

# **SOCIO - CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF YOUTH OFFENDERS FROM EDUCATIONAL CENTERS IN ROMANIA**

R. Ungureanu

**Roxana UNGUREANU**  
**PhD, West University of Timisoara**

**Abstract:** This paper explores the resilience of delinquent children who are serving a sentence of imprisonment in an educational center of Romania. Using the specific questionnaire for investigating the level of resilience of youth, “The Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM)”, data was collected on a total of 117 youth, boys, aged between 18-23, from an educational center of Romania. The measure has three sub-scales accounting for personal, relational, and contextual factors implicated in resilience processes. On the respect of this paper, we are focused on the items which refer the contextual factors (cultural, educational and spiritual context) of these children.

The results of the investigation can serve to a universal preventive strategy based on cultural context and of the resilience of delinquent youth in these types of the facilities. More than in the case of adults, in children and youngsters, the major concern in establishing educational measures running an offense should aim building their resilience.

**Key words:** children offenders, child and youth resilience measures, resilience, educational centers

## **Theoretical background**

Adolescence presents a critical period of unique challenges that lays the groundwork for transitioning into adult life. Key developmental milestones include a progression towards independence and the discovery of self identity.

Significant to this process, adolescents negotiate their primary parental attachments in becoming more attentive and adaptive to their extra-familial environment. Learning, discovery, and identity status involves integrating the norms and values of the wider social realm (Sanders, 2013). Peer association presents various opportunities for socialization. In the form of *peer pressure*, friends can exert direct and overt efforts to forcibly prescribe or proscribe certain attitudes and behaviors. Most prominent through conversations among adolescents, *normative regulation* typically involves the use of gossip and teasing to reinforce expectations of the peer group. More covert influences may present in the form of *social modeling*, in which individuals can observe the reaped benefits and consequences of behaviors committed by their peers in the social realm. Additionally, peers may garner influence through the *structuring of opportunities*, when association with groups yields differential exposure to situations that may encourage or dissuade certain behaviors. The youth who have a good adaptation to peer group and don't attend to delinquent behavior are named in this paper as resilient.

Resilience is often defined as a person's ability to positively adapt or achieve success despite having faced situations— being abused or neglected, witnessing violence, or living in poverty— that could lead to negative outcomes such as delinquency (Kaplan, 2005).

Much of the research on resilience has focused on the risk factors that contribute to problem behaviors rather than on the factors that promote positive development (Smokowski, 1998). Although information on risk is important from a theoretical perspective, developing interventions focused on changing the risks for delinquent girls may not be the most effective approach. The knowledge that a girl is at risk for delinquency because she lives in a disadvantaged neighborhood or has a history of abuse is insufficient information for researchers and practitioners to develop an effective intervention program because these risk factors are not easily amenable to change in intervention programs (McKnight & Loper, 2002). In view of the limitations of risk focused intervention strategies, research on resilience turned toward protective factors—aspects of individuals and their environments that buffer or moderate the effect of risk (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004; Wright, & Masten, 2005). The protective factors discussed in this paper offer an explanation for why children and adolescents who face similar risk factors may or may not have a propensity toward negative outcomes like delinquency. Given the multiple processes involved in resilience, there are also multiple pathways to resilience, embedded in varying contexts that require our attention and understanding (Masten & Obradovic, 2006). In this respect, Ungar underlined that “resilience has global as well as culturally and contextually specific aspects” (Ungar, 2011). The Minority World (also referred to as the

West or Developed World) includes people who form the dominant culture in countries that are numerically small but exert a Eurocentric bias in areas of politics, economics, science, and art. Majority World cultures, which include economically underdeveloped nations, former East Bloc nations with economies in transition, and marginalized populations such as immigrants and native peoples living in the Minority World, have yet to be systematically included in studies of resilience. Most commonly, Minority World researchers describe resilience as a quality of individuals that reflects their capacity to engage in processes that make it likely they will overcome adversity and achieve normal or exceptional levels of psychosocial development (e.g., they will go to school, maintain a prosocial peer group, and avoid delinquency (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011).

## **Methodology**

The research was conducted in one educational center in Romania. This center is subordinated to Justice Ministry of Romania and the measures applied for minors are custodial measures.

Using the specific questionnaire for investigating the level of resilience of youth, (CYRM, developed by Ungar and Liebenberg), data was collected on a total of 117 youth, boys, aged of 18-23, from an educational center of Romania. This paper is focused on the items which refer the contextual factors (cultural, educational and spiritual context) of these children.

The Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM) is a measure of the resources (individual, relational, communal and cultural) available to individuals that may bolster their resilience. The CYRM was originally designed to be used with youth aged 9 to 23 years old. Since its initial validation, the measure has also been adapted into a 26-item version for use with children aged 5 to 9 years old, a 28-item version used to obtain data from a Person Most Knowledgeable (PMK) about a child/youth's life, and a 28-item version for use with adults (aged 24 and older).

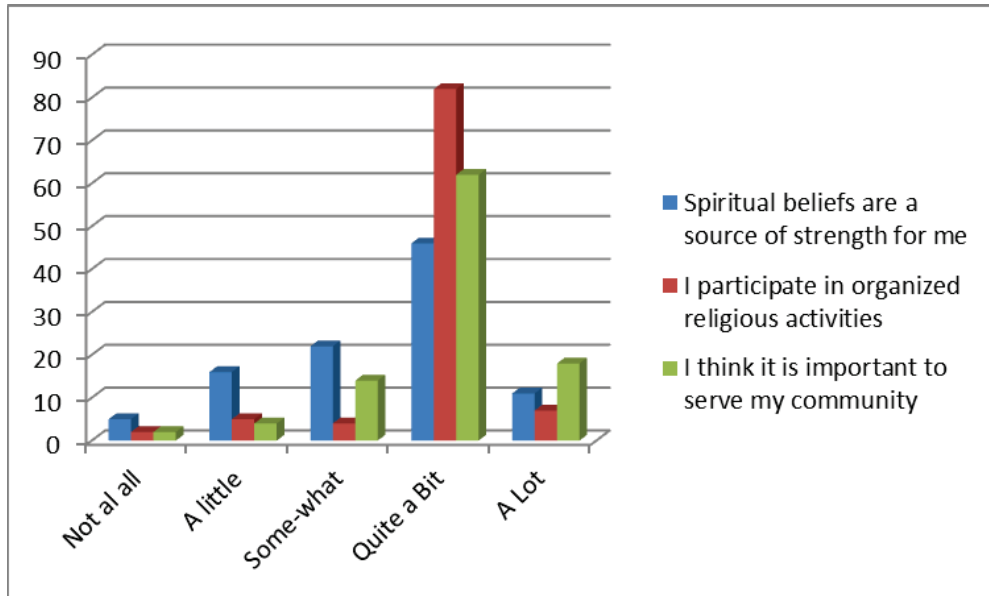
For our research, CYRM has been applied by researchers, both individually and in groups. Given the relatively low level of understanding of the youth, the researchers ensured that each question was correctly understood, responding to the clarification questions of the youth.

## **Results**

Demographic data describing the investigated group are: 117 youth, boys, aged between 18 and 23 years old ( $M = 19.3$ ;  $SD = 1.3$ ); school level between 1 to 10 classes ( $M = 5.8$ ;  $SD = 2.43$ ).

To highlight the contextual factors underlying the resilience of young delinquents, we selected from the 28 questions of CYRM, 10 relevant questions from the spiritual, educational and cultural context.

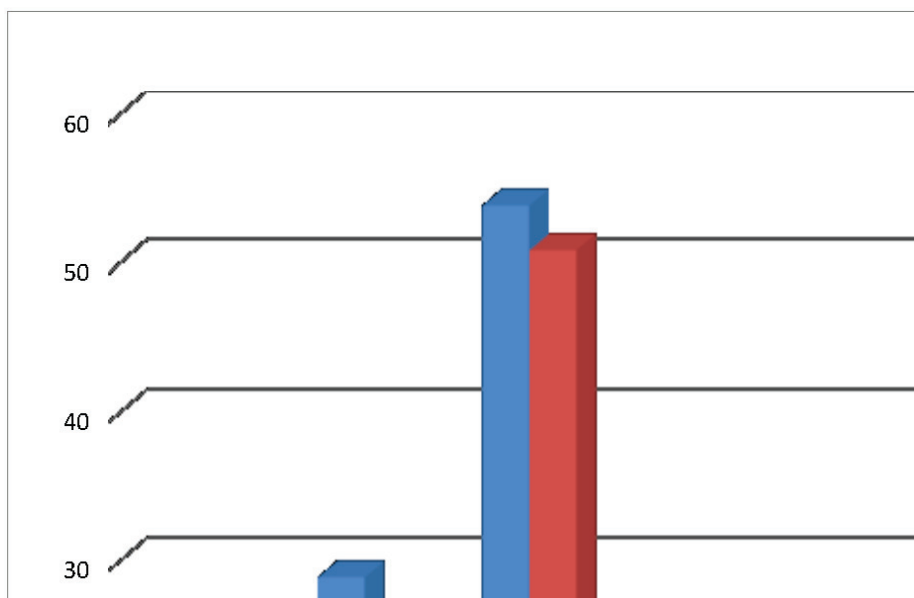
As can be seen in the figure below, in which the three questions about spiritual factors are presented, the spiritual context in which youth live has a great influence on the degree of development of their resilience.



*Figure 1. Spiritual Context*

Young people in the educational center where the research took place participate to a great extent (80%) in religious activities. They believe that participation in such activities can help to some extent overcome the trauma suffered as a result of being admitted to the educational center and feel attached to people coming from the community to carry out such activities.

Another important factor in developing the resilience of young delinquents is the educational context. Research shows that school is an important resilience factor for adolescents in general and for delinquent teenagers in particular. In the figure below, it can be seen that more than 50% of respondents say that school is as important to them.



*Figure 2. Educational Context*

Although most of the respondents are not very precise in their responses, 52% say that it is important to have an education and 50% feel that they are part of the school they attend or attended, there is obviously a positive climate and a desire for children to succeed in schooling.

Young people with higher level of education have easily surpassed the traumas they were subjected to in early childhood or the shock of internment in the center. Educators, psychologists and school teachers can play an important role alongside parents, in building young delinquent resilience, and define their life projects.

The cultural context in which teenagers live, the way they are treated by the community they live in, the fact that there are people to respect, are aspects that demonstrate the importance of protective factors for the healthy development of adolescents, and these issues must have priority in building individualized intervention programs.

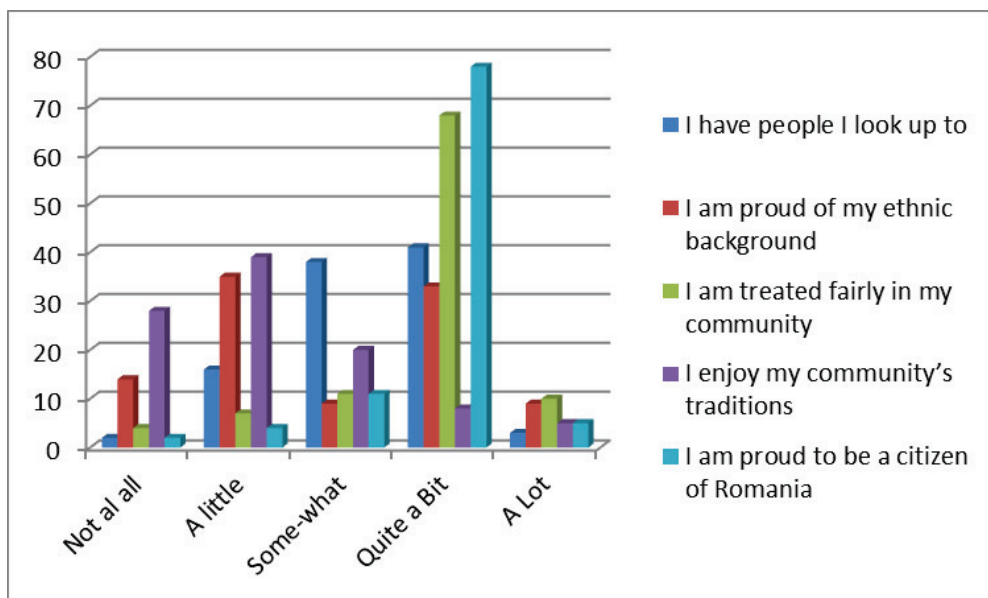


Figure 3. Cultural Context

A relevant example is the fact that Roma children (even if not so) have a native quality of music, and are eager to engage in the most diverse cultural activities.

Our results are related with other research studies and show the reasonable standards and the positive encouragement of the child, the promotion of child's competences and the facilitation of constructive peer contacts and friendship are important aspects on which the institution aimed to promote child's resiliency. (Wustman, 2005).

Although the Roma population is predominant in educational centers, very few adolescents are recognized as part of this. The explanation lies in the fact that Roma belonging to them most often brings disadvantages, stigma and labeling being in the top. They declare themselves as Romanians, precisely to avoid the appearance outlined above. In a fairly large percentage, 78%, they feel proud of being the country's own.

However, the lack of valorization of the strong points regarding the culture, customs and religion of the Roma ethnicity, together with a major deficit in education, as well as the fact that they consider Roma to be discriminated against, are specific features taken into account in the intervention programs applied during the detention period.

## Discussion

Factors contributing to juvenile delinquency are thus to be found not only in the mental and physical development of the child, but also in his present

and past environments. Unwholesome influences and difficult situations encountered in early childhood are probably as important causal factors of juvenile delinquency as are present conditions. They may even be more important.

In searching for the root causes in any given case of juvenile delinquency, prior to treatment, it is therefore absolutely necessary to make a thorough investigation of the past and present life of the child and of his mental and physical make-up. It is probable that this cannot be undertaken by one person; for it will involve making an extensive survey of past and present home conditions, past and present school, about family and friends, besides making complete mental and physical examinations of the case. These latter also include delving into the earlier life of the child.

Research on resiliency offers to all youth workers, parents, friends, and educators hope that they can make a difference. It encourages us to go beyond simply trying to fix problems and to move toward building capacity in our young people. Initially community development partnerships may be most able to influence what Kim, Wan-Chun & Lambert (2015) calls Environmental Characteristics. They can develop ways to involve more people in caring relationships with youth, using mentors, older kids working with younger kids, etc. Such relationships can and should involve encouragement and high expectations for young people. Finally, schools and other community organizations and families can provide more opportunities for youth participation in decision-making, work and other meaningful activities. Each young person needs to become attached, to belong, to matter, to make a difference in his/her community. He or she will do so in either positive or negative ways, depending on the opportunities available. It is also recommended to be supportive and strengthen ties with family and outside the community to promote the best interests of young people and their families, ensuring that educational resources, moral and spiritual are in a direct line with their specific needs (Tomita, Goian, 2009).

The role of parenting and that of parental caregiving are closely related, and often overlap, they need to be distinguished and treated separately (Panzaru, Tomita, 2013).

In the educational center where we conducted the research, there is a great deal of openness to interact with the families of youth and to work with non-governmental organizations that come and carry out attractive activities with young people and develop their resilience.

This positive aspect is easily noticed in how young people interact with adults, in which they are open and happy to collaborate with anyone who offers them a "wide hand".

Exploring the cultural, educational and spiritual factors allowed us to observe, beyond the responses of the children that led us to the results presented above, a series of other observations related to the need for the attachment of children, the stages through which it passes after incarceration, and especially by the desire to become good people.

Although, as we have shown, there is a great deal of openness towards a positive atmosphere, the small number of specialists working in the center, as well as intervention programs focusing on children's problems and not on their potential (especially concerning Roma children), makes the treatment efficiency applied in the center relatively low, which also explains the large number of youth who relapse and return to the criminal justice system.

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