

Juvenile Crimes and Its Counseling Implications

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ABSTRACT No matter where one lives in the world today, everyday seems to bring another crop of lurid crimes committed by youngsters. These waves of crimes among young people have increased dramatically over the last few decades and begin more and more at ever lower ages. Juvenile crime is a complex psycho-social problem caused and reinforced by no single factor. This paper attempts to look into the current waves of crimes, psychology of the early and late blooming delinquents, the current deterrent measures and their effectiveness. Management strategies by guidance counselors and other stakeholders for juvenile crimes such as early prevention programmes for early delinquents, parents' management training and children interpersonal skill training programmes were discussed. The late blooming delinquent management programmes such as insight-oriented counseling, community wholesome therapeutic techniques and competency development programmes were highlighted. Though tasking, preventing juvenile crime is a possibility if the management techniques can be translated into concrete behavioural programmes and policies.

INTRODUCTION

Millions of people worldwide, even in countries once considered relatively safe, seem to have a haunting fear of crime and violence in recent times. The once cherished sense of personal safety appears antiquated and national security is being supplanted by deep anxiety and global terrorism. In regard to a UNICEF report in 2008 about the state of children and crime, it noted that increasing numbers of young Britons are dying at gunpoint and victims and perpetrators of gun crimes are getting younger and younger. According to this report, the prison population in England and Wales has ballooned to almost 80,000.

Robson (2008) observed that in a state in the United States of America, a police survey reported that nearly 17,000 youths, male and female, belong to one of some 700 gangs. This, according to him, is an increase of about 10,000 members just in four years. Femandes (2008) in her study observed that in year 2007 alone police identified 73 gangs operating in Toronto. She affirmed that the police chief admitted that there is no simple solution to the growing culture of urban crime and gangsterism among young people. In the same view, Samenow (2007) also observed that in Central America and Mexico, there are about 50,000 juvenile gang members and in year 2005 alone 15,000 people died at the hands of juvenile gangs in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

According to Burton (2008), fear of crime permeates every aspect of young South Africans lives. This he observed include violent crimes such as aggravated robberies, drug abuse, hijacking and bank heists. He further stated that over 70 percent of those sentenced for burglary and theft are reconvicted within two years. Many crimes he stressed are committed by young drug addicts desperate for money to pay for their costly, self-destructive habits.

Growing concerns over the increasing juvenile crime rate have sparked extensive research into various factors that may lead young adults to engage in illegal behavior. George (2007) observed that over the past ten years, the number of juvenile courts cases handled has more than doubled in West Africa. The rise in destructive acts amongst youths seems to be evident in school dropout rates, teenage pregnancies, drug abuse and quite apparently substantial increase in teenage crimes committed.

It is reasonable to ask: Are present deterrents such as stiff penalties, prison terms and remand homes working? Does prison reform criminals? More importantly, is the society addressing the root cause of crime? Concerning the present deterrents, Staton (2006) observed that after a taste of prison, the criminal may become shrewder and more cautious, but continues his exploitative way of life and commits crimes. According to him, Recidivism (relapse into criminal behaviors) statistics indicate only whether he has been careless enough to be "caught again". In effect then,

prisons often become finishing schools for criminals, inadvertently helping them hone their anti-social skills.

Ulrich (2008) observed that factors which may lead to an increasing rate in juvenile crime include breakdown in families, percentage of families in poverty and the female labour participation rate.

In most West African countries, for example, over the last few decades there seem to have been a decrease in the number of children per family among the educated parents while the illiterate parents have had more children than they can cope with. Though there seem to be an increase in the educational level of parents, the overall well-being of children has undergone a tremendous decline. The proportion of children and adults in poverty seem to have generally increased dramatically. According to UNCP report of (2006), 44.1% of Nigerians are living below poverty level while 43.6, 45.3, 40.1, 36.8, 31.4, 32.3 live below poverty level in Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'ivoire, Ghana and Togo respectively. Teenage suicide rate seems to have more than tripled in many of these countries, school performance has continued to decline and juvenile delinquents have increased and become more violent. Bartkus (2008) observed that subsistence living may make individuals more adapted to engage in socially unacceptable behavior including crime. In Nigeria particularly, unemployment, lack of opportunity, social inequality between classes and pervading frustration within growing segments of the population seem to create a domestic climate encouraging crime.

A cursory observation shows that before the advent of Western education, many women work in their farms or in some skilled jobs. They had time to care for their children. Moreover, in the extended African family system, the upbringing of a child was everyone's responsibility. However, as a result of Western education many women have acquired more learning and have taken up white collar jobs. The Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) no doubt may also influence the juvenile crime rate. This upward trend in FLFPR might suggest a decrease in the amount of time and attention that children receive from their mothers. In viewing the mother as the parent traditionally responsible for child-care, the decrease in time spent in the home may adversely affect child development. With-

out adequate supervision and attention, children may be lured into criminal activities. More and more serious and repeated juvenile offenders are continually being incarcerated in fortified juvenile remand homes in virtually all states in every country. Examining the arrest rate and its change over time can provide insight into current nature of juvenile crime. For example, the juvenile cases handled within a period of 10 years from 1998 to 2008 in Ondo, a state in south-west Nigeria shows a steady increase in the number of cases handled from years 2002 to 2008 (See Fig. 1).

In many developing countries like Nigeria, many crimes go unpunished, especially among the influential high social economic class. This may lead felons to conclude that crime does pay after all and this belief can make criminals bolder and more set in their ways.

Ordinarily, crime may be seen as almost a normal, if not excusable reaction to the grinding poverty, divorce, unstable home, child abuse and despair that pervaded the criminals' lives. However, after extensive research Samenow (2007) concluded that criminals choose to commit crimes. In his study, he found that crime is caused by the way the person thinks not by the environment. Furthermore, he found that behaviour is largely a product of thinking and that everything we do is preceded, accompanied, and followed by thinking. So rather than regard criminals as victims, criminals seem to be victimizers who have freely chosen their way of life. Supporting this view, Simon (2008) opined that crime is a career of choice for young urban men aspiring to better things. He concluded that humans have free will and can choose the course they want to take, even under difficult circumstances. Rainbow (2006) also observed that millions of young people struggle daily against social injustice and poverty or they may live in dysfunctional families but they do not become felons. Criminals cause crime not bad neighborhoods, inadequate parents or unemployment (Bartkus 2006). In his opinion, crime, therefore, seems to reside within the mind of the young individuals and is not caused by social conditions. When a person thinks bad thoughts, he nurtures wrong desires. These, in turn, may lead to harmful acts. For example, a casual interest in pornography by a youth may develop into obsession with sex that impels him to eventually act on his fantasies, perhaps in a criminal way such as rape.

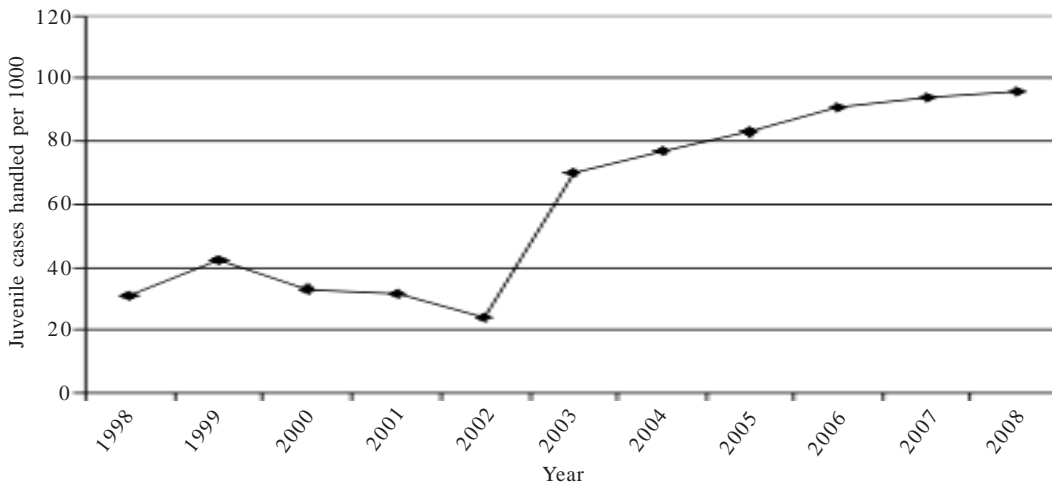


Fig. 1. Juvenile cases handled from 1998 to 2008 in Ondo State, Nigeria

PSYCHOLOGY OF THE DELIQUENTS

Many researchers (Patterson 1986; Yoshikawa 1994; Yoerger 2003) have observed that what the child learns is acquired in interactions with siblings and parents in the home. According to recent estimates, about 30 to 40 percent of child antisocial behavior can be accounted for by family interaction patterns (Yoerger 2003). In normal families, children use both aggressive and prosocial ways of resolving conflict. In clinical families, however, conflict occurs more frequently and children are successful in resolving conflict only with whining, yelling, temper tantrums or physical attacks (Patterson 2004).

According to Patterson (1986), parents of antisocial children threaten, nag and scold, but seldom follow through. Furthermore, these parents may find themselves giving in to the demands of children rather than setting limits, and withdrawing from their child to limit unpleasant exchanges. Thus, in his opinion, the children growing up in these families learn that aggression works. He concluded that a breakdown in parenting practices produces antisocial behavior which in turn leads to delinquency in early adolescence.

Early delinquents who begin crime before the age of 15 have many problems that can be detected as early as preschool. They are typically aggressive, impulsive and lacking in social skills and self-control (Reid 2003). Factors such as hyperactivity or genetic influences may predispose these youngsters to delinquency, but they

don't tell the whole story (Steinberg 1999). These early delinquents, typically boys, come from families with neglectful, hostile and antisocial parents who fail to instill self-control and a healthy conscience (Patterson and Yoerger 2003). Their families tend to be of low socio-economic status, frequently unemployed and often times divorced (Steinberg 1999). Furthermore, the siblings of early delinquents often experience trouble with law as well; many were uninvolved in school and exhibited low verbal ability, poor academic records and serious reading problems (Bogenschneider 2009).

Antisocial behavior learned in the family may also be transferred to the school with teachers and peers responding in much the same way as parents. When faced with troublesome youngsters, teachers may respond with negative sanctions; in contrast, well behaved children are likely to receive support from teachers. The school performance of the youngster may suffer as a result of rejection. In a nutshell, these early-occurring delinquents trigger the anger of their parents, alienate peers by their refusal to play by the rules, anger teachers with their disobedient and disruptive behavior, and may short-circuit their own ability to master more prosocial skills. Overtime, the negative consequence of the antisocial behaviors snowball; these early delinquents may lack the social skills necessary to find work or marriages that might enable them to adjust positively to the society. They may eventually drop into committing crimes.

According to Reid (2003), the best predictors

of who will become violent offenders are youths who commit their first crime at an early age and continue their criminal career. In his opinion, boys arrested between the ages of 6 and 14 are at greater risk of becoming frequent and violent offenders than boys arrested after the age of 14. According to him, when crime begins early, more than two-thirds become frequent offenders (arrested 3 or more times) and only one-third do not continue their criminal careers.

Late Delinquents

Assuming that all teenagers who commit crimes are psychologically similar is wrong (Moffitt 1993), and can thwart efforts to develop effective policies and programs. Researchers (Moffitt 1993; Madison 2004; Patterson 2004) have observed that some kids straighten out their lives after a few, petty, delinquent acts, while others spiral down into serious crimes.

Adolescents who commit first offense at age 15 or late bloomers comprise the majority of delinquents. (Steinberg 1997). According to him, these delinquents engage in few delinquent acts, commit few serious crimes, and stop their criminal careers by the time they reach adulthood. Psychologically, this type of delinquent appears to be quite normal; socially skilled, popular with peers, and with no history of previous problems. Late blooming adolescents seem to be found in most communities, their families appear to be less disadvantaged than those of early occurring delinquents and the parents appear more skillful in family management practices (Steinberg 1997).

Harrington (2002) observed that though the evidence is not all in, crime that begins after age 15 may be influenced primarily by such factors such as knowledge of their friends' and peers' delinquent acts: susceptibility to antisocial peer pressure and poor parental monitoring or supervision. Another explanation revolves around the declining age at which young people reach physical maturity, as early as 9 for some girls and 10 for some boys. Today's young people seem to go through puberty earlier and stay in school longer; This according to Steinberg, (1997) has resulted in the largest separation in human history between when adolescents are able to reproduce and when they assume adult roles and responsibilities (that is, voting, drinking and getting married). Yet a cursory observation reveals that adolescents desperately want to engage in

adult activities, be treated as adults, and demonstrate their ability to make their own decisions. Delinquency may be one of the only tastes of the adulthood available to young people. According to Moffitt (1993), every curfew broken and car stolen is a statement of independence and maturity and not surprisingly, these late blooming delinquents drop off delinquency as they enter work and family commitments.

COUNSELLING IMPLICATIONS FOR JUVENILE CRIMES

Over 80 percent of all adolescents report having committed a chargeable offense at one time or another though most of them are 'normal' adolescents who do so infrequently (Hall 2009). Considering this huge percentage of youths that seem to be prone to committing offenses, promising approaches need to be developed for addressing juvenile crime.

According to Staton (2007), imprisonment does not alter a criminal's basic personality. Whether he is on the streets or in prison, he develops contacts, learns new tricks of trade, and passes on few tips of his own to others. He observed that in prison, a person may become more successful criminal, immersing himself heavily in crime but being slick enough to avoid apprehension. Based on the two types of juvenile delinquency, one set of prevention programs is needed to head off those children at risk of becoming early starters. Another set may need to begin after the age of 10 or 11 to focus on children at risk of becoming late bloomers. Even though many of these late blooming delinquents may stop their offenses over time, their delinquency can interfere with their own school performance which may have implications throughout their adult lives.

Researchers (Hawkins 1987; Reid 1993; Yoshikawa 1994) have suggested that early prevention programs, specifically before school entry hold the greatest promise for early starters. Prevention efforts that begin before school entry may focus almost exclusively on parents and their child rearing practices. It is, therefore, counseled that parents management training centers be established in various communities. In these centers parents may receive training on how to interact differently with their children. Strategies may be geared towards early prevention and alternation of harsh and inconsistent

parenting, waiting until youth commit their first crime may be too late for preventing this type of delinquency.

Parents Management Training aimed at improving health care, parents' involvement and counseling to parents may be introduced in these centres. Training may include a daily 1-2 hours classroom sessions for children, a weekly home visit to each mother and child that attend the programme and a monthly parents meetings to assess the success of the training. The home visitors may counsel the mothers, model parent-and-child interaction and may assist in developing contacts and referral to other agencies where necessary. These training programs may increase positive reinforcement among family members improved communication, negotiation and problem-solving skills. Another aspect of this training programme may include teaching the children how to engage in a step-by-step approach to solve interpersonal problems. These may include teaching how to be less aggressive, impulsive, impatient and engage in fewer temper tantrums including exhibiting more concern for each other.

For late blooming delinquency, broad-based programmes may be needed that address the individual, peer group, family and community. Adolescents are counseled to learn how to resist negative peer pressure. Parents are also counseled to learn the importance of monitoring their children more closely. Communities need to take steps to provide definite consequences for youth misbehavior, but avoid labeling first time offenders as "delinquent". Communities can also take steps to support and provide opportunities for youth to demonstrate their maturity in ways to benefit the society.

The initial step in managing delinquency and juvenile crime is a thorough diagnosis of underlying causes by a professional counselor. At this point it should be borne in mind that therapy with the delinquents should be geared towards consideration of the delinquents total life adjustment. Such a consideration could bring significant and lasting changes in the delinquents' personality patterns. Through this insight-oriented counseling the insight-oriented counselor listens to the youth's concerns and problems and leads him or her to gain insight into the causes of these problems; this insight, in turn, is expected to lead the youth to discontinue delinquent behaviors. Sometimes the counselor also works with the

youth to generate alternative solutions to the youth's problems.

An important management strategy by counselors for juvenile crimes is the family therapy technique. In this technique, the child is allowed to express his/her feelings about the world. Then the parent and other members of the family are able to see the child's world through the child's own perspective and picture the adolescent as a person striving for acceptance and individuality. As parents and family members begin to understand the adolescent's motivations and needs the adolescent is struggling to meet, they can learn to help meet such needs in a more wholesome and acceptable manner.

It is also counseled that counselors should evaluate the school adjustment, vocational opportunities and leisure time activities of the delinquents. On school adjustment, the delinquency could result from poor performance at school. Where the delinquency results from feelings of failure, the possibility of remedial study programme, securing a private tutor or checking on the adolescents' intellectual capacity may be considered. All these could lead the adolescent to an opportunity to experience success and accomplishment. Delinquency may also result from vocational opportunities. In this case, the delinquency could result from the frustration of not feeling fulfilled or not being gainfully employed. A cursory observation shows that many adolescents, as a result of poor academic performances in secondary or lower education results become confused and unhappy and join gang to move with others like them to either while away their time or 'deaden' their feelings of failure. It may not be surprising, therefore, to find majority of these adolescents getting into deeper troubles and crimes on leisure-time activities, it may be observed that many delinquents are not engaged in wholesome recreations. It is, therefore, counseled that the counselor, therapist, parents or anyone interested in assisting the delinquent to change from delinquency to wholesome behavior may be able to help by providing wholesome recreation avenues for the delinquents. Youths' activities, volunteer jobs within the community for community development or religious activities based on ethical standards and norms may be focused. Furthermore, successful individuals in various fields of work who are from the community may be called upon to give talks on job placement and work experience. This may help

the delinquents to learn more interpersonal skills which they may lack in relation to supervisors and co-workers. Their poor problem solving skills in such areas as work attire, transportation and punctuality may also be addressed along with money management skills.

Competency development programs may be designed in various youth counseling centers in the communities. These programs features may include; assisting youth in setting specific and measurable goals, objectively diagnosing the youth's skill deficits and consecrating on providing the youth with necessary practical living, learning and working skills.

According to Bazemore (1992), the underlying argument is that youth who have committed crimes are, with rare exception, not socially ill and morally deficient, but simply lack necessary skills to become viable members of the community. Just as juvenile delinquents vary in the crimes they commit, the age they begin their criminal careers and factors that under lie their delinquent behavior, policy responses also need to be varied. Even though the job won't be easy, advances in identifying the path way through which youth embark on juvenile crime and programmes that may successfully divert youth from these paths may bring hope. Preventing juvenile crimes therefore is in the realm of the possible. The biggest challenge for policy makers and practitioners alike especially in developing countries is to translate these counseling strategies into concrete programs and policies that will promote youth development and translate delinquent youths into competent, law-abiding adults.

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