

# SOCIOECONOMIC ASPECT OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Review Article

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**Abstract:** Juvenile delinquency is a widespread sociopathological and security phenomenon, which, due to its increasingly serious forms and consequences, deserves more attention from scholars and professional experts, that is, the general public. The consequences of some violent acts, which produce victims, committed by juveniles are so serious that this phenomenon first requires a comprehensive understanding, then resolving the cause. This paper focuses on sociological theories and such an aspect of the approach to the causes of juvenile delinquency. The tendencies of juvenile crime are observed from the aspect of socioeconomic situation in society and the position and functionality of families, and above all, through the prism of the data obtained from centers for social work and the records of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia. This paper seeks to present the trend of socioeconomic vulnerability of families, social service interventions in families with violence and the number of juveniles who needed some service provided by the center for social work, to show whether the values of these factors follow each other and what trends we can expect. The data generated by the Republic Institute for Social Protection, which is obtained from all centers for social work refers to the period 2015-2019. The years 2020 and 2021 are specific to research and certainly require a broader analysis, given the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the declaration of a state of emergency, the imposition of curfew and numerous other regulatory measures to prevent the spread of infection, which we believe has had an impact on crime rates in general, even juvenile delinquency.

**Keywords:** juveniles, delinquency, crime, family, status

## INTRODUCTION

Behavioral disorders among young people have become more visible, but also more serious and violent. From the point of view of the factors of social deviations, inappropriate behavior is reflected in early alcohol and drug use, ag-

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gression, the avoidance of obligations and disrespect of rules and authorities. A more serious form of socially unacceptable behavior, unfortunately, enters the legally sanctioned area – crime and the commission of criminal acts. Juvenile delinquency is both a security and sociologically serious and widespread phenomenon, and it seems that this topic is not a taboo anymore for it is discussed in public and the community. The consequences of certain violent acts, which produce victims, committed by juveniles are so serious that this phenomenon first requires a comprehensive understanding, then resolving the cause.

As Međedović (2021) points out, in criminological theory there is an inconsistent approach to defining “juvenile delinquency”, where a broader approach can be distinguished, which, in addition to illegal, includes behavior contrary to social morality and (un)written norms. In contrast, a number of professional experts, under the mentioned term, consider exclusively behavior that is primarily contrary to law, that is, which is envisaged as a misdemeanor or as an offense, and this narrower approach is called a formal legal approach (Međedović, 2021: 154). The Law on Juvenile Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles defines several categories of persons under 18 years of age, as follows: 1) A juvenile is a person who, at the time of commission of the offense, has attained the age of fourteen years and have not attained the age of eighteen years; 2) A younger juvenile is a person who, at the time of the commission of the offense, was over 14 but under the age of 16; 3) An older juvenile is a person who at the time of the commission of the offence has attained 16 and is under 18, and 4) A younger adult who has attained 18 at the time of the commission of the offense but is under 21 at the time of the trial.<sup>2</sup>

Although the formal legal definition of age is important from the legal point of view and treatment within the social protection system, data from various studies show that delinquent behavior and misdemeanors and even crimes are committed by juveniles of almost all ages, which is a phenomenon that does not subside, but only acquires new manifestations and intensity.

## METHODOLOGY AND THE OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

This paper attempts to show the trend of socioeconomic vulnerability of families, social service interventions in domestic violence and the number of juveniles who needed some social work services, to determine whether these factors are related and what trends we can expect. The data generated by the Republic Institute for Social Protection from all centers for social work refer to the period from 2015 to 2019. The years 2020 and 2021 are specific to research and certainly require a broader analysis, given the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the declaration of a state of emergency, the imposition of curfew and numerous other regulatory measures to prevent the spread of the infection,

<sup>2</sup> Law on Juvenile Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles, Article 3, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 85/2005.

which we believe has had an impact on and the crime rates in general, even juvenile delinquency. The aim of the analysis is to observe the trend of socio-economic trends in society and families, with detected acts of juvenile delinquency. In addition to the data contained in the report of the Republic Institute for Social Protection, the data from the records of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia, which refer to various criminal complaints filed against juveniles for the period 2015-2019, were processed and presented.

We decided on this aspect of understanding the parameters and trends by following certain sociological theories of juvenile delinquency, so this approach and previous research will be listed and explained first.

**THEORETICAL APPROACHES – SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES**

Criminal behavior, in general, is explained by various theories. Psychological and biological theories advocate the view of innate criminals, the constitution that is a predisposition for recognizing future perpetrators, the action of hormones and the work of internal organs. This paper is focused on sociological theories and this aspect of the approach to the causes of juvenile delinquency. We observed the tendencies of juvenile crime in parallel with the aspect of the socio-economic situation in society and the position and functionality of families, and above all through the prism of the data obtained from the centers for social work. A significant number of scholars (Kroher & Wolbring, 2015; Liu & Miller, 2020) believe that young people who have a strong connection with their parents and a high degree of respect for school obligations are less likely to commit a delinquent act. Hirschi (1969), Cohen and Felson (1979) and Felson (2014) point out that the two key theories for understanding and preventing delinquency are Social Control Theory and Routine Activity Theory. These two theories have been further elaborated by numerous authors (Hart & Mueller, 2013; Hay, 2001; Onder & Yilmaz, 2012). Social control theory emphasizes that young people who are firmly emotionally connected with their parents and express a desire for improvement and career achievement will not show deviant behavior. Hirschi laid the roots of this theory in 1969, emphasizing that it is unlikely that a juvenile will go through delinquency if he or she is properly socialized through the processes of upbringing and education and has strong ties with the community, respecting conventional norms and values. Routine activity theory, which is widely used in the field of criminology and victimology, emphasizes that, as Trinidad et al. (2019) point out, everyday activities play a significant role in shaping behavior. According to Cohen and Felson (1979) and Felson (2014), Routine activity theory identifies three necessary elements for a crime to occur: an offender, a target, and the absence of guardians. When the target is without the capable guardians and the circumstances are such that the offender can commit a crime without hindrance or without fear of being caught – he or she will do it. In addition to psychosocial circumstances, this theory introduces a space-time element. Brantingham et al. (1993) point out that,

especially in the case of juvenile offenders, “favorable” environmental factors influencing the decision to commit an offense. Johnson & Summers (2015) emphasizes that juveniles commit crimes in places where young people spend most time, such as schools, the area where they live or spend part of their free time. Of course, knowledge and environmental characteristics influence a person’s decision to commit or not to commit a delinquent act. High level of collective efficiency in the environment (Maimon & Browning, 2012: 809). In his study, Wong (2017) demonstrates that in the areas where children live with only one parent, multiple delinquent acts are committed. The conclusions of these authors in the area of sociology are that the inadequate process of socialization of personality, poorly developed family and authoritative ties, make a juvenile, especially during puberty (which from the psychological and biological point of view should not be neglected), more prone to delinquent behavior and that he will commit the crime sooner in the area he knows and where spends most of his or her time. In addition to the above factors, the occurrence of delinquency can be significantly influenced by socioeconomic status and a poor control of compliance with the law (Margaret, 1970).

Even in the cohesion of different disciplines (psychology, sociology, criminology), the factors of personal characteristics and predispositions, the social factors of the role of family and school and environmental factors are key factors. From our point of view, especially nowadays, which is again full of economic crises, wars and migrations, it is necessary to consider the impact of economic and social factors on forms of behavior and decisions to commit a misdemeanor or a crime. The poor socioeconomic status of the family may not indicate weak family ties and social control, but with disturbed values promoted through the mass media, in the era of various and uncontrolled information, sharp stratification that characterizes communities can be one of the decisive factors among juveniles to commit a delinquent act. Thus Burgess (1952) points out that juvenile delinquency is highly correlated with poverty and low family income and these factors are one of the most common causes of delinquency. Kvaraceus (1944) states that by following the patterns of high, middle and low class positions in the community, the causes of delinquency among young people can be identified, and while they are some of the strongest ones, they are not the only determinants of such behavior.

#### *Epidemiology of various forms of delinquent behavior*

In his article, Međedović (2021) cites the results of research conducted by Ignjatović (2014) and Nikolić-Ristanović & Kostantinović-Vilić (2016) in Serbia, which show that today the share of juvenile offenders amounts to 5% and the number is higher than in previous decades, as well as the dominance of property crime offenses. Šobot et al. (2010) state that, according to the data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (RZZSS, 2008), 4085 criminal charges were filed against juveniles, while the number of convicted juveniles amounted to 2229. They further state that violent crimes account for about

10% of total crime committed by young people and that adolescents are committed 8% of all murders (Šobot et al., 2010). A study conducted by Đurđević, Bošković and Senić (2013) showed that between 2006 and 2009, the percentage of juvenile participation in the total number of perpetrators of crimes ranged between 9.87% and 9.14% and that in most cases these were property crimes, the disturbance of the peace, including inflicting bodily injuries.

The results of the International Survey of Self-Reporting Delinquency, which was prepared and published by Nikolić-Ristanović (2016), surveyed 1,344 elementary school students (grades 7 and 8) in the cities of Belgrade and Novi Sad, including high school students in 2013 and 2014. The data showed that 63.7% of juveniles exhibited some form of delinquent behavior. The majority of sample juveniles consumed alcohol (79.5%), slightly more than half illegally downloaded content from the Internet (57.4%), while one quarter of juveniles had used drugs once in their lifetime (22.1%) (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2016: 5).

Juvenile delinquency is a part of general crime in the community, but with its characteristics related to the perpetrators themselves, it is a phenomenon that requires focused security, sociological, psychological and pedagogical attention and monitoring (Bošković & Janković, 2014: 203).

*Indicators of socioeconomic status, position of children and juvenile delinquency*

The most common problems, as shown by long-term practice, which are dealt with by the Centers for Social Work (CSR) are family problems – the problems of domestic violence, divorce, custody decisions, adoption, monitoring the situation in families and responding accordingly, alarming other state bodies, primarily the police (Bošković and Mišev, 2022). Given that CSRs are responsible for assessing a situation, the needs and risks of beneficiaries and other important people in their environment, placement with foster and relative care families, foster home placement, shelter accommodation, financial and material assistance, their data relatively accurately shows a socioeconomic situation in society. Data on claiming material assistance and exercising the right to it were created in cooperation with the records of the then Ministry of Labor, Veterans' Affairs and Social Affairs. The next part of the paper presents data on the number of families receiving financial assistance, the number of reports of domestic violence, the number of children displaced from families, including the number of children with behavioral problems and conflicts with the law.

*Table 1. Total number of families of beneficiaries of financial assistance in the records of centers for social work in Serbia*

Year	2015	2016.	2017.	2018.	2019.
Number	101303	102392	104876	98754	92673

*Table 2. The share of the largest number of beneficiaries in the CSW records, in relation to age, on the territory of Serbia*

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Share in age structure, age group 25-64 years (%)	47,7%	47,8%	47,8%	47,7%	47,4%

Based on the data in Table 1, it can be seen that the number of families of beneficiaries varies in the period of 5 years, but in 2018 and 2019 there is a certain decline, which is in line with the official statistics published by the Institute, and the number of people applying for financial aid has been declining slightly during these years – 85,624 families applied for financial aid in 2016, while the number of them amounted to 73,919 in 2020. Table 2 shows that the largest number of recipients, by age, in the CSW records are people aged 26 to 64; it can be said that most services are used by those who can be classified as “able-bodied” population. According to the percentage, that number is almost consistent over the years.

Table 3 shows the number of reported domestic and partner violence cases.

*Table 3. Number of reported domestic and partner violence cases to the Centers for Social Work in Serbia*

Year	2015.	2016.	2017.	2018.	2019.
Number	31.138	18.743	23.218	35.102	36.227

Unfortunately, the data shown indicate that the number of applications is constantly growing. This can be viewed in a number of ways – either that the phenomenon has become more widespread or victims are more likely to report it, regardless of whether there is more or less violence. The data in the following tables show that the number of children beneficiaries in the Center for social services records is mainly growing, as well as the number of children who are victims of domestic violence, that is, their share in the total number of children using some services provided by centers for social work is increasing.

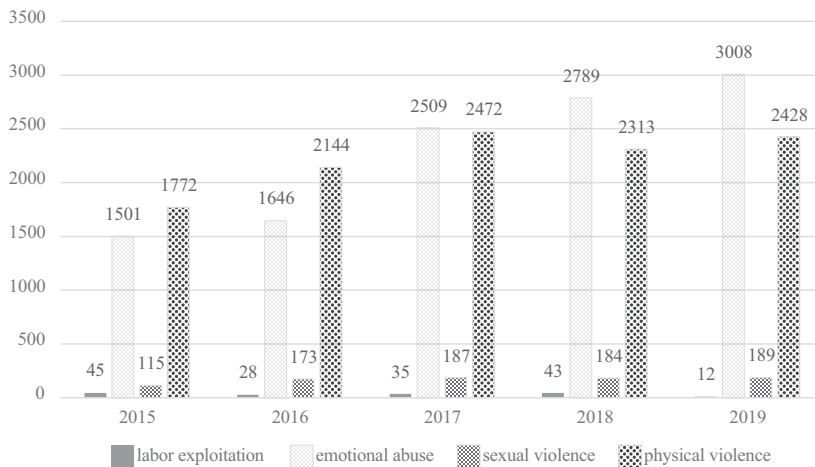
*Table 4. Total number of children in the CSW records in Serbia*

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Number of children	197.879	202.940	201.097	205.129	197.713

*Table 5. Share of children as victims of violence and neglect in the total number of juveniles who use social welfare services provided by centers for social work in Serbia*

Year	2016.	2017.	2018.	2019.
The share of child victims in the total number	4,6%	5,5%	5,6%	6,2%

Graph 1 shows the types of violence committed against children. The data shows that, in most cases, violence includes forms of physical and emotional violence, then sexual violence, but that there are also cases of forced labor.



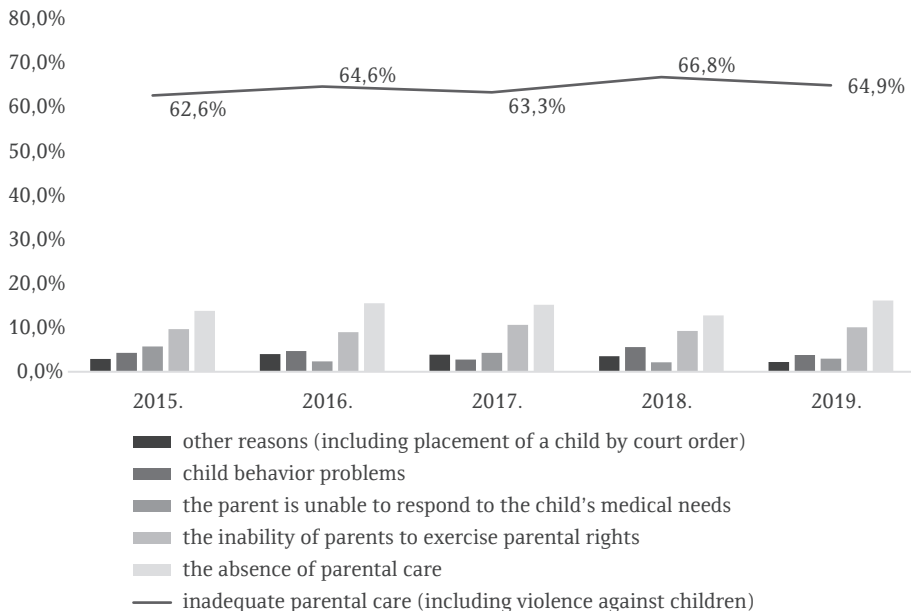
*Graph 1. Overview of the type of violence committed against children in the CSW records for the period 2015-2019*

Table 6 shows the total number of children in social care and the number of children in placed in foster homes and foster family homes. Children can be taken away from primary families for various reasons, including violence and neglect, the deprivation of parental rights, the loss of parents, then migrant children without parental escorts, children living on the streets and so on.

*Table 6. Total number of children in the care system, placed in foster homes and foster family homes.*

Year	2015	2016.	2017.	2018.	2019.
Number	6052	6062	6145	6166	5997

Graph 2 shows the reasons for taking away children from primary families, and the reasons, in most cases, are inadequate parental care (including violence), followed by the lack of parental care, and the inability of parents to exercise parental rights, child behavior problems and others.



*Graph 2. Reasons for taking away the children from the primary family*

*Source. The 2019 Report of the Institute for Social Protection of the Republic of Serbia*

As shown in Table 6, a similar trend can be observed regarding the number of juveniles with behavioral problems or in conflict with the law. The total number of these children, for the period 2015-2019, is shown in the following Table.

*Table 7. Total number of minors with behavioral problems or in conflict with the law*

Year	2015	2016.	2017.	2018.	2019.
Number	22412	23214	24969	23143	22879

Table 8 shows the number of children under 14 who are in conflict with the law. As with the previous indicators, fluctuations are also evident here, while the number decreased somewhat in 2019.



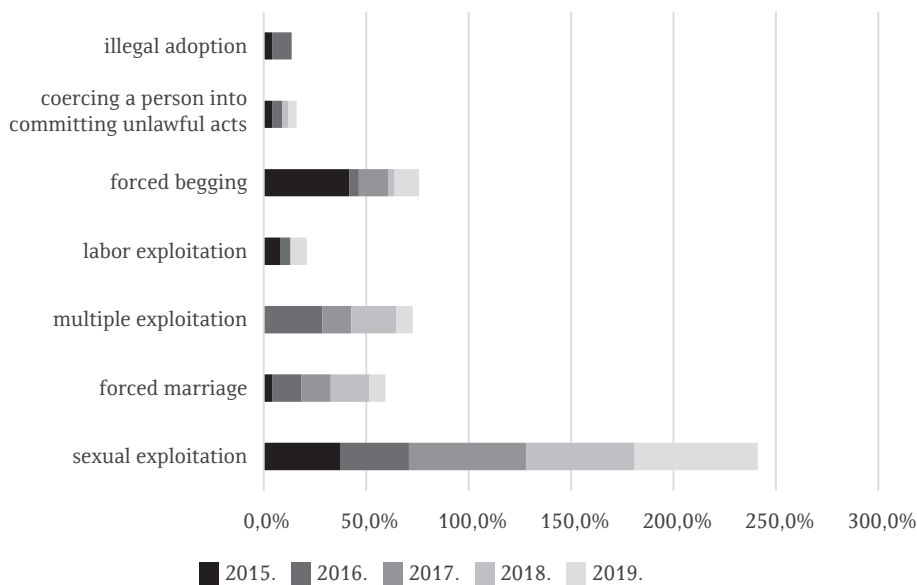
*Table 8. Number of children under 14 who are in conflict with the law*

Year	2015	2016.	2017.	2018.	2019.
Number	980	1195	1270	1019	893

The CSW records, unfortunately, show that the number of child victims of trafficking is increasing; the number of child victims is shown in Table 9, while the type of exploitation and coercion is shown in Graph 3, according to the Report of the Institute for Social Protection.

*Table 9. Number of child victims of trafficking, according to the CSW records*

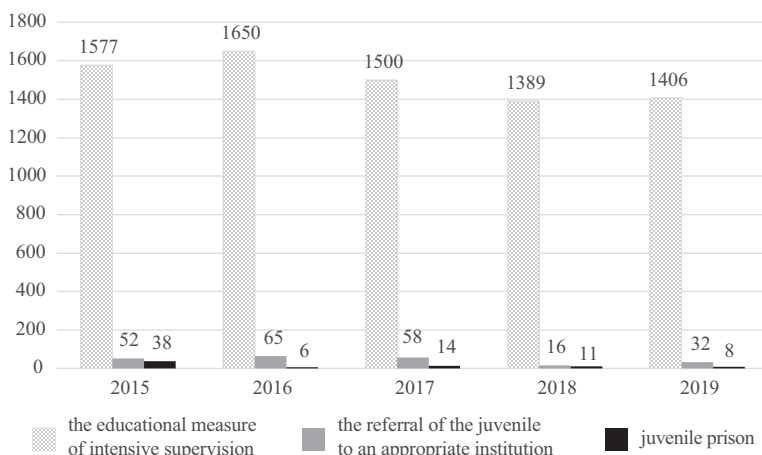
Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Number	67	109	68	132	146



*Graph 3. Types of abuse and coercion of child victims of trafficking and numerical presentation, for the period 2015-2019.*

*Source: the 2019 Report of the Institute for Social Protection, and according to the Report of the Center for the Protection of Victims of Trafficking*

Graph 4 shows the movement of the number of the measures imposed by the CSW on juveniles with behavioral problems or in conflict with the law.



*Graph 4. Number of specific measures imposed on children with behavioral problems or in conflict with the law, for the period 2015-2019*

The data in Graph 4 show that the measures of intensive supervision are most often imposed, but there has been a decrease in the number of measures of referral to an educational institution as well as the measure of sending juveniles to a juvenile prison.

Tables 10 and 11 show the data obtained from the records of the Ministry of the Interior, which are processed for the needs of this paper, which show the number of misdemeanor measures and criminal sanctions imposed on juveniles for the period 2015-2019. The tables show, according to our choice, the most serious and severe forms of delinquent and criminal behavior, particularly bearing in mind they are carried out by children.

*Table 10. Number of misdemeanor charges against juveniles*

Year / Type of misdemeanor	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Physical attack on participants in a sports event, unauthorized entry onto stadium playing field, bringing or attempting to bring alcohol, narcotics, pyrotechnics, etc. into sporting facilities.	20	21	20	14	31
indecent and insolent behavior, insulting another person, causing a fight or participating in it	1534	1287	1316	1326	1244

*Table 11. Number of criminal charges filed against juveniles*

Year / Type of crime	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Obstruction of performance of public duty <sup>3</sup>	46	21	22	14	33
Murder <sup>4</sup>	1	1	3	3	5
Attempted murder <sup>5</sup>	16	13	4	7	5
Serious bodily injuries <sup>6</sup>	155	122	116	116	111
Minor injuries <sup>7</sup>	166	175	203	188	182
Abuse and torture <sup>8</sup>	11	20	10	16	19
Domestic violence <sup>9</sup>	103	128	151	143	155
Theft <sup>10</sup>	1,580	1,498	1,484	1,447	1,601
Aggravated theft <sup>11</sup>	2,020	1,697	1,584	1,491	1,508

A review of the data selected indicates that juveniles commit serious violent, deviant and criminal acts. Like the data contained in the CSW report, according to statistical data, the largest number of misdemeanors and offenses was committed in 2015 and 2017, but there has been a slight decline since 2017. Such a trend is shown by the data on the number of users of financial aid and social assistance for the same period. What is especially worrying is the number of criminal charges filed against juveniles for domestic violence offenses, which are not visible in the CSW records at all. The reason for that may be that the victims of violence do not report their children (or relatives) to the centers for social work; rather, the police respond *ex officio* or upon the report filed by other persons. Certainly, these data indicate a two-way disruption of family and social ties.

## CONCLUSION

A review of the selected data indicates that juveniles commit serious violent, deviant and criminal acts. Like the data contained in the CSW report, the statistics indicate that the largest number of crimes and misdemeanors were committed in 2015 and 2017, but there has been a slight decline since 2017.

3 Article 23 of the Law on Public Peace and Order

4 Article 113 of the Criminal Code.

5 Article 113 of the Criminal Code.

6 Article 121 of the Criminal Code.

7 Article 122 of the Criminal Code.

8 Article 137 of the Criminal Code.

9 Article 194 of the Criminal Code.

10 Article 203 of the Criminal Code.

11 Article 204 of the Criminal Code.

Such a trend is shown by the data on the number of users of financial aid and social assistance for the same period. Certainly, the data indicates a two-way disruption of family and social ties. The data on criminal offenses committed by juveniles between 2010 and 2012, which were presented by Bošković and Jan-ković (2014), shows that these persons committed an average of 1,487 crimes of theft and robbery per year (4,461 in total) and an average of 115 offenses of inflicting grievous bodily harm (346 in total). This trend is also observed in the data presented in this paper. What is particularly worrying is the multiple increase in the number of crimes of domestic violence committed by juveniles – according to the same source, for the period 2010-2012, an average of 20 offenses per year, while now this number ranges from 103 to as much as 155 for the period 2015-2019. According to the reports of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, for the period 2013-2014, 110 or 89 offenses of inflicting grievous bodily harm were committed, 50 or 49 domestic violence offenses and 587 and 586 offenses of theft, respectively. The data shows that since 2013, there has been an increasing trend in the number of crimes committed by juveniles, especially the most serious ones. What is indicative is the number of criminal charges filed against juveniles for domestic violence offenses, which are not visible in the CSW records at all. The reason for this may be that the victims of violence do not report their children (or relatives) to the centers for social work; rather that the police react *ex officio* or upon the report filed by other persons. In that case, this difference may indicate a certain lack of coordination in the work of the CSW, the police and the prosecutor's office. Bearing in mind that violence against the elderly, the so-called ageism, which is another stereotype and prejudice in our society, is one of the dark numbers of victims, a more detailed analysis of the causes and forms of domestic violence committed by juveniles should be performed in the future.

The largest number of children in the CSW records come from families which use financial aid and social assistance, while children with disabilities, children under guardianship and others constitute a smaller number. The trend that is not declining is the increase in the number of intimate partner violence and domestic violence and the number of child victims of violence.

The above data indicate that in the years when there is a growth in the families receiving, and applying for, financial assistance, there is a slight increase in the number of children with behavioral problems or in conflict with the law. The cause of juvenile delinquency does not necessarily lie in the poor material status of the family. From the socio-psychological aspect, the causes can also be dysfunctional families, unhealthy behavior within families which is adopted as a model of behavior, or parents' insufficient commitment to raising children, especially adolescents. Certainly a stable socioeconomic situation, which would provide existential certainty and healthy functioning of the family, provide a much better basis for children's socialization.

No theory can independently explain the causes of delinquency and criminal behavior, but taking into account the challenges facing communities and

families, from socioeconomic to security challenges, in which the development of technology affects the spread of certain pathological phenomena (pedophilia, sectarianism, human trafficking), the overall analysis of the state of a society must be the basis for considering the issue of the frequency and form of juvenile delinquency.

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