

We Just Call Them Problem Children: Understanding How School Leaders Define, Explain, and Manage Juvenile Delinquency in Pakistan

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored how school leaders in Pakistan understand, explain, and manage juvenile delinquency within their institutional settings. Drawing on Agnew's General Strain Theory (1992), the research examined principals' interpretations of antisocial behavior, the underlying causes they identified, and the strategies they employed to maintain discipline. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 principals from government high schools across Rawalpindi, Murree, and Gujjar Khan tehsils, and the data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach, supported by NVivo 12 Plus for coding and organization. Three major themes emerged. The first captured the manifestations and awareness of delinquent behaviors, including truancy, bullying, disrespect, and digital misconduct, highlighting the limited conceptual familiarity with the formal term "juvenile delinquency." The second theme reflected administrative and preventive responses, where counseling, parental engagement, and moral education were emphasized over punitive measures. The third theme revealed the emotional strain and institutional challenges faced by principals, underscoring burnout, lack of counseling resources, and the need for systemic support. Overall, the findings demonstrate that while school leaders recognize and actively manage various forms of student misconduct, their efforts are constrained by structural and emotional pressures. The study calls for policy-level interventions to enhance psychological, administrative, and parental support systems in schools.

Keywords: Juvenile Delinquency, School Leadership, Pakistan, Counseling, principals.

Introduction

The issue of juvenile delinquency is one of the most important social and educational challenges. It moves different social actors, such as social workers, educationalists, psychologists, sociologists, and policymakers. Although the expression is used to refer to minors and young people who carry out delinquent activities (violating legal and social prohibitions), there are differences across cultures and social institutions. It is important to recognize the issue not only as a question of order and control, but also as a fundamental question of social, educational, and psychological inequities. Most juvenile crimes are non-violent crimes (ex. truancy, theft, vandalism, bullying) and it has

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a deep social cost (UNODC, 2021). Most of these behaviors are the product of social and structural failures of supervision and control across family, school and community. Most of the recent literature in juvenile delinquency focuses on social and structural positive rehabilitation as opposed to the punitive approach. This focus has underlined the school system as the most important place to enact behavioral change.

Reforms that focus on restorative justice and restorative justice practices have contributed to declining juvenile offending rates in many high-income countries. However, many societies in the developing world, particularly those in South Asia, have problems escalating with urbanization and impoverishment, and weakening community ties (Dahal, 2023; Rasul et al., 2021). The breakdown of traditional joint-family systems and the rise of isolated family units have resulted in diminished supervision and social control from within. In these environments, the emergence of delinquency is simply a manifestation of frustration, social neglect, and the absence of psychological and developmental scaffolding (Wang & Dong, 2025). Agnew (1992) and Moffitt (1990) posit that unrelenting psychological strain, poor academic performance, and absence of emotional resources create an environment of ungovernable loss that compels young people to break laws as a reclaiming act. This line of thought compels us to understand juvenile delinquency not as an individual failure but as an expression of punitive and unsupportive socio-educational conditions.

In Pakistan, there is a lack of empirical research and legal framework in relation to and despite, visible juvenile delinquency in schools and communities, it is legally seen as a juvenile offence and suffers weak implementation of protection laws and thus, a juvenile delinquency is a legally indictable offence and those under eighteen are legally considered as children and are still processed under juvenile adult criminal system (Ullah & Bakhsh, 2024). The introduction of Juvenile Justice System Ordinance (JJSO, 2000) was a major step in making the legal system more humane as it called for neglected revealments on the focuses of rehabilitation, education, and reintegration as opposed to the methods of detention. However, the legal system and reforms institutions are not best suited for schools and preventive legal action. Pakistan has seen Ahmed (2023); Hameed et al. (2024) research the issue in regard to school and psychological domain, wherein the gross lack of teaching, corporal discipline, and emotional neglect of parents are major factors leading to a decline in student behavior along with, social inequities, and mental health, and thus problematic behavior is severely mishandled (Rizwan et al., 2025).

In educational contexts, understanding the meaning of delinquent behavior is highly contextual, culturally embedded, and expressed through language. Teachers may not even understand the jargon and simply refer to problematic students using locally coined expressions with moral or behavioral associations (Faisal et al., 2024). For instance, many Pakistani schools use the expressions "problem children" and "problem students" to refer to disobedient, aggressive, absent, or truant children. This shows the utter lack of diagnostic conceptual knowledge of problem behavior. While concern is expressed through these labels, the underlying structural or psychological roots are overshadowed by the notion of flawed personality (Shakir et al., 2024). Still, the labels

reveal an understanding of the complex student behavior using the cultural idioms of school managers. Therefore, understanding the construction of these meanings is key to understanding the response and management of schools to delinquent behavior.

The psychological aspects of delinquency must be layered. In General Strain Theory, Agnew (1992) explains how experiences such as parental rejection or harsh discipline may create emotional pressure with a result in aggression or defiance (Agnew & Brezina, 2019). In Pakistan, where counselling remains outside school systems and teachers have minimal training in child psychology, principals and teachers respond. Thus, their biases and management as emotional first-aid responders influence the trajectory of at-risk students (Mansha & Khanam, 2023). A punitive approach may push students away, strengthen their marginalization, and reinforce negative behavior, while a mild approach may assist in controlling the situation. How school leaders think about and deal with such situations is important in the design of effective, preventive, and contextually appropriate interventions (Yaqoob, 2024).

Qualitative research has illustrated how the values and practices of school leaders shape the response to behavioral problems at the local level (Karakose et al., 2024; Morris, 2024). Conversely, most of the research studies on juvenile delinquency in Pakistan has been quantitative in nature, with the predominant focus on the correlational risk factors, leaving the subjective meanings placed by educators unexamined (Hussain et al., 2024). Siddiqui (2025) notes the absence of research on the teachers' and principals' perspectives of language around delinquency and its management. This absence is of particular concern because the school principal plays a critical role in defining the school's disciplinary framework and emotional atmosphere and acts as the primary school-community interface.

Thus, this research was designed to find how school leaders in Pakistan interpret, articulate, and handle juvenile delinquency within their schools. This involved studying twelve secondary school principals based in the Rawalpindi district.

As such, the study sought to document their understanding of student misconduct and the practices they employ to prevent and rehabilitate student misconduct. Braun and Clarke (2006)'s thematic analysis was utilized for the study, which involves the identification of themes and patterns within the participants' responses. This study was able to identify three themes.

- i. Awareness of juvenile delinquency and local terminology.
- ii. Factors such as parental involvement, teacher support, and weak problem-solving mechanisms.
- iii. Prevention and management strategies such as counseling, teacher-parent cooperation, and guidance.

This study offers valuable insight into the nature of juvenile delinquency in Pakistan, helping to define delinquency as a phenomenon of language and society. Many principals have attained an indifferent understanding of juvenile delinquency.

Review of the Literature

Global Understandings of Juvenile Delinquency: It is still a global concern that intersects with the legal, social, and educational fields. As defined, it involves minor children in acts of absences, bullying, thievery, and vandalism. In the past few decades, many researchers and politicians have come to understand that such behavior is rarely associated with pathological criminal tendencies, but the result of complex social and psychological conditions that are averse to development. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021) indicates that, most of the juvenile offenses across the globe are non-violent, and there are adverse consequences on the development of the youth, school dropout rates, and overall community welfare.

Within continents and across nations, case studies point to weak family structures, monetary deprivation, negative peer influence, and inadequate education to support children as common factors needing investigation. In the West, studies have focused on the mitigating role parents and active school representatives have on negative outcomes. Wallner et al. (2021) argue that children with adequate emotional and supervisorial guidance are less likely to perform antisocial acts; they argue this is less likely in the children subject to inconsistent discipline or emotional neglect. In the same vein, Azzopardi (2025) argued that loss of control on the part of empathy, discipline, and supportive guidance in schools increases the chances for deviant behavior in children. Countries like New Zealand, Canada, and the United Kingdom have adopted the discipline of restorative justice, with a focus on reintegration and new skill development, at the expense of punitive measures.

On the other hand, in developing countries, socio-economic factors, urbanization, and a lack of available quality education increase the likelihood of children engaging in delinquent behavior. According to UNICEF (2020), children living in developing countries face numerous violence, neglect, and child labor and possess very few means to cope with these struggles. Also, the term "juvenile delinquency" is more complex than what is defined in the West. In several non-Western countries, it is morally, religiously, and even disciplinarily (Zhang & Liu, 2023) defined, as opposed to legally or psychologically. Therefore, these within culture constructions must be understood to formulate effective prevention and intervention methods that are culturally relevant.

Relating Juvenile Delinquency to Pakistan: In Pakistan, juvenile delinquency is a problem that is still developing in the context of education and is beginning to show its presence in the context of social issues. Juvenile delinquency in educational settings is more apparent than the rest in the context of the socio-economic condition of the country which includes poverty, inequality, and lack of institutional coherence. There have been significant strides in legal reform with the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance (JJSO, 2000) and the Juvenile Justice System Act (2018) which aim to protect children within the legal system. Protection is still very lacking with the enforcement of such laws, especially in a school setting, which is the more reasonable place to implement such protective measures (Awais et al., 2024).

The crucial role that schools have in spotting and resolving behavioral issues at an early stage is not well understood. Most teachers are not adequately trained to understand and solve these issues. An example of the consequences of neglect or ineffective teacher support linked with corporal punishment and absent parenting is the dismissal of delinquency in Pakistan. Students displaying aggressive behavior or emotive truants are often the victims of broken teacher-student relationships (Ahmad et al., 2024), as defiance in the classroom during the adolescent stage is mainly the result of academic distress and emotional abandonment (Ishfaq & Kamal 2025). In Pakistan, the use of terminology such as “problem children” or “disobedient” lies at the center of common discourse. This is indicative of a more moral than psychosocial approach to behavior. To a certain extent, this type of talk shows that the notion of delinquency in children is absent, at least as a phenomenon of social development.

These patterns are further exacerbated by socio-economic inequalities. Children raised in low-income families are more likely to experience early exposure to work, which is often accompanied by the absence of parents, and disrupted educational settings. As with schools in urban areas of Pakistan, some schools in Rawalpindi complain of increasing bullying and rising cases of absenteeism. Meanwhile, rural schools complain about child labor and the absence of any adult supervision (Fehmi et al., 2024). All these contextual factors combine to create stressors which in all probability will add to the difficulties of the region. The absence of the school leaders’ viewpoint is certainly one of the most glaring omissions in the literature concerning juvenile delinquency in schools, particularly with respect to the intricate ways principals deal with such matters in other schools in Pakistan.

Research on juvenile delinquency is readily available, however, there is a clear lack of primary qualitative research on the topic in Pakistan. Many studies take a quantitative or correlational approach. These studies outline aspects such as poverty or family dynamics but entirely miss the delinquent behavior as perceived by the teacher-respondents. Most of the research studies continue to focus on the legal or psychological aspects of the phenomenon being studied, ignoring the educational and sociocultural factors, including the language used by school administrators in reference to students, especially the term 'problem children,' and the implications of such language from a cultural and ethical point of view. In addressing these gaps, the research explores how educational leaders in Rawalpindi construct, interpret, and manage juvenile delinquency using thematic and semi-structured interviews to frame their understandings within socio-cultural and institutional contexts. The purpose of the study is to advance school-based culturally responsive theoretical and practical frameworks by suggesting a paradigm shift from context-, language- and compassion-neglecting punitive approaches to prevention and support.

Theoretical Grounds

This research is based on Agnew’s General Strain Theory (1992) which posits that delinquency arises as a product of the emotional strain that results from negative

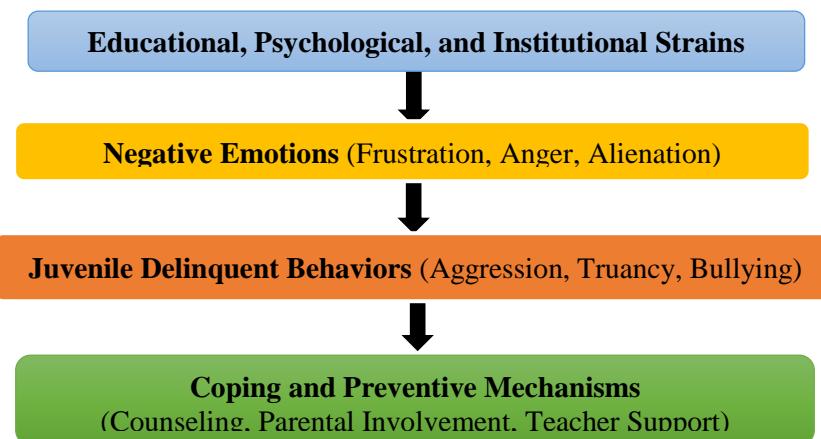
stimuli. Individuals undergoing repeated bouts of frustration, failure, or suffer from adverse conditions like abuse, school failure, and social isolation develop negative feelings of anger, resentment, or anxiety. People in such conditions may exhibit deviant or delinquent behavior if there is lack of effective coping mechanisms. Theory or practice, the behaviors are not moral slip-ups or failures, but poorly suited attempts to complicated psychological pressures. Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) has been used in education to explain student misconduct and highlight how school contexts that impose too much control and no (emotional) support cause strain.

Conceptual Framework: The conceptual framework that stems from the GST Theory of strain focuses on juvenile delinquency and the interaction of multiple strains at school and home. It delineates three primary domains of strain.

- Educational Strain - Chasing academic goals, lack of student engagement from educators, and general unproductive teaching behaviors.
- Psychological Strain - Isolation and exclusion, and stressful home environments.
- Institutional Strains - Weak school systems, poor home–school communication, and lack of counseling opportunities hinder development of adaptive coping skills.

According to GST, these strains create undesirable emotions, which might translate into absences, victimization, violence, and rule breaking. The framework of this model suggests that mitigating the gaps by proactive teacher support, including parents, and strong school leadership can reduce these behaviors by offering healthy ways to spend emotional energy. Thus, this assured the framework informed the study's focus on the perceptions and handling of delinquent behavior by school heads. Their thoughts are interpreted in the context of “strain–emotion–coping” of General Strain Theory. It created a theoretical framework that connected: a) The types of strain, b) Emotional and behavioral responses of students, and c) The strain coping responses that the educators applied.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Research Objectives

1. To explore how school leaders conceptualize and define juvenile delinquency within their educational and cultural contexts.
2. To identify the perceived educational, psychological, and institutional factors contributing to juvenile delinquent behavior among students.
3. To examine the strategies employed by school heads to prevent and manage juvenile delinquency in their schools.

Research Design and Methodology

This study used a qualitative design method in the attempt to grasp each school leader's conceptualization, rationale, and strategies on juvenile delinquency within the context of their respective schools. The qualitative method was used here because the aim was to appreciate the individual realities and narratives of study participants rather than engaging in a quantitative analysis. Construct of this study was guided by Agnew's General Strain Theory (1992), which posits that the tendency to engage in delinquency becomes plausible and possible whenever an individual is subjected to some form of strain that causes negative emotions like frustration, anger, or resentment. Failure to manage these emotional coping mechanisms in a constructive manner becomes a gateway to an array of malfunctioning behaviors. The absence of parental involvement, the absence of solid relationships between a teacher and a student and weak institutional frameworks, within education, are some of the stressors that are prone to be experienced. This perspective informs both data collection and data analysis, and the interpretation of the school leaders' perceptions is guided within the strain, emotion, and coping paradigm.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study considered all the heads/principals of government high schools of the Rawalpindi District in Punjab, Pakistan. For the purposes of this study, the focus was on three of the District's Tehsils: Gujar Khan, Murree, and Rawalpindi. These tehsils were selected to obtain a geographical and socio-cultural mix as well as to ensure variety in the urban and peri-urban school contexts. The sample was comprised of 24 government high schools, equally distributed across the three tehsils (8 schools from each). The sample maintained a mix of male and female schools to ensure diverse perspectives on student behavior and school management practices.

Sampling Technique and Selection Process

According to Creswell & Poth (2018), this research applied purposive sampling which is the intentional focus of the selection of answers to provide study participants. This sampling occurred in two stages:

- **School Selection:** The District Education Office provided a detailed register of all government high schools located in the tehsils of Gujar Khan, Murree, and Rawalpindi, which was used to purposively identify schools that met the criteria listed below.

- Relatively easy access for data collection
- Participating in and observing gender balance (both boys' and girls' schools);
- Applicable to the domain of concern, that is, schools known to have behavioral problems among pupils or schools that enforce and actively apply disciplinary measures. The sample consisted of 8 schools (4 boys and 4 girls) from each of the 3 tehsils, resulting in a sample of 24 schools.
- **Participants' Selection:** As participants, the principals or heads of the selected schools were automatically included, as they have a direct sideline on discipline, behavioral management, and other control measures on pupils. This equated to 24 participants, comprising 12 male and 12 female principals.
- Each of them had spent more than 5 years in administrative positions and were active in the decision-making processes of discipline to which they were directly affiliated.

The sample, and the context of diverse school settings from which the participants were drawn, together with the leadership contributions they had made, provided a rich, varied data set.

Data collection

It is described as the implementation of semi-structured interviews facilitated to provide the interviewees freedom of expression while closing the interview to the objectives of the research. In alignment with Agnew's theoretical model and the objectives of the research anchored on the perceptions school leaders gain, the model seeks to explain the behaviors in relation to the management of the student's disorderly conduct. Three open-ended guiding questions were used.

1. What forms of antisocial behavior (e.g., truancy, bullying, substance abuse) have you encountered among students in your school?
2. How did you or your school administration respond to such behaviors?
3. Have you ever faced a situation where student misconduct made you consider leaving the profession? If yes, what support from the administration would have helped?

Questions were asked and follow-up probes were used to gather more information or expand on an answer when it was deemed necessary. Each of the interviews took between thirty to forty-five minutes and were done face to face on the participants' school premises, or through video conferencing software depending on what was more accessible and convenient. Depending on the preference of the participants, the interviews were carried out in either Urdu or English and were documented.

Interviews were later transcribed verbatim, and, if it was warranted the transcriptions were translated into English while preserving the intended meaning. Field notes were taken to document the contextual and my other recollections as the researcher.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data qualitatively through the six-stage framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was selected because of

its ability to systematically determine presence of different patterns within text data, and the organized, flexible means of interpreting meaning ascribed to texts.

The audio of the interviews was transcribed and checked to ensure the accuracy of the texts. Each transcript was then processed by NVivo 12 Plus, a software that allows the qualitative researcher to process data by describing, managing, and systematically arranging it for ease of analysis. NVivo was utilized for efficient data partitioning, coding, retrieval, and visualization of emerging categories and relationships through code hierarchies. NVivo facilitated data organization, but the researcher was still responsible for interpreting the codes and themes gathered so that the analysis presented the true voices of the respondents within the contexts of the themes.

The analysis proceeded through the six stages that were constructed as repetitive cycles.

- **Initial Understanding of Participants and Their Experiences with the Data:** From the transcripts, the researcher captured the essence of what was being discussed to be able to analyze the different facets of the experiences being presented.
- **Generation of Initial Codes:** Within NVivo, selective sentences that were deemed relevant were captured, and short codes were given for usage within the program.
- **Identifying Themes:** Codes which have relations to each other were sorted to begin the process for developing themes that capture the overall patterns in the data.
- **Reviewing themes.** Each provisional theme was cross-checked with the coded data extracts and the whole data set in order to check for internal consistency as well as clear delimitation among themes.
- **Refinement and Naming of Themes:** Themes were further refined and clearly delineated to provide succinct and epithetic labels that embody the main aspects of the themes.
- **Thematic Analysis:** The refined themes were arranged in a coherent narrative with selected pieces of transcripts from the interviews conducted with the participants.

This approach ensures trust and rigor regarding qualitative analysis. The multiple iterations of reading, coding and restructuring the data were done in a way to provide a coherent, thematic narrative of the participants' experiences as the final output.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness and rigor of the findings, several techniques from Lincoln and Guba's (1988) model were utilized (Enworo, 2023).

- **Credibility:** This is achieved through member checking where participants were able to authenticate and crosscheck the summaries of the interviews for alignment and accuracy.
- **Dependability:** This was maintained through an extensive audit trail that painstakingly documented every single step of the data collection process, as well as coding and theme construction.
- **Confirmability:** This was verified using reflexive journals which lessened the evaluator bias scrutiny to preserve the principles of confirmability.

- **Transferability:** Achieved through comprehensive contextual narratives of participants, settings, and procedures, which enables readers to assess relevance to other contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval for all concerns was sought and obtained from the relevant university ethics review committee prior to the commencement of the study. Voluntary participation's purpose and the freedom of withdrawal from the study including the non-cost consequences were explained to participants. No interviews were to be done without obtaining prior consent. It was made clear that participants straightforward that all documents used in the analysis, including the transcripts and reports, which were ethically de-identified using pseudonyms, would be examined to ensure no revealing data would be included. The researcher was the only individual granted access to the audio files, transcripts, and consent which were all saved in securely protected digital folders. The folders were password protected and only contained folders that were accessed.

Qualitative Results: Thematic Analysis

School leaders' opinions on juvenile delinquency and their experiences related to student misconduct have been analyzed through the prism of evidence gathered from 24 semi-structured interviews. These interviews were thematically analyzed in accordance with the procedure developed by Braun & Clarke, in which three central themes aligned with the questions asked in the interviews emerged:

1. Manifestations of Antisocial and Delinquent Behavior among Students
2. Administrative and Preventive Responses to Misconduct
3. Emotional Strain, Professional Burnout, and Need for Institutional Support

All themes are elaborated on with evidence provided by the principals and presented in the following sections.

Theme 1 highlights that the most widespread behavioral issues were truancy, bullying, and defiance, reflecting a multidimensional pattern of delinquency combining academic disengagement, aggression, and emerging digital misconduct.

Table 1 : Theme 1-Manifestations of Antisocial and Delinquent Behavior among Students (n = 24)

Subthemes	n	%	Description
Truancy and Absenteeism	18	75.0	Frequent absenteeism, lateness, and truancy linked with peer influence or time spent in internet cafés.
Bullying and Aggression	16	66.7	Verbal teasing, ridicule, and fights during school hours; cyberbullying is also reported.
Substance Abuse and Risk Behaviors	10	41.7	Experimentation with smoking, drugs, and glue-sniffing; often peer-driven.

Disrespect and Defiance toward Authority	14	58.3	Disobedience, arguments with teachers, vandalism, and cheating during exams.
Emerging Moral and Digital Misconduct	9	37.5	Inappropriate mobile phone use, immoral content sharing, and early romantic behavior.

- “Truancy and frequent absenteeism are the most common problems... some students loiter outside or sit in gaming cafés instead of attending lessons.” (*Principal, Gujar Khan*).
- “Bullying, especially verbal teasing, is quite prevalent... sometimes it turns into fighting during breaks.” (*Principal, Rawalpindi*).

“Inappropriate use of mobile phones for immoral activities has been a concern... some even misuse social media for bullying.” (*Principal, Gujar Khan*).

Figure 2. Word Cloud Illustration: Student Misconduct Patterns



Table 2 : Theme 2-Administrative and Preventive Responses to Misconduct (n = 24)

Subthemes	n	%	Description
Counseling and Parental Involvement	20	83.3	Use of counseling, guidance sessions, and parental meetings to correct misbehavior.
Disciplinary Monitoring and Policy Enforcement	17	70.8	Use of written warnings, detentions, suspension, and attendance monitoring.
Awareness and Preventive Programs	15	62.5	Assemblies, anti-bullying campaigns, and moral instruction to promote discipline.
Collaboration and Restorative Practices	12	50.0	Peer mediation, apologies, & coordination with parents or community police.

This theme shows that principals are moving away from punitive methods toward rehabilitative and preventive approaches, emphasizing counseling, awareness, and community collaboration.

- “We counselled the students individually and involved their parents... parental cooperation made a big difference.” (*Principal, Murree*).
- “A disciplinary committee was formed to investigate serious cases... for repeated truancy we imposed detention and follow-up checks.” (*Principal, Rawalpindi*).
- “Restorative justice practices were used, asking offenders to apologize and make amends... it helped reduce conflicts.” (*Principal, Rawalpindi*).

Figure 3: Word Cloud Illustration: School Response Strategies

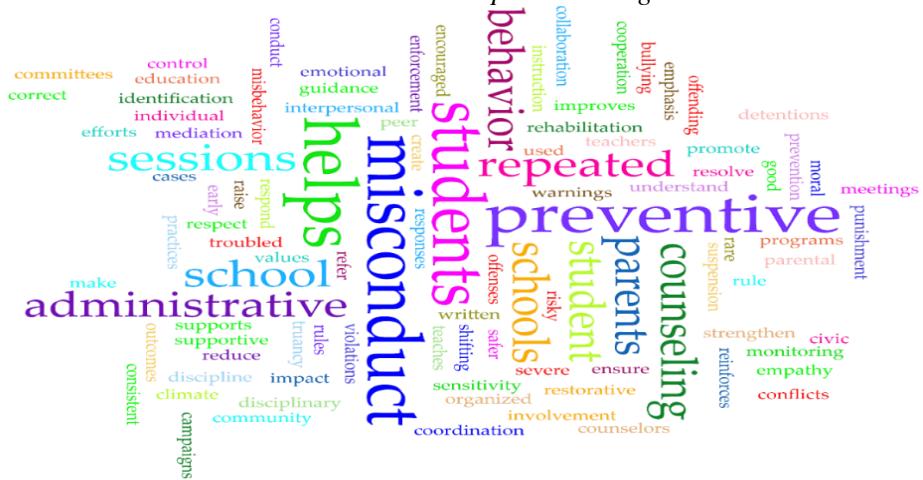


Table 3: Theme 3-Emotional Strain, Professional Burnout, and Need for Institutional Support (n = 24)

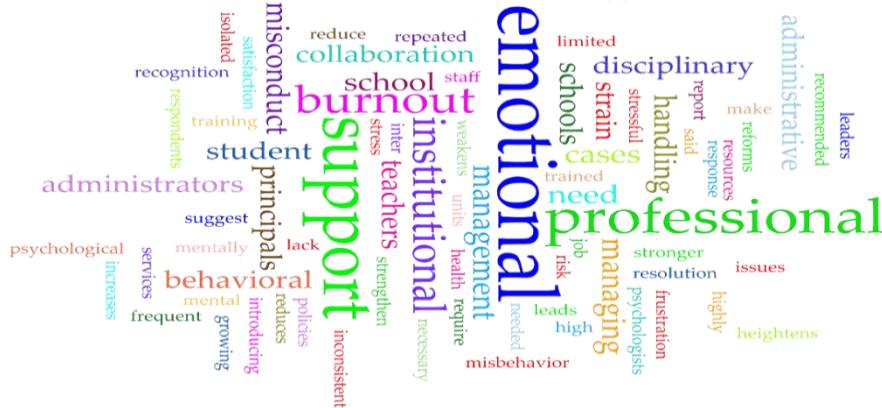
Subthemes	n	%	Description
Emotional Toll and Burnout	18	75.0	Fatigue, stress, and demotivation resulting from repeated behavioral challenges.
Lack of Institutional Support	15	62.5	Inadequate resources, absence of counselors, and inconsistent administrative backing.
Recommendations for Support & Reform	13	54.2	Calls for training, school psychologists, rehabilitation programs, and policy alignment.

Theme 3 reveals the emotional labor of school leadership in managing misconduct under resource constraints. The findings underscore the need for institutional reforms, mental health support, and systematic administrative assistance.

- “Yes, repeated cases of aggression made me feel exhausted... I even thought of quitting.” (*Principal, Rawalpindi*).
- “When drugs were found on campus, I felt overwhelmed... stronger collaboration with law enforcement was needed.” (*Principal, Murree*).

- “A school psychologist would have been useful... we need professional guidance to handle extreme cases.” (*Principal, Rawalpindi*).

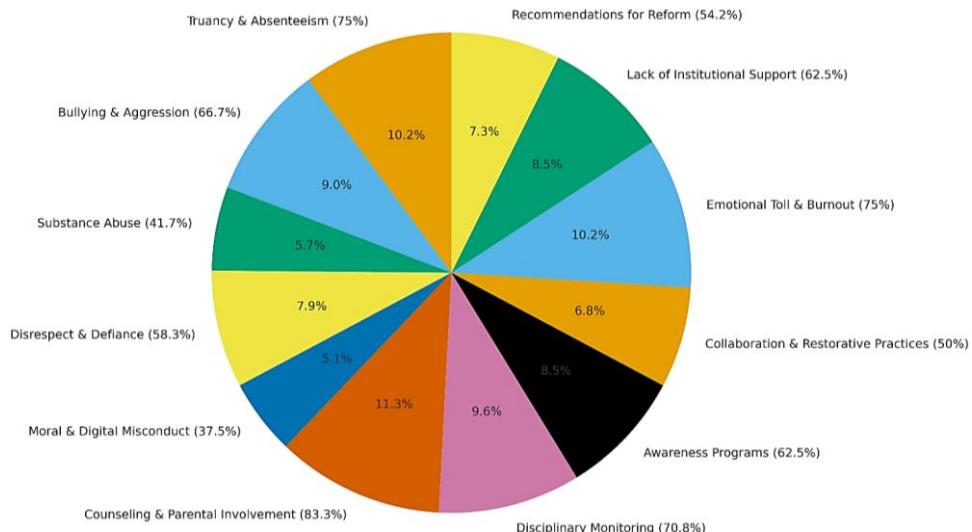
Figure 4: Word Cloud Illustration: Educator Stress & Support Needs



Consolidated Summary of Thematic Analysis

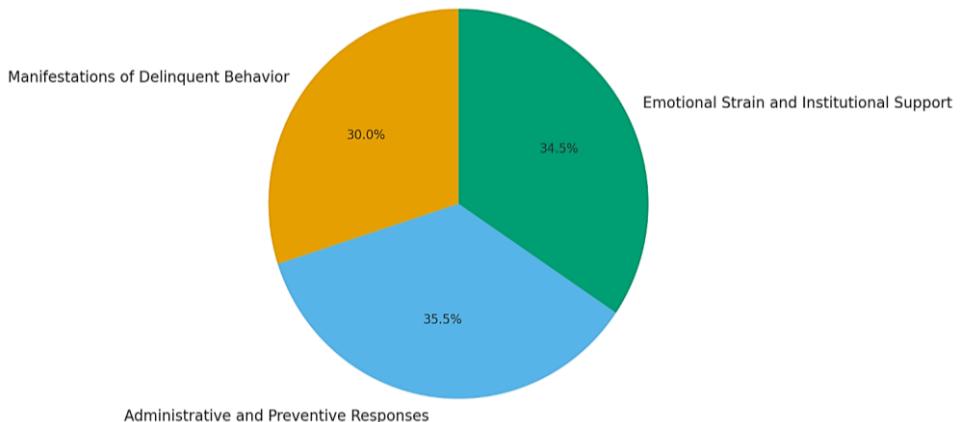
In terms of principal interviews, figure 5 illustrates the qualitative findings of major and minor themes and shows the percent of each minor theme within the specific major theme to which participants attended to with specific concern. Figure 6 shows all three thematic constructs and how school administrators understand, manage, and experience juvenile delinquency within schools in Pakistan. These two figures and the other findings of the study demonstrate the scope and interrelatedness of the findings.

Figure 5: Distribution of Subthemes Identified in Qualitative Analysis



This figure shows the relative prominence of subthemes pertaining to the main themes and represents the interests of school leaders in the interviews the most.

Figure 6: Distribution of Major Themes Based on Frequency Ranges



On all the themes, the greatest frequency (83.3%) was recorded for counselling and parental involvement and shown principals' inclination towards more supportive and preventive strategies. On the other hand, emotional burnout and truancy and absenteeism (both 75%) were also noted as widespread issues. The data suggests that, alongside a lack of institutional support, principals face a range of psychosocial stressors that require urgent attention and coordinated reforms of support systems within the school.

Discussion

Currently, research is concerned with the way school heads in Pakistan comprehend and tackle juvenile delinquency in association with schooling. The qualitative findings suggest that the behavior of students is delinquent secondary to the individual, familial, institutional, and societal circumstances. Principals stated that students experience behavioral problems such as truancy, bullying, drug abuse, and other forms of digital misconduct, which suggest that delinquency is context-dependent and is a multi-faceted issue. Using Agnew's General Strain Theory (1992), it is evident that both students and school leaders endure forms of strain that determine their reactions, which often, is accompanied with deviant and disruptive behavior in the student's case, while the principal's case is characterized by emotional exhaustion and institutional grievances.

The most prevalent problems reported by school principals, such as absenteeism, bullying, and insolence towards teaching staff, show the role of divisions at the micro level of school systems in Pakistan. Agnew's theory suggests that the removal of positive stimuli, the presence of some negative interactions, or the unavailability of interactions at all, can cause some level of distress which results in misconduct (Agnew, 1992; Agnew & Brezina, 2019). In this case, emotional neglect and parental control in addition to peer

pressure were identified by the respondents as contributing factors. Their statements reflect the global patterns of unmonitored children in unstructured home settings and attendant antisocial behavior (Booth & Shaw, 2023; Viteri, 2025). Similar studies in South Asia and other developing regions, such as Nyarangi (2024) in Nigeria, Muchiri & Kirimi (2025) in India, and elsewhere have discussed the role of family communication deficits and the stress impoverished conditions impose on school deviance.

In Pakistan, Kamran & Kazi (2024) and Ali et al. (2024) research confirms that parental neglect and weak control of disciplinary practices predict youth disobedience. Along the same lines, Siddiqui et al. (2025) showed that among unsupervised urban adolescents with exposure to certain types of media, there was an increase in cyberbullying and disengaged morals. This case study adds to the findings of mobile phone use among students, class absence to participate in gaming café activities, or immoral actions of students engaged in online activities. All demonstrate considerable evidence of sociological and ethical strain that accompanies modernization and increasing networked world.

As far as principal reaction to misconduct is concerned, the data revealed an increasing shift away from punitive measures to counseling reconciliation and preventive approaches. Leaders in the school described counselling, parent-teacher meetings, awareness strategies, moral education assemblies as the main pillars of their interventions. Within the framework of strain theory, these interventions are examples of positive coping strategies that convert negative emotions into positive social control (Agnew, 1992). This shift is supported within the international literature: Restorative justice and discipline frameworks that incorporate counseling have reduced aggressive behavior and school suspension rates in the U.S. and Europe (Figueroa, 2023; Cuevas, 2024). In Pakistan, Khan et al. (2023) found that schools that emphasized collaborative outreach to parents had recidivism rates that were significantly lower than schools primarily using punitive strategies. This evidence suggests that Pakistani principals are increasingly adopting more global best practices that emphasize understanding, self-reflection, and family involvement.

The accounts also exposed the tension that accompanies the control of misconduct in under-resourced institutions. Several principals noted that chronic aggression, substance abuse, and disrespect can cause strain, fatigue, and in some cases, a desire to leave the profession. This experience extends to Agnew's framework in that it also highlights the ways in which strain is experienced by educators.

The combination of repeated student misbehavior, coupled with lack of administrative support, has been termed in the literature as burnout. Other studies lend support to this interpretation: Enright (2025) found that the absence of institutional support and student misbehavior are strong predictors of teacher burnout, while Gohar et al. (2025) reported that in Pakistan, principals without counselling services were more emotionally exhausted. Moreover, Abbas et al. (2025) also found that emotion focused coping was more pronounced in circumstances of leadership stress particularly when principals lacked the autonomy to make decisions and the policies governing them were

vague. These studies illustrate how strain operates in a reciprocal fashion. Students, to relieve strain, can externalize a frustration that is often accompanied by acts of delinquency. Administrators, on the other hand, seem to take on a form of institutional strain which results in a lack of motivation. Both, however, support Agnew's position that deviant coping such as emotional breakdown results from an onslaught of negative experiences when positive resources to cope are in deficit. Failure to find any absence of such negative experiences amid family dysfunction, inconsistent policies, emotional overload, and lack of discipline is illustrative of the notion that both strain and delinquent behavior arise from intervention.

This study pivots and emphasizes that juvenile delinquency in Pakistan has both local and global undertones. The global risk factors of modernity, exposure to digital technologies, and socio-economic divides, juxtaposed with institutional neglect and apathy from parents, contribute to the local context. The findings align with the World Health Organization (2020) directives that call for more holistic psychosocial counselling service integration, community engagement, and teacher-level advocacy to the school system. These strategies include the integration of the psychology of the school, streamlined governance policies, and the strengthening of parental accountability for discipline to the system.

The legal case study of the principles demonstrates that student delinquency is more than an administrative issue; it is also an emotional and structural issue. Slapping on General Strain Theory, it may be deduced that both misbehavior and burnout originate from the same systemic sources of strain in the school. Preventive strategies will hinge on restructuring schools to be emotionally safe, policy consistent, and collaborative in engagement with all stakeholders.

Conclusion

This study focused on the perception and management of public-school juvenile delinquency by the school leaders in Gujar Khan, Murree and Rawalpindi. Via Braun & Clarke (2006)'s thematic analysis, three core issues were identified: acts of delinquency, administrative and preventive measures, and emotional distress & the need for institutional support. The studied phenomena revealed vastly unique multi-layered and multi-faceted fabric of observation and analysis school delinquency in Pakistan with respect to conduct, sociology, and ethics. Principals consider truancy, bullying, aggression, and disrespect to be the most chronic disciplinary infractions while also pointing to the new problems of digital immorality and adolescent drug use.

Using Agnew's General Strain Theory (1992) to analyze behavior, we can understand these actions as the result of students' maladaptive coping strategies to deal with emotional or situational overbearing pressure, which phenomena such as academic failure, neglect, overbearing peers, or socio-economic status. The principals also experienced strain by feeling overworked and emotionally exhausted because of the poor resources, inconsistent punishment strategies, and lack of support from the school. The

stabilizing dual strain of students and teachers demonstrates the chronic dysfunction that is organizational and social, as opposed to solely relaxed indiscipline.

In spite of all obstacles, the avoidance of punitive measures displayed by many of the school leaders was indicative of a great deal of empathy and, more importantly, of rational thinking, as was their shift towards preventive and rehabilitative measures.

Such behavioral modifications as counseling, exercise of restorative justice, constructive moral deliberation, and legal parental control were all credited with greater positive impact. Also, the study does hypothesize the fundamental premise that sustainable solutions need institutional support, educational assistance for the teachers, active collaboration from the parents, and clear policy integration. There is a need for punitive measures; however, there is also the need for humane, organized, and systemic responses to the delinquency that creates a school environment that the youth in the school are willing to defend, as opposed to school systems that marginalize and segregate.

Recommendations:

Based on the findings of the current study, the following key recommendations can be made:

1. Incorporating psychological counseling units in schools.
2. Establish discipline and restorative justice processes within and across schools so all institutions can uniformly deal with misconduct.
3. Organizing workshops for principals and teachers in emotional resilience, behavior management, and crisis management.
4. Creating structured parent-teacher cooperative programs to increase communication and accountability with the aim of increasing active parent involvement.
5. Embedding character and life skills education in the curriculum to mitigate social and moral development gaps.
6. Strengthening partnerships to include the local police, NGOs, and rehabilitation centers to collectively address the prevention of delinquency.
7. Establishing and maintaining emotional and administrative support systems to alleviate burnout and exhaustion of school leaders.
8. Establishing counseling programs, awareness initiatives, and behavioral measures that require monitoring and evaluation systems.
9. Financing vandalized and unsafe school infrastructure and vandalized schools which include putting in security measures.
10. Undertaking qualitative studies of students and teachers to gain deeper insight into school delinquency.

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