


Chapter 4

How Might We Prevent Youth Crime?

Lessons From Research in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Youth crime is a problem throughout the world and the most common methods of dealing with it often rely on retribution and imprisonment as the ultimate goals. This approach of “warehousing” youths through the institution of prison has been argued to undermine sustainable youth development and crime prevention. This paper and its findings are adapted by the author from his earlier field survey on: “Opinions of victims of crime and criminal justice professionals” conducted in Nigeria (Omale, 2009), and suggests initiatives to tackle this problem. A total number of 151 respondents comprising 74 victims of crime and 77 professionals of the criminal justice system took part in this study. This paper is evidence-based research; with a review of relevant literature to support its argument. The paper highlights some theoretical explanations (with a focus on sociological positivism and social constructionism) to explain the complex interaction of the variables which might be implicitly and explicitly implicated in youth offending behaviour in Nigeria and globally.

INTRODUCTION

There have been growing international demands for research information on the causes and strategic preventive measures of youth crime and violence around the world. And the question that is often asked is: why do some youths get involved

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in offending behaviour? And how might we prevent youth crime? To answer these questions, researchers and criminologists have investigated a variety of factors to develop relevant theories of offending and recommend effective interventions (Palmer, 2003). So, understanding the factors that increase the risk of youths being the victims or perpetrators of youth crime is essential for developing effective policies and programmes to preventing it. Hence, the problems associated with youth offending are issues which should interest all of us. But whether they interest us or not, as Justice Oputa (1975) put it: 'they deeply and sometimes sadly involve and concern us rather intimately'. So, a complete or total disinterested attitude towards youth crime and violence is therefore not easy to achieve. But the more serious the youth crime problem is, the more important it is that society should look at it coolly and rationally. If youth crime is becoming a real threat, (as we have seen in Boko Haram insurgencies; Niger Delta Militancy, etc in Nigeria) then, the primary step is to try to understand the phenomena of increase, and the causes of such offending behaviour. Because in the word of Socrates '*Fundamentum Omnius Cultus animae*' (i.e., the soul of all improvement is the improvement of the soul). Put differently, this could mean that, to treat youth offending, we first, need to know something about it, diagnose it, isolate the push, and pull factors, and then prescribe appropriate remedy. Because just as a headache, though unpleasant, is no more than a symptom of an underlying disease, so could the problem of youth crime in Nigeria and around the world, be the outward indication that something is fundamentally going wrong in the society (see Justice Oputa, 1975, Omale 2005, 2006, 2009, 2012). Therefore, understanding the psycho-social and econometric factors that predisposes, and increase the risk of young people being the victims or perpetrators of youth crime and violence is essential for developing effective policies and programmes to preventing it.

So, what should be the response to this endemic and epidemic situation which affects so many youths in so many countries of the world? Is retributive justice and imprisonment the best response? Are tougher laws and policing such as 'operation fire for fire'; 'operation sweep', 'operation flush' as was (and is) the case in Nigeria (Omale, 2005. p.3) or building more prisons and longer sentencing the answer? Are youth offenders to be treated in the same way as adults? In treating young offenders, should our attention be focused on the youths themselves or on the socio-econometric and systemic factors that put these vulnerable groups at risk? (Shaw, 2005. p.2). Perhaps, there is no cap fit all solution because the complexities of youth crime and violence in terms of its causes, and the wide variety of forms it takes in different countries and regions, means that 'no simple or single approach is sufficient to provide lasting and sustainable solutions' (Shaw 2005. p.2). However, are there any lessons to learn from research? This paper present findings from a field survey in Nigeria and suggests initiatives to tackle the problem.

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