Research Article

Voices From the Edge: Lived Experiences of Male Vulnerable Children

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of male vulnerable children in Cavite, Philippines, particularly those classified as Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL), who were exposed to adverse family, social, and economic conditions. It specifically aimed to examine the underlying causes of their misbehavior and to identify the coping strategies they employed prior to and during institutionalization. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, three male adolescent aged 16-18 residing in a Bahay Pag-asa were purposively selected based on gender, age, length of institutional stay, educational attainment, and family background. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed interconnected themes including problems at home, delinquent behavior with peers, financial constraints, boredom during rehabilitation, repentance, and self-reflection. These experiences highlighted coping strategies such as seeking belonging through peer affiliation, economic coping through informal or illegal means, avoidance behaviors (e.g., running away), and adaptive coping through reflection and repentance during intervention. The findings underscore the importance of gender-responsive and context -specific interventions to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of male adolescents in institutional care.

Keywords: *Male vulnerable children, Children in conflict with the law, Coping strategies, Delinquency, Lived experiences*

Introduction

Children who grow up in vulnerable circumstances often face overlapping challenges that significantly influence their behavior, identity, and future trajectories. Misbehavior among adolescents rarely results from a single factor; instead, it emerges from a complex interaction of family dynamics, peer influence, and socioeconomic conditions (Ouyang et al., 2022). When these vulnerabilities remain unaddressed, male adolescents are at increased risk of delinquent behavior, academic

disengagement, and long-term difficulties in social adjustment.

The family environment serves as the foundation of a child's emotional and behavioral development. However, neglect, parental conflict, and lack of emotional support can weaken a child's sense of belonging and security, making them more susceptible to misbehavior (Marici et al., 2023). Beyond the family, peers play a critical role during adolescence, particularly among males, as peer acceptance often becomes central to identify formation. Association with delinquent peers may normalize deviant behavior and undermine commitment to education (Reeta, 2020). Economic hardship further intensifies vulnerability, as limited legitimate opportunities may push adolescents toward alternative—and sometimes illegal—means of survival or fulfillment (Nautan & Manda, 2025).

In the Philippine context, children in conflict with the law are provided with child-appropriate interventions under Republic Act No. 9344, as amended by Republic Act No. 10630. One such intervention is placement in a Bahay Pag-asa, a residential care facility designed to promote rehabilitation and reintegration. While these policies emphasize restorative justice, limited qualitative research captures how male adolescents themselves experience vulnerability, delinquency, and institutional intervention. Addressing this gap, the present study explores the lived experiences of male vulnerable children in Cavite, with particular emphasis on the coping strategies they employed before and during their stay in a Bahay Pag-asa.

Methodology
Research Design
This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine the lived experiences of male vulnerable children. Phenomenology was selected because it focuses on understanding the essence of experiences as perceived and interpreted by individuals themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Researcher Reflexivity
The researchers are graduates of criminology with academic exposure to juvenile justice and rehabilitation systems. To minimize potential bias, reflexive awareness was maintained throughout data collection and analysis. Peer debriefing was conducted during theme development, and interpretations were grounded strictly in participants' narratives.

Participants of the Study
The participants consisted of three male adolescents aged 16-18 who had been residing in a Bahay Pag-asa in Cavite for more than one year. Based on the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) classification, all participants were identified as Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) and socially disadvantaged children. They had not completed elementary education and came from economically challenged and dysfunctional family backgrounds.

Sampling Technique
Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich and relevant information about the phenomenon under investigation. Selection criteria included male gender, age, length of institutional stay, educational attainment, and willingness to participate.

Research Instrument
Data were gathered using a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide consisting of demographic questions and open-ended items focusing on family experiences, peer relationships, delinquent behavior, coping strategies, and reflections during rehabilitation.

Data Gathering Procedure
Interviews were conducted in a private room within the Bahay Pag-asa to ensure confidentiality and participant comfort. Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. A parent or guardian was present in accordance with ethical guidelines. All ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed.

Validation Strategies

To ensure rigor and credibility, peer debriefing and thematic review were employed. Emerging themes were collaboratively reviewed to ensure consistency, accuracy, and alignment with participants' lived experiences.

Results and Discussion

Profile of the Participants

Table 1. Profile of the Male CICL Participants

Particpant	Age	Sex	Educational Attainment	Length of Stay in Bahay Pag-asa	DSWD Classification
P1	16	Male	Grade 5	More than 1 year	CICL / Socially Disadvantaged
P2	17	Male	Grade 5	More than 1 year	CICL / Socially Disadvantaged
P3	18	Male	Grade 6	More than 1 year	CICL / Socially Disadvantaged

To contextualize the lived experiences presented in this section, Table 1 provides a brief profile of the participants. All participants were male adolescents aged 16-18, classified as Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) under the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). They had not completed elementary education, came from economically challenged family backgrounds, and had been residing in a Bahay Pag-asa for more than one year at the time of the study. This profile situates their narratives within a specific social and institutional context and ensures appropriate interpretation of the findings.

Problems at Home

The home environment emerged as a significant factor influencing the participants' vulnerability and misbehavior. Participants described strained family relationships marked by emotional distance, frequent conflict, and feelings of rejection. These conditions weakened parental guidance and contributed to disengagement from family life.

One participant shared:

Participant 1:
"I really don't work at home, so to speak, eat and sleep is what I only do at home. Wandering, then when I got home, I will just eat again and idle, that's what I do."

This statement reflects emotional detachment from the household and a lack of meaningful interaction within the family. The absence of structure and engagement at home contributed to feelings of purposelessness and avoidance.

Another participant emphasized family conflict as a reason for repeated escape from home:

Participant 2:
"I am always running away because my parents and I don't get along. Until I learned to acquire vices and lost direction."

Similarly, Participant 3 described feelings of rejection that led to rebellion and distancing from family members:

Participant 3:
"I feel that my mother is always mad at me and like I am not accepted. Because that's how I used to think before, that is why what I did was I chose to be a rebel and run away from home. Because I thought what they were telling me was wrong. That is why I chose to be with my friends than my family."

These narratives demonstrate how family dysfunction fostered emotional insecurity and withdrawal, pushing the participants to seek acceptance and belonging outside the home. This finding aligns with previous studies indicating that parental neglect and persistent conflict increase the risk of delinquency among male adolescents (Marici et al., 2023).

Delinquent Behavior with Peers
Delinquent behavior among the participants was strongly influenced by their

association with peers. In the absence of consistent family support and supervision, peer groups became a primary source of belonging, identity, and validation. However, these peer affiliations frequently normalized deviant behavior, escalated conflicts, and reinforced misconduct both in school and within the community.

Participant 1 described extensive involvement in delinquent activities with peers, including violence, theft, and behaviors that resulted in community rejection:

As participant 1:
"I sell cigarettes, I carry a knife. Those were my foolishness at school... I have a lot of troops. I am fighting with others, and also involved in riot. When one of our friends got into a fight, we would wait for him at school... There are many. Like bulgary, and that's it we were stealing... We are already annoying in our barangay, so we are rejected by the community because of being a nuisance."

This narrative reflects a pattern of collective delinquency in which peer loyalty and group identity encouraged risky and unlawful behaviors. Such group dynamics fostered a sense of power and protection, yet simultaneously intensified social marginalization through community rejection.

Peer involvement also contributed to academic disengagement, as reflected in Participant 2's experience:

Participant 2:
"I was ok at that school. However, I was involved with peers, I stopped studying. Because it's like I was already lazy to study."

Similarly, Participant 3 described how peer influence led to truancy and declining academic performance:

Participant 3 as he claimed:
"I also experienced during first day of school, I cut classes because of the influence of my friends. Until I got failing grades. And I lost hope in learning."

Beyond overt delinquent acts, peer relationships were also characterized by frequent conflicts and misunderstandings, particularly within male-dominated social environments.

Participant 2 explained how minor reactions often escalated into conflict, forcing him to constantly navigate shifting alliances:

Participant 2 shared:
"To be honest, throughout my youth it was mostly men around me. If you show a little reaction, it can immediately turn into trouble. That's why I often get caught in conflicts. Sometimes I don't even know whose side I'm on, so I ended up switching just to protect myself."

These narrative highlights how peer interactions among the participants were characterized by tension, instability, and a constant need for self-protection. Frequent misunderstandings and the absence of conflict-resolution skills increased exposure to violence and reinforced maladaptive coping strategies. Empirical studies have consistently shown that adolescents embedded in delinquent peer networks are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior, substance use, and school disengagement, particularly when peer norms tolerate or encourage misconduct (Reeta, 2020).

Aligning with Social Learning Theory, these behaviors were learned and reinforced through peer interactions (Bandura, 1977). Additionally, Social Control Theory suggests that weakened bonds to family and school heightened susceptibility to peer-driven deviance.

Overall, peer affiliation functioned as both a coping mechanism and a significant risk factor. While it provided participants with a sense of belonging and protection, it simultaneously fostered delinquency, academic failure, and social exclusion.

Financial Constraints as a Coping Strategy
Financial hardship emerged as a significant factor influencing the participants' engagement in delinquent activities, not only as a cause of misbehavior but also as a coping strategy for

addressing unmet needs. Limited access to legitimate economic opportunities led the participants to seek alternative means of income, which they perceived as practical and rewarding despite the associated risks.

Participant 1 described how engaging in informal or illegal economic activities provided quick and substantial financial returns:

Participant 1:
"There, making money is quite simple. My only investment is eight thousand (₱8,000.00), then fifteen thousand (₱15,000.00) will drop in one day—let's say two or three days—that's the size of my income."

This statement illustrates how the attraction of rapid financial gain served as a powerful coping mechanism, offering a sense of independence, control, and economic security. In the context of poverty and limited supervision, such activities appeared to be a viable solution to financial strain.

Participant 2 emphasized money as a means to satisfy personal needs and desires:

Participant 2:
"Self needs as well. Like money. In order to buy something you want to buy, that's it."

For this participant, financial gain was directly linked to personal autonomy and the fulfillment of basic and material needs. These narratives reflect how economic coping, even through illicit means, functioned as a survival strategy within constrained environments.

These findings align with Merton's Anomie Theory, which explains that when individuals are unable to achieve socially valued goals through legitimate means, they may adapt by engaging in deviant behavior. For the participants, economic strain and limited opportunities intensified this pressure, making delinquent activities appear as rational and accessible coping responses rather than purely criminal acts (Nautan & Manda, 2025).

Boredom During Rehabilitation

Boredom emerged as a significant challenge experienced by the participants during their stay in the Bahay Pag-asa. Unlike other factors that contributed to their delinquent behavior prior to institutionalization, boredom was primarily associated with the rehabilitation process itself. Participants described feelings of restlessness, confinement, and emotional discomfort resulting from limited activities and restricted movement within the facility.

Participant 1 articulated the psychological strain caused by prolonged inactivity:

Participant 1:
"Because here I get bored. You really became your own enemy here—you think about what you experience outside; you can't do those things inside. There is really only limited movement here."

This narrative reflects how boredom intensified self-reflection and internal conflict, as the participant compared institutional life with experiences outside the facility. The lack of stimulation heightened emotional distress and frustration.

Participant 2 expressed boredom as a state of passive waiting and introspection:

Participant 2:
"I just think a lot because I'm just here. But it's okay. It is my fault that I'm here."

This response suggests a combination of acceptance and resignation, where boredom became intertwined with self-blame and prolonged rumination.

Participant 3 associated boredom with a sense of alienation and the desire to escape:

Participant 3:
"First of all, I feel like there are no lessons for me here, so I used to want to run away. I just want to leave because I feel I don't belong. I don't want to hang out here; I want to leave."

This account highlights how boredom, coupled with feelings of not belonging, increased

the urge to disengage from the rehabilitation process. Without meaningful and engaging activities, boredom may undermine the goals of intervention and increase the risk of non-compliance or escape.

Consistent with existing literature, prolonged boredom among institutionalized adolescents is associated with heightened frustration, impulsivity, and risk-taking behaviors (Matijašević et al., 2025). These findings underscore the importance of structured, purposeful, and engaging programs within rehabilitation facilities to ensure that boredom does not become a barrier to effective rehabilitation.

Repentance and Self-Reflection as Adaptive Coping

Repentance and self-reflection emerged as adaptive coping strategies that developed during the participants' stay in the Bahay Pag-asa. Unlike earlier coping mechanisms characterized by avoidance, peer dependency, or risk-taking behaviors, these responses reflected a growing awareness of responsibility, consequences, and the desire for personal change.

Participant 3 expressed feelings of regret and a longing for forgiveness, particularly in relation to family relationships:

Participant 3:
"I begged them before, as if I wanted to say, 'just forgive me and I will change,' but that never happened, so I was brought here instead."

This narrative reflects a sincere plea for reconciliation and highlights how these absence of forgiveness and restorative dialogue within the family intensified emotional pain. While repentance was evident, the lack of immediate familial acceptance limited opportunities for healing prior to institutionalization.

Self-reflection became more pronounced as participants spent time in rehabilitation. Participant 1 described gaining insight into his past behavior and its impact on his family:

Participant 1:
"When I came here , I realized that what I did was wrong. I ignored my family outside, as if I was not paying attention to

them. If they give me another chance, I will change my attitude."

This statement illustrates a shift toward accountability and moral evaluation of one's actions. Reflection enabled the participant to recognize the value of family relationships and the need for behavioral change.

Participant 3 further described how observing the experiences of others intensified his self-reflection and fear of future consequences:

Participant 3:
"I was anxious before I feel like I can't stay here for too long. I see many people in jail who are in serious trouble, begging their parents for forgiveness. I realized that I might also experience the same if I don't change. "

This realization functioned as a cognitive coping mechanism, wherein fear of long-term incarceration and awareness of social consequences motivated self-correction. Prior studies have shown that exposure to the realities of incarceration—either through direct experience or observation of others—can heighten adolescents' awareness of risk and consequences, prompting behavioral reassessment and moral reflection (Ayeo-eo, 2025). Such awareness often serves as a turning point, encouraging individuals to reconsider delinquent pathways and contemplate change.

Overall, repentance and self-reflection represented constructive coping strategies that emerged within the rehabilitative environment. These processes signaled readiness for change; however, their effectiveness depends on sustained emotional support, opportunities for family reconciliation, and guidance from institutional staff. Without such support, expressions of repentance may remain unresolved, potentially hindering long-term rehabilitation.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of male adolescents classified as Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) residing in a Bahay Pag-asa in Cavite. The findings revealed that vulnerability among these male adolescents

was shaped by an interconnected set of family, peer, and economic factors that influenced both their misbehavior and the ways they coped with their circumstances.

Prior to institutionalization, the participants employed maladaptive coping strategies to navigate their environments. These included seeking belonging and protection through peer groups, avoidance behaviors such as running away from home, and economic coping through informal or illegal means to meet personal and material needs. While these strategies provided temporary relief, they ultimately intensified delinquency, academic disengagement, and social exclusion.

During rehabilitation, a shift toward adaptive coping strategies became evident. Participants demonstrated repentance and self-reflection, marked by increased awareness of the consequences of their actions, fear of future incarceration, and a desire to change behavior and restore family relationships. These internal processes signified readiness for rehabilitation; however, their effectiveness depended heavily on external support systems.

The study further identified boredom during rehabilitation as a critical challenge within the institutional setting. Limited activities, restricted movement, and lack of meaningful engagement heightened frustration and, in some cases, increased the desire to disengage from the rehabilitation process. If unaddressed, institutional boredom may undermine intervention efforts and elevate the risk of non-compliance or recidivism.

Based on these findings, the study recommends specific and context-responsive interventions rather than generalized approaches. These include family reconciliation and mediated dialogue programs to address parental rejection, structured recreational and skills-based activities to reduce boredom during rehabilitation, and vocational training programs that provide legitimate economic alternatives upon reintegration. Gender-responsive programming is also essential, as male adolescents may experience and cope with vulnerability differently from their female counterparts.

The findings of this study are context-specific and reflect the experiences of male adolescents in institutional care in Cavite. They should not be generalized to all vulnerable children or female adolescents. Nonetheless, the insights generated contribute to a deeper understanding of how male CICL experience vulnerability and cope with adversity, offering valuable implications for strengthening rehabilitation programs and juvenile justice policies. Failure to address these needs may result in persistent cycles of delinquency, academic disengagement, and long-term difficulties in social reintegration.

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