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Delinquent behaviors in Southern Italy: A survey on adolescents perceptions

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Abstract

Introduction: Numerous studies have examined the precursors and personal traits associated with deviant behavior, but little is known about normative attitudes. This study aimed to conduct an exploratory survey on the perception and moral beliefs about deviant behavior.

Methods: We collected data from 100 students belonging to two high schools in Calabria, Southern Italy, to whom was administered a revised version of the Italian version of the International Self-Reported Delinquency (ISRD-3) questionnaire and a self-rating scale for the moral evaluation of deviant behavior.

Results: In our sample, deviant adolescents were less than 5%. However, it was possible to collect attitudes by drawing graffiti, illegally downloading from the internet, making their own justice, and signaling the police car. It has also emerged as difficult to correctly conceptualize and categorize rights and duties.

Conclusions: Our results, discussed in the light of the literature, provide to policymahers and researchers helpful information on the most prevalent attitudes among adolescents in Southern Italy.

Take-home message: This study reveals a low incidence of deviant behavior among adolescents in Southern Italy, underscoring the need for improved legal and moral awareness educational programs.

Keywords: adolescence; deviant behavior; rights and duties.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on deviant behaviors in adolescence have a long history dating back to the early 1900s. Some studies even adopt a retrospective perspective, successfully analyzing the deviant behaviors of adolescents from the preceding century. However, most of these studies have focused on understanding specific characteristics of the deviant individual, including personality patterns [1-3], intelligence types [4], genetic components [5], psychobiological factors [6], and risk factors [7]. On the other hand, recent studies have shifted their focus to normative processes and adolescents' attitudes toward deviant behaviors [8,9]. The "*International Self-Report Delinquency Study*" (ISRD) is an ongoing research project on adolescent delinquency and victimization that employs standardized data collection tools and procedures. Originating in Europe, the ISRD now includes a range of non-European nations (e.g., China, Cape Verde, Venezuela). The ISRD Study has two main objectives: (1) observe and compare differences, similarities, and trends in deviance and victimization among nations; (2) explore and analyze theoretical issues related to juvenile delinquency and victimization while preserving the importance of normative behaviors [10]. The initial data were collected in 1990-1991 in 13 nations (ISRD-1) and 2005-2007 in 31 nations (ISRD-2); the third data collection session (ISRD-3) took place in 36 countries. This standardized school-based survey is underway for the fourth time (ISRD-4), with approximately 50 participating nations worldwide.

In line with recent research trends, we aimed to explore several areas related to the frequency of deviant behaviors in non-delinquent adolescents. In this regard, the following objectives were formulated.

1) To identify characteristics related to family composition, stability, and the presence of traumatic family events.

2) To assess attitudes towards school and whether it is perceived as a setting for delinquent behaviors, including drug dealing and fights.

3) To determine the most common modes of leisure time management used by adolescents, with particular attention to self-disclosed deviant behaviors such as being part of a gang.

4) To explore beliefs regarding social norms and the conceptualization of rights and duties.

METHODS

Study design and population target

In this descriptive, observational study, the questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample of 122 students, but only 100 participants who had fully completed the questionnaires were considered for analysis. The final sample consisted of 100 participants (69% female), evenly divided into two homogeneous groups based on their origin: 52% from an Artistic High School and 48% from a Classical High School. Participants ranged from 13 to 17 years (M=14.09; SD=0.65). Most of the participants (91%) were of Italian nationality, with the remaining (9%) consisting of individuals from Romania (N=6), Morocco (N=2), and Poland (N=1).

Study instruments

The Italian version of the "*International Self-Reported Delinquency Questionnaire*" (ISRD-3) was used to assess self-disclosed deviant behaviors. The questionnaire was used in its version translated and validated in Italian (the third edition of the "*ISRD-3 ITALY Questionnaire*"), which has been successfully used in previous research [11]. The ISRD-3 comprises 10 areas of investigation with a total of 147 items. In this study, a modified version of the questionnaire was employed, consisting of three selected areas chosen by two independent evaluators: (1) "Some questions about yourself"; (2) "Some questions about

the school you attend"; (3) "Some questions about how you spend your free time and your friends." A fourth section was specifically introduced to explore beliefs regarding the rights and duties of citizens as perceived by adolescents: (4) "Some questions about rights and duties." Therefore, the questionnaire used in this study consisted of four sections with 94 items.

Study procedure

Two assessors administered the questionnaire in two schools, one Classical High School and one Artistic High School, in the Municipality of Cittanova, in Calabria, a region of South Italy. The first classes of three sections (A, B, and C) in each school were evaluated. Questionnaire administration took place during regular class hours in a single session. The questionnaire was administered in the presence of the assessors, following the distribution, and questions and clarifications were available. Each session lasted for 30-40 minutes. The questionnaires were anonymous, and privacy protection was ensured for all participants.

Statistical analyses

The data were entered into a database and processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 26.0). The qualitative analysis uses descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations).

Ethical aspects

The research has been approved by the local ethics committee and proposed to educational institutions. School principals were assured anonymity and the purpose of the study was explained to all participants in writing. Paper questionnaires were administered after obtaining formal authorization. The team made themselves available to provide feedback upon verified requests.

RESULTS

Section 1: "Some questions about yourself"

The first section of the questionnaire includes demographic information, some questions about adolescents' relationships with their parents (Table 1), and questions about possible traumatic events related to the family nucleus (Table 2). Among the interviewed students, 94% had Italian parents, and 3 were adoptees. In 93% of cases, it was reported that the father had a stable occupation, with only 2% being unemployed. Regarding the mother's employment status, 50% had an occupation, 27% did work (presumably performing housewife duties), and 23% had sporadic employment.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of responses (N=100) for the section "Some questions about yourself."

Relationships with parents	M	SD
1. I have a good relationship with my father	3,43	,76
2. I have a good relationship with my mother	3,60	,65
3. My parents support and help me emotionally	3,53	,63
4. My parents know where I am when I go out	3,55	,80
5. My parents know what I do when I go out	3,12	1,00
6. My parents know which friends I hang out with	3,46	,86
7. When I go out, my parents ask me what I did, where I went, and with whom[...]	3,20	,85
8. If I go out in the evening, my parents tell me what time I should come back	3,35	,88
9. I tell my parents, who I spend my time with	3,29	,87
10. I tell my parents how I spend my money	3,15	,96
11. I tell my parents what I do in my free time	2,73	,99

As can be observed, the sample reported a high level of parental control, assigning the highest scores on the Likert scale to the statements - minimum 1 ("never"), maximum 4 ("almost always"). Only a small percentage (> 6%) reported not communicating with parents about their whereabouts, with whom, and how they spend money. However, the last item represents an exception: 12% of adolescents choose not to disclose how they spend their free time, and 30% only share it occasionally.

Table 2. Percentages of responses (N=100) for the section "Some questions about yourself."

Traumatic family events	Yes	No
1. Death of your father or mother	3%	97%
2. A serious illness of one of your parents or someone close to you	31%	69%
3. Alcohol/drug problems of one of your parents	0%	100%
4. Episodes of physical violence between your parents	2%	98%
5. Severe and repeated arguments between your parents	10%	90%
6. Separation or divorce of your parents	3%	97%

Table 2 displays the percentage of adolescents who reported traumatic family events. The percentages are relatively low; however, it is noteworthy that 31% of the subjects reported serious illnesses affecting parents or relatives: 16% reported severe illnesses of grandparents, 3% of uncles, and 3% of fathers or mothers.

Section 2: "Some questions about the school you attend"

The second section investigates attitudes towards school (Table 3). The analysis of results revealed a common positive attitude among most students. Even though 22% admitted to not always enjoying going to school, generally, the lessons were considered attractive, and there was an overall positive evaluation of the school. The second part of the table analyzed negative aspects more closely related to deviance. The small percentages of phenomena such as fights, vandalism, thefts, and drug use (>10%) suggest that a relatively small portion of students perceive the school as a place where criminal phenomena occur. Presumably, this is explained by the subjectivity of each student's experience rather than a collective phenomenon.

Furthermore, the positive attitude towards school was confirmed by academic performance: 73% of the subjects reported above-average performance, 21% average performance, and only 6% below-average performance. In literature, it is known that academic performance is closely linked to learned helplessness, school dropout, and a predisposition to delinquency.

Table 3. Percentages of responses (N=100) for the section "Some questions about the school you attend."

Attitude towards school	Yes	No
1. If I had to move, I would miss my school	87%	13%
2. Most of the time, I enjoy going to school	78%	22%
3. I like my school	91%	9%
4. The lessons are interesting	84%	16%
5. In my school, many thefts occur	7%	93%
6. In my school, many fights occur	1%	99%
7. In my school, many acts of vandalism occur	4%	96%
8. In my school, there is a lot of drug use	3%	97%
9. I have been absent without a valid reason	39%	61%

Section 3: "Some questions about your free time and your friends"

The third section investigates the potential presence of deviant behaviors outside the school context, starting from the hypothesis that they may be more prevalent where they escape the control of adults and educational figures. The examination indicates that most participants go out twice (27%) or thrice (22%) per week. Following this, 19% claim not to go out at night, and 7% say they go out daily. Of those adolescents allowed to go out at night, 69% still need to follow a curfew. The majority (38%) spent their free time with two or three friends, while 29% spent time with family or friends, and only 4% spent time alone. Activities carried out during free time were also recorded (Table 4). The percentages of related deviant behaviors were minimal (<5%).

Table 4. Frequencies of responses related to the section "Some questions about your free time and your friends."

Free time organization	Never (0)	Sometimes (1-2)	Often (3-4)
1. I frequent bars	66%	33%	1%
2. Creative activities	35%	31%	34%
3. I engage in fights	96%	3%	1%
4. I engage in sports	20%	34%	46%
5. I study	4%	27%	68%
6. I go out to have fun	13%	56%	31%
7. I engage in illegal activities	95%	3%	2%
8. I drink alcohol	95%	3%	1%
9. I bother people for fun	85%	10%	5%

In the observed sample, the most frequent behaviors were drawing murals and illegally downloading content from the internet. While only 2% had used light drugs and 1% had heavy drugs, a significant 45% of adolescents reported consuming alcoholic beverages from one to four times a week (M=1.47).

Section 4: "Some questions about rights and duties"

In this final section, we examined beliefs about norms, specifically how deviant behaviors were perceived in terms of their seriousness (see Table 6). Of the adolescents, 44% correctly understood that norms were relevant to the state and all citizens. 62% declared that they obeyed an adult even when making a request they did not like. 44% of participants found it fair to pay taxes, but 27% considered it "foolish." In general, 94% of the interviewed adolescents agreed that considering norms as a guarantee for civil coexistence is important."

Table 5. Frequencies of responses related to the section "Some questions about rights and duties."

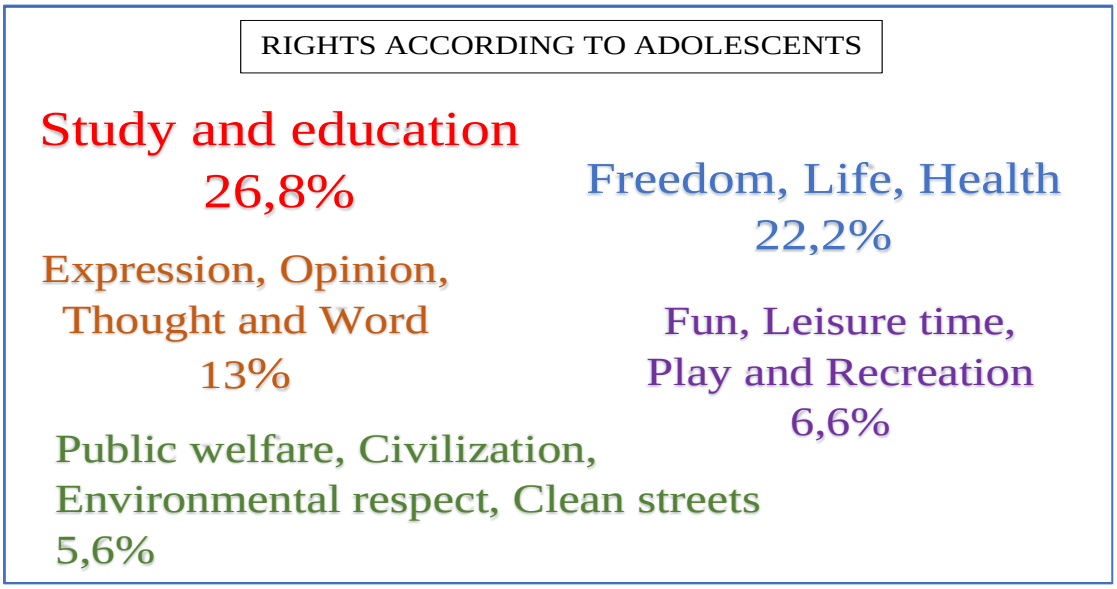
Moral perceptions	Right	Less serious	Very serious	Serious
1. Insulting someone based on their religion, skin color, ethnic or social origins	0	0	56%	44%
2. Lying, disobeying, or responding rudely to adults	2%	32%	26%	40%
3. Boarding the bus without paying the fare	6%	51%	17%	26%
4. Riding a scooter without a helmet	4%	29%	35%	32%
5. Breaking or damaging things that do not belong to you	2%	12%	48%	38%
6. During a school trip, at the highway rest area, putting snacks or other items in your pocket without paying	7%	6%	49%	38%

7. During a school trip, singing and running around in the hotel until 4:00 in the morning	24%	40%	17%	19%
8. Smoking in the school restrooms	3%	19%	50%	28%
9. Mocking a classmate for their physical appearance	1%	7%	56%	36%
10. Making anonymous phone calls	11%	51%	12%	26%
11. Calling someone using vulgar epithets	3%	8%	51%	38%
12. Pretending not to notice if I see a classmate in difficulty or being attacked by others	1%	4%	48%	47%
13. Shooting at a thief who has entered your property at night	26%	21%	31%	22%
14. Signaling to cars, using high beams, the presence of the police	38%	27%	14%	21%
15. Illegally downloading movies or music from the internet	20%	43%	19%	18%
16. Entering a building by breaking in with the intent to steal something	1%	2%	62%	35%
17. Physically harming someone with the intent to cause harm	4%	9%	55%	32%

Many adolescents did not consider 'running around' in the hotel until morning during a school trip, signaling the presence of the police with high beams, illegally downloading from the internet, but especially shooting at a thief entering the house at night, as serious as all. About half (51%) found it not very serious to board the bus without a ticket and make anonymous phone calls.

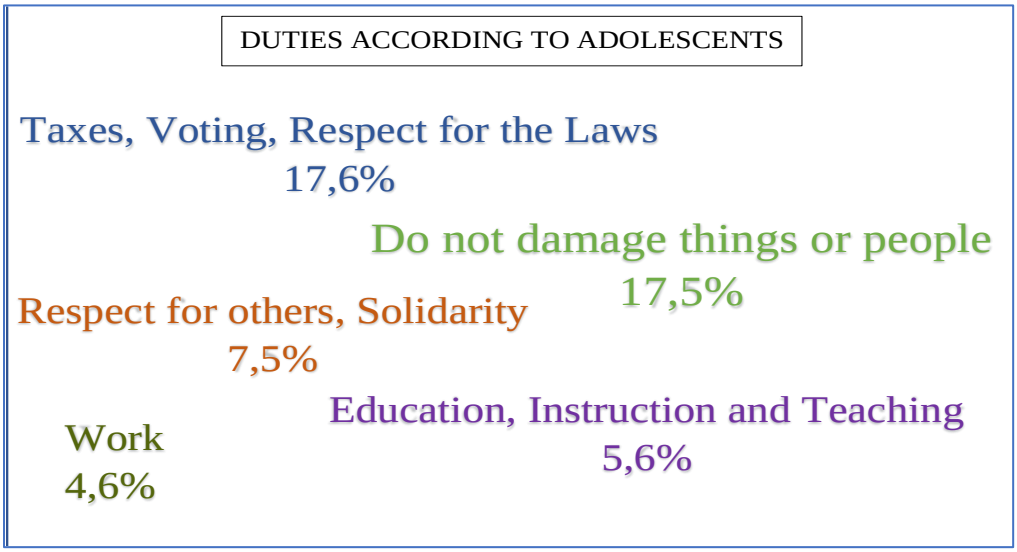
The last part of the questionnaire included an open-ended question: "Could you list at least three rights and duties?" Only 46% listed some rights, and 36% listed some duties. Most of the students showed some difficulty in conceptualizing this question. Figures 1 and 2 show the most prevalent categories.

Figure 1. Rights according to adolescents in the section "Some questions about rights and duties."



Among the rights, a small percentage (0.9%) listed privacy, gender equality, and non-violence. Some categories were identified as rights and duties: education, work, and voting. Interestingly, the family was recognized as both a right and a duty. Other rights were attributed improperly (e.g., paying taxes). Regarding duties, it is interesting to note that a significant portion was expressed negatively, such as prohibitions (e.g., not stealing, not killing, not abusing, not driving at high speed).

Figure 2. Duties according to adolescents in the section "Some questions about rights and duties."



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study evaluated self-reported adolescent deviant behaviors and the perception of social norms regarding rights and duties. The overall findings did not appear to be dramatic. Out of 100 subjects, less than 5 reported significant concerns. This data seems explainable by the nature of the study: a comprehensive survey more easily detects normative attitudes than behaviors deviating from the norm [12].

Nevertheless, precisely for this reason, the study contributes to understanding adolescents' prevalent attitudes and beliefs, clarifying factors that may precede delinquent acts. Various authors have highlighted that adolescents' deviant response to societal norms reaches its highest point between the ages of 15 and 17 [13,14]. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that deviant youths, compared to non-deviants, exhibit more immature cognitive strategies concerning role assumption, logical cognition, and moral reasoning [15].

In the observed group, certain attitudes have emerged that may not raise objective concerns except in an educational and pedagogical context. The most prevalent behaviors involve drawing murals and illegally downloading content from the internet. The criminal justice system has yet to respond uniformly to graffiti and individuals engaged in street art. This may be because such offenses fall into a grey area between criminality and public disturbance. Grant (1996) [16] emphasizes that this could be considered an entry-level offense, potentially leading to more severe crimes such as theft and assault. The author suggests a connection between graffiti and the gang subculture, involving spheres of communication and territoriality.

Another relevant result concerns widespread alcohol consumption. While only 2% have used light drugs and 1% hard drugs, a significant 45% of adolescents report consuming alcohol from one to four times a week. However, adolescents tend to experiment with risky life situations without displaying adequate knowledge regarding the long-term damages and risks to health [17]. The early use of nicotine, alcohol, and marijuana is significantly associated with an escalation of deviant behaviors [18,19] and a higher likelihood of involvement in dangerous behaviors [20]. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that

youth who use alcohol double the incidence rates of deviant behaviors, such as handling weapons and participating in fights, compared to their abstinent peers [21]. Unfortunately, this trend appears to be influenced by genetic factors [22] and temperamental traits [23]. Preventive interventions, therefore, rely on identifying and intervening in risk factors [24].

Regarding the perception of the seriousness of deviant behaviors, many adolescents in our sample consider it "acceptable" to "run around" in the hotel until morning during a trip (n= 24), signal the presence of the police with high beams (n= 38), illegally download from the internet (n= 26), and especially shoot a thief entering the house at night (n = 20). About half (n = 51) find it not very serious to board the bus without a ticket and make anonymous phone calls. It is not surprising that the attitudes of adolescents may change during a school trip. Outside the traditional academic context and detached from parental control, away from home and school, it is understandable that young individuals perceive a different set of rules or even the absence of rules, considering it acceptable behavior. An individual's behavior during a journey seems to be significantly influenced by individual and functional congruence. Self-congruence represents the correspondence between the visitor's image and the concept of oneself as a tourist: the image of the social, real, and ideal self [25]. Plausibly, during adolescence, this self-maturity (congruence) has not yet been fully achieved, so adolescents might exhibit different behaviors simply due to being on a trip.

This seems to be confirmed by functional neuroimaging studies, which have shown that, at the neuropsychological level, brain development in adolescents cannot be considered complete. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) has revealed that adolescents exhibit lower activity in the prefrontal cortex than adults, which plays a crucial regulatory and inhibitory role against instinctual [26]. Additionally, acting in groups and seeking approval from others can contribute to disengaging personal responsibility from the action [27].

Regarding the second point, the attitudes of adolescents towards law enforcement have been studied by numerous authors and found to be related not only to other types of authority but also to the concept of self. Rigby & Rump [28] found that attitudes towards the police, teachers, the military, the law, one's parents, and parents in general among adolescents aged 13 to 17 show a moderate positive correlation. More recently, Levy [29] observed not only a correlation between these attitudes but also, predictably, more favorable attitudes towards authorities in non-delinquents compared to delinquent youths, with significant implications for the concept of self. As early as 1956, Reckless et al. [30] noted that the non-delinquent adolescent was characterized by a self-concept as a "good kid," obedient and respectful of laws, with strict values about right or wrong, conforming to the expectations of parents and teachers, and with a stable family environment. Conversely, a self-concept characterized by poor academic performance and a negative relationship with parents and school is more strongly associated with delinquent behaviors [31].

Furthermore, we have observed a widespread belief: illegally downloading from the internet is considered acceptable behavior. The issue of illegal downloads has been regulated by the Geneva Conventions in response to copyright infringement through the file-sharing of films and music. While responsibility has been established for uploaders, in terms of effectiveness, this measure has not had practical implications [32]. Similar to the issue of graffiti, illegal downloads (which involve avoiding payment for the product, violating copyright, and sharing pirate files) fall into a grey area, constituting violations of a right. The adolescents we evaluated seem not to perceive the harm, highlighting a gap in normative internalization or, in any case, an attitude of indifference/disagreement regarding the penalization of such behavior [33].

Another element emerging from the collected data is the belief that it is acceptable to "shoot a thief entering the house at night." Tripp [34] emphasizes that the instinct for revenge is determined by a sense of injustice and related cognitions (attribution of blame) and emotions (pain and anger). This aspect again reflects a widespread belief in "taking justice into one's own hands," thus challenging the relationship with authority. Authority should be internalized as the only entity capable

of intervening when wronged or a crime is committed. Still, it should be replaced by personal revenge, which is perceived as more effective. Therefore, among adolescents, there seems to be a view of revenge as just.

The last part is dedicated to exploring rights and duties, which we believe is the core of the research. Most students (54%) had difficulty listing at least three rights, and even more (64%) struggled to conceptualize three duties. Moreover, among the adolescents who responded, only about ten listed all three rights and responsibilities. We cannot ignore the methodological aspect: open-ended questions can challenge students [35]. However, some rights were attributed improperly (e.g., paying taxes), and others were listed as rights and duties: education, work, and voting. Curiously, family was identified both as a right and a duty. Most listed rights are fundamental human rights, i.e., absolute subjective rights. Adolescents were also introduced to the right to entertainment and play, part of children's rights (Art. 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN, 1989).

Regarding duties, it is interesting to note that a significant portion was expressed negatively as prohibitions (e.g., not stealing, not killing, not abusing, not driving at high speed). This difficulty in identifying rights and duties should make us reflect on the cross-cutting skills transmitted through educational models and the vicarious reinforcement of adult behavior [36-38]. Moral development is a fundamental educational and psychological element in the development of the self in adolescence [39].

Study limitations

Some methodological notes are necessary; the study has some limitations in terms of generalizability. Despite Calabria, along with Puglia, Campania, and Sicily, being considered one of the regions at higher risk of juvenile crime [40], according to the classification used by Gatti et al. [41], Cittanova falls into the category of small cities, with a population of 10,376. The second edition of the international ISRD-2 study found that certain types of crimes are more common in large cities (violent behaviors against people and property crimes). In contrast, other illicit behaviors, such as vandalism and drug use, prevail among students attending schools in smaller cities. If, in line with the results of our study, small towns have a prevalence of acts of vandalism and cyber piracy, larger cities experience a more significant influence on violent crimes, such as involvement in fights and weapon possession [41].

Furthermore, in its current state, the study has exclusively involved two high schools. Generally, high schools are chosen by students with better academic results and from families with better social conditions. In contrast, vocational schools are often attended by students who have shown poor learning abilities and come from economically disadvantaged families. The higher frequency of deviant behaviors could, therefore, be linked to both the poverty of the family and academic underachievement, a well-known significant risk factor for juvenile delinquency [42-46]. Indeed, it has been observed nationally that crimes are significantly more frequent among students in vocational schools (44.9% prevalence in the last year) and, with slightly lower percentages, among those in technical institutes (40.2%).

On the other hand, much lower percentages are found among high school students (28.2%) [41]. For these reasons, we aim to extend the study to other educational tracks to integrate the information in the literature. It should be noted that the study's originality lies in the introduction of a section dedicated to the moral evaluation of deviant behaviors and the exploration of beliefs about rights and duties. These elements can contribute to developing psychoeducational programs and interventions to prevent deviant behaviors by educating and increasing students' awareness of their rights and violations.

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