

# FAMILY STRUCTURE AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY: CORRECTIONAL CENTRE BETAMBA, CENTRE PROVINCE OF CAMEROON

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The relationship between family structure and juvenile delinquency was explored in a purposive probability sample of 120 adolescents of the Betamba children's correctional center using a questionnaire. The use of quantitative statistical analysis revealed the following significant relationships: (1) Juvenile delinquents mostly come from homes in which the parents are married; (2) The moral education of juvenile delinquents is undertaken more by others than their biological parents; (3) Most delinquent children come from the lowest socio-economic stratum of society; (4) About two-thirds of the juvenile delinquents come from homes where 7 persons and above live under the same roof; (5) Most parents of our respondents have low paid jobs which keep them for long periods away from their children. A growing number of parents need additional socio-economic support, development of vital skills of responsible parenting, in order to adequately manage periods of rapid social change and simultaneous multidimensional challenges.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

According to Wright and Wright (1994), the family is the foundation of human society. Children who are rejected by their parents, who grow up in homes with considerable conflict, or who are inadequately supervised are at the greatest risk of becoming delinquent. Adolescence is a time of expanding vulnerabilities and opportunities that accompany the widening social and geographic exposure to life beyond school or family. Understanding the nature of relationships within the family, i.e. family adaptability, cohesion, and satisfaction, provides more information for understanding youth behavior (Cashwell & Vacc 1996). Cohesiveness of the family successfully predicts the frequency of delinquent acts for non-traditional families (Matherne & Thomas 2001). Family behaviors, particularly parental monitoring and disciplining, seem to influence association with deviant peers throughout the adolescent period (Cashwell & Vacc 1994).

Juby and Farrington (2001) claim that there are three major theories that explain the relationship between disrupted families and delinquency; trauma theories, life course theories, and selection theories. Trauma theories suggest that the loss of a parent has a damaging effect on children, most commonly because of the effect on attachment to the parent. Life course theories focus on separation as a long drawn out process rather than a discrete event, and on the effects of multiple stressors typically associated with separation. Selection theories argue that disrupted families are associated with delinquency because of pre-existing differences in family income or child rearing methods.

The family is thus the most natural environment for human development but it is however important not to over-idealize the former, at least in its assumed traditional stable form, since it now seems to be in crisis, as can be seen from statistics worldwide (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 1984). For instance, “In the family system of every human society, incomplete families emerge due to various reasons – demographic, economic or social: such as the death or divorce of a spouse, partition of the family, or migration” (UNESCO, 1991, P. 11).

The dominant family pattern in Cameroon is the extended or joint family. Although descent is mainly patrilineal, there are a few matrilineal cultures, like the Kom, and most people maintain close ties to their maternal relatives. Although the basic forms and functions of the family have survived across millennia of history and cultural evolution, they now co-exist, sometimes competing, with the multiple images from “modernity” (Nsamenang, 1998), particularly in urban centers. This study is an attempt to find out to what extent the Cameroonian family structure has changed, and the incidence of this evolution on the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency.

## **HYPOTHESES**

The following are the hypotheses of the study:

1. Delinquents usually come from broken homes through divorce, separation, desertion, death of one or both parents;
2. Delinquents have had inconsistent moral education;
3. Delinquents come from families in the lowest socio-economic stratum of society;
4. Delinquents come from overcrowded homes;
5. Parents of delinquents spend little time with their children due to job constraints.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research design adopted for this study is the evaluative survey research method, in the sense that it seeks to present family structure as source of delinquency. The population for this study includes all Cameroonian adolescents who are found centers for re-education and subsequent reintegration into the society. The sample for this study is made up of one hundred and twenty adolescents of the Betamba Re-education Institution of the Central Province of Cameroon. The purposive sampling technique is used for this study because institutes for re-education have already categorized their inmates, making them the most socially representative for the study of delinquency.

The instrument for data collection is a questionnaire made up of 19 items. Most of the questions are close-ended to facilitate answering and scoring, some being open-ended for provision of supplementary information. The items in the questionnaire include personal data, matrimonial family status of respondents, quality of moral education, socio-economic status of family, level of education of respondents, number of persons living in their homes, and crimes committed. Data analysis was through simple quantitative analyses, i.e. percentages, means, and modes.

## **FINDINGS/ANALYSES**

Data analysis revealed the following findings:

- All the respondents of the study are above 10 years of age, indicative of the onset of adolescence, with its correlates of the search for identity and role integration.
- 66.1% of the respondents' parents are legally married, and supposedly living under the same roof.
- Only 43% of the respondents receive moral education from their parents, with friends and in-laws accounting for 39.2%.
- 87.9% of the fathers of our respondents have lowest paying jobs, 10.8% of them are unemployed, and 66.1% of our respondents' mothers are jobless housewives, whilst 33.9% of them have the lowest paid jobs. These statistics reveal a situation of general financial hardship.
- 82.15% of the homes of this study have between four and fifteen residents, i.e. 5 persons, 19.65%, 8 persons, 32.15%, 11 persons, 16.07%, and 14 persons, 14.2%. Overcrowding characterizes the homes of the respondents of our study.
- 73.1% of the fathers of our respondents are employed in jobs that generally keep them away from their children for very long periods of time, and at all hours of the day and week. If we add to this percentage 10.8% of unemployed fathers, we have 83.9% of fathers who are home for short, unpredictable periods of time. 33.9% of the mothers of our respondents are either engaged in jobs or activities that are both low paying and with heavy time constraints.

### **HYPOTHESIS 1:**

My first hypothesis states that delinquents come from homes that are dysfunctional through divorce, separation, desertion, and death of one or both parents. Statistics collected suggest that 66.1% or about three-fifths of the children come from two parent homes. This is contrary to our hypothesis which predicted that most delinquents come from broken homes. Furthermore, 16.05% of the children come from homes in which their parents live apart through divorce or temporary separation, whilst 5.35% of the children do not know their fathers. Finally 12.5% of the respondents have either lost one or both of their parents. Generally speaking, the composition of families is one aspect of family life that is consistently associated with delinquency. It is assumed 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 behavioral problems including delinquency, than children who are from two parent families (Thornberry, et al. 1999).

If we consider broken homes as first indicator and causal agent of juvenile delinquency, our first hypothesis is unconfirmed by collected data, since only 5.35% of the children's parents are divorced, whilst as earlier reported 66.1% of them are married. Looking at the second aspect of dysfunctional homes, i.e. separation of parents, we have a percentage of 10.7%, indicating a small but significant tendency of delinquents coming from families in which the parents are not living in the same home. Thirdly, we find out that if 5.35% of the children do not know their fathers, and 7.2% of the latter are dead, then 12.55% of them live with their mothers. Furthermore, 3.5% of the respondents of this study have lost their mothers, while only 1.8% of them are orphans. From the preceding statistics, we immediately realize an inversion of the relationship between the general index of family stability (married parents), thought to account for less delinquent children, and those traditional causal factors of delinquency (divorce and separation of parents, orphaned children, bastards, single parents). From this study, the latter categories produce less delinquent children than the former, and goes contrary to a number of studies which show a very real connection between delinquent and/or criminal behavior, and single parent families. Wright and Wright's (1994) research shows that single parent families, and in particular mother-only families, produce more delinquent children than two parent families. Indeed the very absence of intact families makes gang membership more appealing (Muehlenberg 2002). Contrary to the supposition that the institution of marriage acts as a culture's chief vehicle to bind parents to their children, and that two parent households have a reduced rate of juvenile delinquency (Wright & Wright 1994), this study proves that most delinquents come from two parent households. What factors can account for this evident paradox?

1. Joblessness and economic hardship are major impediments to family cohesion and viability, with socio-cultural mutation facilitating the emergence of "underground, shadow parents" who acknowledge or not paternity/maternity, but do not actively, consistently, and positively participate in the holistic development of their children.

2. The predominant fact of 66.1% of the juvenile delinquents in this study coming from two parent families indicates that the latter are most likely “cohabiting two parent families, and not “really intact two parent families”.

## **HYPOTHESIS II**

Despite the fact that 66.1% of our respondents' parents are married, 10% have had moral education from their fathers, 32.2% from their mothers, 28.5% from friends, 10.7% from in-laws, and 17.8% from aunts, uncles, brothers, in-laws, stepparents and grandmothers. Tchombe's (1993) intergenerational study shows that the power structure of the Cameroonian family varies according to whether the family is nuclear, polygynous, or single parent. A typical Cameroonian father exerts considerable influence and wields enormous control over family resources and is expected to control what happens within the family, to the extent of deciding whether or not his wife or children should engage in activities outside the home (Nsamenang, 1987a). Any deviation from the expectation threatens a man's status, giving him the leeway to handle challenges to his authority as insurrections.

The statistics of our study reveal contrary to the preceding traditional image of the Cameroonian "super-father", a figure that accounts for only 10% of the input for the moral education of his children, especially the boys. The "subordinate womenfolk", i.e. mothers, aunts and grandmothers account for up to 42.9% of the moral education of our respondents. Certain deductions can be made from the preceding data:

- Traditional Cameroonian culture acknowledges and sanctions the authority of the father over his family, but fails to specify a routine childcare role for him. The apparent scientific neglect and/or devaluation of the role of the Cameroonian father in family life and the development of children stands in sharp contrast to the social visibility and high esteem accorded the father in the culture.
- A father who is tender and nurturing toward infants and young children, like the Aka forager father (Hewlett et al., 1998), is regarded as effeminate or otherwise behaving inappropriately (Nsamenang, 1987a). This situation is a paradox in which fathers represent authority figures, maintaining both a rigid attitude and emotional non-involvement with their children.
- In contemporary Cameroonian families, parents are struggling to handle the conflict between traditional and modern directives regarding parenting, a state of affairs that is confusing for many parents. This scenario has been complicated by social and economic demands that require men, especially urban fathers, to spend more time away from home rather than doing things with children to earn the label of "good father." Consequently, some children are growing up with only vague ideas of what a father really is.
- The values of Cameroonian parents create the conditions that permit children to spend more time within the peer culture than in parent-child dyads. Consequently, most toddlers in Cameroon learn more from each other than from their parents or other adults (Nsamenang, 1992c; Nsamenang & Lamb, 1994, 1995). In this way, the responsibility for the development of toddlers falls less on parents, especially fathers, who "raise" them and more on children themselves "coming up" or emerging within the peer culture (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995). Parental values thus indirectly prime or socialize the norms that foster children's self-emergence and creativity. This form of indirect parental influence is effective because a mechanism of self-regulation exists within the peer culture due to the power

inherent in the expectations and directives of absent parents whose direct intervention is no longer needed. (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995) imply indirect parental impact on children when they affirm that events which occur in the context of parent-child interaction affect children's social behavior in other settings and at later times.

In my opinion, parents especially fathers, have moved from being authoritarian and emotionally distant from their children, and have nowadays become indirectly concerned with the socialization and emotional development of their children. There is the generation of an ambivalent father image which is at once "domineering", "inaccessible" and "delegating of the socialization process" to peer culture. In other words Cameroonian fathers have evolved from being authoritarian (exerting absolute control over their children without much expression of warmth and affection, i.e. "Just do it or else" approach), to becoming permissive (control is given over to children, rules are few if any and are inconsistently enforced, with parents feeling "helpless" or "indifferent", i.e. "Do anything you want", "I don't care what you do"). Secondly, it is ascertained that children of authoritarian parents do not learn to think for themselves, and understand why their parents are requiring certain behaviors. This parenting style causes children to be not even "egocentric", and to consider moral behavior on the basis of fear of domineering, uncompromising parent figures. With the current socio-economic mutation of the Cameroonian society, the latter whilst attempting to preserve the authoritarian stereotype have been forced to become "unconsciously permissive" in parenting style which is inappropriately termed "indirect parental impact on children". Nsamenang and Lamb (1995) also say "This form of indirect parental influence is effective because a mechanism of self-regulation exists within the peer culture due to the power inherent in the expectations and directives of absent parents whose direct intervention is no longer needed."

I think on the contrary that the traditional Cameroonian inflexible authoritarian parenting style has become dysfunctional and redundant in the contemporary socio-cultural and economic setting, creating a "moral vacuum". The result is an "unconscious projection" of the responsibility of the moral education of adolescents to "peer culture members and siblings" who have not yet been freed from the stigma of a lingering authoritarian parenting style legacy. In effect there is "moral fragmentation", in which transitory, inconsistent and even contradictory norms coexist and converge on the existing "moral vacuum", in the backwash of which emerge complexes of parental helplessness, indifference and outright neglect of moral education of their children. The statistics of this study confirm the current trend, in the sense that though 66.1% of the respondents come from two parent homes, only 43% of their moral education is from the latter, with fathers and mothers accounting for 10.8% and 32.2% respectively, and 57% of their moral education coming from aunts, uncles, brothers, friends, in-laws, stepparents and grandmothers. The latter percentage is not necessarily a reflection of traditional extended family collective moral education and socialization of children, as much as it is more indicative of parental social helplessness and growing neglect of their traditional parenting roles.

### **HYPOTHESIS III**

The third hypothesis states that juvenile delinquents come from the lowest socio-economic stratum of society. Except for one out of the 120 respondents of this study whose father is a pharmacist, 87.9% of the fathers of the rest have lowest paying jobs that can range in monthly salary from 20.000frs CFA to about 50.000frs CFA, (between 40 to 100 \$). Fathers falling in this category as revealed by this study are trader, police constable, farmer, driver, painter, builder, storekeeper, clerk, hunter, nurse, secretary, mechanic, barber, cook, and dockyard worker. These jobs are not only the lowest paid ones in the Cameroonian context, but they are also the most associated with “drop outs” from the formal educational system of this country, with the corollary of negative social, and self esteem. Secondly, 10.8% of the fathers of our respondents are unemployed. Furthermore, 66.1% of our respondents’ mothers are jobless housewives, whilst 33.9% of them have the lowest paid jobs like tailor, farmer, nurse, cook, trader, clerk and secretary. But what we may ask are other aggravating factors that compound this fact?

- It is paradoxical that most of the housewives of our study, i.e. 66.1%, are jobless, implying that they are mostly economically disempowered, and more tragically cut off from their traditional agrarian setting where the skill mostly needed was farming. They can hardly be integrated into the mainstream of the job market fields of contemporary Cameroonian society, since they either do not have the requisite skills and abilities, or the latter are undeveloped.
- Most fathers, i.e. 98.7% of the fathers of our respondents are either unemployed, 10.8%, or have the lowest paying jobs, 87.9%.
- The causal link between low socio-economic status and juvenile delinquency can be considered on the premise that children from such homes lack a consistent and adequate supply of basic amenities such as books, fees, clothing, food, medicines. The penury of the latter facilities is compounded by permissive moral education, home overcrowding, and long and regular absences by low paid working parents, thereby giving the “abandoned children” the leeway for deviant behavior. This assertion can be confirmed by both the level of education and antisocial behavior the respondents of this study exhibit, as reflective of the socio-economic status of their parents. From the statistics of the study, 87.6% of the respondents are drop outs from primary school, whilst 12.4% have equally dropped out from forms one (10.7%), and three (1.7%). These dropout levels are more related to the socio-economic status of parents who might not be able to afford fees and basic school requirements for their children, and also the fact that these parents are permissive and thus indifferent to their children’s educational predicaments.
- Furthermore some of the crimes committed are in my opinion more indicative of family socio-economic problems than the personalities of the respondents. In this wise, stealing accounts for 29.1% of the crimes committed, most likely due to the inability of parents to provide regular and substantial meals to their offspring. 22.4% of the respondents run away from school, not I think because they are unintelligent, but most likely since their parents are unable to provide basic school requirements, remain indifferent, unavailable, unable to follow up on school performance, and are most likely unconcerned about the consequences. Thus

when children run away from school, which performs a vital function of keeping the former occupied while working parents are at their job sites, they might most likely avoid going home because their parents might not be home, there might be no food for them, and overcrowding could push them to loaf in the streets, increasing the probability of getting involved in deviant behavior, but not of the violent kind.

#### **HYPOTHESIS IV**

Hypothesis four states that juvenile delinquents usually come from overcrowded homes. The smallest number of persons living in the homes of our respondents is either at the lowest extremes of 3 persons (8.93%), or the highest extreme of 16 and above persons (8.92%). In other words, in 82.15% of the homes of this study, there live between four and fifteen persons, i.e. 5 persons (19.65%), 8 persons (32.15%), 11 persons (16.07%), and 14 persons (14.2%). Traditionally in Cameroon, the man and his wife or wives are not the only adult members of the household. Adult relatives and friends are sometimes part of the household. In some cases, a man's or woman's children from a previous marriage, pre-marital relationship are also bona fide members of the household (Ellis, 1978). When all the children are added to the adult members of the household, a picture of a very large family emerges. The number of children per West African household ranges from 4.5 to 7.0 in most countries of the region (Ware, 1983). Because family sentiment is passionate, isolated nuclear families are rare.

Statistics from this study, if taken in the light of the aforementioned traditionalist context, might not appear alarming, but will become mind boggling when considered in the light of the overall and earlier mentioned delinquency predisposing variables. These are the low socio-economic status of parents, inconsistent moral education of children through a predominantly permissive parenting style. Overcrowding becomes a consequence of the desire to perpetuate the traditional extended family stereotype, transposed from an agrarian and rural setting, to an urban, cosmopolitan context. The twin variables of fixation on perpetuating traditional family systems while at the same time ill-preparedly facing the unavoidable financial exigencies of urban settings literally create a socio-economic and psychological implosion/explosion of the family. Overcrowding is the "last straw pressure" that "evicts" some children away from homes characterized by absentee parents, permissive moral education, financial hardship and overcrowding. This exodus, forces the children into circumstances in which their a priori psychological, moral and financial vulnerability increases the chances of their resorting as a last resort to delinquent behavior.

### **HYPOTHESIS V**

Hypothesis five states that parents of delinquents spend little time with their children due to job constraints. The low paying jobs of fathers of the respondents of the study have the singular characteristic of also being jobs with heavy time constraints, leaving the men with little or no time for their families. To illustrate this fact, 73.1% of the men are employed as the following jobs: trader, farmer, driver, constable, dockyard worker, builder, storekeeper, hunter, nurse, secretary, mechanic, barber and cook. These are jobs that generally keep fathers away from their children for very long periods of time, and at all hours of the day and week. If we add to this percentage 10.8% of unemployed fathers who are prone to moving around looking for jobs, or just loafing, we have quite a significant percentage of 83.9% of fathers who are home for short, unpredictable periods of time. This prevents them from effectively and consistently carrying out their socializing and moralizing role. In addition to the long absences of working parents, based on the fact they have the lowest paying jobs, they remain incapable of meeting up with their financial responsibilities, thereby aggravating their sense of impotence. Thus a vicious circle is established in which fathers have low salaries, cannot effectively take of their family's financial needs, are forced through guilt to stay away from home for even longer periods of time, thereby increasing the chances of their squandering the little money they have, and finally indefinitely prolonging the "runaway attitude" because of aggravated poverty.

Secondly, 33.9% of the mothers of our respondents are either engaged in jobs or activities that are both low paying and have similar time constraints like those of fathers of our study. In addition, 66.1% of the mothers are jobless housewives. The interesting issue here is that, if up to 66.1% of the mothers are housewives, implying they have more time to spend at home, why then do their children become delinquents? Physical presence at home of mothers because of joblessness might not necessarily be a positive influence in the moralization of children, especially if associated with low or no financial contribution from their husbands. The mother's inability to meet up with their traditional care giving role, their husbands' low paying jobs, and the generally permissive parenting styles are powerful ingredients to nurture an atmosphere of "want", be it physical, moral or financial, thereby favoring the emergence of anti-social behavior among their children.

Furthermore, in a setting of jobs with maximum time constraints, there is the critical issue of parental monitoring of their children which relates to the types of delinquent behavior our respondents got involved in. Monitoring is reflected in the parent often not knowing where the child is, whom the child is with, what the child is doing or when the child will be home. Monitoring becomes increasingly important as children move into adolescence and spend less time under the direct supervision of parents or other adults and more time with peers. Previous research found that coercive parenting and lack of parental monitoring contributes not only directly to boys' antisocial behaviors, but also indirectly as seen in the contribution to their increased opportunity to associate with deviant peers, which is predictive of higher levels of delinquent acts (Kim, et al. 1999). Gorman-Smith and Tolan (1998) found that parental conflict and parental aggressiveness predicted violent offending, whereas, lack of maternal affection and paternal criminality predicted

involvement in property crimes. In another study conducted by Gorman-Smith and her colleagues, data show that children are more likely to resort to violence if there is violence within relationships that they may share with their family (Gorman-Smith, et al. 2001). Contrary to the aforementioned studies, the crimes committed by our respondents are less the outcome of family violence, and are more indicative of families characterized by “lack” or deficiencies in moral education, physical or spatial constraints, and financial disempowerment. 29.1% of our respondents engaged in stealing (low socio-economic status of working fathers, high percentage of jobless mothers), vagabonding (17.1%), late-outings (22.4%), running from school (22.4%), disobedience (5.2%), fraud (1.5%), sadism (1.5%), and drugs (0.8%). I think the low intake of drugs could also account for the absence of violent behavior among the respondents. On the contrary, the behavior of the latter characterized mostly of stealing and running away from home and school, is more I think the direct consequence of their family’s economic disempowerment, permissive parenting style, and parents’ heavy job-time overload. In the absence of moral, psychological and financial viability at home, the children are forced to seek to “survive” beyond the family context. Juvenile delinquency in this case is an escape from a family system which is neither empowered nor empowering. It is the deviant quest for fulfillment due to vulnerability, not necessarily based on hatred and anger, but more out of anxiety, helplessness, hopelessness and despair.

## CONCLUSION

On the basis of this study, I think the Big Five factors of family structure in Cameroon that account for juvenile delinquency are: (co-habiting) married two-parent homes, permissive parenting style, female and male financial disempowerment, overcrowded homes, and heavy job time constraints overriding quality time parents should spend with their children.

The statistics of the present study highlight the facts that the family structure of the respondents is characterized by structural fragmentation, functional dissonance (two-parent co-habiting couples), permissive parenting style (abandonment of children to their devices, indifference and outright parental neglect), financial hardship (lowest paying jobs for parents, with high rate of mother joblessness), general overcrowding, and parental jobs having heavy time constraints leaving them with little or no time for their children. The family structure of the respondents of this study is characterized by father/mother vacuum, moral vacuum, financial vacuum and contracting space. The latter factors render children vulnerable, and force them into the streets in despair. The atmosphere of physical, psychological, financial and moral lack, are conducive for the perpetration of non-violent crimes like stealing, running from home and school. The Big Five factors named above account in my opinion for the existence of dysfunctional Cameroonian family structures portraying simultaneous unresolved contradictions, based on the commingling of traditional and modern socio-economic systems.

The following are areas in which I feel research could be carried out in the future:

1. An exploration of the extent to which traditional family and parental values are being renounced or the degree to which they have changed or are changing.
2. Differences of socialization practices in matrilineal and patrilineal cultures, and effects on child behavior.
3. The effect of paternal, maternal and adolescent role transitions.
4. Role of taboos, patterns of fathering in adult-centered versus child-centered communities, individualistic and interdependent societies, nuclear and extended families, and child behavior.
5. Multiple forms of fatherhood, including and going beyond the biological father to include secondary and surrogate fathers, and the circumstances that affect fathering.
6. Family socio-economic status, self esteem, and juvenile delinquency.
7. The possible implications and repercussions on parents, children, families, and the society of increased father involvement in childcare, and the welfare of families, particularly the well-being of children.

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