



Juvenile Delinquency in Western, Sierra Leone: Causes and Characteristics of Offenders

KEYWORDS

Juvenile Delinquency, Juvenile Offenders, Causes of Delinquency, Characteristics of Juvenile Offenders

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ABSTRACT World-wide youths between the ages of fourteen and eighteen years are finding themselves in conflict with the law. A civil war that lasted for a decade ended in 2002 but violence and aggression still thrives and alarmingly among the youths. This study was conceived to investigate factors causing Juvenile Delinquency and the characteristics of Juvenile Offenders. It was undertaken in the Western Area of Sierra Leone which has the capital, Freetown. It was a bulk population of forty that was used as all the offenders in the two Juvenile Detention Centres that consented to take part in the study responded to questionnaires. Focused Group discussions were held with stakeholders including community members of the Juvenile Delinquents and staff of the Juvenile Correctional Centres.

Results revealed that Juveniles Delinquents are mostly first time male offenders between the ages of fifteen and seventeen. Most had left school or were in the junior secondary level of education and were living with friends when they were incarcerated. Inferential Statistics inferred that the following determinants were significant at P value of 95 percent confidence level: whom the respondents live with and the educational level of parents, guardians of offenders.

Recommendations include: ensuring that Juvenile Delinquents have access to formal schooling whilst incarcerated and Social welfare workers should have follow-up mechanisms to ensure that juvenile delinquents are properly integrated into society.

Introduction

A juvenile according to the Child Rights Act (2007) is considered as a person below the age of eighteen. Delinquency according to United Nations (2003) is socially inadequate adjustment on the part of the individual to difficult situations. This may be regarded as due to the failure of an individual's internal controls or the failure of the external social controls or both. Juvenile Delinquency is endemic throughout the world. Butterfield (1995) estimated that in a decade, the crime rate in most countries would have doubled. Hope (2006) confirmed that juveniles, aged between fourteen and eighteen, are getting arrested for felony crimes at an alarming rate. He stated that juveniles all over the world are coming in conflict with the law. He goes on to give a profile of Juvenile arrests in U.S; one third of all Juvenile arrests are for arson; one fifth for sexual offences and vandalism; one eighth for burglary and rape and one twelfth are for violent crimes. For the deviant youth, it is crime that is the most drastic behaviour they can engage in. It is crime that attracts social control in the form of punishment and incarceration.

Cohen (2008) writing under the Social Strain theory stated that a large amount of delinquent behaviour results from blocked goals and "status frustration." According to the writer, lower-class boys want to achieve success and higher social status, just like middle- and upper class boys. Yet, due to their unpromising social circumstances, they find that they are blocked from achieving status (especially in school). Essentially, Cohen (2008) reported, lower-class boys who aspire to increased social status in a dominant, middle-class value system can respond in one of three ways:

1. The "college-boy" response
2. The "corner-boy" response
3. The "delinquent-boy" response

The final response in Cohen's (2008) typology is the delinquent boy. Boys in this group become frustrated with their inability to gain status through conventional means. Consequently, they develop what he referred to as a delinquent subculture, whose values and behaviour are antithetical to those espoused by the middle class. Paradoxically, in acting out their sub-cultural values, these boys find themselves in harmony with the expectations of their group but are perceived as nonconforming delinquents by the larger society.

Family characteristics such as poor parenting skills, family size, home discord, child maltreatment, and antisocial parents are risk factors linked to juvenile delinquency. Os-good (2004) study of 250 boys found that among boys at age 10, the strongest predictors of later convictions for violent offenses (up to age 45) were poor parental supervision, parental conflict, and parental aggression, including harsh, punitive discipline. Gibbens (2001) research into causes of Juvenile Delinquency correlated being raised in a single-parent family with increased delinquency. This is because most parents are single mothers living in poor socio economic circumstances with four or more children. The absence of a father figure on these children has been linked to crime. Also, adolescents who grow up with criminal siblings are more likely to be influenced by their siblings and embark on a life of crime. Darbuze (2013) in his study of American juveniles stated that the closer a youth is to his mother; the less likely such a person is at risk of delinquency. Age has been viewed as important in the oc-

currence of crime among juveniles. According to a report from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2012) the most prevalent age for juvenile crime is between 16-17 years. Synder (2001) on the other hand, stated that the ages of the offenders are getting younger. Most of the offenders were between ten to fourteen years.

Studies have found a consistent relationship between involvement in a delinquent peer group and delinquent behaviour. Roberts (2010) noted that for youths ages 12–14, a key predictor variable for delinquency is the presence of antisocial peers. Factors such as peer delinquent behaviour, peer approval of delinquent behaviour, attachment or allegiance to peers, time spent with peers, and peer pressure for deviance have all been associated with adolescent antisocial behaviour. Conversely, Synder (2001) reported that spending time with peers who disapprove of delinquent behaviour may curb later violence. The influence of peers and their acceptance of delinquent behaviour are significant, and this relationship is magnified when youths have little interaction with their parents. For Butlers and Jeremy (2002), peer associations are the most important proximate cause of Juvenile delinquents. Youths who associate with deviant peers are more likely to be arrested than youths who do not have such friends. The importance of accomplices cannot be overstressed.

Several individual-specific personality characteristics are linked to delinquency. De Coster et al (2006) are of the opinion that the best social behaviour characteristic to predict delinquent behaviour before age 13 appears to be aggression. Problems at school can lead to delinquency. He noted that, children with low academic performance, low commitment to school, and low educational aspirations during the elementary and middle school grades are at higher risk for child delinquency than are other children.

Prison Watch Sierra Leone (2014) states that the reason why delinquency is increasing all over the world is because it is not juveniles who are in conflict with the law but the law that is conflict with juveniles. The Report contends that the legal system in most countries including Sierra Leone is not operating to help juveniles. Synder (2001) states that as a result of the problems faced by juveniles, both institutional and home based, the crimes they commit are grievous and serious. The next paragraphs bring out the situation of Juvenile Delinquency in Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone was involved in a long and protracted civil war that lasted for over ten years. At the core of the conflict, lay a class of marginalized young people especially from rural areas lacking education and access to livelihood opportunities. Child soldiers were enlisted into the rebel movement and they were made to perpetuate terrible atrocities. Yahaya et al (2010) state the war ended in 2002 but violence still thrives and alarmingly among the youths and the spillover effects are still felt. There is a rise of aggression and an inability to face their status among youths. Most children, especially the boys, in Sierra Leone between the ages of fourteen to seventeen are considered by their family old enough to fend for themselves. Butters and Jeremy (2002) research point out that worldwide there are more males involved in Juvenile crime than females. They attribute this to the male personality and ego which lead them to violence and crime.

One of the priority areas for the Sierra Leone Government following the end of the war were efforts to bring the laws relating to child rights in line with the millennium. Prison

Watch (2014) outlines some of the efforts that have been made to reduce the rate of juveniles in conflict with the law. The Sierra Leone government passed into law the Child Rights Act in 2007 which introduced several innovations including creation of the Family Supports Unit (FSU) of the Sierra Leone Police to prevent delinquency among youths who may be victims of family neglect arising from broken relationships or homes. Furthermore, the Government has ratified various international instruments aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of children, including the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juveniles, commonly known as the Beijing Rules.

Despite the fact that Sierra Leone has passed the Child Rights Act and has ratified many international conventions, there continues to be constraints which impede on the problems of Juvenile Delinquency. The Ministry of Social Welfare Gender and Children Affairs Report (2011) has stated that there has been an increase in the number of juveniles at the Remand Home due to the drift of many households to the urban areas especially Freetown which has led to increase in petty thieving or larceny. The Sierra Leone Housing Sector Survey (2004) Poverty Profile reveal that 85 percent of children in Sierra Leone can be classified as vulnerable children, children living in conditions of extreme poverty. As confirmed by Hope (2006) most of the slums in the urban areas have as high an intensity of poverty as the rural areas. Most of these households are characterized by lack of opportunities, unavailability of social amenities, low education and crime. She contends that in such situations, juveniles will continue to reoffend and continue to be at conflict with the law.

It is against this backdrop of continued problems with Juvenile Delinquents that this study is conceived to investigate the causes of Juvenile Delinquency and characteristics of Juvenile Delinquents in the Western Area of Sierra Leone.

The following research hypotheses were tested in the study.

H₀: There is no significant relationship between the number of offences Juvenile Offenders commit and their Characteristics.

H₁: There is a significant relationship between the number of offences Juvenile Offenders commit and their Characteristics

Research Methodology

A non-experimental cross sectional survey research design was adopted for the study. The research was conducted in the Western Area of Sierra Leone. The Western Area is the wealthiest region in Sierra Leone, having the largest economy, financial and cultural centre, as well as being the seat and capital of the country's national government, Freetown. After several visits, permission was finally obtained from the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs allowing interviews to be conducted with the officials of the two institutions where juveniles are incarcerated in the capital, Remand Home and the Approved School as well as the right to issue questionnaires to the Juvenile delinquents who were confined at the time in the two Correctional Centres. Out of the fifty juveniles incarcerated, ten opted not to take part in the study. A bulk

form of data collection was utilized as the forty inmates who volunteered to take part in the study formed the respondents that answered the questionnaires. Furthermore, the researcher interviewed key other stakeholders working on Juvenile Delinquency issues. The information from the stake holders was recorded and used in discussing the issues that helped to achieve the objectives of the research.

Data collected was summarized into tables and charts and interpreted by using descriptive statistical techniques like percentages, frequencies, and mean to analyze the various variables. Inferential statistical technique was used in order to test the hypothesis set out in the study. The linear Regression Statistics was employed to establish the determinants of the Juvenile Delinquency at the 0.05 confidence level.

Findings and Discussions

87.5% of the respondents were male and only 12.5% were females. The information depicted here was not surprising as more boys as against girls commit crimes. The ages of the respondents revealed that 87.5% of the respondents were in the 15 – 17 year category 7.5% were aged between 12 to 14 years; whilst 5% were between 18 to 20 years. A group entitled, below 12 years, was not reflected in the table as these ages are not considered criminally culpable. The information displayed above shows that the respondents were all within the age bracket of what is termed a juvenile. From the characteristics of the offenders; 97.5% or thirty nine of the respondents were first time offenders. One or 2.5% was a repeat offender. 70% of them had had some form of education whilst 30 % had never been to school. Further information presented in tables is presented below:

Table 1 RESPONDENTS' LEVEL OF EDUCATION BEFORE INCARCERATION

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Primary	4	14.3
JSS	19	67.9
SSS	5	17.8
Total	28	100

The purpose of the table above was to give information about the education level of the respondents before being accused. 67.9% of the respondents stated that they left school or were in the junior secondary level of education when they were incarcerated; 17.8% were in the senior secondary level of education when they left school or when they were incarcerated and 14.3% of the respondents were in the primary level of education when they left school or were incarcerated.

Table 2 PERSONS RESPONDENTS' WERE STAYING WITH

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Parent	9	22.5
Relatives	10	25
Friends	12	30
Living by yourself	2	5
Non-relatives	7	17.5
Total	40	100

The above table portrays the various categories of people that the respondents were living with before incarceration. Friends formed the biggest group as 30 % lived with friends; 25 % lived with relatives; 22.5% of the respondents lived with their parents. 17.5% of the respondents with non-relatives but who were not their friends. They classified them as gang members. Only, 5% of the respondents were living by themselves.

Table 3 EDUCATIONAL LEVELS OF RESPONDENT'S CAREGIVERS

Category	Frequency	Percentage
No Education	15	37.5
Primary Education	8	20
Secondary Education	15	37.5
Tertiary education	2	5
Total	40	100

The purpose of this table was to give information about the education attainment of parents/guardians of the respondents. 37.5% of the respondents' parent and guardians have no education. 37.5% of the respondents' parent or guardians have attained secondary education whilst 20% attained primary education. 5% of them have accessed tertiary education.

Table 4 FACTORS THAT LED TO JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Abuse and Neglect of Parent/ Guardian	6	15
Poor Socio-economic Status	10	25
Fear of Peer Rejection and Wrong Peer Associations	12	30
Lack of Parental Supervision	9	22.5
Parental or Sibling Crime History	1	2.5
Single Parents Homes	2	5
Total	40	100

The table above depicts the factors that these Juvenile Delinquents identify as causes for Juvenile Delinquency. The highest factor identified was fear of peer rejection and wrong peer association as 30 % of them agreed that it was the leading cause leading to their delinquency. The second most important reason leading to Juvenile Delinquency was 25 % which was poor socio-economic status of the family. 22.5 % attributed lack of parental supervision as important reasons leading to Juvenile Delinquency. 15 % stated that abuse and neglect by parents was a cause of Juvenile Delinquency. 5% percent selected as a factor, coming from single parents home. 2.5% selected lack of parental supervision. Lastly 2.5% said parental or sibling crime history was a factor leading to Juvenile Delinquency.

Table 5 CRIMES RESPONDENTS ARE ACCUSED OF

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Murder	6	15
Sexual perpetration (rape)	4	10
Robbery with aggravation	4	10
Sacrilege	10	25
Larceny	12	30
Entering a quarantine home	1	2.5
Conspiracy to Steal	2	5
Wounding with Intent	1	2.5
Total	40	100

The above table shows the crimes that the respondents are accused of: 30 % are accused of larceny; 25 % were accused of sacrilege or larceny in a religious house; 15% of the respondents were accused of murder and 10% were accused of sexual penetration and another 10% were accused of robbery of aggravation. 5% percent of the re-

spondents were accused of conspiracy to steal; the last 2.5% were accused of entering a quarantine home and another 2.5% were accused of wounding with intent.

Table 6 Juvenile Offenders Committing Crime and their Background Characteristics.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	Std. Error	Beta				
B	(Constant)	1.567		1.018	.316	
1	Sex of Respondents	-.178	.263	-.093	-.675	.504
	Age of Respondents	.083	.077	.154	1.086	.285
	Whether Respondents attended school	-.022	.174	-.018	-.126	.901
	Whom respondents live with	-.213	.113	-.335		*.068
	Education Level of respondents parents/guardians	-.201	.076	-.430		*.012
	Whether Parents/guardians have steady income	-.290	.173	-.262		.102
	Whether respondents have been employed	.147	.176	.133	.836	.409
	Whether respondents used addictive substances	-.200	.204	-.153	-.980	.334

a. Dependent Variable: Number of offences respondents have committed

P-Value significant at 0.05 level of significance

The hypothesis was analyzed using the linear regression and the following determinants were significant at P value of 95 percent confidence level: whom the respondents live with and the educational level of parents, guardians of offenders. This infers that the number of offences committed by the respondents depends on the educational level of their parents or guardians and the person they were living with at the time of their crime. Earlier tables have revealed that the educational level of parents or guardians of these youths are low and that some of them although they are still regarded as children were living by themselves or with friends. The family and home structures of these Juvenile Delinquents were sterile and contributed to their present status and circumstances.

Discussion

Findings on the sex of the respondents revealed the majority of the respondents to be males against female offenders. This finding agrees with Butlers and Jeremy (2002) research which point out that there are more males involved in Juvenile crime than females. They attribute this

to the male personality and ego which lead them to crime. The Officers at the Correctional Centres stated that the reason why boys continue to offend is peer influence and that most of the adolescents want to prove to their peers that they are brave. The community members also reaffirmed that boys have a stronger affinity to commit crime than girls as girls tend to be more protected by their parents.

The greater percentage of the respondents was within the age bracket of 15-17 years. This shows that most juveniles only engage in crime when they have almost come of age and understand the consequences of their actions. However they are not too old to be easily rehabilitated and reformed. This follows closely with the findings of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2012) that the most prevalent age for juvenile crime was between 16-17 years. This finding refutes what Synder (2001) states that the ages of the offenders are getting younger. Most of the offenders are within the upper range of adolescence.

The majority of the crimes committed by the respondents were felonies with a few misdemeanors. These offences ranged from murder, sexual penetration or rape, unlawful possession, robbery with aggravation, sacrilege, larceny and entering a quarantine home. The most prevalent and grievous crime was murder which was committed by the male respondents. The findings are against Synder (2001) that stated that sexual offences accounted for one fifth of the crimes committed by American Juvenile delinquents and violent crimes for one twelfth of their offences. The findings of the research state that most youths are being confined for non-violent crimes.

All of the workers in the Confinement Centres stated that anger and aggression are the weaknesses in their characters. The statements confirm Yahaya et al (2010) finding that aggression is on the rise since the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone. Stakeholders blame the parents who are busy doing menial jobs in order to get money and as a result not monitoring their children. Older community members lament that in modern times, they dare not interfere in the upbringing of these youths as they are termed busy bodies.

The respondents were mostly first time offenders. There were only a 2.5% of repeat offenders among the respondents. The Social Welfare Officers stated that this trend indicated that their activities to rehabilitate the juvenile offenders is paying dividends and that they have set up proper follow up strategies to ensure the juvenile offenders are properly reintegrated into society. Information got from interviews conducted with the Officials of the Correctional Facilities in Freetown revealed that the core purpose of the Ministry is the follow up mechanisms to ensure the juveniles are well and properly integrated into society. This finding refutes Hope (2006) that the justice system in Sierra Leone will lead to reoffending even whilst they are still juveniles. When interviewed, NGO workers state that there are no repeat offenders as the situation is so bad in the Correctional Centres that the juveniles dare not re-offend. It is note-worthy that the respondents themselves stated that their present situation is very uncomfortable.

A finding of the research was that more than 32 percent of the respondents had left school at the time their crimes were committed. This was very disturbing as the age of a juvenile is a school going age. Hence, dropping out

of school by these respondents is a cause for great concern. It is the lack of the stimulation and the poor interaction between their homes and schools that drives most of these juveniles into crime. It is interesting to note that there are two set of factors which cause the staying away from school according to an interview with the Officer in charge of one of the Correctional Facilities. One factor is the poor socio economic status and the other is gravitation of juvenile to the wrong choices of negative peers. The finding corroborates De Coster et al (2006) research that found out that academic failure is a strong risk factor for male adolescents' involvement in persistent and serious delinquency.

An interesting finding is that the largest proportion of the respondents lived with friends. This is a major finding as the hypothesis inferred that the person delinquents were living with has a significant relationship with their reoffending. According to the MSWGCA (2011) a major cause of Juvenile Delinquency is the drift from the urban to the rural areas Discussions with FSU workers revealed that many youths are in the capital on their own or living with friends. The study corroborates Roberts (2010) research that peer associations are the most important proximate cause of Juvenile delinquents. The importance of negative peer associations is further pointed out in the research when thirty percent of the respondents cited this factor as a key cause leading to them becoming Juvenile Delinquents.

Parents and home factors were indicted as factors that lead to Juvenile Delinquency. Over sixty percent of these factors involved them. These included: the low socio-economic status of the home, abuse and neglect by the care givers and lack of supervision by the parents. Further findings continue to reveal the poverty of the households these respondents came from. The educational level of parents was low and the majority of their parents did not have a steady income and came from the lower class. Also, the hypothesis tested using Linear Regression Analysis inferred that there is a relationship between educational level of parents/ guardians and the person they were living with before confinement and the number of offenses. These findings corroborate the statements of the Social Strain theorists, theories which underpin the research. Cohen (2008) states that, juveniles who grow up in deprived communities find themselves in situations where, social norms governing behavior are not clearly defined. According to the theorists they use delinquent activities to achieve social status. These juveniles are living in poor homes lacking basic amenities, without parental supervision, some even living with friends and it is pathetic that their lives soon turn to crime.

Recommendations

Juveniles are to be given an alternative to the negatives of life. Workshops and training for parents and guardians and their children are to be done on the streets, in community centres and by other means; scholarship schemes should exist for the less privileged and allowances should be provided for the poor juveniles whilst in schools and technical institutes. To do this proper documentation of Juveniles in Western Sierra Leone and the rest of the country is to be conducted so as to reach those in need.

For those Juveniles who cannot be properly cared for by families the government should establish Juvenile centres. These centres will be different from Correctional Facilities, in that they are not meant to correct, but merely protect. It will serve as homes for those who are prone to delinquen-

cy as a result of high risk factors being present in their lives. These Juvenile Centres should be present in each district, so as to offer an alternate lifestyle to these juveniles. These centres must be made attractive to the youths with schools and centres for vocational and technical education and coaches in Sports and Games. They must also have start up kits or money to start up in life. Government should also be seen as implementing policies that concern the juvenile delinquency eradication. International treaties that are child friendly should be domesticated and adhered to. The Child Rights Act has been passed in Sierra Leone since 2007 but most of its policies that are favourable to Juvenile Delinquents have not been implemented. Government should also set up a system by which it can assess the level of compliance by the general public to Juveniles' rights.

Juveniles who are in Correctional Facilities must have access to schools up to the senior secondary school level, technical and vocational education with workshops and training centres, clinics and all who come in contact with them must be trained in Child Protection rights. Social welfare workers should have follow-up mechanisms for those juveniles offenders released from custody. This is to ensure these juveniles are properly integrated into society, to ensure no discrimination occurs. Schools must have remedial classes for the weaker students and also suspension, expulsion and other excessive disciplinary measures must be curtailed so as not to discourage juveniles to leave schools for the streets. Media houses, print and electronic must spread the message wide against juvenile delinquency

The community also has a role to play: religious leaders and other leaders in the community can greatly assist in spreading the message of eradication of juvenile delinquency. The community is where most juveniles relate so if the members of the community take an active role in guiding these juveniles then they would complement the efforts of the government. It is crucial for the community to get involved as when juveniles become delinquents it is the members of the community that suffer, hence the importance of their contribution.

Finally the courts should ensure that every juvenile appearing as an accused should have available legal representation. Non-Governmental organizations and International organizations must help with more funding in this regard. They are to help with logistics that the MSWGCA need for dealing with juveniles. They must partner with the government and other stakeholders to bring a better change. These organizations and stakeholders must not be seen as acting separately as not much would be achieved.

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