

Perceived Influence of Family Dysfunction on Juvenile Offending

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Abstract

Families play an important role in the development of children and youth. Currently, the rate at which juveniles are getting involved in crime related activities with no respect for law and order is on the rise. According to various studies, there is a general trend among juveniles to participate in at-risk behaviours especially when the family doesn't provide security, support and guidance for their physical, psychological, moral, social and even spiritual development. Numerous researches have been carried out to identify the cause but the focus has been mainly on socio-economic factors such as the neighbourhood, peers and also poverty. There is little literature showing the relationship between family dysfunction and juvenile offending behaviour especially in the Kenyan context. The main objective of this study was to explore the perceived influence of family dysfunctions on juvenile offending behaviour at a Probation Office.

Data was collected using qualitative methods and phenomenological design. One-on-one in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were applied to get information from the participants. Sample population of respondents that is: the juvenile offenders, their caregivers and probation officers was obtained on theoretical saturation through purposive sampling procedure. Data was analysed, using NVivo version 10 qualitative data analysis software. Thematic content analysis was done and themes were identified using both deductive and inductive approaches. Dominant patterns were highlighted and findings presented in form of the identified themes. The five main themes in relation to perceived influence of family dysfunction and juvenile offending emerged

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were: parenting styles, substance use by the parents, domestic violence, family structure, and family criminal history.

The researcher concluded from the findings that the family dysfunctions are perceived to have an impact towards juvenile offending behaviours. Various factors within the family environment can contribute to juveniles' involvement with crime and other factors outside the family also play a role as well. The researcher recommends that various social systems need to undertake the role of sensitizing the public on the relationship between family dysfunctions and juvenile outcomes.

Keywords: *Dysfunctional families, juvenile offending, juvenile delinquency, delinquent behaviours, probation sentence*

1. Introduction

In the past 10 years, there has been an increase in frequency and seriousness of juveniles committing crimes in the world (National Crime Research Center, 2018). A juvenile offender in Kenya is a child between seven and sixteen years, who has committed an act which if committed by persons past this age will be considered punishable as a crime or as an act that is injurious to other individuals or the government (Igbinovia, 2012). Whereas, offending includes a range of behaviours from simple threats, minor acts of physical intrusion like hitting to severely damaging and harmful behaviours like robbery with violence (Sharma, 2013). Internationally, the number of juvenile cases handled are more than 1.6 million yearly, with an estimate of 72,000 taken to custody (Tiampati, 2017). In United States of America (U.S.A), through the FBI juvenile offenders arrest statistics, they reported a 76% in 2008, 78% in 2009 and 2010, 77% in 2011 and 2012 and in the years 2013 and 2014 it was 78% (Masood, 2019). In Africa, statistics on the nature of juvenile criminal behaviours is scarce, and the little available information portrays that it's high in towns where two thirds of the population are between ages 12 -25 (National Crime Research Center, 2018).

According to a research compiled by National Council on the Administration of Justice (NCAJ) for eight counties in Kenya between the years 2016 – 2018, it showed that the police handled 2,758 juvenile cases, with the highest number being 691 in Nairobi County (Wamahiu et al, 2019). The number of gangs dominated by juveniles is also increasing (National Crime Research Centre, 2018). Although various researches have been conducted in order to determine the reason behind the rise, main focus has been on the socio- economic factors like poverty (Bonavila et al, 2017). However, little focus has been placed on understanding the impact of family in regards to juvenile offending. Therefore, in this research the researcher will focus on exploring the perceived influence of family dysfunction on juvenile offending behaviours.

Family is considered as a basic social unit which has a direct impact in one's life. It has various definitions such as: a group of people held together by common birth, marriage, attachment or residence (Mwangangi, 2019). It is mostly assumed that a family plays a major part in shaping an individual behaviours' as some of its functions is to protect, support , provide physical needs and offer moral guidance to the children (Van As & Janssens, 2016). Currently, there has been intense irreversible damages within family systems which ends up affecting its members including children (Nevisi, 2019). Hence families are considered to be an important factor in determining one's involvement in crime (Kerrie, 2016).

A document analysis done on the Government of Kenya National Development Plan (2000-2008), revealed that, most of the plans and programs are not adequate in coming up with policies to prevent juvenile offending behaviours as they mostly focused on eradicating the signs rather than the causes (Wambugu et al., 2015). With little known information about

the causes of juvenile offending, this brings about a gap of information causing poor management of the problem. Based on this background, this study sets to explore the interaction that may be present between perceived family's influences and juvenile offending behaviours.

2. Study Method

Using qualitative method, the phenomenological study design to get participants perceptions was used. The study data was conducted in January and February 2023. The sample population for the study were juveniles from 7-18 years, accorded probation sentence by the court and report to the probation office. The juvenile's caregivers and probation officers were also included in the study. Recruitment of the respondents into the study was entirely on voluntarily bases obtained through theoretical saturation using nonprobability purposively sampling procedure. Contact information of the juvenile offenders and their caregivers was requested from the probation office.

All juveniles who were given probation sentences, consented by their caregivers and gave assent to participate in the study were included. The study excluded any other member of the public who was given a probation sentence as well as juveniles who assented but weren't available during data collection. Written consent was obtained from the probation officers and caregivers by signing consent forms after they were informed of the research objectives.

The researcher developed a socio-demographic questionnaire for all the respondents and a semi-structured interview for one-on-one in-depth interview and focus group discussions. Audio recording which mostly ranged between 45 minutes to an hour of the individual interviews and focus groups was done to ensure that all data was captured. Respondents were

informed of this. The two focus group comprised of 8-10 juveniles and caregivers separately, who had given consent to participate in group discussions. The tools were in English language, however the juveniles and care givers tools were translated to Kiswahili as well. This research explored the relationship between two variables: perceived family dysfunction and juvenile offending behaviour. Whereby, the independent variable was family dysfunction while the dependent variable was juvenile offending.

The data collected was stored in a password protected computer, only accessible by the researcher. Transcription of the audio-records was done while a written summary was obtained from the notes taken. The collected data was transcribed, thematically coded and analysed using NVivo version 10 qualitative data analysis software. Thematic content analysis was done and themes identified using both deductive and inductive approach. Dominant patterns were highlighted and findings presented in form of the identified themes. This study was approved by KNH-UoN, Institution of Review Board (IRB) and registration number P977/12/2021 given. Research permit was sought from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and further clearance from the Ministry of Interior and Coordination of National Government.

3. Results

3.1 Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants

A sum of 31 respondents aged between 14-75 years, were recruited for this study. Out of which: 13 were juvenile offenders, 13 others were their caregivers and 5 probation officers. The researcher found out that with the 31

respondents, saturation of themes was achieved. 18 were males while 13 were female respondents. 7 of the caregivers had reached primary school level, 4 had reached secondary while attained college level. Additionally, majority of them were unemployed and mainly depended on casual jobs. On the other end, 6 of the juvenile were in primary school while 7 of them had reached secondary school. However, 3 out of the 13 juveniles had dropped out of school and were employed as casual labourers. For the focus group discussions, which was conducted on the juveniles and their caregivers separately, the total population was 16. That is 8 caregivers and 8 juveniles.

3.2 Family Dysfunction Factors Perceived to Influence Juvenile Offending

The following themes were identified from the analysis of one-on-one interview of the participants as well as focus group discussions of the juvenile offenders and their caregivers. The themes highlighted the aspects within the family dysfunction that influence juvenile offending.

3.2.1 Domestic Violence

Consistently across, the focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews, the participants mentioned domestic violence to have a contributory effect to juvenile offending. Domestic violence included intimate partner violence and emotional and physical abuse between parents or to the juveniles. According to the respondents, domestic violence can lead to parents separating, juveniles running away from home and involvements with gangs, where they end up being arrested.

One of the juvenile respondents stated *“You cannot watch your mother being beaten up and you are just seated there, that is something that will hurt you so you feel you have to escape from that to avoid getting stressed. Their relationship*

was characterized by just fighting and abusiveness at some point they even made me regret why they were my parents”. JNW Juvenile FGD

This sentiment was also expressed by a caregiver respondent who claimed that; *“It was an abusive marriage both physically and emotionally and at times the children would see all this We separated 10 years ago and it has not been easy I hide what I sometimes do for survival from my children so as not to encourage them on the same though the money is never enough so my son ended up running away and joined a gang.”* JN

3.2.2 Substance Use

Substance use by parents especially alcohol was identified as one of the family dysfunctional factors that contribute to juvenile offending. A caregiver during the focus group discussions said *“My husband is a drunkard and he always comes home drunk there is no time they will ever agree or relate with the children, you know how a father can come and sit down with a child for a talk if he is drunk every little thing will irritate him and he will start being abusive and the child will find ways to always escape his father”.* SA

In an individual interview, a juvenile stated *“I have been brought up by my grandparents since I was young because my mother drinks a lot hence she doesn’t take care of us and she stays in different places, so I had to look for a job. I met friends who introduced me to stealing since I wanted money for circumcision”.* GN

A probation officer added that *“Majority of juvenile offenders have parents who enable their criminality especially those parents who abuse alcohol and drugs.”* GK

3.2.3 Family Structure

Impaired family structures especially single parenting, was viewed as a cause of disability that might lead to juvenile offending. A juvenile highlighted *“I was brought up by my grandmother. My mother separated with my father when we were very young and my mother doesn’t have a job, but I enjoy living with my grandmother because she loves us very much and it is peaceful.”* JNW

This was supported by another respondent, *“I think if there is a father figure in the house the boy will not get involved in crime because he is afraid of his father knowing, so he will be scared to do it, but when you are a single mother and you are bringing up your child alone very few of the boys grow up to be descent boys, most of them have a don’t care attitude because they know there is no man in the house.”* JN FGD caregivers

A probation officer also highlighted that single parenting can lead to juvenile offending, *“Juveniles coming from single parent family have a higher chance of offending especially when raised by single mother as juveniles don’t respect their mothers the way they respect their fathers.”* BA

3.2.4 Family Criminal History

The study identified that some of the interviewed juvenile offenders come from a family with a history of crime. Some of them had either their parents, siblings or extended family members who had a criminal record. For instance, a caregiver reported *“There is a history of criminality from my husband’s side, three of his brothers have been arrested due to stealing. At times I feel like it’s a curse because they once stole some money from their mother, my husband being among them. This was after they sold her shamba and didn’t give her all her money”.* JK

A probation officer also identified family history of offending as a factor associated with juvenile offending *“some of the juvenile offenders come from family background that condone criminal activities or engage in family cultures that seem to glorify immoral behaviours”*. AD

Another probation officer also explained *“There is some genetic predisposition because children from parents with a criminal history are vulnerable to engaging in criminal behaviour”*. JO

3.2.5 Parenting Styles

Different families have different ways of bringing up their children. Some parents raise their children similarly to how they were raised while others come up with different ways. From the data collected, it is evident that how parenting is done can contribute to juveniles' offending as well. Various parenting styles were mentioned as factors, such as neglectful, permissive and authoritarian parenting styles:

A juvenile commented that *“Since my parents separated our father has never played a role when it comes to our upbringing he doesn't pay fees nor buy food. I had to drop out of school and start looking for jobs. I forgave him for that but where I felt completely neglected by him was when he didn't even consider to help me be circumcised. I completely lost my respect for him. I got into crime as I was looking for money to help myself and my family”*. IL

A caregiver claimed that: *“For me, my child was arrested due to his poor behaviours which was brought about by his upbringing by my mother where there were no firm rules. Also, refusing to discipline your child like if he starts to steal small items and the parent knows about it but all she says is “Don't do that again”*. SA

A probation officer concurred, *“I find two parenting styles; permissive and authoritarian that promote juvenile offending and delinquency especially where their immediate environment is supporting negative culture and behaviour”*.

AD

4. Discussions

From the individual interviews and focus group discussions, various factors within the family system were perceived to influence juveniles' offending. They include: domestic violence, some parenting styles, families with a history of substance use, some family structure and family criminal history.

Being brought up in families where they witnessed domestic violence was highly experienced by majority of the juveniles. The violence could be in form of abuse from physical, sexual and emotional towards them. It could also be in the form of intimate partner violence, where the juveniles witness as it happened. A similar finding was reported by Bakari, (2021) where the researcher found a connection between the processes of family conflicts, socialization and committing of various juvenile crimes. The violent incidents contributed to some of their parents separating or even the juveniles being stressed out and hence looking for other means of coping with stress such as drug use. Some run away from home as they feel misunderstood and unloved, so they prefer living in the streets. This result is consistent with previous study in Australia which found a relationship between children who are exposed to neglect and abuse and social problems like substance use and running away from home (Cashmore, 2011).

Families with a history of substance use such as bhang and alcohol posed as a risk for juveniles to becoming offenders. Also parents who use substances or alcohol tend to neglect their responsibilities leaving the children in a dilemma of fending for themselves. A supportive study done by Rathinabalan & Naaraayan, (2017) on the effects of family factors on juvenile delinquency found that maternal unemployment, single parent, paternal age more than 50 years and paternal smoking are major independent risk factors of juvenile delinquency.

Single parent family structured household was prevalent among most participants. Some caregivers admitted not spending quality time with their children as they are busy working. In return, they end up having no idea what their children are up to. Others, had to leave their children under the care of their grandparents who are not firm in exercising behaviour management. A supportive study by Onsando et al., (2021) on influence of family structure on development of male delinquency, found that majority of the juveniles came from families where parents were absent (33.6%). 30.9% came from single parents' households while 23.5% were from grandparents headed families.

Neglectful, authoritarian and permissive parenting styles were strongly perceived to influence juvenile offending. A supportive study to this finding was done by Tapia et al., (2018), where he found authoritarian, permissive and neglectful parenting were associated with the highest number of delinquents. A Probation officer said that most juveniles come from neglected families especially if parents use substance. Supporting this insight, You & Lim, (2015) found that parental abuse and neglect in emotional or physical form had an impact in child's aggression and depression.

One of the respondents stated that they come from families where by being apprehended for committing a crime is not new as three of his uncles have been arrested. Some of the juveniles stated that if a parent is arrested a child will have to steal as well in order to survive. Supporting this finding, a study done by Tzoumakis et al., (2019) on parental offending and children's conduct problems found that parental offending increases a child's likelihood of conduct problems.

5. Recommendations

The researcher makes the following recommendations in regards to the findings:

1. Public sensitization on the association between children's outcomes and family dysfunctions which can be done during public forums where parents are involved such academic days or religious gatherings. Parents can also be taken through modern strategies of behaviour management which are effective and socially adaptive.
2. Learning institutions to hire professional therapist or counsellors whose only job will be to offer therapy or counselling sessions and awareness programs to their students who are experiencing emotional instability, family problems and other related issues like conduct problems from early levels.
3. The juvenile justice systems should be designed in a way that takes into consideration all the risk factors leading to juvenile offending so as to address child related crimes from a solution's perspective rather than from a linear approach of offenses and penalties.
4. Multi-sectorial approach when dealing with juvenile crime. Sectors within social systems such as the

community, schools, religious sectors, non-governmental organizations and government authorities can combine efforts to address juvenile crime.

6. Strengths and Limitations

The study had a couple of strengths such as, this study provides an opportunity to further analyse resources and/or policy related to family dysfunction and juvenile offending for future researchers. Additionally, findings will be shared with the Probation office, which they can utilize as a means of understanding the juveniles in regards to offending holistically. The findings can also be used by other court users apart from the probation office such as the judiciary system, children's department, social work department and police officers in understanding the role of family in regards to juvenile offending for better policies formation.

In limitations, some of the respondents were sceptical about sharing some of their home situations. However, the researcher assured the respondents orally before administering the research instruments about anonymity and confidentiality of their shared information.

7. Conclusion

Juvenile delinquency is being experienced by many countries around the world. Therefore, it is important to remember that a child's behaviour largely depends on the environment that he or she is born or raised in. Thus knowledge on the cause is very important, so that as a community we get to understand how to bring about positive behaviours from children. The study focused on the perceived influence of family dysfunction on juvenile offending behaviours. From the findings it is evident that the family unit has a significant impact on juvenile offending. What children learn and experience plays an important role towards their growth and

development. Hence a toxic family environment can have a negative effect on the behaviours of its members especially children and adolescents. This stems from change in family structure, domestic violence, substance use by the parents, existence of history of criminality within the family, and the different parenting styles. Hence the challenges mentioned above renders the family system dysfunctional and came out as the key variables that influence juvenile offending. Due to various experiences that the study participants have gone through such as witnessing family instability, maltreatment, parental divorce, single parent household. These factors tend to interfere with the socioeconomic aspect, educational outcomes and contributes to risky and delinquent behaviours. Children need stable family environments consisting of protective and nurturing parents, for them to grow positively into their full potential.

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