

## Assessing Empathy of Delinquent Adolescents

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**Abstract :** Empathy has been identified by researchers to be a crucial factor in helping adolescents to refrain from delinquent behavior. Adolescent delinquent behavior is a social problem that has become a source of concern to parents, psychologists, educators, correctional services, researchers as well as governments of nations. Empathy is a social skill that enables an individual to understand and to share another's emotional state. An individual with a high level of empathy will avoid any act or behavior that will affect another person negatively. The need for this study is predicated on the fact that delinquent adolescent behavior could lead to adult criminality. This, in the long run, has the potential of resulting in an increase in crime rate thereby threatening public safety. It has therefore become imperative to explore the level of empathy of delinquent adolescents who have committed crime and are awaiting trial. It is the conjecture of this study that knowledge of the empathy level of delinquent adolescents will provide an opportunity to design an intervention strategy to remediate the deficit. This study was therefore designed to determine the level of empathy of delinquent adolescents. In addition, this study provides a better understanding of factors that may prevent adolescents from developing delinquent behavior, in this case, delinquents' empathy levels. In the case of participants who have a low level of empathy, remediation strategies to improve their empathy level would be designed. Two research questions were raised to guide this study. A mixed methods research design was employed for the study. The sample consists of fifteen male adolescents who are between 13-18 years old with a mean age of 16.5 years old. The participants are adolescents who are awaiting trial. The non-probability sampling technique was used to obtain the sample for the quantitative study while purposive sampling was used in the case of the qualitative study. A self-report questionnaire and structured interview were used to assess the level of empathy of participants. The data obtained was analysed using the simple percentages for the quantitative data and transcribing the qualitative data. The result indicates that most of the participants have low level of empathy. It is also revealed that there is a difference in the empathy level on the basis of whether they are from parents living together and those whose parents are separated. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that the level of empathy of participants be improved through training and emphasizing the importance of stimulating family environment for children. It is also recommended that programs such as youth mentoring and youth sheltering be established by the government of South Africa to address the menace of delinquent adolescents.

**Keywords :** adolescents, behavior, delinquents, empathy

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