

An Investigation of Public Perceptions of Youth Crime and Juvenile Delinquency in Embakasi Sub-county in Nairobi County, Kenya

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Abstract

Youth crime and juvenile delinquency have continued to elicit concerns among stakeholders. This paper reports findings of a study to investigate public perceptions of youth crime and juvenile delinquency in public primary schools in Embakasi West Constituency, Nairobi County. A survey design was adopted and the sample drawn using systematic random method to select participants. The questionnaire was the key research instrument. Validity was ascertained by ensuring that the items were aligned to the construct in question. The study found that the public perceives youth crime and juvenile delinquency to be increasing dramatically, as is the seriousness of the crimes committed. The media, urbanization, family, economic factors, school and peer influences were found to be determinants that shape public perceptions of youth crime and juvenile delinquency. The study recommends continuous and extensive research on youth crime and juvenile delinquency with a view to informing policy to respond appropriately to youth crime.

Keywords: Juvenile delinquency, youth crime, perceptions, deviant behaviour, students, children, adolescents, parents, school, neighbor hood

1.0 Background to the study

The youth have challenged the traditional patterns guiding the relationships and transitions between family, school and work Kim & Kim (2008). Social relations that ensure a smooth process of socialization appear to have collapsed while lifestyle trajectories have become more varied and less predictable. The restructuring of the labour market, the extension of the maturity gap and, arguably, the more limited opportunities to become an independent adult are all changes influencing relationships, educational opportunities and choices. With each new day there are new pressures on young people undergoing the transition from childhood to independence. Regardless of gender, social origin or country of residence, the youth are subject to individual risks but also new individual opportunities; some beneficial and some potentially harmful. Quite often, advantage has been taken of illegal opportunities as young people commit various offences, become addicted to drugs, and use violence against their peers.

In the last decade, a lot of antisocial behaviours have been observed in Kenyan schools. These have elicited rising concerns in the security sector. Aloka and Bujuwoye (2013) also contend that behaviour problems among Kenyan secondary school students have been on the rise over the years. For instance, in the year 2001 students set Kyanguli secondary school ablaze killing 68 students in the inferno (Kindiki, 2004). Many cases of arson caused by students have been witnessed in schools in the recent past as observed by Aloka (2012). The outlawing of corporal punishment in schools perhaps opened avenues for indiscipline. Further, Mathenge (2006) posits that because of the growing number of children in conflict with the law, a model juvenile court be set up.

2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although the public lack an understanding of juvenile delinquency and youth crime, they often express strong opinions about the causes of delinquent behaviour and youth crime and how such behaviours should be handled. Public attitude of juvenile delinquency and youth crime has been changing over the years and often been characterized by mistrust, cynicism, alienation and perceptions of higher than average levels of threat of crime and delinquency. The society has called for harsher punishments for young “thugs” and demanded that youths who commit “adult” crimes be treated like adults in relation to corrective action. Similar sentiments have made by political leaders and policy implementers as well. The public has blamed juveniles and youths for increased disorder and crime without acknowledgement of the multiple risk factors involved in offending and the fact that delinquency and crime is not only deviation, but is also a form of loss and desolation, combining all manifestations of depravity and moral decay in a society. Juvenile and youth behaviour thus mirrors the society. Increase in juvenile delinquency, high rate of early school dropouts in both girls and boys, increase in the numbers of street children and high rate of crime, continue to elicit concerns in the community. Anchored on the Developmental Niche Notion theory postulated by Super and Harkness (1983), the study sought to investigate public perceptions to youth crime and juvenile delinquency in Embakasi Division in Nairobi County Kenya . For Super and Harkness (1983), youth crime and juvenile delinquency are influenced by physical cultural and social

context as well as parental characteristics.

3.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sociologists view the concept of juvenile delinquency more broadly, believing that it covers a multitude of different violations of legal and social norms, from minor offences to serious crimes, committed by juveniles. To criminologists, juvenile delinquency encompasses all public wrongs committed by young people between the ages of 12 and 20. Included under the umbrella of juvenile delinquency are status offences, so called because they are closely connected with the age status of an offender; a particular action or behaviour is considered a violation of the law only if it is committed by a juvenile. In an attempt to explain the theoretical underpinnings of delinquency, sociologists associate the specifics of youth behaviour with the home, family, neighbourhood, peers and many other variables that together or separately influence the formation of young people's social environment.

Antisocial behaviour may be a normal part of growing up or the beginning of a long term pattern of criminal activity. The United Nations Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (the Riyadh Guidelines) assert that "youthful behaviour or conduct that does not conform to overall social norms and values is often part of the maturation and growth process and tends to disappear spontaneously in most individuals with the transition to adulthood". A great majority of young people commit some kind of petty offence at some point during their adolescence without this turning into a criminal career in the long term. It is however very important to note that juveniles often create stable criminal groups with a corresponding subculture and engage in the activities of adult criminal groups, in effect choosing delinquent careers.

Statistical data in many countries show that delinquency is largely a group phenomenon; between two-thirds and three quarters of all juvenile offences are committed by members of various groups (Christian, 1998). Juveniles who commit offences alone are likely to be associated with criminal groups. Different juvenile groups adopt what amounts to a heterogeneous mix, or synthesis, of predominant (class-based) values, which are spread by the entertainment industry, and intergenerational (group-based) values, which are native to the family or neighbourhood. Subcultures can be defined as particular lifestyle systems that are developed in these groups and are in structurally subordinate positions as a result of pressure exerted by the predominant systems. Some groups and subcultures tend to use violence as a means of solving interpersonal conflicts, and the atmosphere thus created is an important mediating factor contributing to delinquent or criminal behaviour. This might even be referred to as a subculture of violence, in which aggression is considered an acceptable and even preferable and courageous approach to problem solving.

Police records indicate that the crime rates of male juvenile and male young adult offenders are more than double those of young females, and conviction rates are six or seven times higher. There are a number of reasons why young people are involved in violent or criminal behaviour. Various restrictive and stimulative factors encourage women to conform to social norms that do not apply to men, one example being the fear of sexual assault. Girls are subject to stronger family control than boys. Cultural concepts are such that society at large is less tolerant of deviant behaviour among young women than among young men. In addition, aggression and violence play an important role in the construction of masculinity and sexuality in patriarchal societies, the primary objective being to reinforce and maintain the status and authoritative position of men. The male perception of violence can be minimized, forgiven, denied or justified. Men often do not consider such acts as verbal or sexual insults to constitute violent behavior (United Nations World Youth Report, 2003).

The intensity and severity of juvenile offences are generally determined by the social, economic and cultural conditions prevailing in a country. There is evidence of a universal increase in juvenile crime taking place concurrently with economic decline, especially in the poor areas of large cities (Chidozie, 2012; Aremu, 2011; Ekpeyong, 2012; and Odumosu, 1999). In many cases street children later become young offenders, having already encountered violence in their immediate social environment as either witnesses or victims of violent acts. The educational attainments of this group are rather low as a rule, basic social experience acquired in the family is too often insufficient, and the socio economic environment is determined by poverty and under or unemployment.

High increase in juvenile delinquency, high rate of early school dropouts in both girls and boys, increase in street children and high rate of crime, both in towns and rural settings, can be linked to poor parental guidance in the early child development (White, 1980). It was also established that majority of the children involved in deviant behaviour, seem to be either staying alone or may be staying far from their families, with their peers. Additionally, they also opt to engage in detrimental lifestyles of drugs, alcoholism, and sexual crimes. The argument that the family factors increase the risk of anti social behaviour was supported by Melgosa (2002), who posit that parenting behaviour plays a significant role in the development of delinquent behaviour in children.

Legal definitions of juvenile delinquency do not make distinction between those who are caught and those who engage in this behaviour. This is important because those who are caught may lose or be restricted of

their freedom. The process of labeling a youth a delinquent may appear as a degradation through which the identity of the youth is possibly transformed into a lesser form of humanity. Labeling can lead to negative outcomes because it can limit a youth education, social and employment opportunities. This causes the individual to see himself differently (a troublemaker, thief etc) and causes others to respond differently or avoid the individual and further increase the likelihood of further delinquency.

Many juvenile justice academics agree that the media are chiefly to blame for false public perceptions regarding criminal justice issues (Nova Scotia Youth Secretariat, 1993; Hartnagel & Baron, 1994). With respect to young offenders, studies have found that the media typically portray youth activity of any kind in a wholly negative light (Yeager, 1995) and sensationalize rare incidents of youth violence by reporting them repeatedly over a number of days. A survey conducted by the John Howard Society of Alberta (1996) which surveyed a sample of Albertans on their views on youth crime and crime prevention found that almost 75% of those surveyed got most of their information about crime from the media. The police and government officials also bear responsibility for fostering inaccurate public attitudes of youth crime and the youth justice system. Thus, the police and government officials alike perpetuate inaccurate perceptions of youth crime.

While certain aspects of juvenile delinquency others are contextual. As a rule, cultural contexts are important in understanding the causes of juvenile delinquency and developing culturally appropriate measures to intervene. In Africa, delinquency tends to be attributed primarily to hunger, poverty, malnutrition and unemployment, which are linked to the marginalization of juveniles in the already severely disadvantaged segments of society. As a result of rapid population growth, young people in Africa will soon constitute two thirds of the region's population. Every year about 790,000 people enter the labour market, while the economy generates fewer than 60,000 jobs. One half of all households in Africa are living in poverty (United Nations World Youth Report, 2003).

Many of the urban poor live in slum and squatter settlements with overcrowded, unhealthy housing and a lack of basic services. It is here that the majority of urban youth and children live. One of the most serious problems is the great number of street and orphaned children, whose numbers have been growing as a result of continuous and multiple armed conflicts, the advent of HIV/AIDS, and the breakdown of a centuries old way of living and social structure. Juvenile crime and delinquency are on the rise, a trend also linked to the rapid and dramatic social, political and economic changes that have taken place in Africa in recent decades. The principal offences committed by young people are theft, robbery, smuggling, prostitution, the abuse of narcotic substances, and drug trafficking.

Anderson and Stavrou, (2000) survey in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania investigated the causes of the criminality among youth. The findings revealed that, inadequate parental supervision and inaccessibility to family were linked to adolescents' involvement with deviant peers. Stealing, robbery and mugging were the common types of crime committed by the juvenile youth. Youth violent crimes accounted for 20% of all arrests. In Kenya, Ndeti (2008) investigated substance abuse using a sample of 1,328 students from 17 public secondary schools. The study found out that beer, wine, spirits, and cigarettes were commonly abused, and that, children as young as eleven years, mainly from educated middle class families were abusing drugs. The study reported that, most drug abusing adolescents came from homes where one or both of the parents modeled substance abuse or had lenient attitude to use of alcohol. Therefore, substance abuse was associated with poor mentoring. In the same vein, Shoemaker (2008) observes that the school context plays a critical role in motivating the youth for delinquency in terms of evaluation of learning achievement and eventual failure or success of students. Research has also established that there is a significant relationship between academic performance and delinquency, (Felson & Staff, 2006; Lawrence, 2007 in Shoemaker, 2013))

In light of the aforementioned, it is clear that adolescents' behaviour problems are a major concern in Kenya. The delinquency problem seems to be blamed on poor parenting. Such problem behaviours have been found to have negative correlation with school engagement and academic achievement (Bryant, Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnson 2003. Kinai (2002) studied the relationship between parental behaviours towards adolescents and their manifest aggression, and found that harsh, cruel, neglecting and rejecting parental behaviours correlated with higher manifest aggression mean scores. So far, there is scanty literature on the relationship between parental behaviours and adolescents' delinquent conduct in Kenya

4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a survey design to investigate public perceptions to youth crime and juvenile delinquency. The study was carried out among students, teachers, schools' religious chaplains, police officers and area chiefs in four selected public primary schools in Embakasi west constituency in Nairobi County. Police officers and chiefs were randomly selected from the nearest police stations and administrative areas respectively. The research targeted a cross section of juveniles and youths aged between 10 and 22 years. The four schools selected had a total population of 1800 students. Questionnaires were used to solicit data from the participants.

5.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study sought to establish what constituted youth crime and juvenile delinquency in public primary schools in Embakasi division. Activities that may once have been regarded as characteristic of people in the past were viewed as problematic and potentially leading to criminality. Although police recorded crime gives a partial account of offending because of the crimes that are not reported, most of the respondents felt that many crimes are not brought to police attention because they are considered insufficiently serious, although the public considers them as crimes.

5.1 Crime rates in Embakasi division

The study found that there was a tendency for the public to overestimate the scale of youth crime and juvenile delinquency. Attitudes of youth crime and juvenile delinquency were not always based on personal experiences but majorly influenced by the mass media. Respondents' actual experiences of youth and juvenile related crime problems were lower than what was purported to be the case in the County. Perceptions of prevalence of crime therefore tended to outstrip direct experience of youth crime and juvenile delinquency. This implied that external factors (such as media reporting) had a role to play in shaping the respondents view of youth crime and juvenile delinquency. Table 1 presents the responses of the perceived crime rates in the county.

Table 1: Perceived crime rates in Embakasi Division

| Responses | Students | Teachers | Religious Chaplains | Police Officers | Chiefs |
|-----------------------|----------|----------|---------------------|-----------------|----------|
| Crime rate. | High | High | High | High | High |
| W(Perceived Vs. Real) | Moderate | Moderate | Moderate | High | Moderate |

The Table clearly indicates that the perceived crime rates are high compared to the reality on the ground. Respondents implicated media coverage in the mismatch between the perception and reality of youth crime and juvenile delinquency.

5.2 Urbanization

Most respondents' (70%) expressed the view that basic features of the urban environment fostered the development of new forms of social behavior perhaps deriving mainly from the weakening of primary social relations and control, increasing reliance on the media at the expense of informal communication, and the tendency towards anonymity. These patterns were linked to the high population density, extent of heterogeneity, characteristic of Embakasi West. This may be attributable to the differences in social control and social cohesion to some extent which is consistent with Kim and Kim (2008) who observed that the access to television and technological advancement could be linked to juvenile delinquency. Therefore an urbanized population like Embakasi West constituency may have higher registered crime rates than those with strong rural lifestyles and communities. Rural groupings rely mainly on family and community control as a means of dealing with antisocial behaviour and exhibit markedly lower crime rates. 60% of the respondents believed that urban industrialized societies tend to resort to formal legal and judicial measures, an impersonal approach that appears to be linked to higher rates of juvenile delinquency and youth crime. These findings are presented in Table 2

Table 2: The extent to which urbanization contributes to youth crime in Embakasi County

| Responses | Students | Teachers | Religious Chaplains | Police Officers | Chiefs |
|--------------------------------------|----------|----------|---------------------|-----------------|--------|
| Urbanization. | Moderate | High | High | High | High |
| (Social Control Vs. Social Cohesion) | Low | Moderate | High | Moderate | High |

Social control and social cohesion are important to control juvenile delinquency and crime. As above shown social cohesion prevented disorder and crime more. Respondents postulated that social cohesion is weak in urban settings and people tend to mind their individual affairs.

5.3 The media

Many respondents reported that public opinion was systematically misinformed about youth crime, and that the media was responsible to a great extent for a large proportion of this phenomenon. Although they perceived youth crime to be on the rise, they also expressed the view that the media tended to be selective in reporting of youth crime, focusing on the most violent and sensational offences. It was believed that media glorification of violence and avoidance of this in its real life consequences is another factor which triggers violence and other delinquencies among the youths. Television and movies have popularized the "cult of heroes, which promotes justice through the physical elimination of enemies. Young people who watch violence tend to behave more

aggressively or violently, particularly when provoked. This is mainly characteristic of 8 to 12 year old boys, who were found to be more vulnerable to such influences. Media was found to bring an individual to violence in three ways. First, movies that demonstrate violent acts excite juveniles, and the aggressive energy can then be transferred to everyday life, pushing them to engage in physical activity on the streets. Second, television was reported portray ordinary daily violence committed by parents or peers. Third, violence depicted in the media was exaggerated.

Table 3: The extent to which the Media contributes to youth crime in Embakasi County

| Responses | Students | Teachers | Religious Chaplains | Police Officers | Chiefs |
|---|---------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Media. (Influence towards Juvenile Crime Vs. Portrayal of Juvenile crime) | Moderate High | High High | High High | Moderate High | High Moderate |

Respondents indicated that media coverage of sensationalistic and violent crimes create fear among the general public and affirms their attitudes towards youth who are labeled as dangerous. Teachers, religious chaplains and chiefs were consistent in indicating the influence of media especially popular culture on juveniles and youth, propagated through contemporary media platforms. They pointed out that juveniles and youth learn crime and antisocial behaviours from the media.

5.4 Family

The study established that children who received adequate parental supervision were less likely to engage in criminal activities. Dysfunctional family settings characterized by conflict, inadequate parental control, weak internal linkages and integration, and premature autonomy were closely associated with juvenile delinquency. 60% of the respondents expressed the view that the family as a s was currently undergoing substantial changes in Embakasi West sub-county. Further its form was also diversifying, for example, with the increase in one parent families and non-marital unions. The absence of father figures in many low income families was perhaps leading young boys to seek patterns of masculinity in delinquent groups of peers. These groups in many respects substitute for the family, define male roles, and contribute to the acquisition of such attributes as cruelty, strength, excitability and anxiety. Results further indicated that broken families also predisposes young people to juvenile delinquency and crime due to stress, lack of parental guidance, inaccessibility to basic needs among other factors. his finding is consistent with Hagan & Sussman (1988) who found that a poor home environment may force youth to seek peer group support leading to delinquency.

A healthy home environment was found to be the single most important determinant necessary to keep children from becoming delinquent. Children who are rejected by their parents, are inadequately supervised, and grow up in homes with considerable conflict and are at greatest risk of becoming delinquents. A healthy home environment is one in which parents and children share affection, cohesion, and involvement, which reduce the risk of delinquency. Children who are inadequately supervised by parents were more likely to become delinquent. Marital discord was seen to be a more powerful predictor of delinquency than divorce or single parent family structure. Family relations, not just the separation, influence delinquency to some extent.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Offending amongst young people has been at the centre of public and policy makers' attention in recent years. Research indicates that the public wrongly attributes a large proportion of offending to young people or perceive youth offending to rapidly escalate. However, a myriad of determinants may account for this state of affairs. This study thus concludes that better dissemination of crime data be put in place so that the public gets access to accurate, non-technical and timely information. Alternatively, it may be that the public's overestimation of youth crime is symptomatic of a more serious concern, in which case, the study concludes that appropriate strategies would be needed to improve communities' sense of safety. In addition, the problem of youth crime perhaps may not simply related to an objective number of criminal actions but also depends on how we, as individuals and as a society, feel about it and respond to it.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations may be made. Given the public's reliance on the media, a timely recommendation would be to ensure that accurate data and full account of cases of youth crime are disseminated through the print and electronic media. Dissemination of complete and accurate information in this way will no doubt aid in changing public perceptions of youth crime. The study recommends that police and government officials take an active role in the dissemination of accurate information about youth crime. In the same vein, the study recommends that the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture develops a policy to offer necessary support in establishing rehabilitation centers to cater for delinquent juveniles and help them

acquire desirable knowledge , skills, values and attitude to drive Kenya’s Vision 2030.

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