

Understanding Juvenile Delinquency in Lithuania: From Misconceptions to Negative Attitudes



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Abstract Criminological research indicates that the majority of individuals engage in illicit activities on an episodic or regular basis, at a young age. The majority of these individuals are not subject to formal control mechanisms, and this behaviour typically ceases upon reaching adulthood. The majority of these offences are minor in nature. It is almost universally the case that young people with a history of serious criminal behaviour have experienced multiple violations of their rights during infancy and early childhood, which have had a deleterious impact on their biological and social development. While there is a general consensus that minor delinquency is a pervasive phenomenon and that the social and psychological factors contributing to more serious forms of criminal behaviour are complex, there is nevertheless a tendency to condemn, intimidate and impose harsh penalties on those who engage in such behaviour. The media plays a significant role in shaping these attitudes, with public opinion often influenced by emotional responses. Furthermore, a segment of the public that is less aware of the context of young people's lives and the factors that contribute to delinquency also has a more negative view of the importance of protecting the rights of the child in all circumstances.

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1 Introduction

In the public sphere, juvenile delinquency is typically regarded as a significant societal issue, often evoking concern and apprehension. This perception has contributed to the view that juvenile delinquency poses a potential threat to the future of society or the state, necessitating specialised measures and enhanced interventions across various levels and forms. This particularly critical perspective is disproportionately directed at the entire juvenile age group, a phenomenon not observed in attitudes towards other age groups. For the state, communities, and professionals to respond effectively to juvenile delinquency, it is essential to analyse the underlying factors contributing to such behaviours. Furthermore, it is crucial to critically evaluate the narrative perpetuated by the media and the societal attitudes shaped by it. Media representation significantly influences public perceptions and can exacerbate misconceptions about juvenile delinquency. This chapter presents findings from a study conducted by the authors on the factors influencing juvenile delinquency, its portrayal in the media, and the opinions of the Lithuanian population.¹

2 The Phenomenon of Juvenile Delinquency and Its Perception in the Context of Children's Rights

Juvenile delinquency is a ubiquitous and pervasive phenomenon that emerges during the developmental and maturational phases of an individual's life. It is a transient issue, often challenging to control (Dollinger and Schmidt-Semisch 2011; Reinecke et al. 2013; Dollinger and Schadbach 2013) and is intrinsically linked to the processes of personality, identity, and autonomy formation (Riesner 2014). Behaviours associated with juvenile delinquency often stem from a natural desire to take risks, test boundaries, explore and understand new experiences, provoke, resist established authority, seek individuality, and maintain social connections with peers. These behaviours may also reflect the fulfilment of personal inclinations, fantasies, or social expectations. Furthermore, analogous characteristics associated with biological and social maturation frequently result in contraventions of legal norms (Jusienė 2007; Sakalauskas 2007, 2013; Schumann 2011). Such characteristics are closely linked to neurobiological processes occurring in the brain during adolescence (Düinkel et al. 2020). Research on juvenile delinquency suggests that the majority of young people have, at some point, engaged in unlawful behaviour, underscoring the transient and developmental nature of this phenomenon (Dollinger and Schadbach 2013). However, the majority of these crimes are minor, with only a

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very small proportion of young people demonstrating persistent or intense delinquent behaviour. Such behaviour is often impulsive, reckless, and episodic in nature, and it typically resolves itself without intervention (United Nations 1990; Icenogle et al. 2019). Therefore, it is not a reliable indicator of poor parenting (Heinz 2017).

More severe cases are almost invariably associated with a combination of structural, social, and psychological problems, both past and present, that serve as risk factors for delinquency (Laurinavičius 2020). Conversely, certain protective factors have been identified, including a favourable social environment (Tillmann 2010), timely and competent support (Enke 2003; Riesner 2014; Švedaitė-Sakalauskė and Eidukevičiūtė 2015), and the opportunity to take on new roles and achieve successful integration into the labour market (Gečienė et al. 2007). These factors have been shown to protect against or prevent offending. The opportunity to assume new roles and achieve successful integration into the labour market (Gečienė et al. 2007) can therefore serve as a protective factor against or a means of preventing offending. The primary—and perhaps most challenging—task in professional responses to juvenile delinquency lies in distinguishing between typical, transient acts of delinquency that do not significantly increase the risk of a criminal career and those behaviours that do. Inappropriate or disproportionate responses to juvenile offences may inadvertently heighten the risk of recidivism (Dollinger and Schmidt-Semisch 2011), reinforce negative self-perceptions, or create self-fulfilling prophecies (Heinz 2017). Such outcomes further entrench the stigmatisation associated with criminal behaviour (Markina 2019).

It is critical to note that this conceptualisation of juvenile delinquency as a universal and transient phenomenon contrasts sharply with the theoretical and practical approaches of former Soviet criminology and pedagogy. Soviet ideology did not prioritise understanding the tensions inherent in the biological and social maturation of young people, nor did it acknowledge the structural and systemic factors contributing to juvenile delinquency. Instead, the Soviet approach was characterised by an emphasis on identifying distinctive personality traits of juvenile delinquents. The focus was on categorising, registering, and segregating these individuals into institutions, modifying their behaviour and thinking, disciplining them, and imposing external values upon them. The use of coercive language and practices towards children displaying delinquent behaviour, rooted in these outdated approaches, remains evident today. This persists despite the Law on the Protection of the Rights of the Child, which is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by Lithuania in 1995). This legislation guarantees every child the right to normal development and full integration into society. Furthermore, the law explicitly prohibits any action that would degrade a child's honour or dignity.

Public indignation towards juvenile delinquency, often fuelled by concentrated media coverage (Ruigrok et al. 2017), is a phenomenon observed across various geographical contexts. However, the ramifications of this indignation differ depending on the specific political, cultural, and legal frameworks in place (Sakalauskas 2008, 2018; Reuband 2011). In this context, public reactions to juvenile delinquency in Lithuania frequently give rise to the assumption that the country's juvenile delinquency problems are unique. This assumption, however, necessitates further investigation to determine its validity.

3 Prevalence and Trends in Juvenile Delinquency in Lithuania

Comparative analysis reveals that both registered and latent juvenile delinquency have demonstrated a decline or remained relatively stable in numerous Western countries, including Lithuania, over recent decades.

3.1 Registered Juvenile Delinquency and Trends

Registered criminal offences committed by juveniles represent the most severe manifestations of juvenile delinquency, for which data are systematically collected in every country. In Lithuania, the collection of such data is relatively comprehensive (Sakalauskas 2011). Over the past two decades, the absolute numbers of registered juvenile criminal offences in Lithuania have consistently declined. In particular, the relative indicators of registered juvenile criminal behaviour have shown a marked decrease in the last 5 years.

As illustrated in Fig. 1, the primary indicators of juvenile delinquency among 14–17-year-olds in Lithuania displayed relatively consistent trends from 1993 to 2014, with a significant decline in the past decade. The number of recorded criminal offences suspected or attributed to juveniles per 100,000 inhabitants of the same age group dropped substantially, from 2625 in 2014 to 857 in 2024. Similarly, the number of juveniles suspected or accused of offences decreased from 1948 to 593 during the same period. Notably, a significant discrepancy emerged in 2004 between the number of juveniles suspected or accused of criminal offences and those ultimately convicted. This discrepancy can be attributed to the enactment of the revised Criminal Code of the Republic of Lithuania on 1 May 2003. The revised Criminal

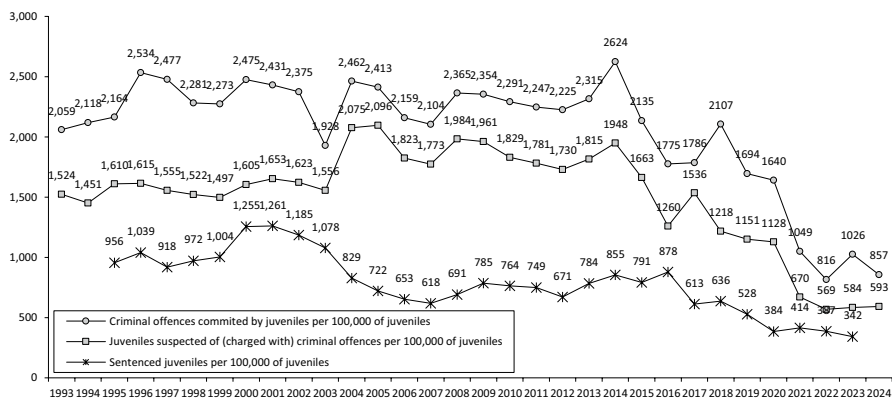


Fig. 1 Main indicators of registered juvenile delinquent behaviour in Lithuania from 1993 to 2024 in relative terms (per 100,000 population of the same age at the end of the year)

Code introduced more lenient provisions, allowing for the imposition of educational measures as an alternative to criminal penalties for juveniles. Conversely, the observed disparity in the proportion of juveniles convicted and subjected to penalties has been on a declining trajectory over the past two decades, with an increasing share of juveniles facing convictions.

The majority of minors are suspected or accused of theft, which remains the most common offence for which juveniles are convicted. Over the past few years, the average proportion of such cases has been approximately 30%, with slightly higher proportions observed in earlier years. Following theft, the infliction of physical pain or minor bodily harm and violations of public order rank second and third, respectively, in prevalence. These offences have demonstrated similar patterns of occurrence over the past few years. Collectively, theft, minor bodily harm, and public order violations account for approximately two-thirds of all offences for which minors are suspected or accused.

The most serious violent crimes, including homicides and serious bodily injuries, constitute only a small proportion of all offences involving juveniles. Nevertheless, these crimes often receive disproportionate media attention and are frequently misrepresented as typical examples of juvenile delinquency, despite a lack of empirical evidence to substantiate this narrative. Since 2006–2008, the number of homicides (e.g., 28 (!) registered in 2006) and serious bodily injuries (31 in 2008) attributed to juveniles has been steadily decreasing, even when assessed in relative terms per 100,000 juveniles. This decline reflects the unique characteristics of juvenile delinquency and the significant repercussions of these crimes. In 2024, only one homicide and six instances of serious bodily injury were recorded as suspected or accused offences committed by juveniles, marking the lowest figures observed during the entire period of analysis. These isolated instances of juvenile homicide, which have attracted considerable media coverage in recent years, thus represent exceptions rather than normative examples of juvenile criminal behaviour. The number of such cases has continued to decline consistently, reaching its lowest point in 2023.

Since 2017, when Lithuania transitioned from administrative to exclusively criminal liability for possession of small amounts of drugs, an average of 130 drug-related offences involving minors have been registered annually. This figure has not increased in recent years, although the high latency of such criminal behaviour should be acknowledged.

It is a well-established principle in criminology that recorded criminal behaviour represents only a small fraction of the actual criminal activity committed (Conklin 1989; Barlow 1990; Sakalauskas 2011). Furthermore, the practice of recording or failing to record criminal behaviour can vary significantly across countries (Christie 1970; Jehle and Harrendorf 2010; Harrendorf 2018; Aebi et al. 2021). The recorded aspect of criminal activity is often regarded as an indicator of law enforcement performance (Neubacher 2014), whereas the unrecorded element depends on several factors. Some offences are characterised by lower latency, meaning they are more likely to be detected and recorded, while others exhibit higher latency. The latter category encompasses the majority of offences committed by juveniles (Dollinger

and Schadbach 2013). On the one hand, juvenile offences are frequently committed impulsively, recklessly, and in groups, which increases the likelihood of detection and investigation. On the other hand, juvenile offenders typically engage in minor offences, often directed at their peers, in which cases formal measures of social control are less likely to be applied. In such cases, formal social control measures are less likely to be applied.

The existing literature suggests that serious, victim-specific crimes, such as bodily harm, committed by juveniles are recorded at a substantially higher rate than minor offences (Raithel and Mansel 2003; Heinz 2016). Despite the episodic and widespread nature of juvenile delinquency—an almost universal phenomenon among young people during periods of intense biological and social maturity (Dollinger and Schadbach 2013; Dollinger and Schmidt-Semisch 2011)—the probability of being apprehended for non-serious behaviour remains statistically very low. The probability of being apprehended for non-serious behaviour remains statistically very low (Sakalauskas 2007; Reinecke et al. 2013). Nevertheless, statistics on recorded juvenile criminal behaviour are often presented in the media and even in academic articles as though they accurately reflect actual trends and the structure of juvenile criminal activity. A more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of juvenile delinquent behaviour requires not only an investigation into its underlying factors but also a re-evaluation of the legal categorisation of such behaviour. This is especially important to facilitate meaningful cross-national comparisons.

Differences between countries regarding the minimum age of legal responsibility (Decker and Martaeche 2017), the composition of offences, and the classification of offences under various types of legal responsibility (e.g., administrative or criminal liability) further complicate such comparisons. Moreover, disparities in the broader domain of social protection (Dünkel 2014), the rules governing the registration of offences, and other related areas highlight the limitations of confining the scope of legal responsibility solely to offences registered under criminal responsibility.

3.2 Latent Juvenile Delinquency: Structure and Trends

When evaluating the patterns and structure of juvenile delinquency, there is a prevailing tendency to rely primarily on official recorded indicators. However, criminological research has long established that these indicators represent only a small part of the overall phenomenon which is often hidden or underreported (Sakalauskas 2011). In addition to traditional factors that influence the latency of criminal behaviour, such as distrust in law enforcement, preference for informal criminal conflict resolution, differences between informal and formal social control, the subjective minimisation of the damage caused, of moral panic, the influence of the media, the latency of juvenile delinquency is also shaped by the models of juvenile legal responsibility adopted in different countries. These models define formal delinquency in varied ways across different countries and set different age thresholds for its occurrence (Sakalauskas 2009; Dünkel 2014; Decker and Martaeche 2017).

Furthermore, the registration of juvenile delinquency is typically influenced by those responsible for the child or young person involved. These may be parents, guardians, or individuals in positions of authority in educational establishments, childcare facilities, sports clubs, or other organisations. The decisions and willingness of these individuals to pursue formal control measures play a significant role in determining whether the delinquency is officially recorded and whether formal processes are initiated. It can be reasonably deduced that the attitudes of individuals or groups, whether social, cultural or legal, and the discrepancies between these attitudes across different social classes, regions or countries, influence practices regarding the registration of juvenile delinquency. It is also noteworthy that in cases of juvenile delinquency involving specific victims, these victims are often minors themselves (Justickaja and Giedrytė-Mačiulienė 2017). Consequently, the individuals or groups responsible for the juvenile's actions also influence the decision-making process regarding the use of formal social control measures for the victims.

Assessing the true extent of juvenile delinquency presents challenges common to empirical research, which are further compounded by the young age of the respondents. The various questionnaires commonly used to measure juvenile delinquency (both for perpetrators and victims) must be adapted to suit the cognitive and attentional capacities of young respondents, while minimising the influence of their generally greater tendency for imagination compared to adults.

Numerous international studies on youth behaviour include Lithuania as a participant, and their results facilitate comparisons of delinquent behaviour across different countries. The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, launched in 1982, is conducted every 4 years as part of a cross-national initiative, with nearly all European countries participating. The International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRSD), initiated in 1992, has been regularly conducted (depending on the organisers) with almost 60 countries participating in recent years. The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD), launched in 1995 is conducted every four years, with 35 European countries participating in recent surveys.

The ISRSD survey utilises the self-report methodology, a widely accepted approach in empirical criminological research. This method involves questioning respondents about their experiences and asking them to recall the frequency of such experiences over a specified period. The structure of offences committed by minors in Lithuania is similar to that observed in other countries, as demonstrated by data from the ISRSD Study. In both Lithuania and other participating countries, the most prevalent offence among minors is the illegal downloading of content from the Internet. The prevalence of this offence in Lithuania aligns with the average response from pupils in all countries included in the study, though notable differences exist between countries. These differences may be attributed to variations in the legal regulation of such activities across the countries surveyed. Furthermore, the prevalence of offences committed by students, while exhibiting some variation between countries, generally follows a ranking similar to that observed in Lithuania. In most countries, shoplifting is the second most common offence, followed by gang fights, vandalism and damage to property, and theft from the person. It is noteworthy that

other offences are relatively uncommon among schoolchildren in Lithuania, as is the case in many other countries. However, the prevalence of such offences is slightly higher in Lithuania compared to other nations. The same trend applies to other listed offences (excluding the illegal downloading of content from the Internet). While the prevalence of some offences may be marginally higher among Lithuanian students compared to specific countries, it remains slightly or even significantly lower than the overall average prevalence for the countries included in the study.

The most recent ESPAD survey, conducted in 2019, revealed that 19% of Lithuanian students aged 15–16 had experimented with illicit drugs at least once in their lifetime. This represents a slight increase compared to the 2015 survey findings. Among these students, the highest proportion of first-time illicit drug use involved cannabis, with 18% of respondents reporting cannabis as their initial drug experience (Rupšienė et al. 2020). With regard to the use of illicit drugs by minors, Lithuania shows no significant distinction, with prevalence rates of 18% and 17%, respectively.

While cases of serious violence and substance abuse among minors attract considerable public attention, latent delinquency among minors in Lithuania is particularly characterised by the high prevalence of bullying. Despite its significance, the issue of bullying in Lithuania has received disproportionately low attention, especially when considering findings from the HBSC survey. This survey identifies bullying as the most prevalent form of violence among students across all three age groups and highlights a significant disparity between Lithuania and the majority of other European countries. The first systematic publication addressing this issue was issued by Povilaitis and Valiukevičiūtė (2006). Even at that time, it was noted that the bullying behaviours of Lithuanian pupils were exceptionally high (Povilaitis and Valiukevičiūtė 2006). Although subsequent studies have consistently demonstrated the substantial short- and long-term harm caused by bullying—both to individuals and society—the situation in Lithuania has only partially improved. While there has been some decline in bullying rates, the gap between Lithuania and other countries remains significant.

Lithuania consistently ranks among the top five countries with the highest bullying prevalence across six age groups, specifically for 11-year-olds (with an average of 13% and 12% in 2014 and 2018, respectively), 13-year-olds (12% and 11%), and 15-year-olds (9% and 8%). Furthermore, Lithuania holds the second position in the 11-year-old group (7% and 6%), following Moldova, and ranks first in the 13-year-old group (9% and 7%) and the 15-year-old group (9% and 7%) for instances of bullying. No other country ranks as highly in all categories as Lithuania (Inchley et al. 2020). By contrast, countries like Finland, Sweden, and Germany exhibit bullying prevalence rates that are three to four times lower across all age groups, and significantly lower—by several times—among those who engage in bullying. In contrast, Lithuanian students across all age categories exhibit bullying rates that are approximately three times higher than the overall average for all countries (Inchley et al. 2020).

An analysis of the national HBSC study in Lithuania correctly identifies that both being a victim of bullying and engaging in bullying behaviours are associated with numerous adverse outcomes. These include physical health issues, impaired emotional well-being, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and the development of problematic behaviours such as aggression, violence, and alcohol misuse. Substance use is associated with a range of detrimental effects, many of which are interconnected with aggressive behaviour. Notably, there is a direct correlation between aggressive conduct and diminished social support. Young individuals who perceive insufficient support from family, friends, and educators are more likely to engage in aggressive behaviours (Šmigelskas et al. 2019). It is evident that school bullying, across various age groups, serves as a significant differentiating factor between Lithuania and other European countries. The prevention of this phenomenon is achievable if it is grounded in scientific insights (Povilaitis and Valiukevičiūtė 2006; Ttofi and Farrington 2011). However, it is regrettable that neither the national nor international HBSC reports offer any conclusions—or even hypotheses—regarding the reasons behind the substantial variation in bullying prevalence among pupils across countries, or why Lithuania exhibits the highest prevalence. It is evident that the underlying causes of these discrepancies can largely be attributed to the social structures and educational systems prevalent in the respective countries, which are likely influenced by the legacy of totalitarianism. Bullying, in particular, is a distinct form of juvenile delinquency that reflects a need to belittle and stigmatise others, demonstrating a lack of respect and an inability to accept differences. This behaviour often stems from personal experiences of feeling undervalued and disapproved.

Despite the absence of a significant rise in juvenile delinquency, the non-severe nature of most offences, and the increasing involvement of younger perpetrators, media narratives have nonetheless constructed a perception of an escalating problem. This narrative influences public perceptions of juvenile delinquency and its underlying causes. We have analysed one such case in more detail below.

4 Depicting Juvenile Delinquency in Lithuanian Media: “The Jurbarkas Case”

The “Jurbarkas case” of 2019–2023 was selected for the case analysis, in which a minor was accused and ultimately convicted of sexual assault causing harm to a minor. A total of 310 media messages, including articles and video reports, published across online media portals over 37 months (from May 2019 to June 2022) were collected for analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative content analysis were performed.

A seventeen-year-old teenager sexually harassed a sixteen-year-old girl. When the girl resisted, the young man physically assaulted her. The minor was charged with attempted rape, sexual assault and causing harm to another minor. The crime

was committed during the victim's class party, which the accused attended with a friend invited by the victim's classmate. The accused was an active participant in sports, attended a martial arts club, and had won prizes in the championships. The accused's parents were members of a political party in the region and were well-known figures in the community. The victim was raised by her father after her mother passed away when she was 3 years old.

The investigation and trial lasted almost 4 years, with two appeals, multiple court hearings and four final decisions.

The first media coverage of the crime was published the day after the incident. In the 37 months following the crime, 310 publications related to the case appeared on eight online media portals: six national and two regional. In the first 18 days, 42 articles were published, with some portals posting more than 10 articles per day. Media coverage was intense for the first five months, then subsided. However, public interest spiked with each court hearing.

The uproar in the mass media was fuelled by public outcry on social media, where relatives of the victim called for donations, while concerned citizens threatened the suspect and called for action. Representatives of professional organisations, including the police, municipal politicians, and other experts, responded to the media uproar. The newly elected president visited the victim in the hospital, journalists interviewed various field experts, and quoted politicians and ministers in the media. Influencers defended the victim, publishing messages on social media, participating in TV shows, and having their statements widely quoted.

Fifty percent of publications were featured in the country's leading daily newspapers such as *Lithuania*, and *Actuality*. Publications also appeared in columns dedicated to crime (40.3%), celebrities (6.2%), and sports (3.2%). The suspect was a martial arts champion. The martial arts club publicly condemned the accused's actions disassociated itself from him.

The headlines of the publications sensationalised the crime, attempting to capture readers' attention with dramatic phrases like: "The question that haunts all of Lithuania", "The story that shocked Lithuania", "The case that shocked the public", "Bloody drama", "Jurbarkas in shock", "Jurbarkas' county rape case". The crime was depicted with emotional and graphic language: "severely beaten", "brutally assaulted", "horrible attack", "violent assault", "tragic event", and "the nightmare continues." The severe and long-term consequences of the injuries were highlighted with phrases like "tormenting nightmares", "the victim still fears for her safety"; "in intensive care", "the consequences will last for years", "unable to speak", "needed more medicine", "psychological state is concerning", "the surgeons worked for three hours"; "disabled child"; "injuries continue to heal even after two and a half years", "cries at night" and others.

Both the perpetrator and the victim were minors at the time of the crime. Despite the protection of their rights and privacy, the photos of both were published and circulated on social media. The boy's photo was shared with a call for people to harass him, while the girl's photo was posted by a relative, requesting donations for her treatment and legal expenses. The victim's name and photos were never published in the mass media, whereas the perpetrator's images were widely circulated.

During the pre-trial process, the most common photo of him showed him in sweat-pants, his muscular build clearly visible, with his face obscured by a black square. After turning 18, the media used photos of him taken in the courtroom. In headlines, the suspect was labelled a sadist, rapist, violent person, abuser, thug, and juvenile executioner. Neither the young man nor the victim gave interviews to the media.

The perpetrator's situation was significantly aggravated by two factors, both of which were exploited by the media. Firstly, he was an athlete with a well-trained body who, despite his physical capabilities, could not control his impulses and used his strength against a helpless girl. Secondly, his parents were politicians, and although they left the party after the incident, this connection was heavily exploited by the media, with references to it appearing in 20% of publications. In Lithuania, there is a general public perception that politics is often associated with corruption and self-serving interests.

The media rarely used only factual information and often cited multiple individuals in a single publication. The victim's advocate was the most frequently quoted source (41%), followed by prosecutors (27.4%). In contrast, the perpetrator's lawyer (6.1%) and parents (0.6%) were quoted the least. Politicians, including Members of the Seimas, the President, municipal council members, the Minister of Social Security and Labour, the Minister of the Interior, and the Minister of Justice, were cited in 7.4% of publications.

The case was used to portray a worsening problem of juvenile delinquency, with several key themes emerging in media coverage. First, media outlets disseminated messages suggesting that unruly minors were "rampaging" in Jurbarkas, intimidating residents, and that professional systems were failing to provide children and young people with adequate education and support. Second, events in Jurbarkas were linked with incidents involving juveniles in other Lithuanian cities, attempting to convince readers that juvenile delinquency was on the rise across the country. News stories emphasising the prevalence or perceived increase in juvenile delinquency appeared in 5.8% of analysed publications.

Furthermore, the same information was frequently recycled across different outlets. Identical factual details or quotes from interviewees were repeated in multiple publications, often with minor variations in presentation or emphasis, and published on the same day or within a few days. Second, even when new information regarding the case was published, previously disseminated details about the circumstances of the crime, the progression of the trial, court verdicts, the victim's physical and psychological suffering, and information about the young offender were repeatedly included.

This repetitive approach inflated the volume of publications, ostensibly to sustain public interest and engagement. The frequency of publication was artificially increased by re-releasing the same articles multiple times a day or republishing identical content under different headlines.

Content analysis of these publications reveals clear media bias. Such bias is reflected in the headlines and the specific manner in which the content was constructed. Journalists selectively chose which individuals and excerpts from interviews to quote, determined how to organise the narrative, decided on the starting

and concluding points, and often presented either a single perspective or limited contrasting opinions on the issue.

Quantitative analysis of the articles revealed prevailing trends in the media discourse, particularly concerning how society should address juvenile delinquents—whether to punish them or focus on education and rehabilitation—and whose perspectives were amplified. Approximately 45.2% of the articles advocated for stricter pretrial detention or prison sentences for the young offender, while 42.3% presented neutral reports on the case's developments. Notably, no publication unequivocally supported or defended educational and rehabilitative measures for the juvenile. In 10.3% of the articles, differing opinions were provided. For example, alongside calls for harsher sentencing, there were mentions that the pretrial measures and sentences considered the offender's age and adhered to legal provisions for minors, including features specific to the juvenile criminal process.

Nearly one-fifth of the publications reflected on juvenile crimes and minors' criminal liability more broadly. During the trial, another crime involving juveniles occurred in Jurbarkas. Approximately 20% of the articles juxtaposed these two incidents, reinforcing narratives about “rampant” juvenile delinquency in Jurbarkas and suggesting an increase in juvenile crime across Lithuania. Only 8.1% of the analysed articles echoed the idea that minors should be educated and rehabilitated rather than punished. Moreover, a mere 1.3% of the publications unequivocally supported the view that juvenile offenders should not face punitive measures but should instead receive education and assistance. An additional 6.8% presented differing viewpoints, featuring individuals who advocated for stricter penalties for minors alongside those calling for their education and rehabilitation. Representatives from helping professions, including lawyers commenting on the criminal liability of minors, as well as psychologists and criminologists discussing the underlying causes of juvenile delinquent behaviour, predominantly advocated for educational measures rather than punitive actions for minors. However, none of the publications suggested that this particular individual required support or assistance.

In 17.7% of the publications, representatives of professional systems, including the police, education, social services, and courts, were cited. Of these, 40% did not express either a defensive or an offensive stance toward the accused. In another 40% of the articles, supportive positions for the defendant were juxtaposed with punitive statements from the victim's family, lawyers, or prosecutors. However, the viewpoints defending the juvenile were not highlighted in the titles or summaries of these articles. For the reader to be exposed to the defence of the accused, they had to engage with the full content of the article or video. In this way, the dominant narrative in the media largely accused, condemned, and called for stricter punishments for juveniles.

This illustrates the partial and distorted representation of juvenile delinquency in the media, which serves as the primary source of information for the public. To better understand the public's perception of this issue, we conducted a quantitative survey of the Lithuanian population, the findings of which are presented in the subsequent section of this chapter.

5 Public Attitudes and Reactions to Juvenile Delinquency: Results of the Representative Survey of Lithuanian Residents

Studying public attitudes and reactions to manifestations of juvenile delinquency is crucial, as societal perspectives often influence the formulation of general criminal policies (Baker et al. 2016; Canton 2015; Dzur 2010) and specific decisions regarding the implementation of juvenile justice policies (Steinberg and Piquero 2010). Populist political parties, keen to garner voter support, are particularly sensitive to public opinions and sentiments, often shaping their political agendas around public concerns about juvenile justice. They monitor societal emotions, such as fears regarding increasing juvenile delinquency and anxieties about public safety, especially in relation to rising juvenile crime rates (Gutiérrez 2018). In turn, these parties respond to public demands for stricter punishments for young offenders (Rogowski 2014). Minkes (2007) and Rogowski (2014) argue that broader political contexts and prevailing public sentiments exert a more significant influence on national youth justice trends than scientific research on the effectiveness of various crime reduction measures.

The following presents some key findings from a representative survey conducted in Lithuania. The primary aim of the study was to explore public attitudes toward juvenile delinquency by investigating:

- a) the emotional responses of residents towards minors who commit offenses and crimes;
- b) how residents perceive the causes of juvenile delinquency;
- c) the punitive or supportive, educational measures that residents endorse for minors who engage in criminal behaviour.

A representative survey of Lithuanian residents aged 18 and older was conducted between July and September 2021. The study employed a multi-stage probability sampling method, incorporating geographic stratification based on the size and administrative classification of the respondents' place of residence. In total, 1508 individuals participated in the survey.

The investigation into attitudes toward juvenile delinquency was rooted in the social psychology tradition and the tripartite model of attitudes (Fabrigar et al. 2005; Van de Ven et al. 1996). According to this model, the internal structure of an attitude comprises three components: affect, or emotions, which refer to the positive and negative feelings an individual experiences towards the attitude object; cognition, which encompasses the beliefs an individual holds about the attitude object; and behaviour, which involves direct actions or behavioural responses towards the attitude object. The formation and manifestation of an attitude occur through the interaction of these three components (Fabrigar et al. 2005; Van de Ven et al. 1996). To measure public attitudes towards juvenile delinquency, the study employed a strategy based on assessing various indicators within the affective, cognitive, and behavioural domains. Participants were presented with a set of statements and asked

to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on a 4-point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” with an additional option of “don’t know/can’t evaluate.”

In order to capture the emotional reactions of Lithuanian residents toward minors committing offenses and crimes, respondents were presented with statements designed to reflect both positive and negative emotional responses for evaluation. Figure 2 illustrates how study participants assessed statements related to the emotions they experience towards juveniles who commit offenses and crimes.

Just over one-fifth (21.7%) of respondents indicated that they were indifferent to juveniles committing offenses or crimes, while another 3.9% chose not to evaluate this statement. However, the majority—74.4%—either completely or somewhat disagreed with the notion of indifference. This suggests that the issue of juvenile delinquency does not leave individuals unaffected; rather, it provokes strong and possibly conflicting emotions in most people. Approximately half of the respondents (50.4%) agreed with the statement that juveniles committing offenses or crimes disgust them, and a slightly larger proportion (53.7%) reported feeling hopeless and helpless about the issue. An even greater proportion of participants agreed with the statements that juveniles committing offenses or crimes evoke feelings of fear (68.6%) and annoyance (76.9%). Additionally, 70.5% of respondents stated that they condemn such juveniles. However, it is noteworthy that a similar proportion of respondents (71.2%) believed that every juvenile, regardless of their behaviour, deserves understanding and respect. A substantial majority (86.7%) tended to agree with the statement that they are concerned about the future of juveniles committing offenses or crimes.

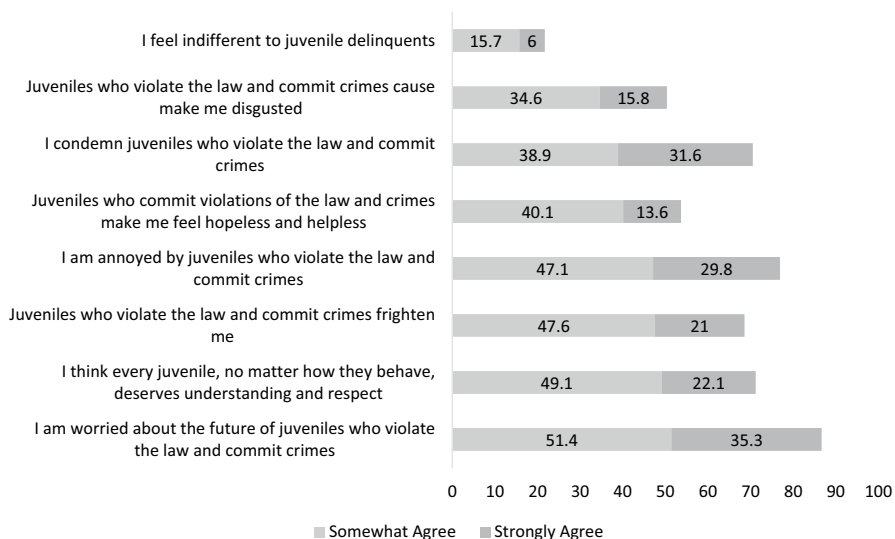


Fig. 2 Evaluation of Statements Reflecting the Emotions Caused by Juvenile Delinquents (Percentage)

In order to understand how Lithuanian residents explain juvenile delinquent behaviour, respondents were asked to evaluate 15 statements about the various causes of juvenile delinquency. These statements were crafted using both theoretical insights from criminology and various societal clichés and stereotypes related to the causes of juvenile delinquency. A larger portion of these statements (nine in total) was based on scientific knowledge, meaning they were derived from criminological and other social science research, as well as theoretical insights. These statements can be conditionally labelled as “correct” explanations. The remaining six statements, on the other hand, reflected “incorrect” explanations, which were based not on scientific evidence but on common stereotypes regarding the causes of juvenile delinquency. It is important to note that, when evaluating the statements, study participants were unaware of which explanations the authors of the questionnaire considered to be “correct” and which were deemed “incorrect,” as all statements were mixed and randomly arranged in the questionnaire.

A larger proportion of survey respondents tended to agree with all of the “correct” explanations for the causes of juvenile delinquency (Fig. 3). The percentage of respondents who agreed with these statements ranged from 57.5% to 92.3%. The lowest level of agreement (57.5%) was with the statement that juveniles commit legal violations and crimes because they lack opportunities to acquire things that are important to them. Additionally, 63.4% of respondents agreed that juveniles who are labelled as “bad” from a young age and discarded by society are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour. A similar proportion (65.3%) agreed that it is natural for juveniles to take risks, experiment, and test boundaries at this stage of life.

Moreover, three other causes received similar levels of agreement: 73.9% believed that juveniles commit crimes spontaneously, without planning; 74.6% thought it was due to a need to rebel against adults; and 74.8% attributed it to a lack of positive role models and proper examples. Furthermore, 79.9% agreed that

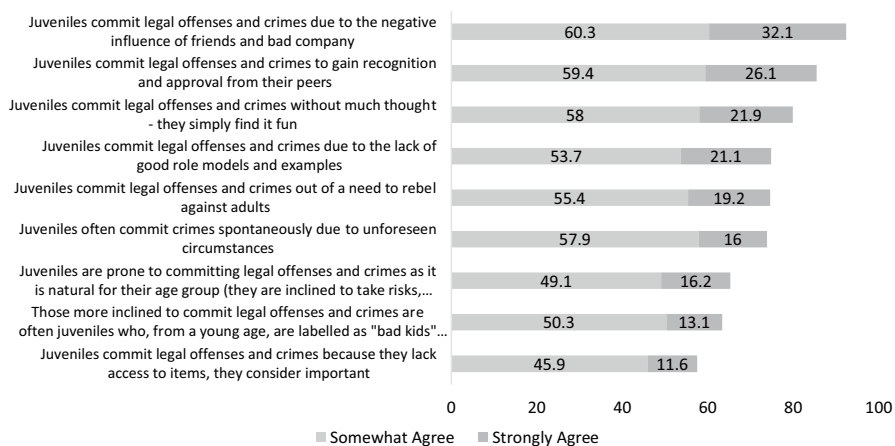


Fig. 3 Evaluation of statements reflecting “correct” explanations of juvenile delinquency (percentage)

juveniles commit offenses simply for fun, without much forethought. The highest levels of agreement were with the final two statements: 85.5% believed that juveniles commit crimes to gain peer recognition and approval, and 92.4% thought it was due to the bad influence of friends or bad company.

When analysing responses to the “incorrect” explanations for juvenile delinquency, it is evident that a smaller proportion of respondents agreed with these explanations compared to the “correct” ones. Nevertheless, more than half of the study participants completely or somewhat agreed with three of the statements (Fig. 4).

The statement that juveniles commit crimes because corporal punishment is now banned and they fear nothing received the most agreement. This explanation was supported by 62.3% of respondents, nearly two-thirds. Similarly, 61.9% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that juveniles are spoiled and, therefore, commit crimes because they do not know what else they want. Moreover, more than half (57.9%) of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement that only juveniles who lack willpower and a sense of responsibility engage in criminal behaviour. The statement that juvenile delinquency in Lithuania is increasing due to the negative influence of Western countries was supported by 45.8% of respondents, while 39.2% believed that children’s actions are determined by their family environment, with bad parents raising bad children. The least agreement (31.3%) was with the statement that criminal behaviour is inherent in one’s nature and genes, suggesting that such juveniles cannot be reformed.

To ascertain the opinions of Lithuanian residents on potential responses to juvenile delinquency, respondents were asked to evaluate various societal actions or methods aimed at reducing juvenile delinquency. Some of these statements focused

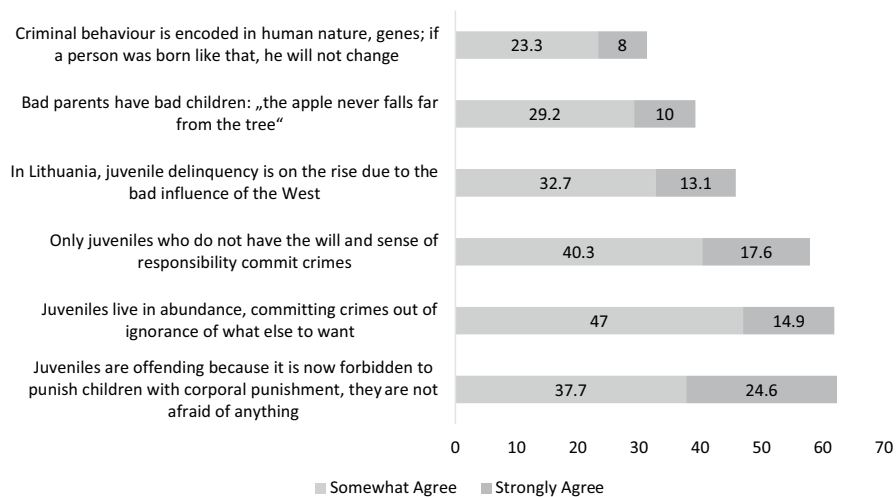


Fig. 4 Evaluation of Statements Reflecting “Incorrect” Explanations of Juvenile Delinquency (Percentage)

on providing support to juveniles who commit offences and to their families, while others emphasised the imposition of punishments or the tightening of existing penalties (Fig. 5).

Statements advocating for support and education garnered almost unanimous agreement from respondents. A significant 88.2% tended to agree that it is more important to educate and assist juveniles who commit offences and crimes, rather than punish them. Moreover, these respondents also believed that support should be extended to the parents of such juveniles. A slightly smaller, yet still substantial majority (71.2%), agreed that juveniles committing offences should only be incarcerated in exceptional or extreme cases.

While the majority favoured responses based on education and support, a significant portion also supported stricter punishments. Just over one-third of the study participants (35.3%) tended to agree that criminal responsibility should be applied to younger juveniles than it currently is. Slightly less than one-third (31.6%) believed that juveniles committing offences should be punished in the same way as adults. Notably, 41.3% tended to agree that parents should be allowed to use physical punishment.

As previously mentioned, the study measured the following aspects of attitudes towards juvenile delinquents: (1) the emotional or affective aspect, i.e., the feelings experienced by the study participants towards offending juveniles; (2) the cognitive or knowledge aspect, expressed as agreement or disagreement with “correct” and “incorrect” explanations for the causes of juvenile delinquency; and (3) the reaction aspect refers to the measures or actions that study participants would support in addressing the problem of juvenile delinquency.

In the further analysis of the study data, the aim was to determine how these three aspects of attitudes interact with one another. To this end, four scales were developed based on the groups of statements discussed: the emotional domain, the cognitive domain (comprising both “correct” and “incorrect” explanations for the causes

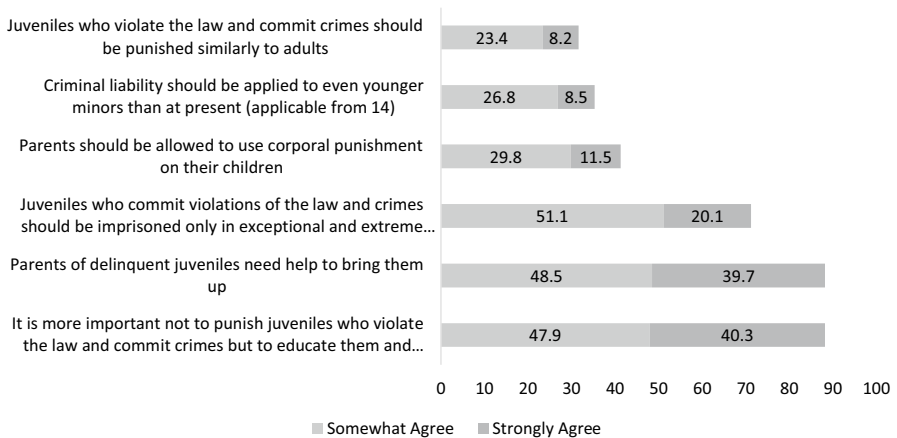


Fig. 5 Evaluation of Statements Reflecting Juvenile Delinquency Reduction Methods (Percentage)

of delinquency), and the reaction domain. All these scales were constructed in a similar manner:

- Higher values on the emotional scale indicate that respondents experience more negative feelings.
- Higher values on the “correct” explanation scale reflect greater agreement with “correct” explanations for the causes of delinquency.
- Higher values on the “incorrect” explanation scale reflect greater agreement with “incorrect” explanations for the causes of delinquency.
- Higher values on the reaction scale indicate more support for punitive measures and less support for measures related to assistance and education.

Table 1 shows the correlations between these four scales.

Correlation analysis revealed that nearly all of the examined aspects of attitudes were statistically significantly related. A noticeable correlation was found between the emotions felt by respondents and their explanations for delinquency: respondents who experienced more negative feelings toward juvenile offenders were more likely to agree with “incorrect” explanations for the causes of delinquency and less likely to agree with “correct” explanations, and vice versa. Emotions were also linked to reactions—those with more negative feelings were more likely to support harsher punitive measures. Harsher measures were also more strongly supported by those respondents who agreed more with “incorrect” explanations for the causes of juvenile delinquency, whereas agreement with “correct” explanations did not correlate with such reactions. The strongest negative correlation was observed between agreement with “correct” and “incorrect” explanations for the causes of juvenile delinquency. The more respondents agreed with “correct” explanations, the less they agreed with “incorrect” ones, and vice versa.

When evaluating which aspect—emotional or cognitive—had a greater impact on respondents’ reactions, it can be stated that reactions were more strongly correlated with the cognitive aspect. It is important to emphasise that the greatest influence on the severity of reactions was exerted by agreement with “incorrect” explanations for the causes of juvenile delinquency, as agreement with “correct” explanations did not statistically significantly correlate with the severity of the reaction.²

Table 1 Correlations between aspects of attitudes towards juvenile delinquents (Pearson correlation coefficient)

	“Incorrect” explanations	“Correct” explanations	Punitive reactions
Negative feelings	0.453 ^a	−0.256 ^a	0.292 ^a
“Incorrect” explanations	–	−0.526 ^a	0.389 ^a
“Correct” explanations		–	−0.037

^a $p = 0.01$

² See also Buzaitytė-Kašalynienė et al. (2024).

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of public attitudes towards juvenile delinquency in Lithuania. The findings reveal that emotions, beliefs, and reactions towards juvenile offenders are deeply interconnected. Most respondents experience strong emotions such as fear, annoyance, and concern for the future of these juveniles. The study also demonstrates that while there is significant support for educational and supportive measures, a notable portion of the population still favours stricter punitive actions. These insights underscore the importance of understanding public sentiment when addressing juvenile delinquency, as it can significantly influence the effectiveness of interventions and policies.

6 Concluding Remarks

The way society approaches juvenile delinquency and evaluates the effectiveness of responses depends on the knowledge we have about its prevalence and the underlying circumstances. The media often sensationalise and scandalise individual cases of juvenile delinquency to attract public attention and generate readers' interest. This tendency can result in a distorted perception of the issue, obscuring the fact that minor forms of delinquency are significantly more prevalent and frequently constitute a characteristic aspect of adolescent behaviour. However, the origin of more severe acts of delinquency is often traced back to more profound, systemic social issues. It is imperative to acknowledge this distinction to ensure that interventions target the fundamental causes rather than merely addressing the symptoms.

Developing an effective policy to reduce adolescent misbehaviour necessitates moving beyond emotionally charged responses to prominent cases. Hence, it would be erroneous to assume that emotional appeals for a harsh response should dictate a policy focused solely on the prevention of adolescent delinquency.

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