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# **FORENSIC SOCIAL WORK: MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS IN RELATION TO THE PHENOMENON OF CRIME**

*Understanding Criminal Behaviour: Social Professionals' Perceptions of Causal Factors and Attribution Theory*

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis delves into the complex interplay of internal and external factors that influence criminal behaviour investigated through the lens of attribution theory. Through comprehensive interviews with experts in forensic social work and related fields, key internal factors were identified, including traits such as manipulateness, aggression, impulsiveness, lack of empathy, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) like neglect, poor attachment, and exposure to violence. External influences such as poverty, discrimination, social isolation, and the normalization of criminal behaviour within certain contexts were also highlighted. The research underscores the relatively stable nature of internal factors while recognizing the variability and potential for change in external conditions and social dynamics. This dual focus highlights the necessity of addressing both internal and external factors in the development of effective interventions. Practical implications for forensic social work include the recommendation to combine cognitive-behavioural therapy with community-based support to address the root causes of criminal behaviour. Additionally, the study advocates for a holistic approach in social work practices, emphasizing the importance of integrating mental health considerations alongside other aspects of an individual's circumstances. The findings highlight the need for further research into the long-term effects of ACEs, the efficacy of various mental health interventions, and the impact of socio-economic and gender-specific factors on criminal behaviour. Addressing these areas can enhance understanding and inform the development of more effective policies and interventions.

**Keywords:** Criminal Behaviour, Forensic Social Work, Mental Health, Social Determinants.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In today's complex global environment, the role of forensic social work has become increasingly important in improving the welfare of individuals and communities. Professionals in this field now require advanced skills and knowledge to address the numerous challenges they face. This study aims to connect academic knowledge with practical applications in public safety, social welfare, criminal behaviour, and mental health. It focuses on forensic social work and examines how various factors influence criminal behaviour. The research investigates how these factors can either contribute to or prevent criminal activities when identified and analysed within specific populations and contexts. By collaborating directly with social service providers, the study qualitatively explores the complex factors behind criminal behaviour in Finland. It foresees to understand how professionals who work with individuals facing socio-economic and legal challenges perceive the root causes of criminal actions. Focusing on the insights of forensic social work professionals, the research uncovers the underlying dynamics of criminal tendencies. For the implementation of the research the study employs a qualitative approach, featuring semi-structured interviews to explore the views of professionals. It specifically examines the composite relationship between crime and individual and social challenges. By investigating the interplay between forensic social work, mental health, and social factors, the research offers a nuanced understanding of crime within the context of social work practice.

## 2 CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR AND MENTAL HEALTH

This section initiates the narrative by furnishing contextual insights essential to the research endeavour. Background elucidation serves to orient within the expansive domain in which the research is placed, delineating focal themes,

concepts, and historical trajectories pertinent to the study. This allows to establish a clear understanding of the research context, thereby facilitating a deeper appreciation of the significance and rationale behind the study itself. Criminal conduct, within the domain of social work, denotes actions that contravene societal norms and legal statutes, resulting in harm to individuals or the broader society (National Association of Social Workers, 2017). This conception aligns with legal definitions found in criminal codes and statutes, which stipulate specific behaviours as criminal and subject to legal penalties (American Bar Association, 2019). Criminal behaviour encompasses a broad spectrum of transgressions, ranging from minor violations like petty theft or disorderly conduct to more serious offenses such as assault, robbery, or homicide. According to Siegel and McCormick (2019), criminal behaviour can be categorized into various types based on the severity of the offense and the extent of harm inflicted. This classification encompasses property crimes (e.g., theft, vandalism), violent crimes (e.g., assault, homicide), white-collar crimes (e.g., fraud, misappropriation), and organized crime (e.g., drug trafficking, human trafficking). Additionally, criminal behaviour may manifest in the form of juvenile delinquency, where individuals under the age of 18 engage in unlawful activities.

In the practical context of this study, research endeavours are intended to be conducted within the Finnish setting, focusing on services and requirements relevant to individuals affiliated with criminal activities. Crime seems to manifest as a complex phenomenon influenced by a spectrum of social, economic, and psychological variables. In this regard, academic investigations underscore a substantial correlation between socioeconomic status and engagement in criminal behaviour, particularly accentuating the disproportionate representation of marginalized demographics within the criminal justice system (Abramsky et al., 2016). Understanding the intricacies of these contextual elements is imperative for the formulation of efficacious interventions aimed at mitigating and impeding instances of criminal conduct.

## 2.1 Prevalence of mental health disorders

The statistics and demographics related to criminal behaviour and mental health issues provide a critical foundation for estimating the scope and scale of these problems within incarcerated populations. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2020) has provided comprehensive data indicating a significant prevalence of mental health disorders among incarcerated individuals. Specifically, approximately 56% of state prisoners, 45% of federal prisoners, and 64% of jail inmates exhibit symptoms indicative of mental health disorders. These statistics, as detailed in Table 1, underscore the pervasive nature of mental health issues within the criminal justice system, highlighting the urgent need for targeted mental health interventions.

Table 1: Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders Among Incarcerated Populations (Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2020)

<b>Population</b>	<b>Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders (%)</b>
State Prisoners	56
Federal Prisoners	45
Jail Inmates	64

In addition to mental health concerns, substance abuse is a critical issue among individuals involved in the criminal justice system. According to research conducted by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (2018), over 65% of individuals imprisoned for drug-related offenses tested positive for illicit substances at the time of arrest. The statistic, presented in Table 2, highlights the widespread nature of substance abuse among those arrested for drug-related crimes. The table also notes variability in substance abuse rates among those arrested for other types of offenses, emphasizing the broader connection between drug use and criminal activity.

Table 2: Substance Abuse Among Arrested Individuals (Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2018)

<b>Offense</b>	<b>Percentage Testing Positive for Illegal Substances (%)</b>
Drug-related	Over 65
Other Offenses	Varies

In Finland, statistics report that individuals with mental health and substance abuse issues are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. Around 70% of individuals sentenced for serious crimes have a history of substance abuse, and mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and psychosis are predominant among incarcerated populations (Lintonen et al., 2019). Finland has seen an expanding trend in substance abuse cases, with over 21,000 individuals using substance abuse services annually, many of whom revealed criminal tendencies (THL, 2021). Demographically, young adults (ages 18-35) are principally at risk, with above average rates of criminal behaviour and substance abuse if compared to other age categories (Aaltonen et al., 2019). Besides, Finland's male population seem to be more incline to engage in criminal behaviour associated to mental health issues and substance use, with men accountancy for about 85% of those guilty of violent crimes (THL, 2021). The table below illustrate the recent statistics and demographic data associated to criminal behaviour, mental health, and substance abuse in Finland.

Table 3: Key Statistics and Demographics of Criminal Behaviour, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse in Finland

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Statistics</b>
Percentage of serious crime offenders with substance abuse history	70% (Lintonen et al., 2019)
Annual number of individuals receiving substance abuse services	21,000 annually (THL, 2021)



Prevalence of mental health issues in incarcerated populations	High rates of depression, anxiety, psychosis (Lintonen et al., 2019)
Age group most at risk (criminal behaviour & substance abuse)	Ages 18-35 (Aaltonen et al., 2019)
Gender representation (violent crime convictions)	85% male (THL, 2021)

Furthermore, socioeconomic factors play a significant role in the propensity for criminal behaviour. The American Psychological Association (2019) suggests that individuals living below the poverty line are significantly more likely to face mental health issues and to engage in criminal activities compared to those from higher socioeconomic statuses. These correlations highlight the importance of also addressing socioeconomic disparities to mitigate criminal behaviour. This data, along with the statistics, provide a detailed demographic landscape, demonstrating the interplay between mental health and substance abuse, with socioeconomic factors contributing to criminal behaviour. Such data is very useful for informing policy and interventions aimed at reducing crime and supporting rehabilitation within the criminal justice system.

## 2.2 Legislation

Legislative frameworks play a crucial role in moulding responses to criminal activity and tackling the root causes of social challenges. An exemplar of such legislation is the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008. This act sought to establish parity in insurance coverage, ensuring that mental health and substance use disorder treatments receive equitable consideration alongside medical and surgical benefits (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019). Additionally, the enactment of the First Step Act of 2018 signifies another progress in the realm of criminal justice reform. This comprehensive legislation introduced a spectrum of reforms geared towards strengthening rehabilitation efforts and decreasing recidivism rates within the correctional system (Bureau of Prisons, n.d.).

Legislation in Finland is comprehensive, addressing various aspects related to social determinants of health and mental health factors associated with criminal behaviour. An exemplar of this comprehensive approach is evident in the Mental Health Act (Finlex, 1990/1116), which outlines provisions aimed at providing treatment and assistance to individuals dealing with mental health disorders. This legislation emphasizes the critical need for accessible and comprehensive mental health services to preventively intervene in behaviours susceptible to leading to criminal acts. Furthermore, Finland has enacted legislation directed at strengthening social welfare and support systems to mitigate underlying socio-economic contributors to criminal tendencies. The Act on Social Welfare and Healthcare Services (Finlex, 2007/1326) places a strong emphasis on extending support to vulnerable demographics, including those who may be at risk of engaging in criminal behaviour due to socio-economic disparities or marginalization.

The recent amendments to Finland's Mental Health Act and Substance Abuse Act (Päihdehuoltolaki), effective from January 1, 2023, foresees to increase the availability, quality, and coordination of mental health and substance abuse services. These reforms prioritize guaranteeing equal access to treatment for all persons regardless of age, emphasizing individual rights. They also review the obligations of the social and healthcare sectors to promote a more streamlined service system, particularly for individuals with multiple needs. The legislative reforms seek to also reduce the stigma surrounding the utilization of these services (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2023). Nevertheless, Finland has embraced restorative justice measures to foster the rehabilitation and successful reintegration of individuals entangled within the criminal justice system. The Act on Community Sanctions and Measures (Finlex, 2015/974) draw attention to the importance of implementing alternative sentencing methods, such as community service and probation, to address the root causes of crime and limit recidivism rates effectively.

### 2.3 Socio-economic and psychological variables

From a social work perspective, criminal behaviour may be comprehensively understood by considering the underlying social, economic, and psychological factors contributing to its occurrence (Payne, 2014). Payne and Gainey (2017) highlight that social workers acknowledge systemic influences such as poverty, unemployment, limited access to education or healthcare, and exposure to violence or trauma as factors influencing individuals' engagement in criminal behaviour. Moreover, individuals grappling with untreated mental health disorders or substance abuse issues are recognized to be at an elevated risk of involvement in criminal activities (Abramsky et al., 2016; Fazel et al., 2016). In fact, many incarcerated people are living with mental health problems that existed before and often contributed to their incarceration. Such issues include difficulty managing emotions, impulse control, depression, anxiety, substance use problems, and psychosis (Maschi, & Leibowitz, 2017, p.508).

Contextually, often social and individual issues may primarily arise from inequities and social determinants of health. The social determinants of health represent the conditions in which people are born, grow up, work, live and age, and the wider set of forces and systems that shape the conditions of daily life (Caruso, 2017, p.3). Essentially, these determinants comprise various factors beyond individual biology or behaviours that considerably influence health outcomes. They are moulded by the allocation of money, power, and resources at global, national, and local levels, frequently influenced by policy decisions. A clear need and core function of public health institutions is to identify and act on the social determinants of health to address the health and social inequalities that often lead to adverse events or circumstances (Caruso, 2017, p.3).

The nexus between crime and its multifaceted determinants features a profound association with various socio-economic and psychological elements. Scholarly literature illuminates the overrepresentation of individuals from marginalized backgrounds, characterized by experiences of poverty or racial discrimination, within the realms of the criminal justice system (Abramsky et al., 2016). As still confirmed by scholarly discourse, pervasive within incarcerated populations

remain mental health ailments, substance abuse issues, and histories of childhood trauma (Fazel et al., 2016). These empirical revelations emphasize the imperative for adopting a holistic approach in addressing criminality, one that encompasses a comprehensive understanding of underlying determinants and mental health complexities.

### 3 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Over the past decade, the study of criminal behaviour has garnered considerable scholarly interest. Researchers have worked to shed light on the complex connections between mental health, social determinants, and criminal activity. This chapter provides an overview of key research findings from studies conducted between 2014 and 2024, offering a panoramic view of the current state of knowledge in this field. The discussion focuses on three main areas: mental health, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and social determinants. Each of these aspects are examined in separate paragraphs.

Recent research has highlighted the vital role mental health plays in criminal behaviour. Fazel and Seewald (2018) conducted a meta-analysis to assess the prevalence of mental disorders within the criminal justice system. Their analysis revealed a markedly higher incidence of conditions such as depression and anxiety among incarcerated individuals compared to the general population. These results suggest that mental health issues can be both a contributing factor to and a consequence of criminal behaviour. Similarly, Peterson and Heinz (2016) explored the relationship between mental illness and recidivism, finding that untreated mental health conditions significantly increased the likelihood of reoffending. This emphasizes the critical call for comprehensive mental health services and counselling within the criminal justice system, highlighting the role of skilled social service workers and mental health care in effective rehabilitation and reintegration programs.

The influence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on criminal behaviour has been a significant focus of recent studies. Baglivio et al. (2016) conducted a longitudinal study examining the relationship between ACEs and juvenile delinquency, finding that individuals with higher ACE scores were more prone to engage in criminal activities during adolescence. Wolff and Baglivio (2017) further investigated the impact of specific ACEs, such as exposure to domestic violence and parental substance abuse, on juvenile offenders. Their findings confirmed that these experiences significantly increased the risk of engaging in both violent and non-violent criminal activities, accentuating the long-term impact of childhood trauma on criminal behaviour.

The role of social determinants in shaping behaviour has also been a focal point of recent study. Sampson and Winter (2016) explored the influences of neighbourhood disadvantage on crime rates, discovering that areas characterized by relevant levels of poverty, unemployment, and social disorganization had higher crime concentrations. This supports the idea that environmental factors can play a crucial role in fostering criminal tendencies. In addition, Kirk and Papachristos (2015) examined the influence of social networks on criminal behaviour, demonstrating that individuals embedded in networks with high criminal activity were more likely to engage in criminal behaviour themselves. This again highlights the importance of environmental context and peer influence in understanding criminal behaviour.

Several studies have adopted integrated approaches to investigate the combined effects of mental health, ACEs, and social determinants on criminal behaviour. DeLisi et al. (2017) utilized a biosocial approach to explore how genetic predispositions and environmental factors interact to influence criminal behaviour. Their findings suggested that individuals with certain genetic markers were more susceptible to adverse environmental conditions, leading to a higher likelihood of engaging in criminal activities. Ford and Schroeder (2018) also examined the combined impact of mental health issues, ACEs, and social determinants on juvenile delinquency. Their research stressed the complex interplay between these factors, demonstrating that addressing only one aspect is insufficient to prevent

criminal behaviour. They advocated for comprehensive, multi-faceted intervention strategies to effectively reduce criminality and support rehabilitation.

#### 4 ATTRIBUTION THEORY

The exploration of criminal behaviour in this research is anchored in the theoretical framework of attribution theory. Heider's 1958 publication "*The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*" investigates the complexities of how people perceive and engage with one another. Heider introduces key ideas, such as attribution theory, which analyses how individuals assign causes to behaviours, whether their own or others'. It posits that people may attribute actions to internal factors like personality traits or external factors like situational circumstances. Internal attributions relate to causes within the individual, such as their personality or intentions, while external attributions point to factors outside the individual, like environmental conditions or societal influences (Heider, 1958). This foundational work has profoundly impacted social psychology, offering valuable insights into the cognitive mechanisms driving social interactions and relationships. Figure 1 illustrates the key components of attribution theory, as originally conceptualized by Heider (1958), indicating the differentiation between internal and external factors and their effect on social perception.

Subsequently, academics such as Harold Kelley (1967) and Bernard Weiner (1995) have expanded upon Heider's theory delving deeper into the cognitive processes involved in attributing causality, suggesting that criminal behaviour might be attributed to the perpetrator's personality disorder or societal injustice (Smith, 2020). As evinced, applied to criminal behaviour, attribution theory can help to understand how individuals rationalize and interpret criminal actions, focusing on explanations related to personal characteristics, situational influences, or external pressures (Smith, 2020). This perspective aids researchers and practitioners in grasping how people perceive the root causes of crime and how to

address them. It acknowledges diverse interpretations influenced by personal beliefs, experiences, and societal norms, shedding light on the underlying beliefs shaping public attitudes toward crime. Given these insights, attribution theory is chosen as the primary approach for this study, offering a deeper exploration of how professionals perceive the causes of criminal behaviour. Due to its nature, in fact, it provides a functional framework for examining the complex dynamics underlying crime, thereby informing more effective strategies for addressing challenges in practice.

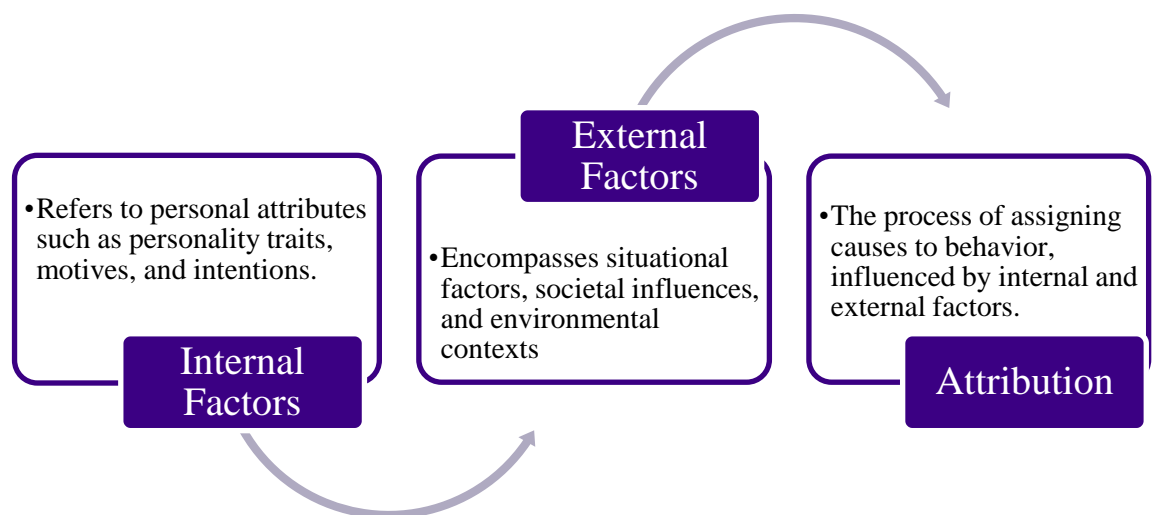


Figure 1: Attribution Theory Framework

(Figure 1. *Attribution Theory Framework*. Adapted from Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. Wiley.)

This theoretical background serves as a foundational framework for this study, as it offers valuable possibilities for concretely understanding how social professionals can perceive the causes of criminal behaviour in a certain context. Aligning with the research intentions, this framework enables an exploration of how these perceptions can inform diverse client approaches. This focus is particularly significant to the role of forensic social work in addressing mental health and crime

determinants. Additionally, by comprehending the attributions made by social professionals, we can also better examine how these insights can model effective methods of support.

## 5 PURPOSE AND AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study is to examine and better understand criminal behaviour by assessing the perceptions of forensic social workers regarding the factors that may influence this phenomenon. The research can be significant as it provides critical insights into how professionals interpret and attribute causes to their clients' actions. Understanding these perspectives is crucial because it can inform the development of more effective intervention strategies, thereby improving client outcomes and contributing to the reduction of criminal activities in society. The research-based study is justified by its potential to reveal relevant causal factors linked to criminal behaviour. These insights can highlight areas where intervention is most needed, guiding policy and practice in forensic social work. Furthermore, the research can help identify gaps in current service provision and suggest improvements that could better address the complex needs of individuals at risk of crime. By focusing on the experiences and interpretations of professionals directly working with affected populations, this study offers a grounded perspective that is both practical and applicable to real-world settings.

The primary aim of this study is to explore and identify the factors that forensic social workers attribute to engagement in criminal actions. Specifically, the research seeks to unknowledge whether there are particular factors that could be useful in the practice of forensic social work or social work more broadly. This study is performed on the base of the following research question:

*“How do professionals working with individuals facing socio-economic and legal challenges perceive the causes underlying criminal behaviour?”*



This question aims to delve into the viewpoints of forensic social workers, uncovering their insights and perceptions regarding the dynamics that contribute to criminal acts. By identifying and examining these factors, the study intends to provide practical recommendations that can enhance the effectiveness of forensic social work interventions and improve outcomes for individuals involved in the criminal justice system.

To clarify the focus of this study, it is important to emphasize that this research does not intend to determine the causes behind criminal behaviour. Instead, the focus is on how professionals in the field perceive and explain these causes. The primary interest lies in understanding whether these professionals attribute criminal behaviour to dispositional factors within the individual, such as personal traits and psychological conditions, or to situational factors, such as environmental conditions and social dynamics. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that a single professional may perceive the causes of criminal behaviour as multifaceted, attributing them to both individual characteristics and societal circumstances. This dual perspective reflects the complexity of criminal behaviour and stresses the necessity to consider multiple variables in both research and practice.

## 6 WORK-LIFE PARTNER

Suomen Romanifoorumi – Fintiko Romano Forum (SFR) is the designated work life partner for this thesis. SFR is committed to enhancing the engagement, empowerment, and networking capacities of its member organizations. The organization is actively involved in both national and international advocacy efforts to promote human rights and equality, representing its members in various forums, working groups, and advisory boards (Väkivalta ja rikostyo, n.d.). SFR employs various strategies to foster inclusion for individuals facing challenges within the legal system. One notable initiative is the D7 project, which is funded by the

Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA). The project aims to promote equality and inclusion for individuals with criminal backgrounds, focusing on identity exploration to enhance self-awareness and empower informed decision-making. This initiative includes group and peer activities, individual interventions, and prison visits, all managed by professionals skilled in social work, substance abuse, and mental health (Väkivalta ja rikostyo, n.d.). The working-life partner can benefit from the thesis results by expanding their recognition of underlying contributors of criminal behaviour, particularly in relation to dispositional and situational causal circumstances. The insights provided can further improve effectiveness of intervention strategies and suggest additional support models. Likewise, the application of attribution theory in practical settings could enhance informed decision-making in client assessments.

## 7 RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative research method was chosen for this study. Qualitative research is a methodological approach that focuses on exploring and understanding complex social phenomena through the collection and analysis of non-numerical data, such as interviews, observations, and textual materials (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach emphasizes the subjective experiences and perspectives of participants, aiming to uncover rich, contextualized insights into the researched phenomenon (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It is particularly suitable for studies that seek to understand the intricate dynamics of human behaviour and social interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For its nature, this study justifies the employment of a qualitative research method since is designed to enable the researcher to collect and analyse data so to derive theories, hypotheses, or generalizations from observed patterns and themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moreover, this methodology was selected because allows for a deeper exploration of specific phenomena through detailed data collection methods such as interviews and observations, leading to the identification of emerging themes or concepts

(Patton, 2015). Hence, this approach is particularly effective for the study as it permits the exploration of the complex aspects influencing criminal behaviour within the given context.

### 7.1 Data collection method

The primary method of data collection for this thesis is the semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews represent a qualitative data collection technique that involves a set of pre-determined open-ended questions (see appendix 4), allowing flexibility for the interviewer to explore themes or topics that arise during the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This method was chosen for this study because it enables a free flow of dialogue, where the order and phrasing of questions can vary, providing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The employment of this type of interviewing is justified for this study by the fact that it was built with the aim to grasp the meanings, perspectives, and motivations underlying human behaviour and phenomena, with a primary focus on investigating "why" and "how" questions (APA, 2020). Hence, its application responded to the question and needs of the research.

In this study, four social service professionals offered their participation by releasing interviews. The number of participants was decided in order to avoid data saturation. These professionals work with young adults and adult men who have criminal backgrounds or are still serving their sentences. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that they had the relevant experience and expertise needed for the research. 100% of participants were qualified professionals and 75% of them were also expert by experience. Demographic details such as age and gender were omitted to safeguard anonymity. To further ensure the anonymity of the participants, this study referred to them respectively as participant A, B, C, and D. Due to the sensitive topic examined, the interviews were conducted in-person within secure settings, scheduled according to participants' work facilities, commitments, and with their organizations' permission. Each interview was planned to last between 40 to 90 minutes and was conducted

in English. The interviews were recorded using audio equipment to ensure accurate data capture.

## 7.2 Interview process

As evinced qualitative interviewing was chosen for collecting data. Qualitative interviewing enabled to comprehend professionals' beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviours, and interactions (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020). The semi-structured interviewing involved various steps. The purpose and objectives of the research were distinctly defined for the interview questions. The questions were then grouped by subject area guaranteeing that the main topics were addressed. Balance between planned questions and freedom to explore new avenues during the conversation was assured (Kallio et al., 2016). Probing questions were employed to obtain more detailed data, while the interviewer adapted to the flow of the discussion. The process also included pre-testing questions to confirm clarity and integrating ethical considerations, such as obtaining participant consent and maintaining confidentiality (Smith & Noble, 2014). Finally, the audio-recorded data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The semi-structured interviewing offered a good formula to explore the specific behaviour's dynamics and to give meaning and interpretations of interviewee's perspectives. The implementation of it allowed for flexibility with the interviewed participants and encouraged to elaborate or provide examples during the process of collecting data.

Reflecting on my presence during the interviews, I was aware that my role as the interviewer could potentially influence responses and the overall dynamics of the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). To mitigate this, a conscious effort was made to create a welcoming and comfortable environment, aiming to build rapport and trust with each participant. In qualitative research, the interviewer's presence and behaviour can, in fact, shape the interaction and influence the responses provided by participants (Bryman, 2016). It is well-documented that establishing a rapport and demonstrating empathy can result crucial in mitigating interviewer bias and improving the authenticity of the responses (Smith & Osborn,

2008). This approach aligns with best practices in qualitative research, which emphasize the importance of interviewer awareness and the creation of a supportive interview setting to capture genuine insights (Gordon, 2020). Hence, such approach was adopted and resulted essential for eliciting candid responses (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). By implementing it, open and honest communication was facilitated, and participants were encouraged to share their experiences freely, thereby enhancing the quality and depth of the data collected.

The use of language played a crucial role in shaping the interviews. Conducting the interviews in English, rather than the participants' native language, posed a potential challenge. However, deliberate steps were taken to ensure clarity and comprehension. This was achieved by using clear and simple language, providing explanations when necessary, and encouraging participants to seek clarification if they were unsure about any questions. This approach aligned with strategies discussed in the methodological literature, where researchers highlighted the importance of linguistic adaptation to reduce potential biases and misinterpretations in cross-language research (Squires, 2009). Additionally, conducting the interviews in person allowed to grasp insights from participants' body language, which enriched the data collection process. Non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and posture provided valuable context and added depth to their verbal responses. These measures and the holistic understanding of participants' perspectives helped to minimize misunderstandings and allowed participants to express their thoughts more accurately, ultimately increasing the validity of the data (Squires, 2009).

By reflecting on the above-mentioned aspects, potential influences on the reliability and validity of the research were thoroughly considered. Acknowledging the potential constraints was necessary for addressing potential challenges proactively, thus maintaining transparency and integrity in the research results. This approach sided again with the methodological literature, which underlines the value of reflexivity and transparency in qualitative research to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study itself (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By being transparent about the limitations, the understandings gained from this study process were more robust and well-founded.

## 8 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis is the qualitative analysis method adopted for this study. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis method used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns or themes within a dataset, focusing on the content and meaning of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It involves systematically organizing and interpreting qualitative data to identify recurring patterns, topics, or concepts relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2019). There is no predetermined minimum number of interviewees mandated for thematic analysis, as the adequacy of the sample size hinges on several factors comprising the research question's scope, the complexity of the phenomenon being studied, and the depth of the data acquired (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Conventional guidelines suggest that qualitative studies employing thematic analysis typically involve approximately 4 to 10 participants. This recommended range aims to ensure that researchers gather a sufficiently rich and diverse dataset, enabling the identification of meaningful patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As this study foresees a qualitative exploration of underlying factor of a specific phenomenon, thematic analysis is justified for this thesis as it allows for a flexible and iterative approach to analysing related qualitative data, enabling the researcher to explore the peculiarities of such phenomenon, and gain rich insights into participants' expertise, perspectives, and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This method results particularly well-suited for examining professionals' perceptions of criminal behaviour and its determinants within the context of forensic social work.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined a thematic analysis method comprising six phases. As shown in the table below (table 3) these phases are characterized by familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This process facilitates the systematic organization and interpretation of qualitative data, aiding in the identification of important patterns and insights.

Table 3: Phases of thematic analysis

<b>Step</b>	<b>Description</b>
Data Familiarization	Immersing in the collected data by reading and re-reading transcripts or qualitative sources to understand participants' perspectives and experiences.
Generating Initial Codes	Systematically coding the data by identifying meaningful segments and assigning descriptive labels or codes to capture key concepts or ideas.
Searching for Themes	Identifying patterns or themes within the coded data by clustering related codes based on similarities and differences.
Reviewing Themes	Reviewing and refining themes through an iterative process of revisiting the data to ensure they accurately reflect the content and context.
Defining and Naming Themes	Defining and labelling each theme with clear descriptions and examples to illustrate their meaning.
Writing up the Analysis	Presenting the identified themes and supporting evidence in a coherent narrative, summarizing the findings of the thematic analysis.

This table outlines the key steps involved in the thematic analysis process, providing a clear and structured overview of each stage.

(Source: Braun and Clarke, 2006)

The analysis process began with transcribing all the interview recordings verbatim. This transcription process was instrumental in developing a deep familiarity with the content. After completing the transcriptions, the transcripts were read repeatedly to immerse in the data fully. During this phase, initial impressions and observations were noted.

Consequently, the data was systematically coded by identifying significant phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that captured key concepts relevant to the research question. Codes were assigned to these segments to represent key ideas. This coding was done manually using a color-coding system to highlight different themes. After coding the entire dataset, the codes were reviewed and clustered into potential themes (searching for themes). This phase involved examining the relationships and patterns among the codes to form coherent themes, grouping related codes based on their similarities and differences.

Once the initial themes were recognized, they were reviewed and processed by re-examining the coded data. During this phase, some themes were merged, fragmented, or discarded based on their relevance and the richness of the supporting data. The goal was to ensure that each theme correctly represented the data and was at the same time distinct from other themes. In the phase that foresees defining and naming themes, each theme was defined and labelled, with clear descriptions and illustrative examples from the data. This involved providing detailed descriptions of each theme, along with quotations from the participants to exemplify the theme itself. Finally, the themes and their supporting evidence were presented in a reasoned narrative. This write-up comprised a summary of each theme, supported by direct quotations from the interviews. The narrative aimed to cater a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives and the factors influencing their considerations.

## 8.1 Analysis

As evinced, Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined the comprehensive method for thematic analysis, divided into six phases. By following the method outlines the first phase required familiarizing with the data. Whether the data was self-collected or sourced externally, it was crucial to engage deeply with it through reiterated readings and thorough examination. This process encompassed ordered notetaking, preliminary outlining, and identifying potential codes and interpretations. The importance of this phase required skills in conducting interviews and transcribing audio recordings. In the second phase initial codes were generated. This stage involved systematically organizing and categorizing the data into logical groups,



which were broader at this stage in comparison to the final thematic categories. A manual approach was employed, involving printed transcripts and color-coded markers to highlight significant patterns and segments in the data. Subsequently, in the third phase, attention turned to identifying the emergent themes. Here, the initial codes were scrutinized and grouped to form potential thematic categories, taking into consideration the interrelationships and varying degrees of complexity inherent within the dataset. Drawing upon own observations during the coding process, primary themes and sub-themes were identified and outlined, respectively: “Dispositional Causal Attributions (internal factors)” along with “Personal Traits” and “Mental Health”, and “Situational Causal Attributions (external factors)” along with “Environmental Circumstances” and “Societal Structure”. Visual aids are used for this stage of the analysis (for the organizational endeavour), so a mind map was employed for the scope (figure 2).

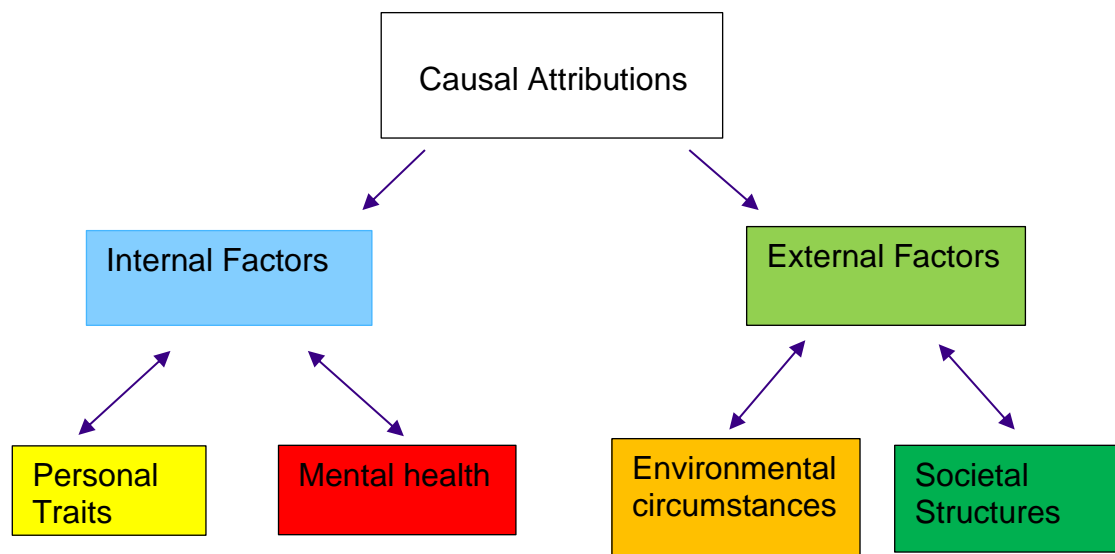


Figure 2. Initial themes outlined from the data.

After compiling a selection of potential themes, the subsequent step required a thorough examination of these themes, marking the commencement of phase 4. During this stage, there was a meticulous review and refinement of the themes to gauge their appropriateness in relation to the dataset and the previously identified codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the fourth phase, it was observed that

themes appeared rather expansive, inducing the subdivision into more specific subthemes, namely “Personal Perceptions”, “ACEs (Adverse Child Experiences)”, and “Personal Needs” in regards of Internal Factors. Similarly, in regards of external factors, the theme “Environmental Circumstances” was refined within two subthemes: “Mental Health and Crisis Stressors” and “High Consensus”.

Although having prepared the thematic map, the terminology and definitions of the themes yet presented some inconsistencies. Eventual discrepancies were addressed in the fifth phase. As Braun and Clarke (2006) elucidated, this phase involves the identification of the core essence of each theme and the particular facets of the dataset they encapsulate. Throughout this phase, extracts from the dataset were used to pinpoint suitable descriptors that accurately captured the essence of each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Refer to Figure 3 below for a visual representation of the finalized themes.

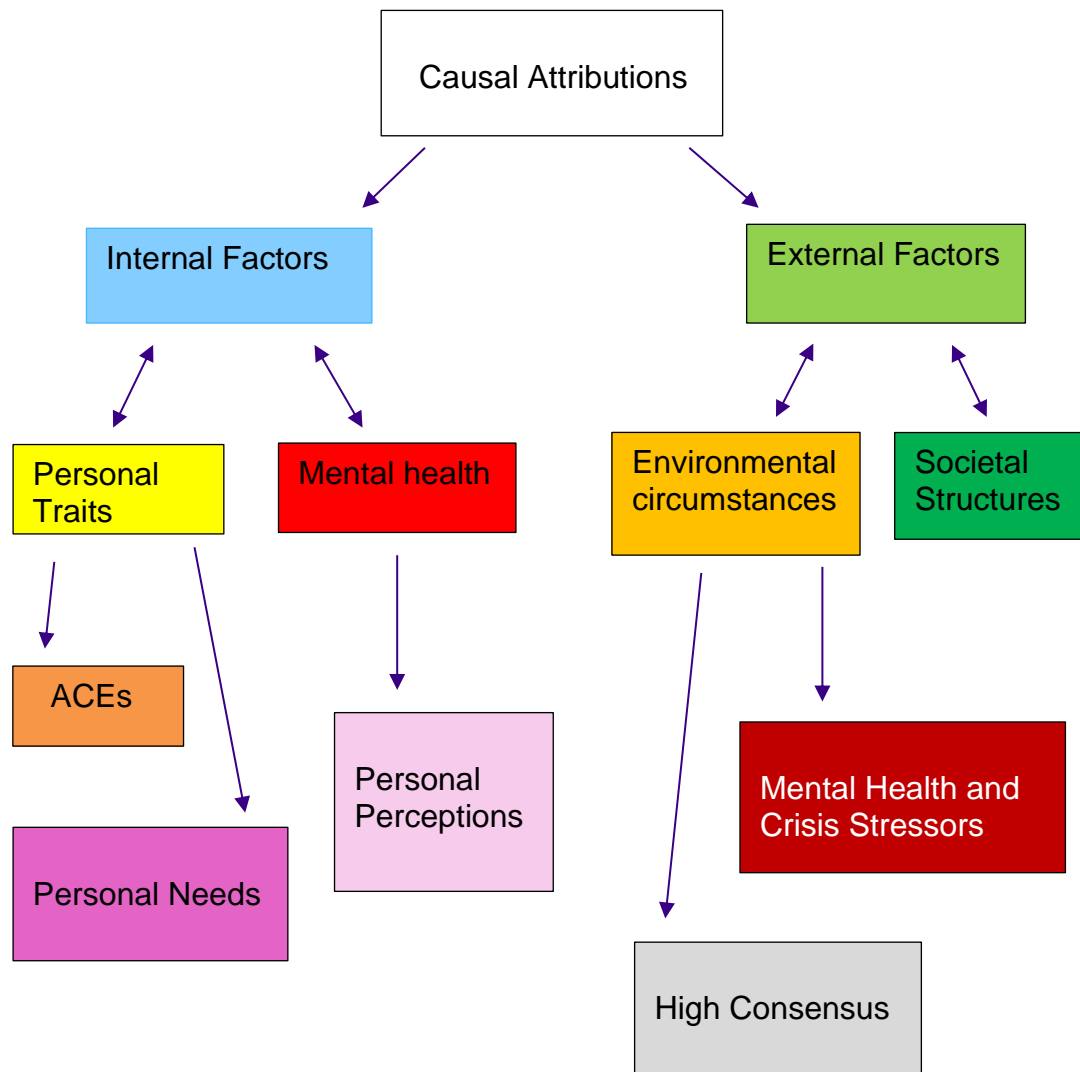


Figure 3. Thematic map showing main and sub-themes.

In order to provide a genuine illustration of the thematic analysis process employed in this stage of the study, and so to provide a pure representation of how the data was analysed and categorized, the table below offers selected instances from the interview materials. The table is organized into four columns: the first column contains original quotations from the participants, the second column lists the codes derived from these quotations, the third column identifies the initial themes that emerged from the coding process, and the fourth column presents the final themes interconnected with the initial themes. The illustration offers a concise overview of the analytical process, starting from raw interview data, through the stages of coding and theme development, culminating in the final themes that condense the research outcomes. With the insertion of participant

quotations, the table intends to ensure transparency in the analysis and provides a clear link between the original data and the assumptions drawn from the research.

Table 4: Selected instances of analysis process.

<b>Original Quotations</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Initial Themes</b>	<b>Themes- Categories</b>
Participant D: <i>“... Almost always there is a trauma during childhood. They always have some dark event during childhood ___ they are also reluctant to talk about it.”</i>	Adverse childhood experience; neglect; violence	Impact of early trauma: “Personal Traits”	Internal Factors Influencing Behaviour
Participant A: <i>“...many of our clients did not have the right educational support from their parents when they were children; because of poor school preparation, individuals are close to poverty and consequently are more susceptible to criminal influences...”</i>	Poverty; lack of education; crime as survival	Socioeconomic challenges leading to crime: “Environmental circumstances”	External Factors Influencing Behaviour

Participant A: “... <i>the type of client we work with usually lives in contexts where there is a common acceptance of criminal behaviour, and this creates difficult situations...</i> ”	Normalization of crime; consensus; acceptance	Cultural and community influences: “Environmental circumstances, Societal structure”	External Factors Influencing Behaviour
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Evidently, the original extracts are direct quotations from the participants captured during the interviews. These quotations were processed into codes, which identify specific elements that were considered significant during the initial coding phase. These codes were grouped into initial themes, which represent broader groups of elements that highlight recurring patterns in the data. Lastly, the final themes were developed by synthesizing several initial themes and subthemes into overarching concepts that encapsulate the key findings of the study. Main themes and sub-themes were organized into main categories. At this stage, internal factors and external factors will specifically indicate two main categories, as per nature of the attribution theory approach employed in the study.

The preceding steps enabled the transition to the sixth and final phase of the analysis process. In this concluding phase, the focus was directed toward ultimately achieving the research objective. In this regards Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasized the significance of presenting an analysis that is concise, coherent, logical, and engaging, effectively conveying the narrative derived from the data, both within and across themes. This entails utilizing vivid and compelling descriptions and establishing connections between the analysis, the relevant literature, and the research inquiry.

## 8.2 Consistency of common factors

The analysis revealed several factors influencing criminal behaviour. Per result of the analysis, two tables have been created to represent the categories of factors shaping criminal behaviour as identified through participant interviews. Table 1 outlines the category internal factors, while table 2 outlines the category external factors.

Table 1: Category Internal Factors Influencing Criminal Behaviour

<b>Themes/Sub-themes</b>	<b>Factors</b>
Personal Traits	Manipulative tendencies. Aggressive tendencies. Impulsiveness. Lack of empathy. Identity confusion. Self-rejection. Criminal mindset. Violent mindset. Low work motivation. Unrecognized potential. Ineffective coping mechanisms. Lack of future vision.
Needs	Financial needs. Basic necessities. Debt burden.
Personal Perceptions	Personality breakdown. Sense of entitlement. Shame. Pride. Revenge. Unrealistic perceptions. Hopelessness. Helplessness. Perceived inequality.
Mental Health Factors	Generational trauma. Substance abuse. Addictions, Depression. Emotional regulation difficulties. ADHD. Identity disorders. Demotivation. Lack of mental health diagnosis. Neurobiological predispositions. Stress from poor coping mechanisms.
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)	Dysfunctional family. Childhood neglect. Poor attachment. Lack of parental affection. Limited childhood experiences. Exposure to abuse. Heightened alertness.

Table 2: Category External Factors Influencing Criminal Behaviour

<b>Themes/Sub-themes</b>	<b>Factors</b>
Mental Health	Historical or cultural trauma. Anxiety. Depression, Forced migration. Stress from displacement.
Environmental Circumstances	Poverty. Homelessness. Limited education. Housing instability. Neighbourhood instability. Discrimination. Social isolation. Ghettoization. Lack of educational support. Social division. Perceived social barriers. Unemployment. Limited advancement opportunities. Minority status.
High Consensus Issues	Presence of criminal communities. Normalization of criminal activity. Peer pressure.
Social Structure	Low socioeconomic status. Stigma. Criminal labelling. Inadequate rehabilitation support. Lack of knowledge addressing criminal issues.

The tables show a plain outline of the two categories with the set of emerged factors influencing criminal behaviour. Concurrently, the tables represent a concrete demonstration of how the professionals working with individuals facing socio-economic and legal challenges perceive the causes underlying criminal behaviour. This organized approach was adopted to facilitate a deeper information of the complex interplay between these factors and their impact in the given context. A significant number of common factors influencing criminal behaviour emerged from the various interviews with participants. Common subject matter included low education levels, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), identity issues, poor family attachment, the absence of a father figure, belonging to minorities, mental health issues, and a high criminal attitude consensus. Notably, among these, ACEs, mental health-identity issues, a high criminal attitude

consensus, poor education, lack of empathy, poor emotional control, and personal traits such as impulsivity and manipulative tendencies were consistent and a constant across all interviews.

## 9 RESULTS

This chapter outlines the results obtained from applying the theoretical framework of the study, along with a thematic analysis of the interviews conducted with professionals working with individuals who have a criminal background and are facing legal challenges. The insights gathered from these interviews offer a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting criminal behaviour as observed by those working directly with affected populations.

### 9.1 Internal factors influencing criminal behaviour

“Personal Traits” are perceived by the interviewed professionals as significant contributors to criminal behaviour. These traits, which include impulsiveness, manipulation, aggression, and a lack of empathy, are seen as both predisposing factors and coping mechanisms within the criminal context. The professionals highlighted how certain traits often become deep-rooted in individuals, shaping their identities and influencing their actions. One participant emphasized the prevalence of these traits among clients, noting that clients often develop these characteristics as a means of surviving within an adverse environment.

*“Manipulation, aggression, and lack of empathy are common factors for the clients we work with! Sometimes they work on being harsh persons!”* (Participant A).



This suggests that the cultivation of such traits is not only a response to the environment but also a deliberate effort to fit into the criminal milieu. Another participant echoed this sentiment emphasizing the challenges individuals face in shedding these traits after long-term exposure to criminal environments.

*“Impulsiveness, manipulation, aggression, and lack of empathy...you need to be like that! The environment is fake-friendly, and you have to be aware! When one has been living like that for so long, it is difficult to learn how to deal with emotions, and you become another person.”* (Participant B).

This passage reflects the impact on individual identity and emotional regulation, revealing that these traits become a rooted part of the individual's psyche. Further supporting this perspective, a third participant described these traits as essential tools that a criminal works on to improve, particularly as coping mechanisms.

*“Aggression, manipulation, and no empathy are needed tools, you also work to have it! That is the coping mechanism...”* (Participant C).

This vision suggests that these conducts are not merely reactions but are also perceived as necessary skills for navigating the criminal landscape. Finally, another professional highlighted how these traits are integral to the criminal mindset and identity, noting that they are constantly developed and maintained.

*“Impulsiveness, manipulation, aggression, and lack of empathy are tools for our clients’ criminal mindset and identity, and they need and develop them... these characteristics are all present, all the time! ... These characteristics are often needed to be accepted in criminal environments...”* (Participant D).

This underscores the idea that these traits are not only acquired but are reinforced by the underlying forces within criminal circles. The findings suggest that certain personal traits are not only dominant among individuals involved in criminal actions but are also actively cultivated and reinforced by their backgrounds. These traits serve as both a means of survival and a way to solidify one's identity within the criminal settings.

In terms of “Personal Needs” the interviews with professionals shed light on the substantial role that unmet needs play in shaping criminal behaviour. Financial hardship, lack of basic necessities, and mounting debt were identified as critical factors causing criminal activities. The data revealed how these unmet needs initiate a sense of despair that can drive individuals toward illegal actions as a means of survival. One participant accentuated the link between unmet basic needs and mental health issues, noting:

*“If basic needs were covered, then mental health issues would be less, and so criminal activities... often mental health and person’s needs create a vicious circle.”* (Participant A).

This statement highlights how a lack of essential resources not only exacerbates mental health challenges but also perpetuates a cycle where unmet needs and criminal behaviour reinforce each other. A second participant contributed to this viewpoint by linking economic and housing instability directly to criminal behaviour (through the lens of mental health struggles).

*“Poverty, house instability, and unemployment are connected to mental issues like in a vicious circle, these conditions are like connection to criminal behaviour.”* (Participant B).

This quotation emphasizes how socioeconomic factors and unstable living conditions can lead to increase challenges, which in turn, are linked to a higher likelihood of engaging in criminal activities. A third participant also contributed valuable insights, noting that actions driven by unmet needs often stem from a deeper desire for a better life:

*“Often, some actions are caused by the hope for a new life that can’t be reached...”* (Participant D).

This reflects the profound impact of unmet needs on individuals' aspirations and the lengths to which they might go to reach a sense of improvement or escape from their current circumstances. These reflections suggest that the strain of

unmet needs can lead individuals to criminal behaviour as a coping mechanism or a means to achieve otherwise inaccessible goals. The findings highlighted the critical necessity for addressing the root causes of such needs to prevent criminal behaviour and to crack the cycle of desperation that fuels it.

In regard of “Personal Perceptions” the interviews reveal that such perceptions (how individuals perceive themselves and their circumstances), play a critical role in shaping behaviour. These perceptions often create a subjective reality, where feelings of hopelessness, entitlement, pride, revenge, and distorted observations of reality can lead to actions that associate with criminal performance. One participant highlighted the profound impact of self-perception on behaviour, stating:

*“I think that often the clients we work with perceive themselves and their situation as hopeless...and they feel there is nothing to lose, and this increases the attitude to engage in crime. Also, often criminal activities are connected to common arguments due to a sense of pride related to family and to the feeling of shame that individuals might have to be in such a condition.”* (Participant A).

This hints that a sense of hopelessness and a lack of realistic alternatives can drive individuals toward crime as an apparent solution or escape. Additionally, the connection between pride and shame illustrates how these emotions can exacerbate feelings of desperation, further embedding criminal behaviour. Another participant provided insight into the long-term effects of institutionalization, noting that:

*“Often our clients have been placed in institutions during childhood. This leads to perceiving themselves as being ‘outside’ and not the same like others; because of these perceptions, they have the feeling that society owes them something... and they will take it!”* (Participant B).

This perspective reveals how early perceptions of exclusion can foster a sense of entitlement and a desire to regain what they feel has been unjustly denied. Still, another participant discussed the unrealistic perceptions some individuals hold about others, stating:

*“Some of our clients seem to have an unrealistic perception of others... it seems some of them think others are abstract, and these abstract individuals are the victims... but when our clients face their actions and the consequences of their behaviour, often they go into crisis, or they deny what they have done!”* (Participant C).

This suggests that distorted perceptions of reality not only contribute to criminal actions but also complicate the process of taking responsibility for those actions, leading to denial or psychological distress. Eventually, one participant emphasized also the role of perceived discrimination and self-repugnance in motivating criminal behaviour, sharing that:

*“Many of our clients believe they haven't been given opportunities for growth; many of them also perceive themselves as discriminated and unwanted by others, and they don't like themselves either. These factors could trigger individuals to engage in criminal activities.”* (Participant D).

Here, the inherent impact of negative self-perception which can direct individuals to criminal acts as a form of rebellion or self-affirmation, was underlined. These perceptions highlight the dense interplay between self-perception and criminal behaviour, indicating that addressing these distorted perceptions could be crucial in preventing crime. Interventions that focus on reshaping self-perception and offering practical alternatives may help mitigate the risks associated with these refusal views.

“Mental Health” emerged as a significant and complex theme, with participants noting its pervasive impact on behaviour. Issues such as generational trauma, substance abuse, addiction, depression, ADHD, identity disorders, and the lack of appropriate mental health diagnoses were all discussed as contributing factors. These mental health issues contribute to internal struggles that may lead persons toward criminal activities as a means of coping or survival. For instance, a participant highlighted the strong link between substance abuse and criminal behaviour, observing:

*“From my experience, almost all of my clients who committed crimes have issues with substance abuse... Many of our clients might have been labelled as problematic kids in the '80s or '90s, while nowadays they would be diagnosed with ADHD. These challenges might have influenced their personal situations: if you have mental issues, it's difficult already to deal with normal life. These factors contribute to finding alternative ways to deal with life challenges, like crime activities” (Participant A).*

This statement underscores how substance abuse may be a constant and how undiagnosed or untreated mental health conditions can exacerbate life's difficulties, potentially pressing individuals toward criminality as an alternative coping mechanism. A second participant echoed this connection, stating:

*“Substance abuse is always connected with crime from my point of view and based on my experience. When you don't have the right tools, you turn to substance use, and this makes you closer to a criminal environment” (Participant B).*

This may suggest that the lack of effective coping mechanisms can lead individuals to substance abuse, which in turn draws them further into criminal circles and mental struggles. Similarly, a third participant discussed the stigma around mental health issues among clients, remarking:

*“Among our clients, there are almost always mental issues, but this is like a taboo for them... Mental issues are there because of the repeated violence cases and a constant state to worry... that mechanism to be alert is always on” (Participant C).*

This can indicate that, while mental health issues are prevalent, they are often not addressed adequately, placing individuals in a constant state of stress and fear, which may facilitate criminal behaviour. A fourth participant provided further insights into the mental turmoil faced by clients, stating:

*“All of them have a mess in their mind... not schizophrenia, but this is an aspect that should be taken more into consideration, it's a big thing” (Participant D).*

This comment remarks the chaotic mental state of many individuals associated with criminal activities, suggesting that more attention should be paid to these underlying mental health issues as part of a comprehensive approach to addressing criminal comportment. The aforementioned considerations regarding the emerging theme of mental health led to reflect on the intricate link between mental health challenges and crime, emphasizing perhaps the need for more comprehensive mental health support as a preventive measure.

“Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)” was also an emerging theme that presented peculiarities to the study that could not be ignored. The interviews uncovered the profound and lasting impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on the development of criminal behaviour later in life. Participants consistently pointed to dysfunctional family environments, childhood neglect, poor attachment to parents, lack of parental affection, exposure to abuse and violence, and a pre-eminent state of alertness from an early age as critical factors that shaped their clients' trajectories toward criminality. In this regard one participant highlighted the absence of a supportive family structure, referring:

*“...Absence of a father is common. Speaking about emotional support, this is commonly missing during childhood... They had to grow up quickly! ... Good parenthood was missing and so was missing affection”* (Participant A).

This observation reflects how the lack of a nurturing environment can force children into premature maturity, often without the emotional tools essential to navigate life's challenges, leading them down a path where criminal behaviour becomes a coping mechanism. Similarly, a second participant observed the connection between lack of childhood support and later institutionalization:

*“...No support during childhood leads to poor emotional control, and this led many of our clients to be institutionalized in child protection structures. This made them closer to situations unfavourable”* (Participant B).

This imply that early emotional neglect can disrupt a child's ability to regulate emotions, making them more susceptible to conditions where crime is

normalized. Another participant delved into the generational aspect of ACEs, noting how the cycle of poverty and neglect perpetuates criminal behaviour:

*“...For many clients, having had poor grandparents and then poor parents, it was really easy to move on to committing criminal acts, feeling the need to look for alternative methods to build an identity, to feel important, to have a status”* (Participant C).

This participant's perception emphasizes the role of ACEs in shaping an individual's identity and sense of self-worth, often driving them to seek validation through unlawful conduct to gain status or importance in their communities. Lastly, a participant provided a pure view of the role of ACEs along with the normalization of violence and legal violations in the environments where their clients were raised:

*“...In my work, childhood experiences are the most powerful thing! It's a constant with our clients since many of them saw violence when they were kids and got used to it, thinking it was normal...” “...They grew up in places where hearing about violence and legal violations was just part of everyday life...”* (Participant D).

These statements reveal how exposure to adverse experiences and violence at a young age can desensitize individuals, making criminal behaviour a normal or inevitable part of life. Nonetheless, this participant also perceived the inherent and rooted trauma that often accompanies such experiences:

*“...Almost always there is a trauma during childhood. They always have some dark event during childhood—they are also reluctant to talk about it. Often psychotherapy is needed. Violence is a constant factor during their childhood...”* (Participant D).

This observation justifies the long-lasting impact of childhood trauma, which not only influences criminal behaviour but also creates barriers to addressing and healing from these early wounds. The observations from the participants

demonstrated the critical role that ACEs play in shaping an individual's path toward criminality. The consistent presence of such experiences among clients suggested that early interventions focused on supporting children in adverse settings (or adults that experienced such circumstances) could be crucial in preventing future inclination toward crime, antisocial behaviour, and personality disorders.

## 9.2 External factors influencing criminal behaviour

The theme “Mental Health and Crisis Stressors” emerged as a topic of considerable interest. In fact, the study's participants placed emphasis on the significant role of mental health also in relation to external factors. They pointed to historical and cultural trauma, anxiety, depression, forced migration, and the stress of displacement as conditions that foster an environment where criminal behaviour is more likely to stem. In this context, one participant echoed the impact of unfavourable environmental conditions, noting how these can lead to a dangerous combination of demotivation and depression, frequently exacerbated by substance abuse:

*“...Due to unfavourable environmental circumstances, our clients can experience demotivation and depression, which together with substance abuse can lead to the criminal world and create a fall-back effect” (Participant A).*

This can suggest that when individuals face persistent environmental stressors without adequate support, they can turn to criminal activities as a form of evasion or surviving mechanism (particularly when these challenges are compounded by substance abuse). A second participant succinctly captured the connection between mental well-being and criminal behaviour, stating:

*“...If you feel good, you don't do it...” (Participant B).*

This observation stresses a paramount point: individuals with sound mental health and a positive thought process are less likely to engage in criminal



activities. It highlights the importance of addressing mental health as a deterrent measure against crime. A third participant debated how belonging to marginalized communities can worsen mental health issues, thereby increasing the risk of criminal behaviour:

*“...Belonging to ethnic minorities, poor sense of belonging, poor attachment to place, and discrimination are risk factors for mental health because they can create anxiety and depression”* (Participant C).

This reflection is indicative of how social exclusion and discrimination can erode an individual's sense of belonging and attachment to civic society, leading to mental health issues that may drive toward additional challenges, crisis, and subsequently to criminal adaptation as a form of retaliation or survival. The participants' insights revealed the significant impact of mental health on criminal behaviour in the relation of external factors. They stressed the need to address mental health challenges within marginalized and displaced communities to reduce the likelihood of criminal activity. Thus, enhancing mental health support and alleviating environmental stressors could be seen as vital strategies for preventing the onset of criminal behaviour.

“Environmental Circumstances” appeared as substantial during the research process. Participants regularly identified environmental circumstances as key contributors to criminal behaviour. Elements such as poverty, homelessness, unstable housing, discrimination, and insufficient educational support were perceived as critical factors that sustained cycles of marginalization and pushed individuals toward criminal activities. These challenges often aroused from systemic inequities and a lack of resources, fostering conditions in which crime became a more realistic means of subsistence. One of the participants noted the long-term impact of insufficient educational support:

*“...many of our clients did not have the right educational support from their parents when they were children; because of poor school preparation, individuals are close to poverty and consequently are more susceptible to criminal influences”* (Participant A).

This underlines how early systemic educational support deficits can set the stage for future financial hardships and later tendencies to behave dishonestly (Lynam & Miller, 2004.) Adding to this, another participant reflected on the sense of societal detachment that can result from extended unemployment and discrimination:

*“...detachment from society for reasons of lack of work or discrimination, and the fact of not having a clear direction where to go in society, many times directs people to engage in criminal activities...the more it goes, the less hope!”* (Participant B).

This reflection explains how a lack of social integration and clear opportunities can erode hope, making criminal paths seem more appealing. Additionally, one more participant also perceived systemic factors such as lack of education, limited job prospects, and discrimination as key underlying contributors to criminal behaviour, particularly within vulnerable population groups:

*“...from my point of view, education, job opportunities, and discrimination are the main causes that bring individuals to engage in criminal actions... especially for minorities...”* (Participant D).

As evinced, this remarks the broader societal factors that disproportionately affect marginalized groups, forcing them toward crime as a response to systemic barriers. These perceptions can indicate that tackling environmental determinants such as enhancing educational access, fighting discrimination, and affording stable housing could be key measures in disrupting the cycle of marginalization and limiting criminal behaviour.

“High Consensus” is the penultimate topic described in this section. The interviews spotlighted a widespread conformity among participants about the impact of criminal communities on individual behaviour. The widespread acceptance of criminal activity in certain settings was often mentioned as a key external factor that sustains criminal behaviour. For instance, peer pressure was recognized as a major influence pushing individuals toward law breaking or offences. One of the participants noted:

*“... the type of client we work with usually lives in contexts where there is a common acceptance of criminal behaviour, and this creates difficult situations...”* (Participant A).

This reveals underlined dynamics of certain contexts and potential barriers individuals may encounter when attempting to escape environments where criminal conduct is both widespread and socially normalized. Adding to this, another participant observed that:

*“... generally, the type of clients we work with just live in the same criminal environment...”* (Participant B)

Indicating thus, that proximity to criminal communities often conditions or can limit individuals' opportunities to seek alternative and legal pathways. One of the participants also reflected on high consensus in connection to socio-economic conditions by stating:

*“...It often happens that the clients we work with come from poor neighbourhoods where people are used to a certain type of behaviour...”* (Participant C).

This highlights how economic disadvantage, and situational causes can reinforce criminal patterns, making it difficult for individuals to evade the influence of these circumstances. The insights collected here from high consensus issues expand the significant role that group dynamics and socio-economic conditions play in influencing criminal behaviour. To effectively reduce crime, it could be decisive to address the widespread normalization of criminal attitudes within specific environments.

“Societal Structure” is the ultimate topic of this section. The collected data related to this theme gave prominence to the major impact of societal structures on criminal behaviour. Participants, during the interviews, revealed to perceive stigma, labelling, inadequate rehabilitation support, and a lack of knowledge in addressing criminal behaviour as paramount aspects. One participant observed that law

breaking often arises from stressful conditions exacerbated by insufficient support for change. The participant emphasized:

*“...People get into crime for stressful reasons like not getting enough help to change their ways. Another big reason is being called a criminal, which makes them feel like they have no opportunities and can't see a better future for themselves...”* (Participant B).

This stresses how the societal label of “criminal” can limit an individual's perceived opportunities and amplify their sense of hopelessness. Ultimately, a participant furthermore stressed the importance of informed and empathetic rehabilitation endeavours:

*“...for rehabilitation to work well, professionals in the criminal justice system need to really get how criminal behaviour works. Otherwise, it's like shooting with no target! It's important to really know the clients, to know their world... to 'speak their language' to connect with them and understand their identity...”* (Participant D).

Evidently, this reflection underlines the need for professionals to possess a deep understanding of their clients' backgrounds to effectively support their rehabilitation. This participant also noted a broader collective issue, asserting:

*“...Society is not open to help criminals so much...”* (Participant D).

This comment mirrors a systemic gap where societal hesitation to assist individuals labelled as criminals can impede their reintegration and rehabilitation. Such reflections accentuate the complex interaction between societal classifications, the adequacy of rehabilitation support, and the need of expertise and cognition for professionals to engage deeply with their clients' experiences.

## 10 ETHICS AND RELIABILITY

Ensuring the ethical integrity of the research was a topmost priority for the study, in alignment with the guidelines set forth by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2023). Before initiating the study, ethical clearance was secured from the relevant institutional review board, guaranteeing that the research design, protocols, and participant engagements upheld ethical standards (TENK, 2023). A research partnership permit was secured from the working-life partner ensuring that the study adheres to ethical guidelines and organizational protocols (see Appendix 1). Informed consent was meticulously obtained from all participants (see Appendix 2), outlining the study's objectives, voluntary participation, confidentiality measures, and participants' rights (TENK, 2023). Participants were additionally given an informational letter that provided detailed information about the study's context, purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. This letter was presented verbally as well to ensure comprehensive understanding of the research context and process (see Appendix 3).

The collected data were securely stored on USB devices, and the devices were locked in researcher personal facilities. The destruction of such devices was planned to be implemented at the termination of the study process. The material was made physically inaccessible to any individual during the phases of collecting, storing, analysing and writing the thesis. Participants were informed about this procedure and the management of their data in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2019). In line with what mentioned above, participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any time without negative effects, aligning with the principle of voluntary participation. Additionally, stringent measures were implemented to preserve participant confidentiality and anonymity throughout all phases of data collection, analysis, and reporting (TENK, 2023).

## 10.1 Reliability and potential limitations

To uphold the reliability of the research, various strategies were employed to bolster credibility, analysability, transparency, and utility of the findings. Credibility was fortified through extended engagement with the data, member validation, and cross-referencing multiple sources (Patton, 2015). Analysability was heightened through systematic data coding and meticulous documentation of analytical decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transparency was achieved by offering comprehensive insights into the research process, encompassing methodological choices, data collection methodologies, and analytical approaches utilized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lastly, the applicability of the findings was optimized by considering their pragmatic implications for informing social work practice, policy formulation, and future research endeavours (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Despite diligent efforts to uphold ethical standards and ensure the reliability of the research, several limitations were encountered during the research journey. These limitations encompassed potential biases stemming from the researcher's standpoint and positionality, constraints on participant recruitment, and hurdles in accessing specific populations or environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Methodological constraints such as the utilization of qualitative methodologies that may restrict generalizability, and resource limitations that may impact the breadth and depth of data collection, posed additional challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Evident acknowledgment of these limitations was imperative for preserving the integrity and validity of the research findings.

## 10.2 Ethical considerations

In the context of the selected target group and research methods, several ethical considerations may occur, particularly concerning participants' rights, confidentiality, and informed consent. When engaging in operations concerning work with vulnerable populations, like individuals with a history of criminal involvement or those grappling with mental health challenges, researchers confront complex ethical dilemmas (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [TENK], 2023). One

ethical question pertains to ensuring the voluntary and informed participation of individuals in the study, particularly given power differentials and potential coercion (TENK, 2023). Researchers must implement measures to mitigate any perceived or actual pressure on participants to partake in the research, emphasizing their right to decline or withdraw at any time without repercussions (TENK, 2023). Confidentiality emerges as another critical ethical concern, especially when handling sensitive topics and personal data. Researchers must ensure participants' anonymity and safeguard their data against unauthorized access or disclosure (TENK, 2023). This entails implementing robust data security measures and adhering to stringent confidentiality protocols throughout the research process, as described in the first paragraph of this chapter (TENK, 2023).

Researchers must also consider the potential impact of their research methods on participants' well-being and privacy (TENK, 2023). For instance, qualitative interviews may elicit sensitive or distressing disclosures from participants. Researchers must prioritize participants' welfare and dignity, ensuring that their rights and autonomy are always upheld (TENK, 2023). In terms of factors affecting the study's reliability, various considerations must be considered as well. One such factor is the adequacy of the sample size and the representativeness of the participant pool (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Insufficient sample sizes or biased participant selection may compromise the generalizability and validity of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ultimately, researchers must evaluate the reliability and validity of their data collection methods and analytical procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Methodological rigor, consistency in data collection, and transparency in data analysis are crucial for ensuring the trustworthiness of the study outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Overall, addressing these ethical questions and reliability matters is essential for upholding the integrity and credibility of the research findings, thereby contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the field (TENK, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## 11 DISCUSSION

The investigation of factors influencing criminal behaviour revealed a complex interplay of elements that may shape individuals' paths into criminality. Participants' narratives portrayed consistent factors such as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), mental health challenges, identity struggles, criminal attitude consensus, lack of empathy, poor emotional control, and specific personal traits. These insights underline the complexity of tackling criminal behaviour, with some factors, like personal traits and ACEs, being relatively stable (as more entwined with individual characteristics), while others, such as environmental conditions and social dynamics, are more variable and subject to change. Stable factors, including personal traits like impulsivity, manipulateness, aggression, and early negative experiences, are deeply rooted and can shape long-term behavioural patterns. Nevertheless, their impact is influenced by an individual's resilience and existing support systems, demonstrating that not all stable factors have a uniform effect. In contrast, external factors such as poverty, discrimination, homelessness, and social isolation were seen as more dynamic aspects that can evolve or be shaped over time, affecting behaviour in ways that fluctuate with changing circumstances.

Recognizing the stability and variability of these factors provides vital intuitions into how professionals can approach criminal behaviour. Stable dispositions, such as ingrained personality traits or ACEs, suggest the need for targeted, long-term interventions that address deep-rooted behavioural issues. On the other hand, variable external factors offer chances for more adaptive, context-oriented strategies that respond to variations in an individual's condition. The findings indicate that addressing criminal behaviour requires an informed approach that reflects both stable and varying elements. Likewise, the findings suggest that recognizing the intersectionality of these internal and external factors improves the estimation of their mutual effects on criminal behaviour and society. This argument strengthens the existing literature on the dual role of internal and external influences in criminal behaviour. Lynam and Miller (2004) remark the influence of personality traits, such as impulsivity to give an example, which aligns with



participants' observations related to individual dispositions. Andrews and Bonta (2010) additionally stress the impact of external circumstances such as socioeconomic factors, supporting the necessity for intervention that address both personality traits and environmental influences in professional settings. This thorough vision supports the development of interventions and risk assessment models that are always more equipped to address the complexities of criminal behaviour in different contexts.

### 11.1 Applying attribution theory to understand and address criminal behaviour: a framework for forensic social work

This section connects the research results with the theoretical framework considered earlier in the study, offering a critical dialogue on how the findings align with the initial concepts. In this study, the application of attribution theory was central to interpreting how professionals working with individuals involved in criminal behaviour perceive the causes behind such behaviour. The research question focused on identifying the factors that experts believe contribute to criminality, and attribution theory granted a useful framework for categorizing these contributors into internal and external factors. This distinction permitted this study to address the complexity of criminal behaviour beyond superficial observations, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how persons and their environments contribute to criminal outcomes.

As acknowledged, attribution theory posits that individuals have a natural inclination to seek explanations for behaviour, often attributing actions to either internal dispositions or external circumstances (Heider, 1958). Having said that, from a critical point of view, the theory itself seemed to have limitations, particularly in how it rationalizes the cause-effect chain in real life, which is rarely as distinct as the theory suggests. The theory presupposes a level of cognitive awareness and rationality in how human beings assign causality, which can be excessively reductive in the context of complex phenomena like human behaviour and crime (Heider, 1958). To mitigate such peculiarity this study suggests, in practice, to always consider the intersectionality of factors (whether internal and external

factors interact in ways that seems linear or not). In fact, the intersectionality of certain factors was highlighted. For instance, the interviews revealed that mental health issues, often seen as an internal factor, are exacerbated by external circumstances such as homelessness or social isolation, creating a feedback circuit where external stressors trigger internal psychological distress, leading to increased unlawful propension or dysfunctional coping mechanisms. This dynamic interaction underlines the limits of simplistic attribution and calls for always more refined interpretation that accounts for the interconnection of various causes and contexts. Hence, while attribution theory was effective in structuring the study outcomes, it also exposed challenges of overgeneralization. Criminal behaviour, as seen, is a product of several interrelating factors, many of which may be ignored if we rely solely on the binary distinction between internal and external factual contributors. To always consider the intersectionality of factors can mitigate such aspects. Nevertheless, applying attribution theory provided a framework upon which the complicated nature of crime could be more easily acknowledged and discussed in a methodical way.

In tangible terms, for this research, attribution theory was considerably instrumental in structuring the perceived roots of criminal behaviour into categories. This allowed the research to not only answer the research question but also suggest practical models tailored to help forensic social workers better assist clients. The experts interviewed in this study often attributed criminal behaviour to external factors such as poverty, discrimination, and lack of education, and to internal factors such as mental health issues. While these attributions denote real challenges faced by the clients they work with, attribution theory allowed for a more systematic classification of these factors, revealing patterns in the professionals' explanations of crime. The benefit of attribution theory in this research extends to its rational and practical applications. By organizing perceived causes of criminal behaviour into structured categories, the theory enabled the suggestion for a risk and needs assessment model that can be employed by forensic social workers. This approach, grounded in the results of the study, helps workers recognise whether the focus of their mediations should be on addressing stable or variable factors. The ability to make this distinction is crucial in creating possible specific intervention plans that are responsive to the unique needs of each client,

increasing the effectiveness of support services and reducing recidivism. Attribution theory demonstrated to be a valuable tool in both structuring the study results and offering a theoretical background that can guide practical interventions. While the cause-effect chain in criminal behaviour can be not always pure, and human cognition tends to overgeneralise these relationships, the application of this theory aided to clarify the professionals' perceptions and to frame them into a coherent model for intervention.

### 11.2 Research findings in relation to the research question

The research findings are closely associated with the research question, capturing the complex circumstances that contribute to criminal behaviour as perceived by professionals. The findings feature a multifaceted relationship of internal and external influences that shape pathways to crime, reflecting key aspects of the investigation. Professionals in forensic social work consistently identified both personal traits and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as the deeply rooted factors that influence criminal behaviour. The interview excerpts revealed how factors such as lack of emotional support, poor attachment, and exposure to violence during the formative years shaped clients' psychological development and behavioural models. As well, professionals underscored how external influences, concerning environmental conditions and social dynamics, significantly impact criminal behaviour. The normalization of crime within certain communities, intensified by socioeconomic challenges, further proves the broader social factors at play. The findings demonstrate an inclusive understanding of how internal dispositions intersect with external conditions, providing insights into the perceived determinants of criminal behaviour and clearly addressing the objectives of the study.

### 11.3 Practical application of findings in the field and professional development

The findings of the study can have considerable practical implications for forensic social work and related fields, supporting professional growth and the

development of key competencies, as outlined in Social Sciences and Social Work programs (Diak, n.d.) A key outcome of this study is the potential for professionals to elaborate comprehensive intervention models. By integrating the study's findings, forensic social workers can better detect internal and external contributors of criminal behaviour, allowing them to produce more holistic assessments. This permits experts to consider the diverse influences on an individual's behaviour, and to concretely ponder the intersectionality of certain factors when assisting clients (which is crucial for addressing the root causes of criminality). With these assessment approach, professionals can supplementarily design tailored intervention plans that address explicit needs, promoting positive behavioural changes. This approach allows professionals to apply the insights across various contexts, making it useful also for resource allocation as they acquire a better estimation of the underlying criminal determinants.

Nevertheless, the findings of the research empower professionals to determine effective multidisciplinary strategies. For instance, the analysed data for this study showed consistency between personal traits and mental health issues compared to external factors: with the lens of the study's findings this could suggest that cognitive-behavioural therapy combined with community-based support could be highly beneficial. This could enhance the chances of realistic outcomes for the clients that too often live a feeling of hopeless.

Ultimately, the research highlights the value of evidence-based interventions in reducing the prospect of recidivism and supporting successful reintegration into society. As suggested by the findings, focusing on the highlighted critical triad of adverse childhood experiences, mental health awareness, and socioeconomic inequalities, social work professionals and policymakers can meaningfully improve the efficacy of their actions, leading to better results for individuals facing socio-economic and legal challenges. As evinced, the study demonstrates the adaptability of its findings in different settings like helping in the efficient administration of time and resources, supporting the formation of preventive measures, improving rehabilitation outcomes, and promoting the development of intervention plans and informed risk assessment models.

#### 11.4 Improvement of personal core competencies.

The research journey significantly improved key skills vital to both research and social work. Proficiency in qualitative research methodologies improved through the process of conducting interviews with professionals, analysing data, and interpreting results. This active experience refined the ability to identify patterns, interpret narratives, and draw significant conclusions from qualitative data. Additionally, communication skills were improved. Interacting with professionals during interviews, active listening, and conveying empathy played an essential role in building rapport during the data collection. Moreover, the ability to clearly communicate research findings, both in writing and verbally was reinforced. Critical thinking was also a fundamental area of development. The research required rigorous literature review, thorough evaluation of research methodologies, and accurate interpretation of findings. This process encouraged reflection, challenged assumptions, and promoted the ability to ponder several perspectives.

Ethical awareness was central to this study, safeguarding that participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis adhered to high ethical standards. These ethical concerns are not only essential to research but are also critical to preserving trust and confidentiality in work settings. Eventually, the insights gained from professionals working with individuals facing legal challenges contributed to an immersed understanding of how diverse factors affect criminal behaviour. Collaboration with these experts raised a keener ability to identify needs, and an overall improvement in professional competence, particularly in relation to sensitive contexts. Likewise, the findings highlighted systemic issues related to societal circumstances, accentuating the magnitude of advocacy and social justice in social work.

#### 11.5 Reflections based on research findings

The findings of this study suggest several key reflections on contributors of criminal behaviour, particularly relating experts in forensic social work, policymakers,

and community organizations. To mitigate the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), comprehensive early intervention programs could be implemented. These programs could prioritize emotional support, promote healthy attachment, and provide trauma-informed approaches during childhood, thereby reducing the long-term effects of ACEs on behavioural tendencies (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Additionally, accessible and integrated mental health services are important to address the underlying psychological issues associated to criminal behaviour. This may include mental health screening, counselling, therapy, and substance abuse support integrated, or reinforced, into the criminal justice system to provide holistic care to individuals in need.

Addressing socioeconomic disparities, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education, is critical to opposing external factors that contribute to criminal behaviour. Policy makers should focus on programs that reduce socioeconomic gaps by improving access to resources and opportunities for marginalized groups of population. In parallel, stimulating community engagement is fundamental. Strengthening public support networks using mentoring, positive peer relationships, and community-based programs can help prevent the normalization of criminal behaviour in specific settings.

Robust rehabilitation and reintegration programs for those with criminal records are also recommended to reduce recidivism. These programs could prioritize skills improvement, job training, and support services that smooth reintegration into society, enabling individuals to rebuild their lives constructively. Additionally, professionals employed in the criminal justice system need to be trained in trauma-informed care practices that recognize the impact of trauma on behaviour and focus on empathetic and supportive methods that expand treatment outcomes. Lastly, since enhancing policy frameworks is crucial, policymakers should strive to reduce socioeconomic disparities and implement legislation that affect the root causes of crime by focusing on early intervention, combining mental health support. Evidence-based policies that are informed by research are necessary to successfully target the complex factors that influence criminal behaviour.

## 11.6 Recommendations for further studies

The findings of this study open the way for future research to extend our understanding and address the complexities of criminal behaviour. Longitudinal studies could be useful in examining the lasting effects of adverse childhood experiences and evaluating the employment of early interventions. Additionally, exploring the most applicable mental health interventions, including cognitive behavioural therapy and substance abuse treatment, could be beneficial in reducing criminal tendencies. Further research considerations on the link between poverty, education, unemployment, housing instability and criminal behaviour are also essential. Comparative research across socioeconomic settings could provide larger information about these influences and could help to identify more effective mediations. The utility of community-based programs, particularly those implying mentoring and peer support, should also be explored to determine which components are most effective in preventing criminal activity and supporting rehabilitation.

Research directed on gender-specific aspects in criminal behaviour could shed light on differences between male and female offenders, suggesting for more targeted interventions. Additionally, observing the intersectionality of social characteristics and their combined impact on criminal behaviour may provide a more meaningful understanding of underlying factors. Also, comparative studies across cultural contexts could offer precious intuitions into how cultural contrasts influence criminal behaviour and could lead to better adapted interventions. Ultimately, the position of social media in determining attitudes toward criminal behaviour deserves strong attention, as it could help to inform behaviour adjustment approaches. Addressing these research gaps would provide a more ample comprehension of criminal behaviour phenomenon, supporting the improvement of better policies, interventions, and mediations aimed at reducing crime.

## 12 CONCLUSION

This study offers critical insights into the dispositional and situational factors that shape criminal behaviour, providing constructive contributions to forensic social work and related fields. By exploring the perspectives of professionals working with individuals facing legal challenges, the research improves the understanding of the drivers behind criminal action, which is crucial for designing realistic interventions intended at reducing recidivism and promoting rehabilitation. Main findings reveal that personal traits such as aggressive tendencies, impulsivity, and lack of empathy, in conjunction with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), play a considerable role in determining criminal behaviour. ACEs like neglect, poor attachment, and exposure to violence profoundly influence psychological development and decision-making. Parallely, external factors such as poverty, homelessness, discrimination, and social isolation also contribute concretely to criminal conduct. Additionally, the acceptance of criminal behaviour in determined communities highlights the critical role that societal structures and community norms play.

The link between mental health and criminal behaviour needs additional investigation, this study remarks the importance of considering mental health issues, both as a cause and a consequence of criminal dynamics. Regular mental health assessments should be integrated into intervention strategies to increase rehabilitation outcomes. The study as well highlights the significance of attribution theory as a framework for recognizing the stable and dynamic factors influencing criminal behaviour. In fact, while personal traits and ACEs are seen as more stable, external circumstances are more variable, suggesting that appropriate interventions must address both. Hence, forensic social workers are encouraged to implement comprehensive plans, such as relating cognitive-behavioural therapy with community-based support, in order to address both stable and variable causality. Essential attention should be given to the intersectionality of factors when interacting with clients.



The findings of this research stress the need of comprehensive professional skills for forensic social workers and social service workers. Critical thinking, ethical decision-making, and effective communication skills were imperative to conducting this study and are essential to developing and employing effective intervention strategies. The findings support the relevance of integrating theoretical expertise with practical skills in forensic social work to create successful and ethical interventions. Future research should consider longitudinal investigations on ACEs and criminal behaviour, mental health interventions, and the correlation between socioeconomic conditions and crime. Gender oriented factors and the intersectionality of social characteristics also merit supplementary exploration to refine and advance intervention approaches. By embracing the diverse insights revealed in this research, it is possible to adopt new perspectives that improve the prevention and resolution of criminal behaviour. This not only drives improvement in the practice of forensic social work, but also reinforces the values of ethical and impactful practice, establishing the foundation for more meaningful and reliable outcomes.

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## APPENDIX 1. Research Partnership Permit

<https://www.vismasignforms.com/form/380a168a-86a5-4387-91de-d6beda12a729>

## APPENDIX 2. Informed Consent Form

### **Consent Form for Participation in a Thesis Data Collection**

Thesis Title: *FORENSIC SOCIAL WORK: MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS IN RELATION TO THE PHENOMENON OF CRIME*

Researcher: ....., Diaconia University of Applied Sciences

I acknowledge that the identities of participants will remain confidential, ensuring anonymity throughout the study. Only specific demographic details such as gender, age, education, and work experience will be collected for background information. Interviews will be recorded for transcription purposes. Dual backups of recordings will be created and securely stored on USB flash drives, housed within a locked cabinet. No distribution of the USB flash drives, or their contents will occur, with both being destroyed upon completion of the research (anticipated by Autumn 2024). The final thesis and results will be disseminated and published broadly via Theseus (Theseus - the theses and publications of the Universities of Applied Sciences on the Internet, <https://www.theseus.fi/>). Additionally, Diaconia University of Applied Sciences retains the right to utilize the thesis for research and development purposes.

I confirm that the aim, purpose, and details outlined above have been explained to me. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I retain the right to withdraw from the interview at any time and for any reason, without incurring consequences. I consent to be interviewed and agree that the information provided will be utilized in the thesis work.

Date and Location:

---



Participant's Signature and Name Clarification:

---

Researcher's Confirmation:

I have provided information about this research to the participant and accept their consent.

---

## APPENDIX 3. Informational Letter

**Informational Letter**

Student: \_\_\_\_\_

Diaconia University of Applied Sciences

Bachelor's Degree Programme in Social Services

Bachelor of Social Services

[Student identification code/A51dss]

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Tel.: +358 \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

[Participant's Name] \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Participant,

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research Study on Forensic Social Work

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study titled *FORENSIC SOCIAL WORK: MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS IN RELATION TO THE PHENOMENON OF CRIME*

As a [profession/position] \_\_\_\_\_, your valuable insights and perspectives are sought to contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors influencing criminal behaviour among individuals facing legal challenges.

Purpose of the Study:

The primary aim of this research study is to explore how professionals like yourself, who work closely with individuals facing legal challenges, perceive the underlying causes of criminal behaviour. By examining your experiences and insights, this study seeks to shed light on the complexities surrounding criminal behaviour in the context of social work and legal challenges.

Thesis-Research question: *“How do professionals working with individuals facing legal challenges perceive the causes underlying criminal behaviour?”*

#### Data Collection Procedures:

Participation in this study involves a semi-structured interview, where you will have the opportunity to share your perspectives and experiences related to the topic. The interview will be conducted in a confidential setting, and your responses will be anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

#### Data Storage and Confidentiality:

All data collected during the study will be kept confidential and stored securely. Only authorized researchers will have access to the data, any identifying information will be anyway removed to ensure anonymity. The collected data will be stored in two USB drivers for the period needed for the analysis. The collected data will be destroyed after the completion of the thesis (estimated time autumn 2024).

Your Participation: \_\_\_\_\_

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Your insights will greatly contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of forensic social work.

#### Consent and Anonymity:

Please indicate your consent to participate in this study by signing below. Additionally, if you wish to remain anonymous, please check the box provided.

However, in the analysis of the data and in the publication of the thesis, participant identities will remain anonymous. Throughout the final text, participants in

this study will be referred to using pseudonyms such as Participant A, B, C, D, and so forth.

[Signature of Participant] \_\_\_\_\_

I prefer to remain anonymous

Please sign and return the enclosed consent form along with this letter to indicate your consent to participate in the study.

If you have any questions or require further information about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at [e-mail](#) \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for considering participation in this research study. Your contribution is highly valued and appreciated.

Sincerely,

Student \_\_\_\_\_

I, [Participant's Name] \_\_\_\_\_, have read and understood the information provided in the accompanying informational letter for the research study titled "FORENSIC SOCIAL WORK: MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS IN RELATION TO THE PHENOMENON OF CRIME"

I voluntarily consent to participate in this study and understand that I have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Date and Signature \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX 4. Interview Framework and Questions

Title of the Thesis:

FORENSIC SOCIAL WORK: MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS  
IN RELATION TO THE PHENOMENON OF CRIME

### QUESTIONS:

1. How do you perceive the causes underlying criminal behaviour?
2. In your experience, what are the causes or triggers that lead individuals to engage in criminal activities? How do you explain why they engage in criminal behaviour?
3. When you interact with individuals that committed criminal actions, do you attribute their actions more to factors like "who they are or what they wanted" (personal traits or motives). Or do you attribute their actions to factors such as situational circumstances or societal pressures?
4. Can you provide examples related to your experience of how you link criminal actions to personality traits or factors like situational circumstances?
5. Do you think to perceive causes of criminal actions like your clients do? How do these perceptions influence attitudes and behaviours within the legal system? Does this influence client`s willingness to participate in rehabilitation or seek help?
6. From your perspective, what are the primary social determinants (or environmental factors) that contribute to criminal behaviour among individuals you work with?
  
7. How do you perceive the role of adverse childhood experiences in shaping the behaviour and life trajectories of individuals involved in the legal system?
8. Can you share any insights or observations regarding the impact of socio-economic factors on criminal behaviour among your clients or service users?
9. How crucial is it for professionals working with individuals in the criminal justice system to understand the process of attributing causes for criminal behaviour? \_
10. How do you perceive the intersection between social determinants and criminal behaviour among individuals facing legal challenges?
  
11. How do you perceive the intersection between mental health issues and criminal behaviour among individuals facing legal challenges?
12. Can you provide examples where there is a clear link or attribution between mental health issues and criminal behaviour?

13. How do mental health issues intersect with socio-economic factors to influence individuals' involvement in criminal behaviour? Can you identify any recurrent patterns or trends in this regard?

14. Can you discuss if you have observed a link between mental health issues, socio-economic factors, and criminal behaviour? Can you provide any example?

15. In your opinion, what role do social determinants such as poverty, housing instability, unemployment, and access to education play in exacerbating or mitigating the impact of mental health issues on individuals at risk to engage in criminal behaviour?... can you discuss the dynamics in this regard?

16. In relation to your experience, could mental health issues be perceived as a cause or as a consequence of the criminal action? Do you see any relation?

17. In your profession, what stressors contribute to both mental health issues and involvement in criminal activities? Can you explain about it?

18. Do you believe that an individual's personal traits can influence criminal behaviour as much as socio-economic factors or mental health issues? What do you think about the individual's personal traits in relation to mental health in the context of criminal behaviour?

19. How do you perceive lack of empathy, impulsivity, aggressive, manipulative, or other particular tendencies in your clients' background? From your point of view, are these tendencies often perceived?

20. How much does understanding social factors and mental health problems matter when deciding who is responsible for what people do?

21. From your experience, what are some common patterns or trends you've observed regarding the root causes of criminal behaviour among your clients or service users?

22. How do you address the factors that contribute to legal involvement and criminal behaviour in your professional practice?

23. What interventions or strategies do you find most effective in addressing the factors contributing to criminal behaviour?

24. Can you discuss any ethical considerations or challenges you encounter when working with offenders or individuals involved in criminal behaviour?

25. How do personal traits, mental issues, and social factors influence individuals' likelihood of reoffending?

26. What insights or lessons have you gained from your experiences working with individuals facing legal challenges in relation to understanding criminal behaviour?