

SINGLE PARENTHOOD AND DEVIANT BEHAVIOUR AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

Deviant behavior is on the increase in many parts of Rivers State. This behavior is not limited to the city centres but the rural communities are also experiencing high rates of deviant behaviour especially among juveniles and other young adolescents. This deviant behavior ranges from petty crimes of larceny to the more serious ones such as kidnapping and cult killing. Many of these criminal behaviours are perpetrated by adolescents from broken homes and mostly female headed households. As the economic situation in Nigeria is altering the traditional family structure, and increasing the number of female headed households, criminal behavior tend to be higher among children raised in single parent homes where poverty is higher and parental supervision appears to be very low. This paper, therefore examines the connection between single parent household and deviant behavior among adolescents in Rivers State.

Keywords: Single parenthood, Single parenting, deviance, adolescent, Rivers State

Introduction

Many Criminologists and sociologists have attempted to investigate criminal causation particularly deviant behaviour among adolescents in human society. For instance, the psychological theorists propounded by Sigmund Freud tried to explain criminal behavior by focusing on human intelligence, personality and learning. A significant aspect of the psychological theory of crime causation is the psychodynamic theory, which is centered on the idea that an individual's early childhood experience influences his or her likelihood for committing future crimes. Proponents of psychodynamic theory suggest that an individual's personality is controlled by unconscious mental processes that are grounded in early childhood (Fitzpatrick, 1976) Subsequently, Goring examined the relationship between crime and flawed intelligence and concluded that criminals are likely to be unintelligent and have low social behavior (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2015). Such deficiencies in behavior arising from the psychological development of the child would lead to deviant behavior.

Apart from psychological development, several other factors have been identified as being the cause of deviant behavior that includes family structure, poverty, peer pressure, and exposure to crime (Howell, 2015). But the one that is of interest to this paper is the family structure. For the past 25 years, the concept of the family is gradually changing in Nigeria from the traditional heterosexual family structure headed by a male to increasing single parenting especially female headed household. In the past, it was uncommon to see a female headed household in Nigeria and most African society (Onyango, 2002). In fact, it was a taboo for a woman to be seen raising children by herself without a man in the home. Children born to out of wedlock mothers were seen as illegitimate and were ridiculed in public places, but that is beginning to change (Tijani and Ogunbanwo, 2008).

Although single parent household is still very low in Nigeria, just 16% compared to 74% of both parents households, and 11% of female headed households, and 5% of male headed household, (Zuliaka & Martin, 2013). However, single parenting is becoming a very popular family structure and alternative to marriage in Nigeria. Economic pressure and increasing women education and awareness of their rights have increased

the rate of divorce, and forcing many women to opt for single parenting rather than being in a marriage relationship. Although, the increasing incidence of single parenting and children born out of wedlock is not a phenomenon common to Nigeria alone, this family structure is also becoming popular in most western societies especially America. For instance, Fagan (1999) reported that in 1950, for every 100 children born, 12 live in a broken family, but today, for every 100 children born 60 will live in a broken family. In addition, Fagan reported that each year in America, about one million children experienced the divorce of their parents and 1.25 million children are born out of wedlock. The U.S. Census Bureau (2009) also reported that there were approximately 13.7 million single-parents in the United States, and those parents were responsible for raising 21.8 million children under 18 years of age. Most of the single-parent population is made up of women (Howell, 2015). The problem is that most single parents especially those female headed households are poor, because many of the women are of low income earners, and poverty has been adjudged by researchers as a cause of crime (Howell, 2015). Apart from many single parents living in poverty which increases the likelihood of their children engaging in crime, the Nigeria society lacks support system such as social welfare as found in advanced societies for single parents. Since most single parent families are trying to make ends meet, there would be less time for them to supervise the behavior of their children.

Literature Review

Theoretical Analysis of Deviance

According to Sociologists deviance is any behavior that violates social norms of society, such as criminal act. In understanding the concept of ‘deviance’ three theories would be used namely: structural strain theory, labeling theory and social control theory.

Structural Strain Theory

The structural strain theory was developed by Robert K. Merton, an American Sociologist, as an extension of the functionalist perspective. Theory traces the origin of deviance to the tensions caused by the gap between cultural goals and the means people have available to achieve those goals.

According to Merton, societies are composed of both culture and social structure. Culture establishes goals for people in society, while social structure provides the means for people to achieve those goals. In a well-integrated society, people use accepted and appropriate means to achieve the goals that society established. In this case, the goals and the means of the society are in balance. Merton argued that deviance is likely to occur when the goals and means are not in balance with each other. Thus imbalance between cultural goals and structurally available means can actually encourage deviance.

Labeling Theory

Labeling theory assumes that no act is intrinsically criminal, instead definition of what constitute criminal are established by those in power through the enactment of laws and the interpretation of those laws by police, courts and correctional institutions. Deviance is therefore not a set of characteristic of individuals or groups, but rather a process of interaction between deviants and non-deviants and the context in which criminality is defined. Thus labeling is enforced by agents of the criminal justice system such as the police and court officials, as well as experts and school authorities. By applying labels to people, and in the process creating categories of deviance, these people reinforce the power structure and hierarchies of society. Theory assumes that it is those who hold more power over others in society, on the basis of race, tribe, class, gender, or overall social status, impose rules and labels on others in society.

Social Control Theory

The social control theory was developed by Travis Hirschi, and assumes that deviance occurs when a person’s or group’s attachment to social bonds are weakened. According to Hirschi, people care about what others think of them and conform to social expectations because of their attachments to others and what others expect of them. Socialization is important in producing conformity to social rules, and it is when this conformity is broken that deviance occurs. Theory suggests that most individuals have the inclination and

propensity to engage in deviant behavior at some time, but their attachment to social norms precludes them from actually participating in deviant behaviour.

The three theories above (Strain, Labeling, Social control) can be used to analyze deviant behavior among adolescents from single parent homes in Rivers State. Many juveniles born to single parents particularly those from lower socio-economic background, experience strain especially the desire to succeed but with very limited opportunities, which propel them to deviate. Although, adolescents from homes whose parents are together also experience strain, but those from single parent experience more strain due to the poor background of their parents. More importantly, adolescents from single parent homes that are poor are more likely to be labeled due to their lower socio-economic background than those from well off background. Additionally, juveniles from single parent background tend to have lower supervision in their homes because of the presence of one parent especially the mother. Thus, adolescents from such homes tend to have lower attachment and conformity to societal norms and have a higher tendency to deviate.

Conceptual Review

Meaning of Single Parenting

Single parenting is a parent either the father or mother alone taking the responsibility of caring for the children in the absence of another parent (Ali & Soomar, 2019). While single parenthood is a family or household in which only one parent is caring or nurturing the child or children (Tijani and Ogunbanwo, 2008).

Causes of Single Parenting

Historically, the death of one parent was a major determinant of single parenting. Such parent could die as a result of disease, war, and complication due to maternal childbirth. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, the family structure and demography started to shift due to increase in single parent households (Chapman, Coleman & Ganong, 2014).

One of the major causes of single parenting is divorce. When one of the parties filed for divorce due to incompatibility, it turns the parent who is in custody of the children, which in most cases the mother, automatically a single parent. Another cause of single parenting is teenage or unwanted pregnancy. Single parenting can also be as a result of death of a spouse due to illness or accident including maternal morbidities and mortality (Ali & Soomar, 2019). Other factors include early marriage, societal acceptance of single parenthood as alternative to marriage, increase in women's awareness of their rights and increase in socio-economic status of women (Tijani & Ogunbanwo, 2008). Additionally, cultural and economic changes are also attributed to be the causes of increase in single parenting in Nigeria and most other African countries (Onyango, 2002). However, for Clark & Hamplova (2013), there are two major part ways to single parenthood namely, giving birth before marriage and experiencing a union dissolution through divorce or widowhood. They relied on a study by De Walque & Kline, 2012 covering 13 countries across sub-Saharan Africa that found that out of the seven countries studied, more than 20 % of women aged 14–49 had already experienced a union dissolution. While the findings from this study is relevant but the focus of this paper is not on female headed households, but single parenthood, that consist of both male and female headed households. Although, both male and female can become single parents but female headed households tend to produce children that are likely to become deviants because the mothers' fare poorly due to her lower socio- economic status, and her inability to supervise her children properly due to her spending time to trying to make ends meet (Clark & Hamplova, 2013).

Relationship between Single Parenthood and Crime

Previous researches have not had any consensus as to whether there is a relationship between single parenting or being married and crime. For example, Cross-sectional studies find little or no association between marital status and criminality among previous offenders or more general populations. Similarly, longitudinal studies

also fail to establish a relationship between marital status and criminality (Wright, 1993). In contrast, other sociologists have put up some compelling arguments in support of the assumption of a positive relationship between single parenthood and criminal behaviour. Matsueda and Heima (1987) posit that single parents are less likely to supervise their children effectively because there is only one parent in the home rather than two; as a result, their children are more likely to come into contact with delinquent peers. Secondly, Donrbusch et al. (1985) argue that most single parent homes especially those headed by a woman is more likely to give the adolescent in what he or she can do, thereby reducing the mother's control over the youth. According to Wright (1993), other studies that have found a positive causal relationship between single parent and crime include (Gibson, 1969; Rutter, 1971; Wilkinson, 1980; Canter, 1982; Rankin, 1983; Matsueda and Heimer, 1987; LeFlore, 1988). But Gove and Crushfield (1982) found a positive relationship between single parent and crime for male and not for female. Rosen (1985) observed a positive association between single-parent households and delinquency for male's children in black families. Further, Brady et al. (1986), testing in a clinical setting, found that the children of single parent families exhibited more behavioral problems than those from two parent homes. Conversely, Rosen and Neilson (1982) and Farnworth (1984) found no association between single-parent families and delinquency. Lastly Howell (2015) in her quantitative study of mid-western urban community of Chicago Illinois examined the connection between crime and family structure. She found there was a relationship between family structure and criminal behavior of youth. The home being the first place of socialization for the child and the type of home the child is raised is more likely to shape the child's behavior in the future.

Conclusion

Single parenthood arises due to several factors including the death or widowhood of one of the parent, divorce and teenage pregnancy. Apart from this, single parenting is also becoming popular in Nigeria due to the changing culture due to increasing westernization of our society, and more women becoming awareness of their rights. Most African societies including Nigeria are beginning to accept single parents especially female headed households as another type of family structure rather than the traditional heterosexual family structure headed by a male. Thus, as single parenting is increasing in Nigeria so there is increase in deviant behavior committed by children mostly from such backgrounds.

Although, the involvement of adolescents from single parent background in deviance has led to contradictory findings and conclusions by researchers, but majority of them find a significant positive relationship between single parenthood and deviance. Although, not all children born to single parents are likely to deviate, but overwhelming majority of them particularly those raised by single mothers are more predisposed to committing crime, because of the deprived conditions in which they are raised. Most single parents' especially single mothers are likely to be poor and of lower socio-economic compared to those from double parent homes (Boylu & Ozturk, 2014), which increases the risk of the child engaging in deviance. More importantly, children raised by single parents' particularly single mothers are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems because the mother may be tolerant and not able to apply some level of discipline that are usually applied on children by a father figure, which increases their tendency to engaging in deviant behavior. Additionally, adolescents raised in single parent homes are less likely to be supervised which increases her/his chances of becoming a deviant.

As most families are struggling to survive in Nigeria due to economic hardship occasioned by the fallen oil price, single parents and female headed households seem to be the most affected by the economic downturn. Children raised in single parent households under this economic condition are more likely to engage in deviance compared to those raised double-parent homes. In Rivers State, a significant number of adolescents who engage in deviance such as gang violence and cult killings are from single parent households, particularly female headed households.

In sum, while not all children raised in single parent households are likely to become deviant due to the African support system, however majority of them especially those raised by a single mother have a higher tendency to become deviant because her/his poor background, and low level of supervision over the children behavior. Children raised in such family structure, where supervision and discipline is very low may tend to get guidance from friends and peer groups. Such peer groups, if into criminal activities may encourage the adolescent into criminal behaviors..

Recommendations

I recommend that the government should provide welfare assistance in terms of monthly stipends to assist single parents so that they would be able to support their households and provide for their children.

I also recommend a training and skill acquisition programme for single parents so that they can assist themselves and become self-reliant and do not depend on government welfare support all the time.

Finally, this paper recommends that schools, both public and private, should establish after school programmes for adolescents particularly those in secondary schools, as a way of keeping them off the streets, while their parents are outside the home engaged in activities to provide for their children.

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