

## *Chapter IV*

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### Circumstantial Transgression by Adolescents

Circumstantial transgression refers to the situational factors which lead to criminal activity. The term ‘circumstantial transgression’ was first used in the book, *Female Crime and Delinquency in Portugal: In and Out of the Criminal Justice System*, to denote crime “... as an exceptional path because the illegality is described as occasional and accidental and because their lives do not revolve around the transgressive practice” (Gomes and Duarte 194). The criminal activity carried out during a short temporary phase is addressed as circumstantial transgression.

In most of the juvenile crime reports, the criminal activities were exercised occasionally or accidentally by, due to circumstantial reasons. Therefore, in juvenile crimes the negative effects of the environment plays a crucial role. The situation to commit crime can vary from individual to individual. The common improper surroundings are: household dysfunction, poor academic performances, peer pressure, violent social setup, delinquent friends and so on. These factors act as a risk factor and could persuade an adolescent to break the law. The objective of the chapter is to recognise the circumstantial factors which lead adolescents towards crime. Thus, the circumstantial factors which trigger a criminal behaviour in the characters of the select novels of Todd Strasser are traced through the application of Situational Action Theory (SAT).

This chapter focuses on the results of Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) and Differential Association Theory (DAT) in adolescence; criminal behaviour: persistent offenders and short term offenders; discussion on adolescence and crime; developmental approach; Situational Action Theory and its application on the select novels of Todd Strasser.

The results of adverse childhood experience and differential association theory had offered the protagonists the select novels a profound opportunity to choose crime. When they are in a critical situation, they are more prone to choose the path of crime than righteousness. These situations play a climacteric role in the characters' decision making which in succession leads them to indulge in criminal activities. Age is also an essential factor while considering the rapid decision making process.

In most of the cases, criminal behaviour is relatively uncommon in childhood. It is initiated during early adolescence or late adolescence and diminishes or disappears in their twenties. The developmental explanation of crime explores that an individual might commit crime at a developmental stage of life and desists in another developmental phase. But in some cases the criminal characteristics are sustained for a long time making them a professional criminal.

Early onset of criminal behaviour can have a long time criminal career known as persistent offenders, who begin their offending at childhood and continue their criminal activity throughout their life. Short term offenders, on the other hand, commit crime for a certain period of time at a certain phase in their life. Ernest Farrington, author of the famous *Materia Medica* states some points which he believed to be the common understanding of developmental crimes. He says, "the peak of offending is between 8 and 14," (Jennings). Additionally, an American psychologist, Terrie Moffitt in his work on, "Adolescent-limited offenders" (695) represents that the majority of adolescent offenders' delinquent behaviour is limited to a certain phase. He adds that criminal activity among adolescents is a result of two factors: social mimicry and maturity gap.

Adolescence refers to the period of human growth between childhood and adulthood. This stage comprises of physical and mental changes that occur between the ages of ten to eighteen. “In early adolescence physical, psychological, and cognitive changes occur and they are considered still financially dependent on their parents; their needs are gratified by their peers; and their expected roles, as they move from childhood to adulthood, are very murky and confusing” (Genitty 109). The changes undergone by a child during this stage have a high chance of instigating criminal behaviour.

Developmental approach is used to identify the risk factors which act as the root cause of a criminal behaviour. In general, developmental approach traces the risk factors and protective factors in a person’s life which contribute to criminal and non-criminal behaviour. The approach examines the pathway, transition and turning point of a criminal behaviour process. The pathway and the beginning of the transition process are analysed in II and III chapters respectively. This chapter focuses on the final phase of transition. The pathway to criminal behaviour is rooted in childhood where an individual is exposed to violence or is a victim of violence. The next step to criminality is the beginning of the transition process which takes place during the early adolescence where the adolescent learns certain unlawful behaviour from his or her peers. Subsequently, the adolescent’s transition process reaches the final stage when the characters choose crime as their course of action.

There are two factors which guide a person. They are risk factors and protective factors. Risk factors are the negative societal factors which contribute to a person’s misbehavior later in life. Protective factors are the things which contribute to a non-criminal behaviour.

If the risk factors are more, then the person is more prone to do criminal deeds. If the protective factors are more, then the person is less prone to do criminal deeds.

Many risk factors together contribute to a criminal act. Adolescents are influenced by different risk factors. They can either be personal or situational that impacts their actions in a certain period of life. The situational factors can arise from the past incidents in their life. But the main focus is on the social environment that induces criminal behaviour in an adolescent. “Environmental factors that contribute to juvenile crime and violence include violent and permissive families, unstable neighborhoods, and delinquent peer groups” (Elliott). If an adolescent has a tough time with unaffectionate parents they seek friends as a substitute for the lost parental love. If these peers are criminals, the adolescent might grasp delinquent behaviours from them. Later when the adolescent is faced with a difficult situation, he or she tries to put up with the criminal behaviour which was learnt earlier. However an individual’s reaction towards these situational factors plays a crucial role during the development of an adolescent’s criminal behaviour. Situational factors act as a triggering factor leading to criminal behaviours.

Situational Action Theory (SAT) was first formulated by Per-Olof Helge Wikström in 2004. He is a Professor of Ecological and Developmental Criminology at the University of Cambridge and Principal Investigator of the Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development Study. The Situational Action theory was first published as a chapter entitled “Crime as Alternative. Towards a Cross-level Situational Action Theory of Crime Causation” in the book *Beyond Empiricism: Institutions and Intentions in the Study of Crime* edited by a former Professor of Criminal Justice, Joan McCord. This book is a collection of individual essays on expanded perspectives of criminal behaviour.

The Situational Action Theory is a general theory of crime causation that addresses the interactions between individuals and their situation or environment. The result of these interactions defines whether or not an individual chooses a criminal action. SAT is the first theory to develop a connection between an individual and the environmental factor in crime causation. It is also known as “intrapersonal [individual factors] and interpersonal aspects” [situational factors]” (Miley 1). The SAT model analyzes “the person, the setting, the situation and the action” (Williams III and McShane 197). The theory’s foundation was built on various insights from numerous criminological theories and research traditions. “SAT is one of the few theories in criminology that takes the person- environment interaction seriously, making specific predictions for how the interaction between a person’s propensity and environmental exposure cause acts of crime” (Wikström, “Crime” 6).

The individual and environment interaction in the Situational action theory takes place through three components: motivation, perception and choice. The first component is motivation, which is analysed through temptation and provocation. According to Wikström, “The action process is initiated by a motivator [a temptation or provocation] which provide goal-directed attention. Motivation is a situational concept” (“Situational” 19). Motivation is a factor which causes a person to do something through willingness. It can be influenced by stimulus, desires, needs or drives. Temptation, defined by Wikström, is “a perceived option to satisfy a particular desire [need, want] in an unlawful way” (“Situational” 19) and provocation is “a perceived attack on the person’s property, security or self-respect that may instigate an unlawful response” (Wikström, “Situational” 20).

The second component is perception. According to SAT, “perceptions are how one interprets their surroundings” (Wikström, “Situational” 22). The interaction between a person and his environment leads to change in perception, which majorly deals with understanding or interpretation of matters. It can be done through observation, intuition or opinion. A change in perception will affect a person’s decisions and choices.

The third component is choice. Choices are done through “the extent to which the individual is able to make choices in accordance with a person faced with temptations or provocations” (Wikström, “Situational” 16). Temptation or provocation affects a person’s perception which makes them choose a path. This choice determines the final course of action. The choice of committing a crime depends on a demanding situation, which compels the person to commit a crime.

The core formula of Wikström’s Situational Action theory states that, the reason for an individual to commit an act of crime is identified through a person’s interaction with his environment. This interaction begins by recognising the factors that contribute to motivate a person through temptation or provocation. Then a choice is made through perception either to commit crime or not. Finally this choice results in the action, which is to commit a crime. According to SAT, crime is one of the choices available among the alternatives. But as a result crime becomes the individual’s chosen action. In the select novels of Todd Strasser, the components of Situational Action Theory - motivation, perception and choice are traced among the adolescent protagonists.

The first novel taken for analysis is *Angel Dust Blues (ADB)*. The three components of SAT are analysed through Alex’s life. Alex at a tender age yearned for love and attention from his parents but he did not receive any, so he sought it from others. Through the years,

the loss of parental love troubled him a lot so he decided to rebel; in his senior year he got into the wrong company of Michael and ended up quitting tennis.

Motivation, the first component of Situational Action Theory states that a person commits an act of crime because he was motivated through provocation or temptation. From the beginning Alex was motivated to commit crime because of his temptation to receive attention from others. His need to gain attention from his parents drove him to become a criminal. Alex from a young age was lonely because of his busy parents and their rare visits. Alex's parents were not aware of Alex's loneliness. He was, "... on the verge of flunking out of school and showing no interest in college at all, and yet his father, almost totally oblivious to his son's situation" (Strasser, *ADB* 18). Not only his father but his mother was also ignorant of her son's issues and troubles. All Alex expected from his parents was to support his decisions and spend some quality time with him. When he did not receive these he began to rebel against them. At this juncture, Alex got motivated with the dauntless attitude of Michael, a schoolmate.

A person is motivated through temptation or provocation. Temptation is the desire to satisfy one's need or want. Provocation is a deliberate action which induces anger on others. Here Alex was tempted to befriend Michael because of his bold, apathetic attitude, carefree, irresponsible and authoritative image. Alex became Michael's friend so that he can have a caring companion and also he admired Michael's life as a drug dealer. Alex wanted to experience the attention that Michael received from his fellow students by selling drugs. So he chose Michael. Alex felt, "He liked how Michael had not been afraid to drop out of school and how he openly refused to be herded along from high school to college like the rest of the kids" (Strasser, *ADB* 26-27). Alex was fascinated by Michael's



law breaking attitude. Since Alex admired Michael, Alex was tempted to follow Michael's attitude.

Perception, the second component of SAT, is defined as understanding or interpretation of matters through observation, intuition or opinion. Alex's perception was affected because of his friendship with Michael. Alex befriended Michael as a substitution for his lost parental love. He looked for a close bondage with Michael. Alex learnt to sell drugs through Michael, so that he too can be a part of Michael's world. The attention he would receive from his schoolmates became his top priority. He also enjoyed the thrill of doing something exciting. There were many incidents in the novel which show Alex's interest in drug business. One day, Michael took Alex to buy drugs from a dealer. That was the first time Alex saw a drug dealer in person. After getting a new drug named Angel Dust, Alex felt "...the nervous thrill of doing something exciting and illegal" (Strasser, *ADB* 35). Alex enjoyed the process of receiving drugs from a dealer. This gave him an outlook to continue the drug business. When Alex was given a chance to accompany a drug dealer, his perception of drug and drug dealing made him to accept it.

Choice, the third component of SAT states that choice is the act of choosing the best among two or more possibilities through temptation or provocation. Alex was given a choice to please Michael and to gain attention from his schoolmates through drugs or to live a drug free life away from Michael. But Alex chose to please Michael by helping him with his drug business. So when Michael asked Alex to sell drugs at school, Alex found it interesting and rewarding. At the same time he could be on good terms with Michael and could become a renowned figure at school. Alex wanted to gain attention from other students so he planned to sell drugs like, "Godfather" (Strasser, *ADB* 53). *The Godfather*

was a famous literary classic by Mario Puzo about an Italian Mafia family who became rich by selling drugs in America. Alex imagines his life as a drug dealer and compares it to the fictional character who is well known for his criminal activities. Alex's this imagination led him to the choice of becoming a drug dealer and had further led to the action of committing a criminal offence.

According to SAT the circumstantial factors such as motivation, temptation, perception and choice led to the final action. Alex's final action was committing a crime. Alex learned the techniques of selling drugs from Michael and he also understood the monetary benefits of selling drugs. Alex bought one kilogram of angel dust and sold them at school. After that Alex's business flourished and he sold every drug that was bought for a good price. He became good at selling drugs. He expounded his views and ideas of the business based on his experience as, "It was deceptively easy to sell a few joints of grass, and from there it wasn't much harder to sell a nickel bag or an ounce or even a pound" (Strasser, *ADB* 11). Through these lines Alex explains the trouble-free life of an illicit drug dealing business.

The attention and admiration Alex received from school was huge that he said, "People like to be seen walking with him in the halls, he was invited to just about every party and activity where drugs were consumed. In short, he was the primo dealer at Deepbrook High" (Strasser, *ADB* 53). "He was beginning to get a new kick from the grass-status" (Strasser, *ADB* 53). Alex enjoyed his status as a drug dealer. He was well received by his schoolmates as a drug dealer so he was invited to parties to give away drugs. Alex was tempted by Michael's lifestyle and made a choice to follow it. Through

selling drugs he gave in to temptation. So Alex chose to sell drugs for Michael and eventually into the thrill of making money.

As a consequence of his action, within a few months of his business Alex was arrested and taken to jail for selling drugs. He understood the difference between selling and consuming drugs. Alex realised that rather than consuming drugs like other kids he crossed the line by selling those drugs. In the police station Alex was charged with possession and selling of controlled substances to minors. Alex was taken to court where he was asked to pay two thousand dollars as bail money and was released. He understood the harmful effects of drug usage.

Alex's crime was possession and distribution of drugs to underage students. Possession, use or distribution of drugs is banned according to the American federal law. Drug distribution is a felony and it is considered a more serious crime than a drug possession. The sentence can vary from three to five years. Also under federal law distribution of drugs for a person under the age group of twenty one is punishable by doubling the regular sentence. Distribution of drugs to people under the age of twenty one violates the section 418 of Act 21 U.S. code section 859. The punishment for breaking this law is thrice the authorised punishment of section 841b. According to section 841b when a person has a detectable amount of 100 grams to 1 kilogram of phencyclidine (angel dust) with them they will be sentenced a term of imprisonment for 10 years or a lifetime or levied a fine of \$10,000,000. Alex was also fined and asked to do community service and to further attend college. Since he was a minor he was exempted from serious punishments.

As SAT states, the situation that prompted Alex into dealing was a troubled childhood and wrong peer influence. Alex thinks that people would blame the drugs

and not “... the circumstance that prompted kids like Michael, and even himself, to take them” (Strasser, *ADB* 203). Alex was motivated by his friendship with Michael and was tempted to choose drugs as a rebellious means to gain attention from his peers. Alex’s perception of drugs and its benefits made him act in haste and choose drug dealing as his course of action. This was an indirect rebellious message to his parents to prove that he needed their attention. Finally he ended up as a criminal at the age of seventeen and resented for his criminal activities at prison.

The drug dealer as a protagonist kept repeating in Strasser’s works like *Angel Dust Blues*, *Summer of ’69*, *Boot Camp* and *The Accident*. *Summer of ’69* (2019) was Strasser’s semi-autobiographical work about his summer in 1969. The protagonist’s name was Lucas and he was an eighteen year old boy. The novel comprises the author’s life as a constant drug user and his fear about his future. Lucas’s life as a drug addict with divorced parents at a young age was a similar theme as witnessed in *Angel Dust Blues*.

In the novel, *The Accident* (1988) Strasser talks about Chris who was a high school student and a drug dealer. The story focuses on a fatal accident which killed Chris’ friend and Chris became a suspect because of his connectivity with drugs. Another novel by Strasser named, *Boot Camp* (2006) was known for its depiction on American Boot camps. It talks about Garrett, a smart kid who ends up as a drug addict at the age of fifteen. So his parents sent him to Boot camp. The characters get easy access to drugs in the school campus which is similar to Strasser’s *Angel Dust Blues*.

The second novel taken for the analysis is *Give a Boy a Gun* (*GBG*). The novel represents a broad view of bullying and school shootings that had happened in America and across the world. The protagonists Brendan and Gary are victims of bullying in the school

environment. The novel is a recreation of the fictional description of the school shooting incident. It is influenced by the 'Columbine High School Shooting' which shook America. This incident is still influencing many youngsters to follow the same path. Through this story Strasser traces the situational factors that could be the root cause of many school shooting incidents.

Gary and Brendan knew each other for a year. In a very short time they got close and began spending most of their time together apart from school hours. They faced a similar hassle in school. They became closer than ever because of the bullies made by their schoolmates. Gary and Brandon had a hard time at school because of bullying. They tried not to be bothered by it for years but when they were embarrassed and hit in front of many students, they decided to avenge the bullies. Together they plotted to steal some guns, ammunition and make bombs to kill them. There were many similar situations of bullying which contributed to their actions.

Motivation is the first component of the Situational Action Theory. A person could be motivated through provocation or temptation. In this novel, Gary and Brendan were provoked. The circumstance which motivated Gary to commit crime was the ill-treatment which he received from the bullies as he was studious and stout. He was abused and mocked for his interests in academic subjects and called names such as "faggot" (Strasser, *GBG* 22) and "loser" (Strasser, *GBG* 77). Gary was disturbed by these comments. Gary was one of the smartest kids in his school and received many awards for his knowledge. At the same time, when he repeatedly heard kids calling him an idiot, Gary unconsciously got affected by it. Allison, Gary's girlfriend, said, "The rest of the school said he [Gary] was a loser" (Strasser, *GBG* 36). There were many times when Gary playfully said that

he was a loser just like the jocks have stated him to be, during those times Allison would deny it but she felt “ ... it was like he couldn't hear me” (Strasser, *GBG* 36). Since Gary was different from others he was called a loser. Gary started believing that he was a loser and had reached a point where he accepted it to be true. The continued verbal and physical abuse he received everyday had led him to accept it as a part of his life until Brendan came into his life.

Gary was provoked by the comments he received from the bullies about his physical appearance. While growing up Gary was disturbed by the body shaming comments which he received at school. He was mentally struggling with it for a long time and no one knew his troubled situation. He did not open up about his problems to his mother so she sent him to a psychiatrist but Gary did not reveal his problems to the psychiatrist either. During his ninth grade Gary became increasingly frustrated by the behaviours of his school bullies. So when Brendan suggested that they should avenge these bullies for the pain they had inflicted on them, he easily agreed to it.

Brendan on the other hand was always addressed as an angry kid at school. He was ready to fight with others at anytime because of this. He gave a hard time to his parents. Brendan was provoked every day at school and the school counselor had noticed it many times. One day the school counselor was talking to Brendan in the hallway and Sam Flach gave Brendan a nudge while walking past him. Brendan became furious and was irritated. So the counsellor suggested him not to take it seriously but Brendan was hurt by her words and responded: “it's not ‘just’ a little push, not when it happens every day.” The counsellor understood the meaning behind his pain. Brendan experienced small act of nudge repeatedly every day, without his consent. According to Brendan it was a

constant and unrelenting torment without his consent. The counsellor gave an analogy for this situation: “A little bit of salt doesn’t bother your skin. But the same small amount in an open wound can really, really sting” (Strasser, *GBG* 51). When some expression or an activity happens every day to provoke him, it becomes a problem. In the same way Brendan was constantly hit and it provoked his anger which he directly expressed at many places. Once the school counselor asked if Brendan had trouble with anything or anyone, he responded with a lie saying “No ma’am, I don’t have a problem with anyone”. But the counselor witnessed a change in his facial expression and she added, “But you could see the pain and anger in his eyes” (Strasser, *GBG* 38).

Brendan and Gray were provoked mainly by two incidents. The first one was when Brendan attended Dustin’s party where Brendan was ruthlessly punched by Sam. Ryan, Gary and Brendan’s close friend witnessed this incident and explained it as, “Have you ever heard the sound of a fist on bone? It would make you sick. One thing I know for certain, Sam was definitely going for Brendan’s face” (Strasser, *GBG* 115). He said that Brendan was hit in the face so hard that he could even hear the punches hitting the bones in Brendan’s face. This incident was an illustration of the cruel treatment the teenagers received from bullies outside the school environment. As Gray and Brendan were undergoing a similar experience, Gary, empathised Brendan. Since Gary and Brendan were close, the terrible incident at the party affected Gary as well. Allison spoke to Gary after this incident and Gary was so angry that he wished all the people who witnessed without protesting while Sam beat Brendan, to die. In Allison’s statement she told that,

Gary was really down.... We were talking on the phone about what happened to Brendan at the party and how the jocks just stood around and didn't stop Sam. Gary said he wished they'd all die. I said "Not really, right?" He said he really, really did want them to die slow, painful, miserable deaths. I said, "While you live to be a hundred?" He said he really didn't care. He was past the point of caring. He just wanted them to die. (Strasser, *GBG* 17)

Gary's sudden burst of anger was a reflection of the suppressed emotions he had against the bullies for many years. Gary was provoked by this incident that he openly wished for them to die. After this Brendan and Gary felt that they cannot be happy either at school or outside the campus. This hopeless situation made them feel helpless.

The second incident which provoked Brendan was when his school bullies held him by the ankles and dunked his head in the toilet till he screamed and cried. Everyone at school got to know about this incident. Brendan was hurt and embarrassed. So his friends suggested him to complain to the teachers but he refused because he feared the bullies. He felt helpless and frustrated because he could not share his problems with anyone except Gary, who was also angry with the bullies after hearing this incident. In anger Brendan brought a gun and showed it to Gary and Allison, they asked Brendan about the purpose of the gun he replied that "...he was going to blow away some kids at school" (Strasser, *GBG* 73). Allison had also noticed that, "Brendan was changing. Definitely getting darker and angrier" (Strasser, *GBG* 72). Thus these two incidents were the main situational factors which provoked Gary and Brendan to plot against the bullies.

Perception, the second component of SAT states that a person's perception defines his or her choice for the final course of action. There are three factors of perception



which led Gary to kill the bullies. Firstly, at a young age due to Gary's parents' divorce he started showing symptoms of depression. As a result he felt an overwhelming sorrow confining him all the time. Gary's perception of life relied solely on his familial situation and the bullying he experienced. Substantially, Gary strongly believed that life was an accident. As Allison states his views as, "...to Gary it [life] was always hopeless and meaningless" (Strasser, *GBG* 36). The despair in his situation later developed to suicidal thoughts. As Ryan puts forth, "Gary might have been thinking about killing himself" (Strasser, *GBG* 119-120). Even his close friends had a doubt that Gary might have suicidal tendencies. Since Gary showed disinterestedness in living, it was easy for him to plot to kill the people who made his life miserable and finally to kill himself.

Secondly, Gary and Brendan's interest in playing violent video games made them more violent and unempathetic. "Past quantitative research shows that exposure to fictitious media violence through video games can desensitize the player's emotions to real-world tragedies" (Kneifer 1). Therefore the exposure to violent video games has the ability to demobilize a person's emotions. Likewise the characters -- Gary and Brendan became more and more unempathetic towards the suffering of others due to too much exposure to violent contents of the video games. They considered reality as a video game with guns and bombs. Finally they visualized killing their enemies in real life as killing the enemies in the video games.

Thirdly, Brendan and Gary had wrong role models for themselves which also influenced their perception. They admired Harris and Klebold, the murderers of thirteen fellow classmates of Columbine High School. Harris and Klebold killed their classmates because they were bullied and finally they killed themselves. This incident gave Gary and

Brendan the idea that they too can kill their bullies and finally can kill themselves. After the incident in the toilet Brendan emailed to Gary stating that, "*I will kill every friggin' one of them. It's gonna be Columbine all over again, only better. Harris and Klebold did it right*" (Strasser, *GBG* 71). Then together they planned to "*Blow the friggin' school, then blow yourself away*" (Strasser, *GBG* 71). Harris and Klebold negatively influenced Gray and Brendan's perception of killing. Thus these three factors changed Gary's perspective on death.

Choice, the third component of SAT states that a person's choice changes the final action. Apart from bullying Brendan reached a breaking point when his application was rejected by the military school. Military school was Brendan's last hope. Military schools are known for the strict disciplined teaching and most teenagers dislike it because of the rigorous mental and physical training imposed on the students. Brendan chooses such a school to save himself from his distorted condition. Brendan believed that moving to a rigid environment like a military school could rescue him from his angry and revengeful dark side. Emily realised that military school might have been Brendan's last hope to have a normal life. When Brendan failed to get admission in the school he felt that the last string of hope was lost and as a corollary he was placed in a hopeless situation. Emily states this situation as:

But I think somewhere inside he knew he was headed for big trouble, and he must have believed that military school might be the way to save himself. And if I'm right, then he was rejected, it was like he lost his last lifeline. Being rejected meant two more years of living hell at Middletown High. I think he knew he'd

never survive it. I think maybe that was the last straw. He lost hope.

(Strasser, *GBG* 118-19)

After the rejection from the military school Brendan decided to proceed with the school shooting plan which he plotted with Gary. So he questioned Emily if she would be attending the school dance but she assured him that she would not. Brendan wanted to make sure that his close friend Emily would not be a victim of their mass murder plan, which they planned to execute on school dance.

Ryan had been Gary's friend for many years so he was aware of Gary's interests and hobbies. He explains that Gary was interested in building robots and computers. This interest made him build a bomb with the help of a dark website. Gary bought all the required materials from the hardware store and fireworks stand and built a bomb. He cleverly tested the bomb in a deserted forest region and analysed the blast pattern to make sure that he had built the bomb right. After the testing, on their way back home in the car Brendan and Gary were discussing the list of people they would like to blow up with those bombs. While Ryan listened to this he felt, "And it's a pretty good-size list. The only thing is they really meant it" (Strasser, *GBG* 109). Ryan was not aware of the seriousness behind their words, rather he thought it was one of Gary's fun experiments. But only later he realised the true intentions of Gary and Brendan. This shows that Gary had made his choice to bomb the school along with other students as well. All these situational factors led to the moment of decision where Gary and Brendan had to decide whether they wanted to proceed with the plan or to drop it. Both Gary and Brendan chose to kill the students during the school dance with bombs and guns.

The final action Brendan and Gary chose was to kill everyone at the school dance for all the unfair things which were done to them. They made a cruel choice because they did not want to go through the bullying again in their school life. Gary and Brendan were ready to avenge them and make them feel the pain they felt for years and to finally kill everyone including themselves. So they bought guns and fixed bombs at all the exit doors in the dance hall. They began to shoot at the ceiling and took hostage of students inside including the teachers. They shot the Principal and a bully named Sam. Hence they harmed civilians and broke many laws of the government. As Ms. Bender puts forward, Gary and Brendan's actions would result in serious trouble from the police. She says, *"They're armed. They're shooting. They've already wounded people. They've taken hostages. They've broken all these laws already. Real laws...If they walk out of here alive, they are going to go to jail for a long time"* (Strasser, *GBG* 147). Thus Gary and Brendan became criminals at the age of fifteen.

According to 18 U.S. Code section 922, "It shall be unlawful for any person who is a juvenile to knowingly possess— (A) a handgun; or (B) ammunition that is suitable for use only in a handgun" ("18 U.S."). Anyone less than eighteen years of age is not allowed to possess any form of firearm in America. Discharge of firearms on a person in a building is charged with first degree attempted murder. It is considered as a serious crime which could lead any juvenile case to be charged like an adult case. This applies to a teenager bringing firearms to school and threatening or using it on others. Such perpetrators will be charged with five to ten years according to their crime.

Bringing destructive devices to a public place such as schools, parks or religious places are charged with fines. Destructive devices are bombs, grenades, explosives and

poisonous gas. Brendan and Gary carried semi-automatic rifles to school and fired them on people; they also bought bombs and fixed them to the doors of the school with the intention of blasting the whole building and killing everyone inside. Brendan and Gary had broken many laws by bringing bombs and guns, firing guns, threatening others, taking hostages, attempting murder, shooting people and causing serious injuries. Thus these delinquent acts labeled them as criminals.

There were two incidents, which motivated Brendan and Gary to pull the trigger. Firstly they were victims of bullying and the bullying went to the extremity of dunking Brendan's head in the school toilet for fun. Secondly they were called names for their appearances and were beaten in public for no reason. The painful bullying continued every day sometimes even in the presence of the negligent teachers, this provoked them to anger. Their perceptions were affected by other school shooting incidents and violent video games. These made them less empathetic. The final breaking point happened when Brendan and Gary felt helpless since Brendan was rejected by the military school he applied to and Gary started undergoing suicidal tendencies. All these incidents led them to the final course of action which is to kill their bullies and the rest of the students along with them.

Throughout the novel, "Strasser explores common social problems facing adolescents, including the difficulties of moving to a new school, the sense of inferiority if one does not play sports, and a lack of understanding and empathy often found among students—all of which can create a sense of fear and alienation" (Meyers). The sense of fear and alienation has led Gary and Brendan to come to terms with the darker side of them and finally reach a breaking point where they stopped caring about others.

The novel is about students' mistreatments and its effects on the mental health of the victims. In recent times violence in the school environment has become an inevitable phenomenon. According to Strasser: "It is a story of heartbreak and fear and regret" (Strasser, *GBG* 10). Strasser talks about violence in the school environment and states that, "Violence comes in many forms – guns, fists, and words of hate and contempt." (Strasser, *GBG* 10). Throughout the story the author questions the gun control system, family influence, societal judgments and the unrecognized negative interaction habits at school. He says, "Every year you hear about kids walking into their school and shooting classmates and teachers...It's a message, and the sooner we wake up and listen, the better" (Strasser, *GBG* 121-122).

School shootings refer to the violent attacks on students and teachers that involve firearms and occur in the school campus. It has become a common phenomenon in the recent two decades and it is still expanding. There are more school shootings that have occurred in the United States than all the other countries combined. Compared to other countries America has more access to guns which resulted in higher cases of school shootings. The main reason behind these shootings is due to peer rejection or social rejection which is often done by bullying and marginalization. School shootings can be avoided if the child feels safe in a positive school environment. This could be only provided by teachers and peers through care and respect for each other.

Strasser in his other novels such as *The Wave* (1981) and *Wish You Were Dead* (2009) followed a similar theme of bullying. *The Wave* focuses on the experiment conducted by a teacher on Nazi ideas and its impact on students. The theme of bullying was evident when the followers of the wave started to bully other kids who do not follow the wave.

In the next novel *Wish You Were Dead*, three popular high school students disappear and at that time an online blog surfaces with wishing those dead. Later the protagonist expresses the reason for wishing them to die. It is mainly because of the physical and mental bullying she received from them. Thus the theme of bullying is seen in these two novels of Strasser which is similar to the novel *Give a Boy a Gun*. It also reiterates the fact that bullying is a serious issue that is to be addressed and an awareness is to be created on it among school students.

The third novel taken for the analysis is *Can't Get There from Here (CGTH)*. In this novel Todd Strasser projects the life of a group of homeless teenagers living on the streets of New York. These characters live on the roadsides and road side valleys with the fear of cold and psychopaths. The novel was commended as “A powerful and disturbing look at the downward spiral of despair that remains too common for too many teens” (Shoemaker). Their miserable life makes them choose illegal paths for survival. The circumstances become the cause of their crime, mainly due to unemployment and poverty-stricken conditions. Through criminal acts they choose the easiest means of survival. The situational factors that Maybe faced were the cruel weather, insecure environment, hopeless condition, exposure to illicit drugs, alcohol and hunger.

Motivation, the first component of Situational Action Theory states that the characters are motivated towards crime through provocation or temptation. Maybe was tempted to consume alcohol because of the bleak weather of New York which was harsh during winter. One of the members of the tribe named Country Club dies and when Maybe and others enquire about his death to the police officer, the officer responds as, “Exposure to cold, drugs, drink, disease and hunger” (Strasser, *CGTH* 17). This was the proof that

exposure to extreme cold also could kill a person. In New York every year around fifteen people die because of the cold weather. This was the actual condition of the city and these adolescents had a tough life in the cold streets of New York. Many times because of the harsh weather Maybe's friends recommended her to consume alcohol so that her body temperature will rise and she will be warm. Maybe was also tempted by the idea.

Perception, the second component of SAT states that perception is the aspect a situation is looked upon. This perception induces the interaction between the person and the environment. Maybe's perception is affected by two things: the unsafe environment and the poverty stricken condition. The tribe members experience unsafe environmental conditions throughout the novel. Maybe and her tribe members fear the dark at night so they sit outside a shop named Delly, which was open twenty-four hours and had light all night. Maybe even expresses her fear of staying in the dark or sleeping at night because they might be attacked or killed by psychopaths. They heard many stories about street people getting killed at night by lunatics. So they stay up all night outside in the light of the shop.

The struggles of surviving on the vulnerable street were evident through the author's description of the weather and the characters' thoughts. The unsafe condition makes Maybe nostalgic about her past life with her mother. Maybe contemplated on the comforts she had when she was with her mother. She says "I didn't remember having stomach-aches when I was with my mom" (Strasser, *CGTH* 43). Even though life with her mother was brutal, she felt safe living in a home with food to eat. Maybe and her friends were disrespected and looked with contempt on the street. Maybe says, "when street people cried, their tears were filmy with grim" (Strasser, *CGTH* 9). Even the tears of street



people are easily disregarded as depressing and unimportant. The plight and discomforts the character experiences are explained here.

Maybe's perception depended on the external situation as she described it as: "Maggot always said living on the street was a choice. But it wasn't. It was when you ran out of choices" (Strasser, *CGTH* 165). Maybe felt there was no choice but despair that made these kids think they had a choice. At the end Maybe understood that they were in a helpless situation.

Maybe soon realises that she had no one to care for her or her tribe members. She felt everyone was just trying to be alive and this thought made her feel bad. Maybe says,

It was a pain from inside. The pain of this cold, hunger, dirty life where nobody cared whether you lived or died. Where you were not even a name. Not even a number. Just some flesh clinging to some bones. Waiting to eat or not eat. To sleep or not sleep. To live or not live. (Strasser, *CGTH* 105)

The despair in Maybe's words is expressed after witnessing the critical condition of her friend. So she concluded that, "Nobody survived on the street for long" (Strasser, *CGTH* 165). She understood the thin chance that she had for survival when she lost her close friends. The fear of getting sick and old on the street was haunting Maybe.

During this situation Rainbow recommended Maybe to try ginger ale for stomach pain. Maybe's friends were a delinquent influence on her since they had no food or shelter they followed illicit methods to earn money. The unsafe environment and hopeless situation made Maybe accept alcohol consumption as a normal means for survival. Thus the fear and helplessness of the tribe members changed Maybe's perspective towards alcohol consumption leading to choose alcohol as a solution for her miserable life.

Choice, the third component of SAT, defines that Maybe's choices depended on her friends with whom she spent most of her time. Her friends whom she addressed as her family are prostitutes, drug dealers, sufferers of HIV, OCD and suicidal thoughts. Each character either lives a miserable life or dies in a short span. Through the harmful impact of friends, Maybe's innocent opinions are corrupted.

Destitution also plays a role while making a choice. The author explains the starvation of the characters through their undernourished physical features. Once Maybe compares her bony body to "a picture of a starving African child you'd see in a magazine" (Strasser, *CGTH* 55). She also expresses her hunger by saying "My stomach hurt bad" (Strasser, *CGTH* 48). So whenever Maybe gets a stomach ache because of hunger she buys some medicine for stomach ache and eats it rather than having a meal because food is unaffordable and expensive compared to the tablet. These situations lead Maybe to choose either to follow a criminal path or to lead a normal life.

The final action takes place through Maybe's choice of crime as a solution to her problem. Once Maybe was hungry and her friend Rainbow offered her ginger ale as a substitute for food Maybe too was starving. So she drank it. Later she said "The ginger ale worked for a little while, but then my stomach started to hurt again" (Strasser, *CGTH* 44). Maybe's perception of right and wrong was blurred when she was offered alcohol in groaning starvation. Maybe's circumstances such as her tough living condition, harsh weather, helplessness and hunger had exposed her to alcohol. Maybe was made to drink alcohol as an alternative for food. Since the cold weather was intense she believed that alcohol could keep her warm for a short period. Thus Maybe consumed alcohol as a substitute for food at the age of fourteen.

As SAT states, the circumstantial factors behind Maybe and her friends' unlawful acts were due to poverty and hunger, which made them to choose an unlawful life. However the bleak weather, unsafe environment, hopelessness and hunger had also made Maybe to believe that alcohol consumption is the only method for survival on the streets. Thus these situational factors made Maybe to choose the final course of action which is to follow an illegal method for survival.

Maybe consumed alcohol at the age of fourteen which is against the law. According to the U.S. law, consumption of alcohol before the age of twenty-one is prohibited. The National Minimum Drinking Age Act was passed in 1984. In accordance with this any minor who purchases or consumes alcohol may be charged with criminal offenses. The act falls under 23 U.S. Code section 158. If they are convicted, they may face jail sentences or fines or diversion programmes such as counselling and community services. Maybe escaped jail sentence because she hid herself from the police. Thus Maybe is a criminal of underage alcohol consumption.

The characters of the novel, *Can't Get There from Here* are exposed to many illegal habits and misdemeanors at a young age. These kids chose the unsafe street life and suffer through hunger and cold because their home does not feel safe anymore. The characters in the novel sought crime as a solution for their situational problem. The plight and discomforts the adolescents experience in the novel at a young age without the proper guidance of an adult was vividly portrayed by Strasser.

Strasser also in his other novel, *No Place* brings a similar homeless situation of a teenager. Dan, being a middle class family was forced to move to tents by the government. The struggle Dan faces to adjust to his new life was highlighted in the novel. Similarly

the teenagers in *Can't Get There from Here* and Dan are the victims of circumstances which led them to live on the street.

The fourth novel taken for analysis is *If I Grow Up (IIGU)*. It deals with youngsters growing up in the inner-city projects. DeShawn, the protagonist was reluctantly forced into the gang world by circumstances. DeShawn's family lived in a poor condition in the projects, but still they managed to survive with his grandmother's income. When DeShawn's sister, Nia gave birth to twins, his grandmother had to stay home to take care of the kids. They had no other source of income. This changed DeShawn's life.

Motivation, the first component of Situational Action Theory states that a person is motivated through temptation or provocation. DeShawn in the novel was provoked and tempted by his need for money. He was motivated by poverty which was rooted in his identity as an African American. The majority of immigrants in the US are African Americans. In the novel *IIGU*, the author places his characters in the inner city of Chicago, where majority of African American immigrants lived. Most of the African American people in America are deprived of their rights and are ill-treated because of their poor living conditions. Strasser while writing this novel wanted to identify the role of racism in adolescent crimes. Hence he placed the protagonist of the novel in the inner city of Chicago and narrated his character's experience as a discriminated adolescent.

DeShawn as an African American questions his future because of his poor living conditions and poverty. Apart from poverty DeShawn felt that his problems were elevated because of the discrimination of African American people in America. In the novel, even though the government had stated that they had taken many initiatives to enhance the lives of inner city Projects, these initiatives never reached the Projects in reality. Many

youngsters living in the Projects at the age of twelve had quit school and joined the drug dealing gangs because of poverty. This was one of the underlying reasons behind DeShawn joining the gang as well.

DeShawn was provoked to commit crime because of his poverty-stricken condition. Poverty was the root cause of crime among many slum-dwellers. Many data suggest that the high rates of crimes appear more intense in areas of low income. This is proved in the novel *IIGU*, where the characters are faced with low income or unemployment. It was evident in DeShawn's family. After DeShawn's grandmother quit her work to take care of his sister's babies, his family did not have any source of income. They did not have money to feed themselves or the babies. At times due to lack of food they were forced to give sugar water instead of milk for the babies. Once DeShawn witnessed his sister eating baby formula in secrecy as she was starving. At that moment he noticed that his sister looked thinner and bonier than before. DeShawn felt frustrated and helpless in that situation. This incident of lack of food, made DeShawn choose crime as a solution.

DeShawn decides on stealing money from anyone passing by the street. He tells himself, "Go down to Abernathy a few blocks and wait by the intersection for the right car- one driven by some older white woman with a pocketbook on the seat beside her. Pretend I was crossing with the light and strike fast. Smash the window, grab her bag, and run" (Strasser, *IIGU* 145). When he began convincing himself to steal, his conscience was disturbed. So he further told himself that, "It was a step down to a place I'd tried all my life not to go. But Gramma was sick the babies needed food, and we were all hungry" (Strasser, *IIGU* 145). "Nia's welfare checks ain't started yet, we're already behind on the rent and cable" (Strasser, *IIGU* 143). Hence when the helplessness of DeShawn's family struggled and starved, he was provoked to commit a crime.

DeShawn was not only provoked because of poverty but was also tempted by the wealth amassed by Terrell, a drug dealer friend. Terrell made money effortlessly by selling drugs and lived a comfortable life while DeShawn's family could not fulfill the basic needs. DeShawn was tempted to earn money like Terrell to support his family. On his way out to steal, DeShawn saw Terrell wearing new clothes and "He was listening to an iPod, and on his wrist was a gold-plated watch with a thick gold band. I'd never seen him so tricked out" (Strasser, *IIGU* 145-46). DeShawn understood that Terrell made good money from drug dealing so he asked him for some money but Terrell offered him food in return. When DeShawn asked Terrell about the source for the money, the new clothes and accessories, Terrell confessed that he got the money through selling drugs. This made DeShawn wonder if he too could make money and support his family like Terrell. So DeShawn was tempted to join the gang for money. Thus DeShawn did not pursue his plan to steal rather he was tempted to deal with drugs for minting money.

Perception, the second component of SAT highlights the reasons that affected DeShawn's perception. His perception was majorly affected by the environmental factors. Since poverty had already taken a toll on him, he was further influenced by delinquent role models who nudged DeShawn to change his perception on survival. Firstly, in the novel in many places Terrell questioned the importance of education and its irrelevance to their situation. This had an impact on DeShawn's perception on education in the later part of the novel. At fifteen he felt that education does not help him with the practical problems which he experienced at the Projects. As DeShawn expressed: "More and more I couldn't connect the things they were teaching us with life as I knew it...all I saw around me was unemployment, drugs, and death?" (Strasser, *IIGU* 141). Thus DeShawn's

anguish and uncertainty of his future in education transformed his notion that education would not uplift his life. DeShawn's perception on education has changed in due course with delinquent influences.

Secondly, DeShawn's perception was affected by Marcus, a drug dealing group's gang leader. DeShawn always admired Marcus. Many times Marcus approached DeShawn with the intention of making him to join his gang. As Marcus was the leader of the Douglas Gang he was able to identify DeShawn's potential. So to persuade DeShawn into joining his gang he offered a good deal of money. Marcus also began dropping hints about the poor living conditions of DeShawn and he offered DeShawn a good job, if he joined the Douglas Gang. He also added that he would not be selling drugs outside like his friend Terrell but given a good post where brain work was required. Marcus also adds to DeShawn that "You'd be good for other things. Things that pay a lot better" (Strasser, *IIGU* 99). DeShawn contemplated on Marcus' offer: "I tried to hide my surprise that he was so eager for me to join the Disciples" (Strasser, *IIGU* 99). DeShawn's belief that education could save him from gang life was affected by Terrell and Marcus. Both Terrell and Marcus persuaded DeShawn to consider gang life. All these things affected DeShawn's perception.

Choice, the third component of SAT explains the choices given to the characters which made them commit crime. DeShawn met Terrell and had food from him. They met their friend, Lightbulb who worked hard at his part time job. They witnessed Lightbulb being scolded by the shop manager for no reason at his workplace. After witnessing this incident, Terrell asked DeShawn's plans after graduation, which was either to, "Get yourself a job working in some factory? Or driving a truck? With guys like Marcus making more in a day that you make in a month?" (Strasser, *IIGU* 141). This question made DeShawn

wonder if he wanted to work like Lightbulb and go through all the embarrassment throughout his life or to live a carefree life by earning money like Terrell. Lightbulb struggled with discrimination and poverty. Even though he had basic education he did not have much hope of getting a reputable job because of the colour of his skin. This incident made DeShawn choose between the life of Lightbulb and Terrell.

DeShawn thought that, even if he studied well and entered a good school it would be of no use if he couldnot take care of his family when they needed him the most. With occupied thoughts DeShawn headed upstairs to Marcus's apartment, "As I climbed, I thought about Lightbulb being yelled at in King Chicken" (Strasser, *IIGU* 151). He thought about both the life of Lightbulb and Terrell. DeShawn was tired of the poverty that consumed his family. When he realised that the only way out is either to work at a place like King Chicken like Lightbulb or to join the gang like Terrell and make good money in a short span. He admits: "I was sick of not having money and being hungry at the end of each month. I was sick of being alone in the world and being the man of the house with an ailing gramma and a widowed sister with two babies" (Strasser, *IIGU* 152). Many families in the project go through the similar situation as DeShawn's because they were not provided with a proper living condition by the government. Thus they never had a chance to break free from poverty. So DeShawn believed that he was left with no choice because the government, teachers, reporters and politicians did not help them. As he states:

The people who sat around tables on TV, wearing suits and talking cracker English, might say there was a choice.

The teacher who came for a year and then disappeared forever might want to think there was a choice.



The politicians looking for excuses to get on TV might want people to believe they were going to give folks like us a choice.

But everyone knew the truth: There was no choice.

Not when the only world you knew was the projects. (Strasser, *IIGU* 151-52)

This made DeShawn to pursue a gang life which he believed to be the only choice he had. So DeShawn followed Terrell to become a drug dealer. Thus the crucial lifestyle he lived and the desperate need for money made him choose the path he resented all his life. As he states: “When you grew up in the projects there were no choices. Not good ones, at least” (Strasser, *IIGU* 136). The practicality of DeShawn’s problem was not addressed by the government or by others around him so he felt helpless. In that helpless situation he decided to join the gang.

After joining the gang DeShawn became the brain of Marcus and made most of the drug dealing related decisions. When Jamar, one of the Douglas gang members killed Marcus, DeShawn became the gang leader. As a leader he started behaving like Marcus. Finally to avenge the death of Marcus, he killed Rance and ended up in prison. DeShawn was given a life time imprisonment for the murder. In DeShawn’s final action he commits crime by selling drugs and murdering people.

DeShawn grew up in the Projects, hearing gunshots every day, seeing dead people, living in hunger, witnessing consumption of underage alcohol and drugs, delinquent peers and negative role models. These circumstantial factors made DeShawn to join the gang as a means to support his family. Later DeShawn becomes the gang leader at the age of fifteen and fathered a child. His business flourished and he distributed drugs and carried illegal weapons. At the age of seventeen he gets to know that Rance was the one

who killed Marcus and soon he plotted against Rance and killed him. At the age of eighteen he was imprisoned for life time for committing the crime of murder.

DeShawn had violated many laws of the U.S. government. Firstly, he consumed alcohol at the age of fourteen which violates 23 U.S. Code section 158. Secondly, he sold drugs to minors and all age groups which is against the section 418 of Act 21 U.S. code section 859. Thirdly, he killed a person which is a first degree murder – manslaughter out of revenge. In 18 U.S. Code section 1112 if someone is murdered then they are sent to prison for fifteen years with a fine. Since DeShawn has committed many criminal acts he was given a life sentence in prison.

Poverty is the reason behind many crimes. The poor living condition of DeShawn's family was the situational factor which prompted him to choose crime. Even in the beginning of the novel he was clear that gang life was not his interest and he disapproved it when his close friend chose to join the gang. But later in his adolescence he joined the gang, when his family was in a crucial need for food. He had no other means to earn money fast and the influence of crime in his life was immense that his first instinct to gain money was through crime.

The Situational Action Theory states that the character was motivated which changes his perception that leads him to choose a final course of action. Firstly, the factors that contributed to DeShawn's decision to become a drug dealer was his need to provide for his family. This motivated DeShawn into provocation and temptation. Secondly, DeShawn's perception and outlook on the world was changed through the influence of his delinquent neighbourhood. Terrell made DeShawn believe that gang life is the only choice which could benefit him in a short span of time. Michael was another factor who persuaded

DeShawn into joining the gang. Since DeShawn grew up without a father, he looks up to Marcus as a fatherly figure and this had an impact on his decision to join the gang. Finally he chose gang life because of the need to earn. Even though DeShawn was aware of the destructive and detrimental nature of his decision he still chose it to save his family from poverty.

Strasser in his preface to the novel identifies the problems experienced in the society as, "...when faced with hopelessness, racism, and inescapable poverty, young inner-city men are likely to join gangs" (Strasser *GBG* preface). In the novel the author addresses the practical motives for crime such as poverty and unemployment that is still prevailing in America. At the face of poverty DeShawn's needs became more significant than values so he chose crime.

Similarly, in Strasser's *Mob Princess* series he talks about a mob family and their life after their father's death. The *Mob Princess* series is a collection of three books focusing on Kate Blessing, a teenager who acts as the brain behind all the mob operations. The character Kate is similar to DeShawn because both these characters played the role of a mastermind behind a drug dealing conspiracy. Strasser brings a similar reference to drug dealing business in both *IIGU* and *Mob Princess* series.

The fifth novel taken for analysis is *Famous*. In the novel Jamie, the protagonist was obsessed with popularity. In recent times many adolescents are obsessed with becoming popular. Dennis Prager, a radio talk show host and writer, in his book *Think a Second Time* said, "People can become addicted to fame, money, and attention as deeply as they become addicted to drugs" (38). His analogy of addiction to fame which is similar to an addiction to drugs, is a representation that fame could consume a person into its vortex of

attention. The regard for popularity as a significant part of life had led many to selfish and materialistic living. Fame does not tempt only ordinary men but even a noble mind falls prey to popularity. In the novel, Jamie enjoyed the attention which she received from her friends and the society for her pictures displayed on magazines which in turn made her obsessed towards fame.

Motivation, the first component of Situational Action Theory states that an act of crime is committed if the character is either tempted or provoked. Initially Jamie was motivated to gain popularity and later this became an obsession. The need to gain attention from others had tempted her in many situations. After her big break through with a celebrity's photograph Jamie's popularity disappeared in a few days. She felt that her popularity lasted for a short period and she compared the time period to fifteen minutes, as she remarked: "My fifteen minutes were over, and it left me feeling slightly empty, as if I'd lost something and didn't know how to get it back. No one whispered or stared at me in school anymore" (Strasser, *Famous* 114). The absence of stardom made Jamie feel empty and lost.

Jamie's picture in New York Weekly and People's magazine had fetched her too much attention at school and on the streets. Jamie enjoyed the attention which she received at school, night clubs and among her friends and family members. Jamie's urge to attain fame does not stop with pictures in famous magazines but she wanted to be recognised by famous students at her school as well. When Jamie got recognition and attention from a popular girl at school, she felt her "...star was definitely on the rise" (Strasser, *Famous* 97). Thus the temptation to gain attention was immense in Jamie and that became a motivating factor for the change in her perception.

Perception, the second component of SAT defines that the character's perception is affected by external factors. In many instances Jamie's friend Avy had altered Jamie's perception about popularity. Jamie was passionate about photography but her perception about photography was affected by Avy. He made Jamie become more obsessed with photography. Avy personally showed great interest in gaining attention from others. He wanted to be recognised and appreciated for his talent but later he considered talent as unimportant for a successful career. So he undergoes plastic surgeries to look better for movie roles. Through this Jamie understood the obsession Avy had for fame so she too wanted to achieve greater heights like him. Thus photography had become an obsession rather than a passion for Jamie.

The theory states that a person's perceptions are connected with the environment which changes the course of action he or she chooses. Jamie was criticised a lot for her popularity. So she felt the urge to come to the limelight again and to be free from criticism. Jamie's first celebrity picture which made her popular got her the name a paparazzo prodigy. On the other hand she was also criticised that she got lucky once. Jamie said, "I felt like everyone was expecting something from the paparazzo prodigy. In addition to "has-been," phrases like "flash in the pan" and "one-hit wonder" buzzed around my thoughts like annoying gnats" (Strasser, *Famous* 115). The need to prove herself changed her perception about others' privacy. Jamie was belittled in front of others by critics so she was compelled to show good results. Thus the pressure to be famous again and the obsession towards popularity had changed Jamie's perception towards violating others' privacy.

Choice, the third component of SAT talks about the choices a person encounters before making the final decision. Through time Jamie's popularity faded away and Jamie

needed another hit picture to get back on starlight. When Jamie found the six images of Willow consuming drugs in her camera she realised that it would make her popular again. So she plotted to sell the picture to a famous magazine without the knowledge of Willow. After sometime Jamie was in a dilemma whether to sell the picture or not. But she was hesitant when thinking about selling the picture. So she spoke to her father about it. Her father pointed out the profit she could make by selling it as, “you can probably make big money by selling these pics” (Strasser, *Famous* 239). She too agreed saying “...it could be a really huge boost for my career” (Strasser, *Famous* 240). Jamie’s only intention while stealing the picture was to become popular again. As a consequence she was given a choice either to become famous or to end in jail for violation of a person’s privacy. But Jamie chose to commit crime to become famous.

The final action she chose is to steal because she was tempted to regain her stardom and to earn good money for the pictures. She was ready to go to any extent for fame and money. So when she found the six pictures of Willow, a famous star, consuming drugs she immediately grabbed the opportunity. She stole the picture in her camera and ran away. She compromised her morals, so that she could be in the starlight again. Thus Jamie violated Willow’s privacy by taking a private picture without her permission. Her action in this situation changed the course of her life by turning her into a criminal.

“Violation of a person’s privacy” – otherwise known as code of conduct and invasion of privacy is a U.S. code for violating a person’s privacy by taking images or videos of that person without their knowledge. According to law it is acceptable to take a picture of a person in public places but pictures or videos cannot be taken without their knowledge inside their house. 18 U.S. Code section 2257 states that the person who breaks this law

may be imprisoned for more than 5 years and fined. In most of the cases the perpetrator blackmails the victims. “Blackmail is a compulsion that comprises the threats of physical harm, or the threat to take the person’s money or property” (Kowsalya).

In the novel, Jamie also violates a person’s privacy and commits a crime. According to SAT Jamie’s circumstance to perceive fame has led her to steal the pictures by violating the law. Jamie perceives her future as a never fading spotlight and she was ready to go to any extent for it. She also understands that she could be imprisoned for this but still continued with her motive to become famous. Jamie was tempted to gain popularity and that had become the situational factor which led her to commit an act of crime.

Many people go to America in the dream of becoming famous through an acting career. This dream can be achieved by only a handful but the obsession towards fame and money has become a never ending desire among many. In the novel, one part of the story was narrated by a detective. On this part he talks about stalkers and the problems actors face because of them. In his narration, he says, “Last week I read an article in *USA Today* where they asked kids what they wanted to be when they grew up. Eighty percent-four out of every five kids-said they wanted to be rich and famous. When did that become an occupation?” (Strasser, *Famous* 180). The author through this character questions the doubtful future of the next generation who solely believe that being rich and famous is everything. He poses this question to the reader to ponder over and understand the materialistic opinions of the future generation.

In Strasser’s other novels *Kill You Last* (2011), *Blood on My Hands* (2010) and *Con-Fidence* (2002) he talks about similar characters who craved for popularity. In the novel *Kill You Last*, the protagonist, Shelby’s father, was a photographer of young models.

These models are ready to go to any extent to become famous. This similar idea was reflected in the characters like Jamie and Avy from the novel *Famous*.

On the cover of Strasser's novel *Con-Fidence*, he defines the novel as "a price one pays for popularity." Lauren, a middle school student, was tempted and caught up in the spiral of the need to be famous. Finally ends up with predicaments and bad friendships just like Jamie in *Famous*.

Strasser's *Blood on My Hands* is about a girl named Callie who was wrongly accused for a crime which she did not commit. She picked up the murder weapon from her best friend's dead body. Thus she was framed as a prime suspect for her friend's murder. This incident is similar to Jamie who also accidentally caught the picture of mishap photos of a famous movie star in her camera. The consequences of both these actions lead to the climax of the stories.

Drug usage is a common phenomenon in America. Especially among teenagers who are exposed to illegal drugs and alcohol at a very young age. Teenagers use narcotic drugs primarily for temporary pleasure. Narcotic drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, stimulants, heroin, meth and prescription drugs like painkillers are commonly consumed. These drugs can affect the emotional and psychological health of the consumer and can cause anxiety, paranoia, weight loss and anti-social behaviour. Many teenagers who are addicted to drugs show high levels of these symptoms on a daily basis. For such addicts getting admitted in a rehab centre is their last resort. A school premise is where many students are able to buy drugs. So school should have a close watch on the students and an early intervention could avoid huge calamities in the future. School can also include subjects



that explain the effects of drugs and its disadvantages to their health. So that students can be aware and avoid such illegal drug consumption.

Strasser has said:

One of the things I used to like about writing books for young people was that it wasn't necessary to deal with murder, adultery, and various other immortal or criminal activities that seem mandatory in adult novels these days. I find it sad and frightening that this is no longer the case.

One of the things I dislike most about guns in our society is that, like violence and sex in the media, they rob children of what we used to think of as a childhood.”

(Strasser, *GBG* Author's Note)

Gun culture is another growing issue in the society. It is the attitude and belief about firearms among civilians. It is prevalent across the world but more in certain developed countries. The United States is the leading country that has more civilians owning guns. According to the BBC's 2018 survey the number of firearms in the US is the ratio of 120.5 firearms per 100 residents, which is more than the general population in the country. Firearms like pistols, shotguns, machine guns and assault rifles are misused to commit crimes resulting in serious injury or death. Nearly 53 people are killed every day by firearm in America.

Gun violence is one of the leading causes of death in America. So Strasser had created a hashtag stating that 'gunscostlives' in instagram to bring awareness about the growing gun violence in America. In the novel *Give a Boy a Gun* and *If I Grow Up* Strasser introduces gun culture. In *Give a Boy a Gun* he highlights the real data about students

bringing guns to school and the data says, “Twelve percent of students say they know another student who has brought a gun to school” (Strasser, *GBG* 92). Gun control is a major issue that is addressed in *Give a Boy a Gun*. Strasser highlights the measure the government failed to take, which led to many school shooting incidents. He insists that gun control is a necessity for a country like America. Through his novel he points out that the school shooting incident would not have happened if Gary and Brendan did not have access to guns. Gun control issue has plagued the country for many years and now many school students are finding it accessible. Strasser says that the government should curb gun access only to police officers and higher officials. So that the gun availability and usage by common people will be reduced. In America, gun violence has led to many school shooting incidents in recent times.

In the select novels of Todd Strasser, it was derived that every crime has a motive. Strasser had focused on the reasons for an adolescent to become a criminal. He had also pointed out many shortcomings in the social systems which had played a huge role in turning an adolescent into a criminal. These shortcomings affect the psychology and the social conditions of the adolescents which in turn made them break the law to meet the requirements for survival.

Situational Action Theory follows the developmental pattern of action. Examining the developmental trajectories to delinquency is a more effective technique to determine the reasons behind criminal activities than focusing on the difference among individuals. The major risk factors leading to criminal behaviour begins with early childhood victimisation or loss of parent; an association with delinquent peers; and an exposure to toxic environmental factors. These toxic environmental factors are identified using situational action theory.

Through the application of Situational Action Theory in the select novels of Todd Strasser the protagonists' circumstantial reasons that prompted them to become criminals are identified. In the novel *Angel Dust Blues*, Alex was motivated by the temptation of Michael's lifestyle; and his perception of gaining attention made him choose the option of drug dealing as his final course of action. In *Give a Boy a Gun*, Gary was motivated by the provocation of his school bullies; his perception was influenced by violent video games; and this made him choose the option of avenging bullies, for the final course of action he built a bomb and took hostages of school students. In *Can't Get There from Here, Maybe* was motivated by the temptation to consume alcohol; her perception was changed due to poverty; and this made her to choose drinking alcohol to fight hunger. In the novel *If I Grow Up*, DeShawn was motivated by the provocation to steal due to poverty; his perception was affected through delinquent role models; and he chose to join the drug dealing gang to eradicate poverty. In *Famous*, Jamie was motivated by the temptation to gain popularity; her perception towards photography became an obsession; and she chose to steal private pictures of a celebrity as her final course of action.

The protagonists in these novels are not persistent criminals rather circumstantial criminals. They later show remorse for their acts. The main reason for a person to commit an act of crime in a situation is because of the lack of enough protective factors. Even after committing a crime many characters regret and resent their criminal deeds because of the protective factors present in their lives. With the help of the concept 'Enlightened Witness' the transformation that occurs in the characters' life through protective factors are analysed in the next chapter.