in the study of crime, it does not receive much mention. The lack of economic capital is one of the motives that encourage children to choose and commit crimes without thinking about the repercussions.

The choice of children to commit crimes sometimes does produce material benefits. This condition has been shown in the concept of converting strategy by Bourdieu (1983). Child perpetrators exchange their social capital and cultural capital in crime in exchange for economic capital. However, when the crime is hampered by a lawsuit, it harms the lives of children and families. This condition is, of course, unfavourable, as during economic hardship, parents and families invest much time, energy, and certain amounts of money to resolve the allegations against their children. Additionally, it is important to consider the social sanctions that take place due to negative stigma and gossip from the community and social environment. Ultimately, these circumstances further complicate the situation, marginalizing children and families away from the mainstream of social life. Ilan and Sandberg (2019) have shown that the amount of capital that benefits actors in the crime field is only relevant and operational within the crime field itself. However, this devalues the position of actors in the mainstream field of social life.

### Crime Field

A field is a place where habitus and capital operate; it is also where power relations develop, and where the position and capital of the actors are at stake. The field may appear in any scope, such as the literary field, the educational field, the political field, and others. In this context, the crime field is examined, where children are involved. The concept of the field is related to the operation of the social world. The field is a structured space where practice takes place, and where power

relations are observed to function. In the field, actors occupy certain positions according to the volume, quality, and quantity of capital owned by each of them (Swartz, 1997). The field becomes a place of struggle to maintain and fight for position, power, and legitimacy, ultimately changing the structure of domination. Here, the actors fight with all the resources (capital) and strategies they have, in defending and claiming their position in the hierarchy (Bowden, 2021). This battle also seeks to compete for influence and defend resources. The struggle, competition, and battle in the field may not be fights in the physical sense, but symbolic struggles.

Bourdieu regards social relations in hierarchical relationships. In the field of crime, it is not only children who are involved, but also other criminals such as adult criminals, who are no longer categorized as children (in Indonesia, if they are over 18 years old, they are categorized as adults). Adult criminals are in a dominant position as they are supported by more capital ownership than children. Privilege as an adult criminal is symbolic capital; knowledge and experience of crime is cultural capital, while networking with the criminal world and other recidivists is social capital.

Here, children are in a dominated position, where adults have the power to regulate, create, and shape children's lives. This aspect is beyond the child's control, but contributes to shaping and influencing the child's life. Therefore, not all crimes committed by children are “purely” the fault of the child perpetrator.

This power relation in the crime field makes the occurring social process not only an associative one but also a dissociative process. The associative social process is viewed in the form of offering assistance (tools), providing knowledge, learning about techniques/methods, targeting victims, etc., or helping when escaping and committing crimes together. Meanwhile, the dissociative social process is in the form of manipulative actions; the ‘use’ of children for the benefit of adult criminals. The innocence and ignorance of children are taken advantage of by adult criminals who invite them to be take part in crimes. As a result, many children have been ensnared by the law, only because they were persuaded by adult criminals. Several cases of informants in this study showed that their involvement in premeditated murder cases, and operations as drug users and dealers, initially took place due to the invitation and persuasion of adult criminals.

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### Conclusion

The Theory of Practice proposed by Bourdieu is relevant to the comprehension and analysis of social

processes and complexity at the focus of the study in this research, child crime. It was found that the practice of crimes committed by children is based on their habitus, the disposition of criminal acts. The habitus is also related to the ownership of capital, which is used by children in the crime field. Then, the capital and the field also continually interact within the lives of these children until the formation of the habitus takes place again. Habitus is an aspect that underlies the actions of these children, relating to their past experiences, parenting patterns, the consequences of their upbringing since childhood, as well as the results of their dialectic with the surrounding environment, such that habitus becomes a preference for most of the crimes committed by children. Meanwhile, social relations and processes that appear in the field will always be hierarchical, where children are in a dominant position. This dominant position proves that the existence of children is inseparable from how the social world as a structure provides influence and direction for the child. Therefore, children as perpetrators of child crimes are not completely unjustified, as being a child relates to a human becoming an individual who still has to learn a lot about life.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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