Understanding Juvenile Violence in America Society

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Abstract

The problem of juvenile violence has assumed a serious dimension in the American society. This study therefore examines the problem of juvenile violence and the challenge it poses to both the individuals and the society. It posits that the juvenile violence is both a social and health issues in the country and efforts at addressing the problem demands a holistic approach. In an attempt at examining the problem, the study highlights some of the predisposing factors responsible for the problem of juvenile violence and compares the classical with the post-modernism theories and concludes that from the sociological standpoint which conflict theory represent, they do not provide an adequate general theory of crime. The study notes that the social disorganization theory remains a very strong theory at the present time, and the most important finding is that violence among the youths and indeed crime corresponds to the structure of the neighborhood.

1. Introduction

The rate of juvenile violence in United States particularly in the urban centers has increased tremendously in the last decade (Davis, 2009). The media now regularly focuses on youth gangs, and violence in schools. Political, social, and economic factors have resulted in the increasing neglect of youths in the society (Vries & Liem, 2011). The obvious effect of this is the rise in juvenile violence, delinquency, and criminal offenses among young persons, many of whom are alienated not only from their families but also from the society (Johnson et al. 2008). Drug abuse, teenage pregnancies, prostitution, alcoholism, robbery, and drug and gun violence have proliferated among young persons (Davis; Vries & Liem). This brings into focus the problems of juvenile violence in the contemporary America society. In the wake of the Columbine killing and the recent beating to death of a high school student - Derrion Albert in Chicago Street on September 24, 2009 that was captured on video and seen around the world the magnitude of the problem of violence among juveniles in the society has further been brought to the limelight. Considering the immediacy and importance of the problem of youth violence and crime, it is not surprising that courses on juvenile violence and delinquency have become popular in the United States College campuses (Davis, 2009).

The field of juvenile violence and delinquency is replete with many studies (Craine, Tanaka, Nishina &Conger, 2009; Thompson, 2001; Lelekov & Kosheleva, 2008). Despite the abundance of research, the issue warrants additional research because the problem has taken a serious and frightening dimension (Heather & Thompson, 2001) and due to the fact that the issue constitutes a serious problem to parents and the larger society. Parents, authorities of education institutions and even governments at different levels now express deep concern about the problem while mass media also regularly feature public opinion on this issue (Davis, 2009; Lelekov & Kosheleva, 2008). It is now recognized that juvenile delinquency is also a problem among children of the middle and upper classes (Mallett, Dare & Seck, 2009: Odekunle, 1986). The seriousness of the issue at hand has been exemplified by the study conducted by Task Force on Community Preventive Services (2007) which found that over the last 25 years, juveniles aged 10–17 years, who constitute less than 12% of the population, have been involved as offenders in approximately 25% of serious violent victimizations.

Looking at these figures, it could therefore be argued that juvenile violence is a substantial public health problem in the United States. Similarly, crime statistics from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001) indicates that crime rates are dropping among adults. In the case of the teens the crime rate is soaring. The report noted that between 1966 and 2001, 18 - 24 showed a 62% increase in homicides; 14 - 17 showed a 124% increase in murders. Taking into the consideration the available statistics, the situation is expected to worsen in the next decade if urgent measures are not taken.

2. Methodology

This is an exploratory research and information has been obtained through both traditional and computer-based criminal justice literature; and the analysis of historical, theoretical, current issues, trends, and strategies as used in criminology and criminal justice. The study is exploratory in the sense that it seeks to provide insight to the factors responsible for the problem of juvenile violence from different theoretical perspectives on the causation of juvenile violence and delinquency, with special emphasis on social disorganization.

3.   Literature Review

Various studies on juvenile violence and delinquency have attempted to justify the magnitude of the problem to the society. Philips (2006) study confirmed that a positive temporal association between age composition and violence and homicide rates exist within the U.S. counties. The study further revealed that other criminogenic forces, such as poor social conditions that produce higher crime rates also have significant effects on the rate of juvenile violence and other forms of delinquency. In contrast, the need for an understanding of the etiological factors associated with juvenile violence and homicide before designing effective intervention strategies was the focus of Heide (2003).

Howell (1994) examines the correlation between street gangs and crime and concludes that they account for the recent increase in juvenile violence. From the same perspective, another study found that a relationship exists between gangs' activities and juvenile homicide offending and conclude that juveniles are more likely than adults to use firearms, commit homicide in public and outdoor locations, and engage in lethal violence in relation to other felony offending (Atkinson, Brewer & Damphousse, 1998).

The role of peers has been well established in the literature; in fact, in self-report studies, association with deviant or delinquent peers is consistently one of the strongest predictors of an adolescent's own delinquency (Hawkins et al. 2003). Other peer-related factors include limited or lack of association with prosocial peers and involvement in youth gangs (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993). Association with and affective ties to delinquent peers are also strongly and consistently linked with youth gang involvement (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Klein & Maxson, 2006).

As with family risk factors, findings about the role of school factors are also mixed, but there is evidence supporting the influence of some school variables on youth violence. For instance, low bonding and attachment to school predict violence in adolescence (Philips, 2006). Research has also documented the relationship of academic failure or poor performance, lack of commitment and low bonding to school, and dropping out of school before age 15 to youth violence and gang joining (Bjerregaard & Smith,1993; Howell,2003; Kelly & Pink, 1973). Similarly, school climate and perceptions of school disorder/crime have been linked to delinquency, aggression, violence, and gang membership (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001).

Within the community domain, researchers have reported that youths who live in neighborhoods in which drugs or firearms are readily available are more likely to engage in violence than are youths from neighborhoods where these are not widely available (Hawkins et al., 2000). Numerous studies have also noted that poverty, unemployment, the absence of meaningful jobs, and social disorganization contributes to the presence of gangs and violence among juveniles (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Curry & Thomas, 1992; Fagan, 1990).
Contemporary and Post-Modernist Criminological Theories

Criminologists and policy planners have speculated on the cause of delinquency and indeed juvenile violence for many years. They have organized observed facts about delinquency and juvenile violence behavior into complex theoretical models. According to Siegel and Senna (1997), a theory is a statement that explains the relationship between abstract concepts in a meaningful way.

For example, if scientists observe that delinquency and indeed juvenile violence rates are usually higher in neighborhood with high unemployment rates, poor housing, and inadequate schools, they might theorize that environmental conditions influence delinquent behavior. This theory suggests that social conditions can exert a powerful influence on human behavior.

The study of juvenile violence and delinquency are essentially interdisciplinary, it is not surprising that a variety of theoretical models (from contemporary to post- modernist criminological theories) have been formulated to explain juvenile misbehavior. Each model according to Siegel and Senna (1997) reflects the training and orientation of its creator. Consequently, theories that explain juvenile violence and delinquency reflect many different avenues of inquiry, including biology, psychology, sociology, political science, and economics.

From the contemporary theories, the choice theory is regarded as the first formal explanations of crime and delinquency. The theory argues that human behavior is a matter of choice because of the assumption that people has free will to choose their behavior, those who violate the law were motivated by personal needs: greed, revenge, survival, hedonism (Akers & Sellers, 2004). More than 20 years ago, utilitarian philosophers Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham argues that people weigh the benefits and consequences of their future actions before deciding on a course of behavior. Their writings formed the core of what is today referred to as classical criminology. The classical view of delinquency holds that the decision to violate the law comes after a careful weighing of the benefits and costs of delinquent behaviors. Most potential law violators would cease their actions if the potential pain associated with behavior outweighed its anticipated gain; conversely, law-violating behavior becomes attractive if the future rewards seem far greater than the potential punishment (Akers & Sellers, 2004).

According to the classical view, youths who decide to become violent and commit other crimes weigh and compare the possible benefits with the potential penalties, such as arrest followed by a long stay in juvenile facility. If they believe that violent offenders are rarely caught and even then usually avoid severe punishments, they will more likely chose to commit violence offenses and become delinquents than if they believe that violent offenders are almost always caught and punished by lengthy prison terms. Put simply, in order to deter or prevent juvenile violence and indeed delinquency, the pain of punishment must outweigh the benefit of illegal gain (Beccaria, 1977; Akers & Sellers, 2004).

Those who held the argument that crime and delinquency are products of social forces, such as environment and socialization have challenged the concept of rational criminal or delinquent. This is because breakthrough in psychology and sociology showed that human behavior was often controlled by outside influences, such as family, school, and peer relations, and that concept of free will was merely wishful thinking(Craine, Tanaka, Nishina & Conger, 2009; Mallett, Dare & Seck, 2009). Mental health professional argued that delinquent should be treated, not punished, for their misdeeds. According to Palmer (1978) delinquents were viewed as troubled or sick individuals who needed rehabilitation, rather than punishment, this view was known as the medical model of crime.

However, the failure of treatment programs instituted by successive governments and juvenile administrative bodies in United States to rehabilitate known delinquents, coupled with a rising teenage violence and gang crime rate, have made it reasonable to view delinquents as individuals who are responsible for their actions and who might respond better to the fear of punishment than to the preventive influences of rehabilitative treatment (Henggeler, McCart, Cunningham & Chapman, 2012). The solution to juvenile violence and delinquency, therefore, may be the formulation of policies that will cause the potential criminal to choose conventional over criminal ones (Akers & Sellers, 2004).

Another contemporary theory worthy of attention here is the biological school, which argues that crime, and delinquency has their origin in chromosomal imbalance or genetic malformation. According to this school, criminals and delinquents have peculiar genotypic as well as phenotypic characteristics. In other words, behavior is a function of the body structure (Lelekov & Kosheleva, 2008). Things like the shape of the head, the size and shape of the fingers, height, build, can be used to identify who is likely and not likely to be a criminal or delinquent(Akers & Seller, 2004; Mallett, Dare & Seck, 2009). This theory has, however, been sharply criticized on the point that it removes attention from both delinquency and crime and focuses on personal attributes (Bernard, Snipes & Geroud, 2010). Moreover, it cannot be validly proved that the possession of certain phenotypical characteristics in all instances leads to delinquency or criminal acts.

Or, to put the criticism the other way around is it delinquency or crime that build the individual the way he is, or the individual's physical build-up that makes him prone to delinquency and crime? This is the question for which this theory has no satisfactory answer (Akers & Seller, 200. It is important to also talk about the social control theory in the explanation of juvenile violence in the country. In criminology, social control theory, as represented in the work of Travis Hirschi, fits into the Positivist School, Neoclassical School, and later, Right Realism(Bernard, Snipes & Geroud, 2010). The theory proposes that exploiting the process of socialization and social learning builds self-control among the youths and reduces the inclination to indulge in behavior recognized as delinquency and antisocial. The theory proposes that people's relationships, commitments, values, norms, and beliefs encourage them not to break the law (Gottfredson and Hirschi, as cited by Akers and Seller, 2004).

The social control theory therefore seeks to understand the ways in which it is possible to reduce the likelihood of delinquency developing in individuals. The social control theory hypothesizes that those youth with low-self-control are highly likely to commit delinquency (Cullen & Agnew, 2011). Hirschi explains that violent acts are a result of a weakened or broken bond to society (Bernard, Snipes & Geroud, 2010). According to theory, low-self-control among the youths leads to violent behavior, delinquency and violent behavior when the opportunity becomes available. In essence, youth with high-self-control are less likely to engage in delinquency violent behavior because of the ability to show self-restraint. The implications of social control theory is that juveniles are less likely to engage in violent or delinquent behavior when they are attached to others, more involved in conventional activities, have more to lose from committing crime, and have stronger beliefs in the moral validity of the law(Bernard, Snipes & Geroud, 2010; Cullen & Agnew, 2011; Vold et al. 2002). Mechanisms to reduced juvenile violence and delinquency from this theory should include programs that provide jobs in the inner city where delinquency/ crime are more rampant will increase commitment of the youths to the economic system and give the youths more to lose if they got arrested for violent behavior or delinquency (Bernard, Snipes & Geroud; Vold et al.).

There is the socio-psychological explanation of juvenile violence and delinquency, which is mainly founded on Durkheim's 'theory' of anomie or normlessness. Merton (1957), Sunderland and Cressey (1970), Cohen and Short (1958) are but a few members of this school. Merton essentially hold that each society or culture has some goals and some institutionalized means of achieving those goals; that acceptance or rejection of societal goals and the accepted means of achieving those goals require essentially the same learning process.

According to Cloward and Ohlin (1960) learning opportunity is scarce and differently accessible to individuals within the various social strata. In other words, the individual's access to either legitimate or illegitimate means of realizing success – goals within the society is dependent upon his structural location in the system. According to Odekunle (1986), this school also holds that apart from access to success-goals varying with socio-economic status of the individual, individuals also differ in their innate ability to acquire professional expertise in criminal or violent activities. In other words, although a number of people under the same circumstances may desire to commit violent crimes, not everyone will actually commit the crime to the same extent (Cullen & Agnew, 2011).

Another theory from the contemporary theories worthy of discussion is the ecological school also known as the Chicago School. This school focused attention on the community and its impact on the individual. In this regard, the work of Shaw and Mckay (1942) is cited as the most significant contribution in this area and therefore it is worth reviewing. Shaw and McKay demonstrate that certain factors in the environment produce violent and delinquency behaviors and that crime and delinquency are confined to certain specific areas or ecological zones and that an individual is likely to be a delinquent or criminal if he comes from or lives among people in the crime or delinquent zones (Akers & Sellers, 2004; Bernard, Snipes & Geroud, 2010).

This theory arose from a number of studies in some American metropolitan neighborhoods (particularly in Chicago) characterized by poor housing, over-crowding and general slum-characteristics. It is important to note that the ecological explanation is not collaborated or supported by findings in other places. In fact, where some findings in this direction have been recorded as in Oloruntimehin (1973) studies of juvenile delinquency in some cities, the largest concentration of juvenile offenders have been found in that part of the city with comparatively better housing, the so called low density areas, than in the more disorganized areas of the city. Moreover, the ecological explanation tends either to be asserting that slum by itself causes crime or delinquency or that uneven distribution of wealth, as objectified by the disparity in zones of habitation, cause delinquency or crime (Akers & Seller, 2004).

Neither of these implications has been borne out by empirical studies for it has been found that Sweden which is reputed for its lack of slums and relatively equitable distribution of income still has a high rate of delinquency and crime (Odekunle 1986). The proponent of the social structure theory views violence and delinquency among the youth as essentially structural and cultural. It holds that delinquency and violence behavior is a consequence of the social and economic inequalities built into the social structure (Cullen & Agnew, 2011). Even those youths who receive the loving support of parents and family members are at risk of crime, delinquency, and arrest over the life course if they suffer from social disadvantage (Patterson, Crosby and Vuchnich, 1992). Social structure theories tie delinquency rates to the socio economic conditions and cultural values. Areas that experience high levels of poverty and social disorganization will also have delinquency rates (Patterson, Crosby, and Vuchnich). Strain theory is an important sub group of social structure theory and it linked violent behavior and indeed delinquency to the frustration and anger members of the lower class feel when they are locked out of the economic mainstream of society (Agnew, 1992). Emotional strain is the result when desire for middle-class and luxuries cannot be met by the legitimate means available. Anger and frustration create pressure for corrective action, including attacking the sources of frustration or escaping with drug and alcohol (Agnew).

According to cultural deviance theory, adolescent residents of disorganized areas, perceiving tremendous strain and frustration, become alienated from the values of the dominant culture (Bernard, Snipes & Geroud, 2010). The resulting strain and frustration prompts the formation of independent subcultures that maintain rules and values in opposition to existing law and custom. Conflict arises when subculture values and beliefs clash with those of the general culture. Delinquent is not cause then by rebellion against the dominant society but by conformity to the rules of a deviant subculture (Akers & Sellers, 2004). The three branches of structural theory are link here because each maintains that a person's place in the social structure controls the direction of his or her behavior and that culture, environment, and economy interact to influence behavior. Each theoretical branch is an important concept of delinquency (Akers & Seller, 2004; Bernard, Snipes & Geroud, 2010; Cullen & Agnew, 2011).

From the postmodernism perspective, conflict represents an important explanation of juvenile violence, delinquency, and criminality. The conflict theory examines human interactions from different worldview to explain why people commit delinquency and crime (Bernard, Snipes & Geroud, 2010). For example Austin Turk argued that some people play subordinate or dominant role in society and that people learn this through interaction. Therefore, the argument here is that juvenile who commits violent acts and delinquency learn these behaviors within the interactions. They learn how to dominate or oppose to authority (Akers & Sellers, 2004). Thus the manner by which people subscribe to those behaviors relates to age, gender, and race variables. Turks argued further that norms resisters are actually the people that manifest behavior that are called delinquent and crime in the society. Therefore, violent youths who are the subject of the present study are not condition to accept that balance of subordination that exists in the society.

According to the conflict perspective, certain conditions in the society that lead to many people being categorized as delinquent and criminal include the following: when law enforcers, police, politicians and courts believe that the offense committed are serious; when there is a large power differentials between enforcers and resisters(Akers & Sellers, 2004; Bernard, Snipes & Geroud, 2010) . In 1970 Richard Quinney posits that criminalization is done to maintain the current balance of power and to increase the power of those in authority (Bernard, Snipes & Geroud, 2010). Also, it was the argument of Quinney that criminal laws have more meaning than what it is written down because of its circulation or transmission by the media and thus it becomes sensationalized. In essence it is the argument of conflict theorists that delinquent definition is the definition of the segments in the society having power and is enforced by their agents like police and courts (Akers & Seller, 2004; Bernard, Snipes & Geroud; Cullen & Agnew, 2011). Conflict theory has been noted to be a sociological explanation of both delinquent and criminal behaviors and the administration of justice because it explains that social factors are responsible for criminal behavior (Walker, Spohn, DeLone, 2007). In essence, it is an alternative explanation to classical theories.

The classical theories as explained earlier may contribute to juvenile violence and indeed all other forms of juvenile criminal behavior but from the sociological perspective which conflict theory represents, they do not provide an adequate general theory of crime (Walker, Spohn, DeLone). The social disorganization theory is an important theory that explores the ecological characteristics that give room for high rate of juvenile violent and delinquent in the neighborhood/ society.

The argument here is that there are factors that affect juvenile violent and crime rates. Mostly early theories identified neighborhoods that were transient – where the social fabrics of the society were beginning to fall apart. Essential services like education, health care, and housing start to go down and people want to leave. Also the common source of control like religion, family and even social services agencies started to disorganize. Shaw & McKay are very influential in popularizing the theory through the argument that life in a transitional slum area is linked to an inclination to commit crime. Influenced by Burgess and Park, the conclusion was that deviance and conventional behavior values compete with each other side by side (Akers & Sellers, 2004). Equally important to note is the fact that juvenile violence and other forms of juvenile delinquency are neither equally likely in all societies nor randomly spread through a given country. Violence is a pattern within cities as argued by the social disorganization theorists. Persistent high neighborhood violent rates are due in part to the cultural transmission of deviant/ violent values (Vito et al, 2007). Once crime becomes entrenched in a particular location, violence becomes a natural part of the cognitive landscape. Juvenile violence and other types of violent behaviors become a way of life; a means to solve personal and life problems of the young ones. This is exemplified by the study of Hochstetler & Copes (2008) which concludes that exposure to violence and criminal activities in one's neighborhood early and at a young age enable the condition that will rationalize participation in criminal behavior such as juvenile violence even when the young ones are confronted with other viable alternatives.

The most widely recognized theory in this area is Wolfgang & Ferraculti's subculture of violence theory (Vito et al, 2007). The argument here is that in some subcultures, norms and values evolve to support and legitimize the use of violence. In these subcultures, for example, the normal response to disrespect becomes violence as opposed to peaceful and other alternatives. As a result, juvenile violence and indeed all forms of violence are not condemned and perpetrators of violence do not feel any guilt for their actions, thus encouraging the youths to be violent. In addition, the neighborhood is also characterized by high level of gun ownership and drug dealings while the songs and lyrics that glorify violence are widespread.

There is empirical support for the existence of violence-legitimizing norms among residence of impoverished inner city area; however it is important to recognize that such norms do not rise out of a vacuum. Rather, they are tied to the cultural isolation, extreme poverty, and violence that exist in such neighborhood (Hochstetler & Copes, 2008). Additionally, the pervasiveness of violence in most neighborhoods has been exacerbated by the negative influence that these neighborhoods exert on its young population which in most cases a lifelong experience learned on the streets (Hochstetler & Copes).

> Critics argued that social disorganization theory does not address basic motivations for people to commit crimes (Akers & Seller, 2004; Bernard, Snipes & Geroud, 2010). The theory indicates that high crime rates are a normal result of weak, divided communities, rather than individual people with a predisposition towards crime. Theorist Robert Merton made the case in the 1950s for a social theory that looked at why some people commit crimes and why others do not (basic motivations for people to commit crime), which social disorganization theory does not provide (Akers and Seller, 2004). Other criticisms are the inability to measure the neighborhood level and the fact that the theory is more of Chicago specific (not all cities grow rings).

It is important to note that the social disorganization theory remains a very strong theory at the present time, and the most important finding is that violence among the youths and indeed crime correspond to the structure of the neighborhood (Akers & Sellers, 2004). When this occurs it does not matter what racial groups populate it, what matter most is the class. To address the problem of the neighborhood that give rise to violence and crime, the theory propose treatment program, development, community action programs which will effect necessary changes in the life of the people of the neighborhood(Akers & Seller, 2004; Bernard, Snipes & Geroud, 2010; Cullen & Agnew, 2011).

Findings

Some of the findings of the present study include the fact that juvenile violence is significantly related to characteristics of the social environment. Statistics on juvenile violence and juvenile crime also shed more light on the magnitude of the problem juvenile violence in the society. The study found that delinquency and violence are consequences of the social and economic inequalities built into the social structure (Hochstetler & Copes, 2008).

Even those youths who receive the loving support of parents and family members are at risk of crime, delinquency, and arrest over the life course if they suffer from social disadvantage (Patterson, Crosby and Vuchnich, 1992). The study has also shown that juvenile violence is a learned process, parents and adults in the neighborhood of the young ones have a responsibility to be good models and to be their children's advocates. Parents need to be supportive and to help their children develop self-assurance and build self-esteem to withstand damaging peer pressure or delinquent acts. It has also been found out that classical theory of juvenile violence and indeed crime are significant contributors to the etiology of violence and criminal behavior, but from the sociological perspective which conflict theory is one, they do not offer an adequate general theory of crime (Walker, Spohn, DeLone, 2007). A review of the available literature on juvenile violence has shown that many of the underlying problems of juvenile violence, as well as their prevention and control, are intimately connected with the nature and quality of the social structure and its institution which include the family, school and the neighborhoods(Agnew & Cullen, 2011; Hochstetler & Copes, 2008). Therefore, any serious attempt at addressing the problem should focus on the social structure as a holistic approach.

Limitations of the study

Like any study, the present study is not without methodological limitations. This is an exploratory study and the findings should be interpreted as such. The review of literature is based on a small sample of available research in the field of the present investigation which may not be a true representative of all findings of previous research although the use of official data might have reduce the impact of this flaws on the findings of the study. However, despite the limitations stated, it is expected that this study has contributed to research on juvenile violence.

Summary and Conclusion

One of the policy implications that can be derived from the study is that violence among the youths is a major public health concern. Violent crime imposes many different kinds of loses both on victims and society. This finding is both novel and provocative. Therefore, determining the appropriate balance between perpetrators and prevention of future violence requires exploring both unmet needs and public priorities in the face of scarce and dwindling resources as a result of the present global recession (Hochstetler & Copes, 2008).

Additionally, as the finding of the present study has made clear, the growing rate of serious violence in the United States is not due to the behavior of juveniles alone. It reflected a more generalized surge in both youth and adult violence. Thus, this suggests that current arrangements for dealing with violent young adults are in need of repair, especially now that the adult justice system is responsible for a larger proportion of all violent young people, including thousands of young offenders once defined as juveniles(Henggeler, McCart, Cunninghan & Chapman, 2012; Lelekov & Kosheleva, 2008; Vries & Liem, 2011). In order to address the nation's violence problem more fully, the justice system as a whole should be working to create new and effective approaches to intervening with youth in general.

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