



Family Environment and Adolescent Delinquency in China: Evidence from the CFPS 2022

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Abstract. This study investigates the relationship between family environment and adolescent delinquent behavior in China, using data from the 2022 wave of the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). Drawing on a nationally representative sample of adolescents under the age of 18, the analysis examines the effects of various family dynamics—including parent-child conflict, parental relationship quality, and communication frequency—on self-reported delinquent behaviors such as arguing, verbal defiance, and physical aggression. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression reveals a significant positive association between adolescent delinquency and both the frequency of arguments with parents and parental conflict, while no significant effect is found for parent-child communication. These results align with prior research and underscore the critical influence of family dynamics on adolescent behavioral outcomes. However, the study is limited by its correlational nature, potential measurement gaps in delinquency indicators, and possible gender-based differences in effect. Future research should employ causal identification strategies, expand behavioral metrics, and explore gender heterogeneity to deepen understanding of these relationships.

Keywords: Adolescent delinquency, family environment, parental conflict, parent-child relationship, China

1 Introduction

Adolescents have become one of the most debated population segments in modern society. The manifestation of delinquency among certain adolescents—encompassing school violence, drug misuse, theft, property damage, and assault—has become a growing focus in academic research. Chinese youth crime rates show notable escalation patterns, with juvenile offenses constituting 20%-30% of total criminal cases during the 1950s, growing substantially to 70%-80% by the 1980s. While statistical reductions occurred in the 1990s, the problem maintains its severity. Modern delinquency patterns now display heightened tendencies toward organized group offenses and physical aggression, creating substantial public safety risks while comprising more than 80% of criminal offenses¹. Scholarly investigations have established that adolescent delinquency stems from various determinants such as educational systems, broader cultural forces, and developmental psychology factors. Nevertheless, familial

contexts continue to demonstrate crucial influence on youth misconduct. This research primarily examines the correlation between household dynamics and delinquent activities within China's adolescent population.

A review of existing scholarship reveals that domestic research examining connections between family environments and adolescent delinquency in China emerged comparatively later in academic discourse. Scholars frequently utilized imported theoretical frameworks rather than developing culturally grounded models derived from Chinese population studies, creating limitations in precisely characterizing contemporary familial dynamics and delinquent patterns among Chinese youth.

Three critical factors prevent direct application of Western theoretical models to Chinese adolescent delinquency-family environment research. Primarily, fundamental sociocultural distinctions exist between Eastern and Western contexts. Chinese society prioritizes collectivist principles that emphasize familial harmony and communal obligations, contrasting sharply with Western individualism. Within this cultural framework, authoritarian parenting approaches are commonly practiced, with adolescents' value systems being profoundly molded by domestic ethics and societal norms. Families function as principal socializing institutions where parental aspirations and supervisory roles directly shape personality formation. Conversely, Western cultures typically advocate democratic parenting styles that prioritize fostering youth autonomy and self-determination over prescriptive behavioral direction.

Second, China exhibits notable disparities between urban and rural regions. Marked differences exist in economic status, educational attainment, and living conditions across urban and rural households. The unequal allocation of educational infrastructure results in urban adolescents generally obtaining superior academic resources, whereas their rural counterparts often encounter constrained developmental opportunities. These socioeconomic and educational inequalities may contribute to varying probabilities of delinquency involvement.

Third, China's distinctive educational framework features a highly competitive environment with longstanding focus on exam-centric educational approaches. This system prioritizes knowledge acquisition and academic performance metrics, driving substantial familial investments in children's scholastic development. Parents frequently impose elevated expectations regarding academic achievement, potentially generating tension within family dynamics. Such competitive pressures might adversely affect adolescents' value systems formation, possibly leading to psychological strain and manifestations of extreme delinquency behaviors.

Considering these contextual particularities, developing localized theoretical frameworks and conducting region-specific empirical investigations becomes imperative when analyzing correlations between family environment and adolescent delinquency within China. This necessitates thorough integration of the nation's unique societal circumstances and cultural contexts.

Building upon this foundation, the current research employs data from the CFPS (China Family Panel Studies) Data Center to conduct confirmatory factor analysis alongside reliability and validity assessments. This methodological approach seeks to systematically examine the magnitude of family environmental influences on adolescent delinquency manifestations.

2 Theoretical Framework

The family setting comprises two distinct dimensions: material and psychosocial spheres. The material dimension encompasses measurable elements like household financial status and structural composition, whereas the psychosocial aspect involves intangible relational dynamics including interpersonal behaviors, domestic atmosphere, and caregiving approaches. This dual environmental framework profoundly influences personal development trajectories, particularly in psychological maturation and character formation. Familial relational patterns, especially spousal interactions and intergenerational communication, serve as crucial developmental catalysts. Wang observed that adolescents from economically disadvantaged households frequently have caregivers occupied in labor-intensive, low-wage occupations, resulting in limited availability for guidance and emotional support². Liu revealed that youth subjected to early emotional deprivation, inadequate supervision, and recurrent maltreatment demonstrate heightened susceptibility to psychological disturbances and maladaptive conduct³. Furthermore, dysfunctional domestic settings marked by absence of caregiver involvement, proper oversight, and affective bonding, coupled with exposure to rejection, abandonment, and mistreatment, substantially elevate risks for serious antisocial conduct patterns.

Adolescent delinquency encompasses behaviors that breach societal norms and inflict harm on individuals or communities, ranging from physical aggression and property destruction to peer harassment and unlawful appropriation of goods. Studies reveal that youths experiencing frequent interpersonal conflicts in educational settings demonstrate higher susceptibility to adult criminal involvement. The developmental trajectory of delinquency behaviors in minors is substantially shaped by familial environmental quality and caregiving approaches⁴. Functioning as fundamental socialization institutions, families critically influence adolescent conduct through their operational dynamics, structural composition, and child-rearing methodologies.

Recent societal developments have witnessed a steady rise in juvenile delinquency rates amid growing social complexities, attracting considerable scholarly and public scrutiny. Investigations demonstrate that adverse familial conditions including domestic abuse and parental separation not only undermine household stability but also generate psychological distress characterized by apprehension, insecurity, and alienation among members - especially adolescents. Prolonged exposure to such environments may shape psychological characteristics like social isolation, depressive tendencies, violent predispositions, or diminished self-worth, increasing the likelihood of confrontational responses when encountering challenges. This substantiates the necessity to examine the operational pathways by which domestic circumstances affect juvenile misconduct, carrying substantial importance for developing preventive strategies and corrective interventions.

In addition to family environment influences, adolescent Delinquency stems from multifaceted determinants. Empirical studies reveal notable gender disparities in behavioral manifestations, with male adolescents showing greater propensity for aggression when confronted with verbal antagonism compared to their female counterparts⁵. Research by Liu further documents heightened exposure to childhood adversity, dif-

ferential psychological resource development, and elevated Delinquency patterns among male youth⁶. Educational institutional factors emerge as critical mediators, where nurturing school atmospheres demonstrate capacity to counteract detrimental effects of adverse experiences while offering compensatory advantages for marginalized learners. Academic institutional philosophies and disciplinary frameworks substantially impact behavioral outcomes, evidenced by Cambridge University findings showing schools with elevated baseline Delinquency rates exacerbate individual misconduct during adolescent development phases. Complementary American studies reveal educational institutions implementing transparent governance systems, equitable disciplinary protocols, and comprehensive intervention strategies typically maintain lower Delinquency prevalence⁷. Macro-level societal influences equally contribute through distorted cultural narratives and pervasive media exposure, particularly adolescent immersion in violent digital entertainment and aggressive media content - a correlation strongly associated with escalated probabilities of antisocial conduct.

3 Data and Method

This study utilizes data from the 2022 wave of the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). A non-probability sampling method was employed, and the final analytic sample consists of 2,873 participants under the age of 18. The primary objective is to examine the relationship between family environment and adolescent delinquent behavior.

Independent Variable – Family Environment

Family environment is operationalized through two main dimensions:

1. **Parental Relationship**

- *Variable example:* qn3 – frequency of arguments between parents

2. **Parent-Child Relationship**

- *Variable examples:*

- qn2 – frequency of arguments with parents
- qn201 – frequency of heart-to-heart talks with parents

Dependent Variable – Adolescent Delinquency Behavior

Delinquency behavior is measured using a composite score based on self-reported antisocial and aggressive behaviors. The index is constructed from the following variables:

- qext002 – tendency to argue (weight: 0.25)
- qext012 – tendency to talk back (weight: 0.25)
- qext013 – involvement in physical fights (weight: 0.5)

Control Variables

Control variables include age, gender, and other relevant demographic or contextual characteristics.

4 Result

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The analytic sample includes 2,873 adolescents, with a mean age of approximately 13.88 years ($SD = 2.82$). Among them, 1,343 (46.75%) are female and 1,530 (53.25%) are male.

4.2 Regression Result

According to Table 1, compared to children who never argue with parents, those who occasionally argue (1-3 times/month) demonstrated a statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) 17.17% higher average delinquency score ($SE = 0.036$). Frequent arguments with parents were associated with a significantly ($p < 0.001$) 30.5% higher delinquency score compared to non-argumentative groups ($SE = 0.064$).

Table 1. Regression result of child delinquency and frequency of argument with parents

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Argument with parents		
None	-	-
Sometimes	.1716977*	.0364529
Often	.3050453*	.0641856
Age	-.0034939	.0095249
Gender		
Female		
Male	.1774104*	.0322101
Urban	-.0816932	.0322691
Academic pressure	.0842535	.0145863
Cons	1.366451	.1221609
$R^2 = 0.0514$		
$N = 1,961$		

According to Table 2, compared to children who never communicate with parents, those engaging in occasional parent-child communication (1-3 times/month) exhibited a 1.733% lower average delinquency score ($SE = 0.037$), which was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Frequent parent-child communication was associated with a 7.9% reduction in delinquency scores compared to non-communicative groups ($SE = 0.041$), representing a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$).

Table 2. Regression result of child delinquency and frequency of chatting with parents

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Chatting with parents		
None	-	-
Sometimes	-.0173305	.0377287

Often	-.079057	.0414838
Age	-.0018031	.0096858
Gender		
Female		
Male	.1640877*	.0324294
Urban	-.0743491	.0325451
Academic pressure	.089111	.0147109
Cons	1.431166	.1289166
$R^2 = 0.035$		
$N = 1,954$		

According to Table 3, compared to children whose parents never argue, those exposed to occasional interparental arguments (1-3 times/month) demonstrated a 17.7% higher average delinquency score ($SE = 0.040$), which was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Frequent interparental arguments were associated with a 20% increase in delinquency scores compared to non-argumentative family groups ($SE = 0.076$), representing a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$).

Table 3. Regression result of child delinquency and frequency of quarrels between parents

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Quarrels between parents		
None	-	-
Sometimes	.1778338*	.0405914
Often	.2004811*	.0767175
Age	.0022661	.0096518
Gender		
Female		
Male	.1640266*	.0326969
Urban	-.0700383	.0327459
Academic pressure	.0795808	.0147804
Cons	1.321121	.1242344
$R^2 = 0.420$		
$N = 1,863$		

5 Discussion

The study finds that higher frequency of argument with parents and between parents are associated with more child delinquency, while no significant effect was found for chatting with parents. This result is consistent with the hypothesis and the broad literature.

The findings of the present study are consistent with the initial hypothesis and align with the majority of existing research. A significant universal relationship was observed between adolescents' delinquency behavior and family environment, which holds validity across both Western and Chinese contexts.

Several limitations persist in this study. First, the study result is correlational, one may not infer causality from the result. Second, measurement of child delinquency contains arguments, verbal aggression, physical aggression, etc. Although these are the well-established reflection of child delinquency, they might not capture the full component of the concept. For example: theft and undermining social cohesion. Third, this study may have a gender bias. Although the sample size of over 1,900 participants indicated correlations between family environment and delinquency behavior for both genders, the observed association might be male-driven. Analyzing female participants may not yield the same conclusion.

To address these, first, the future researcher could apply causal inference, such as instrumental variable estimation and randomized control trial, to understand further the relationship between family environment and child delinquency.

Second, future researcher can incorporate indicators such as theft and disruption of unity into the measure of child delinquency.

Third, future researcher can explore heterogeneous effect of family environment on child delinquency by gender.

6 Conclusion

This study employed CFPS2022 and OLS regression to understand the relationship between child delinquency and family environment. The findings indicate that there is indeed a universal relationship between adolescent delinquency behavior and family environment.

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