
Marital Instability and Juvenile Delinquency in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Instability in marriage has led to the retardation of growth and progress of many families and children in our locality; it is also the cause of juvenile behaviour. Many factors have been found to be responsible for the situation by various schools of thought including Poor parental demographic, rejection, emotional hurt, cut-offs, alienation and anti-social conduct are likely to be responsible for juvenile delinquency. Consequently, this study therefore is on examination of the effects of marital instability on juvenile delinquency in Nigeria. The study adopted a theoretical approach with the use of secondary source of data collected from literature, journals, libraries, books and internet. Findings from the study reveal that marital instability can ensue due to unhealthy parental influence and lack of trust; that there is a relationship between juvenile delinquency and parental demographic characteristics. It indicates that juvenile delinquency is fast becoming a peculiar social problem, this is as a result of Low income/educational levels, poor parental supervision, poor family value-system and negative environmental influences were indicated to be mainly responsible for juvenile delinquency in Nigeria. The researchers recommended that Government, religious bodies and the society should make conscious efforts by formulating and implementing a formidable law guiding marriage and restricting undue parental interference and that to-be spouses should be properly oriented on the demands of a successful home before marriage.

KEYWORDS: Marriage Instability, Juvenile Delinquency, Parental Demographic and Criminal Behaviour

Introduction

Marriage is the oldest social institution ordained by God as a social contract between two individuals to become husband and wife. Marriage as ordained by God gives legitimacy to

sexual relationship and reproduction of legitimate children (Sarker, 2007). Marriage is the state of being united with a person of the opposite sex as husband or wife for the purpose of companionship, procreation and maintaining a family (Gove (2006). However, marital instability has become a thing of concern in this contemporary society and this is associated with separation, divorce, and widowhood. Separation and divorce are social phenomena created by either husband or the wife or both, but widowhood is beyond the control of human being, it is related to death and thus universal (Amina, 2008). However, separation may be in two categories: “physical separation”, that is; when the husband and the wife reside separately without resolving their marital tie, “mental separation” that is; when the couple decides to live together in the same household but without having biological and psychological relations. It is imperative to note that when marriage is dissolved in the court of law, it is called divorce, but when it is dissolved by death is called widowhood (Amina, 2008). Moreover, the term marital instability is used to refer to the process whereby marriages breakdown through separation, desertion or divorce (Lesmin and Sarah, 2008). The act of divorce may bring about juvenile delinquency. No wonder citizens, researchers and public officials perceive juvenile delinquency as a major social contemporary concern in Nigeria. Juvenile crimes witnessed in Nigeria include: drug abuse, cultism, bullying, truancy, examination malpractices, prostitution and theft (Ugwuoke and Duruji, 2010; Sanni; Okediji; Modo and Ezeh, 2010). Shoemaker (2010), defined juvenile delinquency as “illegal acts, whether criminal or status offences, which are committed by youth under the age of 18”. From this definition, it is pertinent to highlight the two types of delinquent offences associated with young people, herein referred to as juveniles/children. The first type of offence is a conduct that would be a criminal law violation for an adult, such as rape, burglary and robbery. The other type of delinquent offence called “status offences” are delinquent conducts that do not apply to adults, such as running away from home and truancy (Alemika and Chukwuma, 2001; Alfrey ,2010).

This ugly trend led to the establishment of judicial administrative processes by the colonial administrators to deal with juvenile delinquents (Fourchard, 2006). It is appalling that the worrisome issue of juvenile delinquency still plagues the contemporary Nigerian society in a serious dimension (Muhammed; Salawu; Adekeye; Ayinla and Adeoya, 2009). However, the problem of juvenile delinquency is not peculiar to Nigeria alone. In 2007, the law enforcement agencies in the United States of America reported 2.18 million arrests of juveniles. Alfry (2010) reported that the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics found that 72% of jailed juveniles came from fragmented families. According to World Youth Report cited in Sheryln (2008), the rate of criminal activity among juveniles in groups in the Russian Federation is about three to four times higher than that of adult offenders. Moved by the increasing rate of juvenile delinquency in Britain, Juby and Farrington (2001), examined juvenile delinquency and family disruption in a longitudinal survey of South London males from age 8 to 46. The researchers found that 29% of the boys from disrupted families were convicted as juveniles compared with 18% of the boys from stable families. The researchers concluded that family disruption was one of the contributory factors to the upsurge of juvenile delinquency in Britain.

The increasing rate of juvenile delinquency has become a major social problem globally and locally. Researchers and concerned individuals have traced the preponderance of juvenile delinquency to the increasing rate of family instability among other factors. Juvenile delinquency in Nigeria is a major social problem which affects the whole society and constitutes a serious impediment to development. Children from unstable homes are more likely to run away from

their families than children who come from more stable families (Uwaoma and Udeagha, 2007). Furthermore, an unstable home has an imbalance, and as a result is detrimental to a child's socialization and personality adjustment. The resultant effect is that a child may be more vulnerable to negative peer pressure and may ultimately commit delinquent acts not committed by children from stable families where there is a balanced structure of two parents who act as good role models in the child's acquiring proper roles (Odebunmi, 2007). Children growing up in unstable families are at a greater risk of experiencing a variety of behavioural and educational problems, including; smoking, drug abuse, vandalism, violence and criminal acts than children from stable families (Sheryl, 2008). According to Sheryl, changes in the family can affect the levels of self-control in children. The transitions in the family structure also lead to changes in the organization, monitoring and disciplining of the children. If the changes are widespread, the resulting changes in the adolescent levels of self-control will likely lead to anti-social behaviours.

Factors found to insulate children from delinquency are stable, unbroken homes with a supportive parent-child relationship, as well as a set of parents who provide both a positive role model and the financial assistance needed to sustain an adequate household (Smith & Walters, 2008). Based on these essential elements, it is obvious that every effort must be made to strengthen the family, in hopes of combating delinquency and bringing about a more stable environment for children to learn and grow. On the other hand, Children from a broken home have been found to be two to three times more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems, when compared to children from intact homes (Popenoe, 2005). The result of this is that many parents do not fully grasp their role as a teacher nor do they realize the influence they exert as parents on their children. When these vital lessons are not taught by the family, a child may collapse under the pressures of the outside world, with juvenile delinquency being an almost certain fate.

While it may be that adolescents are being processed through the system more today rather than actually committing more forms of crime and delinquency, they are nonetheless experiencing increased involvement with the criminal justice system creating problems for parents, schools, communities, and other children who are in the presence of juvenile delinquents. Two of the main factors influencing juvenile delinquency are the family structure that a child is exposed to and the relationships adolescents have with parents. As with patterns of juvenile delinquency, family structure in Nigeria has also changed dramatically over the last century, becoming very diverse in today's society. In Nigeria today, crime is common among the young people, many of them are caught in one criminal act or the other. Thus, it is in this light that the researchers wish to investigate the effect of marital instability on juvenile delinquency in Nigeria.

Theoretical Analysis

The theoretical framework on which this paper is hinged on is the Social Control theory as postulated by Travis Hirschi in (1969) as cited in Pratt; Gau, and Franklin, (2011). The theory posits that criminal behaviour and delinquency result from failure of individuals to bond with conventional social groups such as the family and schools (Miller, 2009). In other words, a person is less likely to choose crime if he/she has strong social bonds. Miller (2009) posits that Social Control theory says that to the extent that a youth/a child fails to become attached to the

control agencies of society (for instance, the families and the schools), the youths' chances of engaging in delinquency are increased. Hirschi (1969) identified four key concepts in his social control theory; attachment, commitment, involvement and belief (Alemika and Chukwuma, 2001). According to Hirschi, attachment to others in the society provides the individuals insulation from committing deviant acts; Commitment entails an investment in conventional activities and norms; Involvement is behavioural and measures one's tendency to participate in conventional activities while belief in the legitimacy of social norms and values minimize delinquency (Winfre and Abadinsky, 2003).

Extrapolating from the social control theory, juvenile delinquency can be linked to family instability. Hence, the inability of the family as a social institution to bond with the children as a result of instability and disruptions could be associated with the problem of juvenile delinquency (Winfre and Abadinsky, 2003). Social Control Theory proposes that people's relationships, commitments, values, norms, and beliefs encourage them not to break the law. Thus, if moral codes are internalized and individuals are tied into and have a stake in their wider community, they will voluntarily limit their propensity to commit deviant acts. The theory seeks to understand the ways in which it is possible to reduce the likelihood of criminality developing in individuals (Richard, 2002). It does not consider motivational issues, simply stating that human beings may choose to engage in a wide range of activities, unless the range is limited by the processes of socialization and social learning. The theory derives from a Hobbesian view of human nature as represented in Leviathan, i.e. that all choices are constrained by implicit social contracts, agreements and arrangements among people. Thus, morality is created in the construction of social order, assigning costs and consequences to certain choices and defining some as evil, immoral and/or illegal.

Moreover, Hirschi (2009) has argued that young people are more likely to conform if their bond to society is strong. The theory further postulates that deviance is the outcome of a failure of social control. When individual have strong bond to society, their behaviour will conform to the conventional norms when any of these bonds is weakened. When the bond in the family is weakened or broken, the constraints that society puts on its members may compel an individual to violate the law. Social control theory assumes that all individuals are potential delinquents and criminal "born bad" and that social control, not moral values maintain law. In the absence of sensitivity to and interest in others, a youth is free to commit criminal acts. With the explanation of this theory, if there was no social control there would be little conformity. The theory further postulates that people who are integrated into the society tend to follow its role, whereas, people who are isolated from society may be inclined to break them. The youths who have close relationship with their parents, friends and teachers and who maintain a positive self-image will be able to resist the lure of deviant behaviour.

Apparently, parents, peers and school are the most important social institutions which a person should maintain. Attachment to parents is the most important. The second element is commitment; this involves the time, energy and effort expended in pursuit of conventional lines of action. Social Control Theory holds that if people build up a strong involvement in life, property and reputation, they will be less likely to engage in acts that will jeopardize their position. Furthermore, on the issue of involvement, Hirschi believes an individual's heavy involvement in conventional activities does not leave time for illegal behaviour. He obliges that involvement in school, recreation and family insulates the youth from the potential lure of

criminal behaviour that idleness encourages. On the belief system, people who live in common social settings often share a similar moral doctrine and revere such human values as sharing sensitively to the rights of others and admiration for the legal code. If these beliefs are absent or weakened, individuals are more likely to share in antisocial acts.

Conceptual Analysis

The relationship Between Marital Instability and Juvenile Delinquency

Researches indicate that various exposures to violence within the family or outside the family are important sources of delinquent acts. In other words, if violence encompasses all emotional environmental aspects of the juvenile's life, he is more likely to engage in delinquent activities (Hagan and Foster, 2001). Families behaviours particularly parental monitoring and disciplining seem to influence association with delinquent peers throughout the juvenile period (Cashwell and Vacc, 2004). A long history of research has further linked family dysfunction with future criminal offending, in part because parents monitor and provide nurturance to children. It is thought that the loosening of bonds among family members may result in more criminal involvement. In most cases, delinquents have been viewed as individuals who come from less-intact families often referred to as "broken homes". Typically, the term "broken home" has been operationalized to mean "children residing in single-parent households or any type of household other than a household in which both biological parents are present". In contrast, an "intact family" usually refers to a nuclear family arrangement in which both biological parents reside in the household with their biological children. "Intact family arrangements" differ from other modern-day family arrangements including single-parent arrangements, two-parent arrangements involving a step-parent, extended family arrangements, and the adoptive or foster family arrangement (Kierkus and Bauer, 2002). A study by Demuth and Brown (2004), demonstrates that broken homes are associated with juvenile delinquency but also that family arrangements are not just a broken home issue. Specifically, the researchers found that levels of juvenile delinquency were much higher in teenagers residing with single fathers and lowest among teenagers who were part of a two-parent household. The researchers suggest that higher levels of delinquency among children residing with their fathers were due mainly to inadequate parental involvement in a teenager's life. They drew the inference that overall, the lack of supervision and the absence of close relationships between the teenager and his parents are factors that influence delinquency.

However, Hoffman and Johnson (2008), in their findings suggest that a broken home is associated with juvenile delinquency. However, these researchers did not find any significant evidence of increased juvenile delinquency associated with whether the child resided with the father or mother. Other researchers have found that many family characteristics and family environment influence juvenile delinquency behaviour. For example, the number of people in a family, inconsistent parenting, familial problems, child neglect, and the children's attachment to parents (Derzon and Lipsey, 2000; Wasserman and Seracini, 2001). Changes in family arrangements emerge for reasons including separation, divorce, and sudden death of a parent, unemployment, and sequel of substance abuse (Demuth and Brown, 2004). The family is very important in creating a law-abiding child; whereas truancy and school drop-outs are disturbing issues confronting adolescents, parents, and teachers alike. Continued efforts to decrease the number of delinquent acts has led many researchers to investigate the underlying factors that lead

to juvenile delinquency. Researches indicate that the family environment is an important variable in the development of delinquency. Gorman-Smith and Tolan (2008), discover that parental conflicts and parental aggressiveness predicted violent offending whereas lack of maternal affection and parental criminality predicted involvement in property crimes. In another study conducted by Gorman-Smith; Sheidow; Tolan and Henry, (2001), data showed that children are more likely to resort to violence if there is violence within the relationships that they may share with their family. Thornberry (2007) posits that children who live in homes with only one parent or in which marital relationships have been disrupted by divorce or separation are more likely to display a range of behavioural problems including delinquencies than children who are from two parent families. Wright and Wright (2004), study shows that single parent families produce more delinquent children than two-parent families. In consonance with this, Muehlenberg (2002), research findings stress that the very absence of intact families makes gang membership more appealing. According to Wright and Wright (2004), two-parent families provide increase supervision and surveillance on property while single-parenthood increases the likelihood of delinquency and victimization simply by the fact that there is one less person to supervise adolescent's behaviour. Many familiar variables have further been studied in an attempt to better understand the etiology of delinquency. Flannelly *et al.* (2009), report that adolescents without parental supervision during and after school hours are more likely to engage in delinquent acts. Featherstone, Cundick and Jensen (1993), claim that youth from intact or two parent families are less likely to report school problem than are children from single-parent families.

Furthermore, Clark and Shields (2007), in their study found a correlation between familial communication and juvenile delinquency asserting that the level of communication within the family among its members may significantly contribute to delinquency. Cashwell and Vacc (2006) investigated the role of family cohesion and found that a cohesive family environment reduces the chances of delinquent behaviours. Similarly, Shields and Clark (2005) found that low levels of adaptability in the family results in higher levels of delinquency. It is apparent that there appears to be a relationship between family arrangements and delinquency in juvenile. Furthermore, Sanni et al (2010) and Goeke-Morey, (2014) have produced the following manifestations of juvenile delinquencies in secondary schools in Nigeria. These include: cruelty, bullying, fighting, vandalism, roughness during games, use of foul language, stealing, lying, cheating, examination malpractice, gambling, truancy, drug abuse, noise-making, disobedience, stubbornness, apathy, untidiness, failure to wear correct school uniform, reading of pornographic materials, sexual immorality, mob action, loitering, and carrying of weapon. Bringing into perspective the preponderance of juvenile delinquency, Edelman (2005) discovers that about 1,234 youths run away from home and 2,255 teenagers drop-out of school each day. Every five minutes, a juvenile is arrested for some kind of violent crime, and every two hours a child is harmed with a weapon. Without doubt, the problem of juvenile delinquency in secondary schools is a grave one. Going by statistical data available on the frequency, intensity and diversity of juvenile delinquency, it appears that in the war against juvenile delinquency, the adult society is steadily losing ground on every front.

Causes of Marital Instability

❖ Impotency on Either of the Spouses

Impotency is one of the causes of marital instability. This is the situation where the husband cannot impregnate the wife because of lack of erection and which does not allow fertilization to take place. This problem also arises from the wife if she is unable to produce children. Childlessness is a very great problem in marriages, especially in Nigeria where traditionally some people's aim of getting into marriages is to raise children who will bear their names in future. As a result of that, any marriage that does not bear issue does not mostly survive. In most cases the man may be forced to marry another wife or to look for means of getting a child no matter where the child comes from.

❖ **Poverty and Economic Problems**

According to Agusiobo (1995) and Odoh (2003) they posited that one of the major problems that contributed to the instability of marriage was poverty. Marriage according to him, no matter how well the intention is when marriage lacks material needs for sustenance, it becomes a problem. In some homes the maintenance of the wife and children becomes so difficult that the wife has no option than to seek those things needed outside their homes. For instance, the woman may start having extra marital affairs in trying to meet up with family needs. And this can result to disagreement thereby leading to separation or divorce.

❖ **Parental Influence**

This is another of the cause of marital instability and it contributes to marital instability in many ways. It could be interference from the wife or husband parent's side; especially the mother in-law. The mother in-law often is too protective of their children thereby creating trouble between the couples which can later lead to instability of the marriage. They (parents) want to look into everything and to make sure that their sons are not cheated. They want to make sure that their daughter in-laws do not use up their entire son's money on expensive wrappers. The parent especially mothers, on the other hand, will make sure that their daughter gets all the respect due to them without asking her if she gave enough respect to her husband's people.

❖ **Lack of Trust and Personal Lapses**

One of the commonest causes of marital instability is lack of trust. Some marriages are contracted nowadays without genuine mutual understanding between couples. Some wives are fond of accusing their husband's falsely, whenever their husband stay out late, the only thing that will come into their mind is that their husbands might have gone to see another woman even when they are innocent. In some homes, husbands suddenly change their character towards their wives; they would no longer care about the welfare of their wives. In such homes where trust is lacking, the result is a breakdown of such unions.

Effect of Marital Instability on the Growing up Children

❖ **Peer Group Influences**

When parents are not in good terms, they will not have time to bring up their children in a proper way, thereby the children learn from their peer group. The children do whatever their peer's do not caring to know if such acts are wrong or not. They may learn all sorts of vices like armed robbery, drug pushing, and prostitution from their peers.

❖ Lack of Love

Children from divorce or separated homes usually lack love. Love is the basic ingredient which forms the basis of all life on earth. It is a feeling which cannot be quantitatively measured but which nevertheless is vital for the coexistence of all forms of living beings on this planet. Love between parents and their children forms the basis for any upbringing. It is not merely confined to the likes of upbringing but goes a long way in deciding the emotional quotient (IQ) of an individual. There are several ways in which parents can show their affection and love toward their children, some of them are saying: "I love you" and other words of affirmation. These three simple plain words can lend a huge assurance to your children. Although many would argue that saying is not everything, but saying conquers half the battle! The words bridge the emotional gap which exists between parents and their children. A simple "I love you" goes a long way toward developing and then strengthening a relationship. This is further strengthened by the development of some rituals such as a bedtime stories or a game of baseball with your kid. Such a gesture makes him or her believe that you as a parent are beside him or her. Love they say is Life, children from unstable homes may not have opportunity to all these parent-child relationships and this can lead to emotional breakdown.

❖ No Sense of Direction

Another effect of marital instability on growing up children is lack of direction. Children whose parents are separated or divorced are usually exposed to all kinds of problem. They usually have no sense of direction in doing things in the right way and have no one to correct them. The child that lacks sense of direction develops habits such as deliquesces, vandalism, pocket picking child labour and some of the social ills which pose threat to the society.

Conclusion

Juvenile delinquency is fast becoming a peculiar social problem in Nigeria, this is as a result of Low income/educational levels, poor parental supervision, poor family value-system and negative environmental influences were indicated to be mainly responsible for juvenile delinquency in Nigeria. Although the problem of juvenile delinquency is not common to Nigeria alone, but that its connection with marital instability is deepening and children from such broken homes are at the risk of experiencing negative peer influence which makes them commit delinquent acts. Indeed, children from unbalanced homes may be faced with behavioural and educational problems. Family conditions can determine importantly whether or not a young male (or female, though rarely) is at risk of having delinquent behavior and ultimately being convicted as a juvenile offender. Poor parental demographic, rejection, emotional hurt, cut-offs, alienation and anti-social conduct are the likely outcomes.

Delinquency amongst juveniles, anti-social attributes of young people, can pose a big challenge to the well-being and progress of our locality. Poor communication, misunderstanding, unresolved differences, marital unfaithfulness, spouse brutality, frequent disagreements amongst couples, topped the contributory factors to marital instability. Therefore, this study submits that couples must promptly react constructively to early warning signs of marital conflicts before they develop into bad signals of cohabitation. So, one approach of reducing delinquency amongst

juveniles is raised consciousness of parental responsibilities and cares towards the young. Again, building a good social welfare scheme that is sensitive to the plights of children from homes with poor demographic/marital outcomes could be useful. In Nigeria, there exist a link between juvenile delinquency and parental demographic characteristics of residents. It indicates that there is a positive and remarkable relationship between marital instability and juvenile delinquency.

Recommendations

- ❖ For couples to overcome the problem of accumulated conflict in marriage, they should promptly and constructively handle early warning signs of marital conflicts before they develop into bad signals of unstable marriage.
- ❖ Considering the possible negative impacts of juvenile delinquency, there is need for leaders and other policy makers to come up with organized social schemes that will first of all, support juveniles from homes with poor demographic profiles and inculcate good morals among them.
- ❖ The major steps needed to checkmate marital instability and juvenile delinquency include formalization/legalization of marital unions, and raising fewer number of children as well as attending workshops and establishment of pre-marital courses in basic education.
- ❖ Government, religious bodies and the society should make conscious efforts by formulating and implementing a formidable law guiding marriage and restricting undue parental interference and that to-be spouses should be properly oriented on the demands of a successful home before marriage.

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