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Socio-economic factors contributing to juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe: A social work perspective

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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted at a time when a growing concern has emerged about increasing incidents of juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe. Adopting a social work lens, social process theory, a qualitative research approach and a case study research design, this paper presents findings on some of the socio-economic factors contributing to juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe. The study targeted caregivers of juvenile delinquents in Highfield, a high-density suburb of Harare, where children received services from Care at the Core of Humanity and key informants who work with children in conflict with the law (juvenile delinquents) at the same organisation. Ten primary participants and two key informants were purposively sampled. Data were collected using in-depth interviews and analysed through thematic analysis. The analysis revealed several socio-economic factors contributing to juvenile delinquency, including peer influence, poverty, an abusive home environment, substance use, supernatural phenomena and the media. Findings also show that children are a product of their environment; thus, a healthy socio-economic environment guards against juvenile delinquency. This research provides a

foundation of knowledge and evidence to inform practice and interventions. The researchers recommend that social workers engage in positive parenting skills training with caregivers to protect children from engaging in unlawful behaviour.

Keywords: juvenile delinquency; qualitative; social work; socio-economic factors; Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

A growing number of juvenile delinquency cases have been recorded in Harare, Zimbabwe (Mugedya & Maushe, 2021; Rugaranganda & Rugaranganda, 2016). Juvenile delinquency refers to unlawful behaviour engaged in by minors (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2022; Rugaranganda & Rugaranganda, 2016). Unlawful behaviour has harmful effects on both society and the individuals involved (Bobbio et al., 2020). As children represent the future of a nation, the rise of delinquent behaviour undermines the social fabric and hampers overall development. This study examines the socio-economic factors contributing to juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe through the lens of social work practice. The study's main research question was: 'What socio-economic factors contribute to juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe from a social work perspective?' The study from which these research findings were derived focused on Care at the Core of Humanity, a child protection organisation in Harare. The study's goals were to enrich the literature on juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe, influence policies affecting children in conflict with the law, and expand the understanding of this phenomenon through a social work perspective. When examining juvenile delinquency through a social work lens, it is important to prioritise the influence of family, peers and community on delinquent behaviour. This approach aligns with social process theory, which emphasises the nature of social learning. Thus, viewing juvenile delinquency from a social work perspective involves understanding it as both an individual issue and a consequence of social systems and interactions. In this article, the authors begin by providing background information and context for the study, including a review of the literature on socioeconomic factors contributing to juvenile delinquency from a social work perspective. We will also articulate the theoretical framework that guides the study, outline the research methods utilised, present the findings, discuss the implications of the study and offer a conclusion.

STUDY BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Care at the Core of Humanity (CATCH) is a child protection organisation based in Zimbabwe that provides legal aid and psychosocial support for children involved with the legal system, either in conflict with it or in contact with it (Namati, 2022). CATCH's goal is to protect the rights of these children. While the organisation plays a vital role in rehabilitating children who have encountered legal issues, there is a critical need for greater investment in rehabilitation services to address and prevent the rising problem of juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe (Action Aid Zimbabwe, 2021; Muchandibaya, 2016).

The Zimbabwean Constitution states that "a child is anyone below eighteen (18) years" (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). A child in Africa is viewed as a 'human becoming' (Mahuntse, 2021, p. 80). If children are inclined to develop delinquent behaviour, there is likely

to be a surge in crime rates in the coming years when these children become adults (Siegel, 2010). In Zimbabwe, children 14 years and older have criminal liability (Government of Zimbabwe, 2004).

Children who exhibit delinquent behaviour may face imprisonment, which can derail their academic progress and having negative societal labels attached to them (Siegel, 2010). Those who commit serious offences, such as murder or rape, can be tried as adults, resulting in a criminal record that follows them (National Research Council, 2013). Having a criminal record can significantly hinder access to job opportunities, even after the offender has undergone rehabilitation (Munikwa, 2020). Given Zimbabwe's limited employment opportunities, the additional barrier of a criminal record is particularly detrimental. Furthermore, children involved in crimes such as drug and substance abuse are at risk of serious health issues, as they are often unaware of the harmful effects of the substances they consume (Ndlovu & Tigere, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to identify the factors contributing to delinquent behaviour among children to protect the future of Zimbabwe. Understanding the socio-economic factors that lead to juvenile delinquency can help in making informed decisions about preventative or reactive measures aimed at minimising such behaviour.

Juvenile delinquency has increasingly become an issue in Zimbabwe and the world over (Ruparanganda & Ruparanganda, 2016; Weng et al., 2016). For instance, every year about 4 000 Argentine adolescents aged 14 to 17 years are institutionalised for committing crimes (Bobbio et al., 2020). UNICEF (2013), states that an average of 263 children were arrested monthly in 2013 in Zimbabwe's three main cities of Harare, Bulawayo and Mutare. UNICEF (2021) later notes that over 500 children in conflict with the law went through Zimbabwe's diversion programme, and many others went through the formal justice system. These figures show that juvenile delinquency is a pertinent issue in Zimbabwe and across the globe.

Juvenile delinquency has progressively become a social menace in urban Zimbabwe (Muchandibaya, 2016; Magedya & Maushe, 2021; Ruparanganda & Ruparanganda, 2016; Siegel & Welsh, 2018). Juvenile delinquency has far-reaching consequences, affecting not only the individual involved but also the broader society (Bobbio et al., 2020). Children, as future leaders and citizens, play a crucial role in shaping the nation's future. Consequently, the emergence and proliferation of delinquent behaviour have the potential to undermine the social fabric and obstruct developmental progress.

Muchandibaya (2016) indicates that in Manicaland Province a total of 202 juvenile delinquency cases were processed in 2015, in contrast to an average of 181 cases four years before that. This data reflects a 12 per cent increase in juvenile delinquency from 2011 to 2015 in the region. Furthermore, the Makoni District Victim Friendly Unit reported a troubling 33 per cent rise in juvenile-committed rape cases when comparing the first quarters of 2020 and 2021 (Action Aid Zimbabwe, 2021). These statistics clearly illustrate the upward trend of juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe, particularly in terms of sexual offences. Katongomara (2018) notes that in 2017 the Harare Province Diversion Programme handled 279 juvenile offence cases, while Bulawayo recorded only 105. This comparison underscores that Harare faces a significantly higher incidence of juvenile delinquency than other regions.

Most studies on juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe were conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mambende et al., 2016; Muchandibaya, 2016; Ruparanganda & Ruparanganda, 2016). Hence, there is a significant need to continue examining juvenile delinquency issues as circumstances change over time. The factors contributing to juvenile delinquency and its social characteristics shifted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which fundamentally transformed daily life in many parts of the world (Buchanan et al., 2020). This paper aims to explore the socio-economic factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency from a social work perspective.

There is a global connection between juvenile delinquency and substance use and abuse (Matutu & Mususa, 2019; Mwangangi, 2019). In countries such as the United States, drug and substance abuse plays a significant role in juvenile delinquency, adversely affecting children's psychosocial functioning (Mwangangi, 2019; Siegel, 2010). Research conducted in Zimbabwe has similarly underscored the link between drug abuse and juvenile delinquency. Urombo and Kasimba (2018) contend that drugs impair users' perceptions of right and wrong. Ndlovu and Tigere (2022) note that when street children develop an addiction to drugs, they may engage in criminal activities, such as theft or drug dealing, to sustain their often-costly habits. Furthermore, children in home-care institutions who use substances such as mbanje (marijuana) typically display behaviours that contravene both legal standards and institutional regulations (Kurevakwesu & Chizasa, 2020; Magedya & Maushe, 2021). As a result, drug abuse not only contributes to juvenile delinquency, but also hinders children's cognitive functions, leading them to participate in irrational and antisocial behaviours.

The phenomenon of children in conflict with the law (juvenile delinquency) is often determined by the way that children are supported by the surrounding systems, especially the family environment, especially the role of the parents (Bobbio et al., 2020). A study carried out by Malindisa and Winterdyk (2015) in Swaziland found that most adolescents who engage in criminal behaviour live in homes where parental conflicts are common, the father was violent and habitually drunk, and adolescents were subjected to severe family punishments throughout their childhood. In the Zimbabwean context, studies (Mambende et al., 2016; Muchandibaya, 2016; Ruparanganda & Ruparanganda, 2016) also point to an unstable family environment contributing to unlawful behaviour amongst children. Siegel and Welsh (2018) emphasise that a child's decision to engage in delinquent behaviour can be influenced by economic needs, as they may desire items they cannot afford. Studies indicate that regions with high poverty rates in countries such as China and Indonesia also exhibit elevated rates of children in conflict with the law (Bobbio et al., 2020; Weng et al., 2016).

Weng et al. (2016) assert that children who struggle academically are more prone to engage in unlawful behaviour. These students frequently experience significant stress, which may drive them to resort to delinquency as a means of coping (Siegel, 2010). In Zimbabwe, Muchandibaya (2016) contends that schools characterised by poor management and inflexible, strict regulations often witness higher rates of delinquency. Furthermore, labelling children based on their involvement in subjects such as Arts and Humanities – by referring to them as "soldiers" or "traditional healers" – can adversely affect their self-esteem and motivation, ultimately influencing their academic performance and behaviour.

Yusuf et al. (2021) suggest that the rising number of children joining criminal gangs in Nigeria can be attributed primarily to peer influence. Similarly, Mambende et al. (2016) note that children in Zimbabwe often adopt behaviours that conflict with the law as a result of their friendships. Ndlovu and Tigere (2022) further emphasise that some street children become involved in criminal activities because of the influence of their peers. A child's behaviour, including delinquent tendencies, can be significantly shaped by those in their social circle. This study aims to examine the socio-economic factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by social process theory, which posits that an individual's relationships with essential elements of the social process – such as family, peers and educational experiences – are critical to understanding both the emergence and persistence of delinquent behaviour (Siegel, 2010). According to this theory, law-violating (delinquent) behaviour is largely a product of socialisation (Taylor & Workman, 2019) and the interactions of individuals with various institutions, organisations and societal processes (Siegel, 2010). Peer groups have a significant influence on most children (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2018). Furthermore, family dynamics, educational encounters and relationships with authority figures – including teachers and justice system representatives such as probation officers – also shape a child's behaviour (Liu et al., 2019; Mambende et al., 2016). When these relationships are positive and supportive, children are more likely to thrive within societal norms (Siegel & Welsh, 2018). In contrast, if these relationships are dysfunctional and harmful, achieving traditional success may become unattainable, leading some children to view criminal behaviour as a viable option (Weng et al., 2016). The theory highlights the importance of strengthening interpersonal connections as a means to promote, restore, preserve and enhance the well-being of individuals, families and communities (National Association of Social Workers, 2014). Consequently, this theory is pertinent to social work practice, because it emphasises the significance of focusing on structures such as family and community in understanding and transforming behaviours, including those that conflict with the law.

Practitioners in the child justice system, guided by social process theory, are well equipped to formulate policies that address the issue of children engaging in unlawful behaviour from a macro-level perspective (Siegel, 2010). By appropriately adjusting social structures, such as social policies, we can effectively prevent similar problems from arising in different individuals (Urombo & Kasimba, 2018). Social process theory allows social workers to distinguish whether behaviours that contravene the law stem from individual pathology or are the result of structural issues (Siegel, 2010). This distinction is crucial for determining the appropriate intervention, whether it involves providing behavioural therapy for pathological issues or addressing dysfunctional social structures.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

The study employed a qualitative research approach, which is an inductive research style focusing on personal meaning and stresses the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study's approach is thus partly influenced by the efficiency of the research approaches adopted by previous studies to capture the voice of the participants in exploring the phenomena under investigation. The open nature of the research approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leavy, 2017) allowed the researchers to gain an in-depth appreciation of the socio-economic factors contributing to juvenile delinquency in contemporary Zimbabwe.

The researchers utilised an instrumental case study design. An instrumental case study is a type of research design used in many fields, particularly evaluation, in which the researcher conducts a comprehensive analysis of a case, which is usually a process, event, programme, activity or one or more individuals to gain insights into a broader issue or phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Researchers collect in-depth information over a sustained period using a range of data-collection procedures (Abdulai & Owusu-Ansah, 2014). Thus, to investigate the socio-economic causes of juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe, the researchers conducted a detailed case study to unpack the phenomenon.

Context

A higher number of juvenile delinquency cases occur in high-density urban areas (Siegel & Welsh, 2018). This study concentrated on Highfield, which experiences a relatively high level of poverty compared to Harare's numerous high-density suburbs (Manjengwa et al., 2016, p. 25). Caregivers were included in the study because they possess valuable insights into the children's developmental histories and can offer a comprehensive account of the socio-economic factors that may have contributed to the development of delinquent behaviour.

Target population and sampling

The study's target population was made up of caregivers of juvenile delinquents' resident in the high-density suburb of Highfield, whose children receive services from CATCH Harare; they were the primary sample. The researchers also targeted key informants (experts and opinion leaders) who work with children in conflict with the law at CATCH Harare. According to Namati (2022), CATCH is one of the prominent organisations that offer legal aid and psychosocial support to children in conflict with the law in Zimbabwe. The researchers used purposive sampling to select 10 primary participants and 2 key informants: a social worker and a lawyer. Purposive sampling takes place when the researcher selects participants who meet the criteria that closely dovetail with the purpose of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Purposive sampling procedures allowed the researchers to arrive at a comprehensive sample population that would enable achieving the goals of their study.

Ethical issues

The researchers complied with the protocols established by the Midlands State University (MSU) School of Social Work Departmental Research Ethics Committee and obtained the necessary approval from the university (Ethical clearance number: BS11221). Permission to conduct the study was also secured from CATCH Zimbabwe. Throughout the research process, essential ethical principles were rigorously adhered to, including informed consent, beneficence, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation and honesty. Written informed consent was obtained from all study participants.

Data-collection method

The study utilised in-depth interviews to collect data from the primary participants and key informants. In qualitative research, the researcher conducts in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researchers chose this type of interview as it allowed them to gather detailed information on the research participants (DeCarlo, 2018). The researchers asked open-ended questions that elicited the participants' in-depth views and opinions (Leavy, 2017). The data-collection process lasted for two weeks.

Data-collection instruments and technologies

The researchers utilised in-depth interview guides for both the primary participants and the key informants, structured around the central research question: What socio-economic factors contribute to juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe from a social work perspective? These guides aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of participants regarding juvenile delinquency, addressing aspects such as personal and professional backgrounds, family situations, socio-economic conditions and community influences. Audio recordings were also used during the interview process to ensure accuracy and detail.

Data analysis

The researchers analysed data through thematic analysis. This is a method for analysing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns or themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leavy, 2017). The researchers selected thematic analysis, because it is relatively easy to grasp and applying its key concepts is comparatively faster than with other data-analysis methods, as there are few procedures and prescriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We adopted an inductive or “bottom-up” way of conducting thematic analysis, where the themes identified are strongly linked to the data. The themes we developed were not driven by our theoretical interest in the area or topic. The researchers followed the broadly accepted framework for carrying out thematic analysis, which involves a six-step process: familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

To familiarise themselves with the data, the researchers organised the various data sets and thoroughly reviewed the information (Kumar, 2011). Following this initial analysis, they generated preliminary codes by examining specific statements and categorising them into themes that reflect the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The

researchers then sought to identify themes by synthesising the diverse ideas and experiences that appeared insignificant when considered in isolation (Kumar, 2011). Finally, they conducted a review of these themes, refining and expanding upon the identified concepts to ensure they remained consistent with the data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

The researchers defined and named the themes by analysing what aspects of the data each theme encapsulates and assessing their significance and relevance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They conducted a comprehensive analysis of each theme, identifying the narrative behind each one (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Kumar, 2011). The researchers then produced a report that included raw data, such as direct quotes, along with a literature review to substantiate the research findings. This approach also allowed readers to engage with and contribute to the ongoing discourse in the literature (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Limitations

A notable limitation of this study is the difficulty in generalising its findings. Since this research is qualitative, its results cannot be applied broadly (Mahuntse, 2021). The sample consists of individuals who engaged with CATCH Zimbabwe in Harare, meaning that the findings may not apply specifically to other contexts.

Trustworthiness of findings

Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which the research findings reflect the lived experiences of the individuals being studied (Curtin & Fossey, 2007; Gunawan, 2015). Establishing the trustworthiness of research increases the reader's confidence in the findings (Lietz et al., 2006). Transferability, credibility, confirmability and dependability enhance the study's trustworthiness (Curtin & Fossey, 2007; Williams & Morrow, 2009).

Credibility

Credibility is defined as the assessment of the truthfulness, accuracy and relevance of the research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The researchers implemented strategies such as data source triangulation, member checking and peer debriefing to establish and enhance the credibility of their study.

Transferability

Transferability is the capacity to apply research findings to comparable environments, populations and situations (Devault, 2019). The researchers achieved transferability by providing thick descriptions of the research setting and methodology.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the ability of a study to be replicated while still yielding trustworthy results (Devault, 2019). The researchers enhanced dependability by using audit trails so that the process is traceable.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree of objectivity in the research findings that enables other researchers to confirm them (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). They provided a detailed methodological description to allow other scholars to scrutinise the integrity of the research findings.

Researchers' qualifications and experience

The researchers involved in this study are all qualified social workers with extensive experience in qualitative research. Four of the researchers are also specialists in child protection, and their prior expertise facilitated the establishment of rapport and enhanced reflexivity. The research team played an active role in designing the study, gathering data, coding, and interpreting the findings.

FINDINGS

The goal of this study was to investigate the socio-economic factors contributing to juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe. The findings of this study indicated that several factors, including poverty, poor parenting skills, peer influence, drug use, out-of-school environment, supernatural phenomena, media and an abusive home environment, influence juvenile delinquency in Harare, Zimbabwe. These findings are discussed in greater detail below.

Poverty

The participants highlighted that poverty is a major determinant of juvenile delinquency. The participants had this to say on poverty influencing juvenile delinquency:

We are struggling to afford everything our child needs. She is not going to school because we cannot pay her fees, and when she wanted new shoes, we could not buy them for her, so she stole them from a shop. Sometimes, I feel like I could do more as a parent to provide for her, but she needs to understand that times are tough. (Caregiver 1)

Caregiver 2 added that:

I have a limited income as a single parent, and I am often away from home. As a vendor, I do everything I can to provide for my children. Our family struggles to make ends meet.

The key informants interviewed strongly believed that one of the causes of juvenile delinquency is poverty, as evidenced by the bulk of cases they handle coming from low-income households. The key informants had this to say:

Many offenders come from economically disadvantaged families. Numerous cases are recorded in areas such as Epworth and Highfield, which have high levels of poverty. For example, there is a case of a child who stole groceries from a supermarket because their family could not afford necessities. (Key informant 1)

Key informant 2 mentioned that:

Low-income, high-density suburbs in Harare have the highest number of children in conflict with the law. In contrast, Northern suburbs like Marlborough have far fewer cases. The differing circumstances contribute to this disparity, with issues such as poverty playing a significant role. One of the main social push factors is the socioeconomic hardships faced by residents. Many of the crimes committed by children stem from a place of poverty. For instance, a child living in a cramped one-room house with their mother and father may witness their parents engaging in sexual activity and may then experiment inappropriately with a sibling or neighbour.

These narratives reveal that poverty drives children to engage in delinquent behaviour as they feel compelled to provide for themselves and their families in challenging socioeconomic circumstances, often resorting to unconventional and unlawful means to do so. The narratives highlight that poverty pushes parents to make significant sacrifices in their efforts to support their families, which often leads to a neglect of their parental responsibilities, particularly in monitoring their children. Consequently, this neglect may expose children to deviant peers, further increasing the likelihood of delinquent behaviour. For example, a child may steal food from a grocery store not out of a criminal disposition, but simply because they are hungry and need to feed themselves and their family. This perspective is corroborated by research conducted by Dako-Gyeke et al. (2022) and Omboto et al. (2013). Such insights align with social process theory, which underpins this study and suggests that social deficiencies – like poverty – and the surrounding social environment significantly influence a child’s propensity to engage in behaviour that contravenes the law. The research findings compellingly illustrate that poverty plays a key role in children's involvement in unlawful activities.

Poor parenting skills

A notable finding of the study indicated that poor parenting skills expose children to delinquent behaviour and involvement in criminal behaviour. Participants had the following to say.

Some of these children engage in unlawful behaviours because of how we parent them. As parents, we need to maintain a strong relationship with our children. We should pray for their well-being and personal growth. During their teenage years, children often make poor decisions, thinking of themselves as adults and being influenced by negative peer pressure. However, if we foster a strong bond, we can offer them valuable advice that helps guide them toward a positive future. (Caregiver 8)

Caregiver 6 said that:

When parents lack positive parenting skills, children often suffer as a result. Many times, we find ourselves preoccupied with financial concerns and overlook the importance of addressing our children's psychosocial well-being. In situations where both parents are employed, children may be left in the care of strangers, who could inadvertently teach them undesirable behaviours.

Key informant 1 had this to say:

Caregivers must enhance their parenting skills to provide effective support for children. While parents frequently pursue better opportunities, the necessity of leaving their children in the care of others can create significant challenges. Often, children are entrusted to individuals who may be well-intentioned but are emotionally unavailable, or to those who are present yet lack genuine concern for the child's well-being. This situation leaves children vulnerable, as they often do not receive the parental guidance and support essential for making informed and positive decisions.

The narratives suggest that insufficient emotional, psychological and physical support from parents significantly increases the likelihood of children engaging in delinquent behaviour. They highlight that when parents do not cultivate a strong personal bond with their children during adolescence, those children become more vulnerable to negative influences from deviant peer groups. Furthermore, as noted by Mahuntse (2021), children raised in abusive environments may internalise such behaviours, underscoring the idea that children are shaped by their surroundings. Family socialisation is a vital aspect of the social process theory that informs this study. It is posited that exposure to parental conflict can lead children to adopt similar behaviours. The authors advocate for a balance between work and family obligations among caregivers, which is essential for meeting children's multifaceted needs and reducing the chances of them engaging in unlawful behaviour.

Peer influence

The research showed that delinquent peer influence is a causal factor for juvenile delinquency. When asked what they think causes juvenile delinquency participants had this to say:

The friends my child plays with are a bad influence on him. They do drugs together, and I believe they may have encouraged him to break into a house that they planned to steal from. He associates with children known in the community to exhibit disturbing and deviant behaviours. While my child may misbehave at times, I want to be clear that he is not a thief. (Caregiver 2).

Caregiver 1 also mentioned that:

My child spends time with older girls who have completed their Form 4 education but are not currently attending school. In my opinion, these girls are a bad influence on her and may have encouraged her to commit a crime. Some of her friends come from financially stable backgrounds, and my child has expressed a desire for shoes that most of her friends own, which we cannot afford. As a result, she stole these shoes in an attempt to fit in.

A key informant said:

Children often start using drugs because their friends do. Initially, children may be influenced by their peers to try smoking, believing it will help them read better and concentrate. Over time, this can lead to a pattern of drug use. (Key informant 1)

It is clear from the narratives presented that peer influence significantly impacts on juvenile delinquency. These accounts illustrate how negative influences from friends can lead children

to engage in delinquent behaviour that is inconsistent with their true character. Some children have been reported to steal, use drugs and break into homes as a result of peer pressure. Supporting this notion, Weng et al. (2016) argue that many adolescents who participate in unlawful activities are influenced by peers from whom they seek a sense of security and approval. Similarly, Malindisa and Winterdyk (2015) assert that associating with unhealthy peer groups during adolescence can drive a child toward criminal behaviour. Negative peer influence markedly increases the likelihood of children committing crimes (McGloin & Thomas, 2019; Osei, 2021). When children align themselves with peer groups that exhibit behaviours contrary to the law, their chances of engaging in risky and antisocial activities rise considerably. These perspectives resonate with social process theory, which highlights how a child's environment, particularly their circle of friends, can promote unlawful behaviour.

Drug use

The participants stressed how drug use influences juvenile delinquency. Participants had this to say on how drug use contributes to delinquent behaviour:

My child began displaying deviant behaviour at the age of 15, using drugs such as 'mutoriro' These drugs led him to engage in delinquent activities, as he does not think clearly when under their influence. When he takes drugs, he becomes violent and disrespectful, even damaging furniture and other family property. (Caregiver 2)

Caregiver 3 also indicated that:

Many children in conflict with the law have a history of drug and substance use. Unlike in the past, children today can easily access drugs. Some of these children, under the influence of drugs, may physically abuse family members or resort to stealing to support their drug habits.

A key informant noted that:

Drugs have increasingly become a significant factor contributing to juvenile delinquency, with drug and substance abuse on the rise. Zimbabwe is not adequately prepared to address this issue, as there are very few facilities where children can undergo detoxification and receive proper rehabilitation services. As a result, drugs will continue to influence deviant behaviour until the root causes of the problem are effectively tackled. (Key informant 2)

Research has shown a significant link between drug use and juvenile delinquency. Drug use often creates a rift between children and their families, as the behaviours exhibited while using drugs can be disturbing and disrespectful. Various factors, such as peer pressure, idleness, stress and the easy availability of these harmful substances in high-density areas contribute to children turning to drugs (Kurevakwesu et al., 2023; Matanga et al., 2024). These findings suggest a chain reaction among the factors that lead children to engage in unlawful behaviour. Financial difficulties can undermine the protective environment provided by schools, exposing children to drugs and negative influences. Therefore, it is evident that children who use drugs are more likely to engage in illegal activities.

Out-of-school environment

The participants noted that when children are idle, their chances of engaging in delinquent behaviour increase. The following narratives highlight the participants' views on how being out of school influences children to participate in delinquent activities.

I first noticed a change in her behaviour when she stopped going to school and began staying at home all the time. We are struggling to afford the necessities for our child, and as a result, she is not attending school because we cannot pay her fees. (Caregiver 1).

Caregiver 2 stated that:

My child is playing with older girls, those who have finished their form 4 but are not going to school, these girls in my view are a bad influence on her and spend most of their time roaming around the neighbourhood.

Key informant 1 had this to say:

The school serves as a form of diversion therapy, keeping children engaged. It provides a safe environment where they can learn about important topics, such as sexual and reproductive health. This education helps them understand the consequences of their actions. However, if parents are unable to pay school fees and a child stays home, they may spend time with friends from the community, which could lead to drug abuse.

The narratives suggest that the school environment functions as a protective factor, effectively keeping children engaged and preventing them from engaging in delinquent behaviour. When students are outside of school, they are more likely to seek out deviant activities as a result of boredom. This perspective is supported by Siegel and Welsh (2018), who assert that an ideal school environment is essential for maintaining children's engagement and ensuring they are surrounded by supportive peers and teachers. Manik (2020) emphasises the significance of sporting activities, pointing out that children with fewer engaging options face a greater risk of committing crimes, as they may channel their energy into negative outlets. This idea aligns with social process theory, which underscores the impact of social systems – such as the school environment – on influencing or mitigating criminal behaviour (Siegel, 2010). Thus, the school environment acts as a protective barrier against unlawful behaviour by providing children with opportunities to connect with like-minded and focused peers.

Supernatural phenomena

Participants also attributed the delinquent behaviours children portray to supernatural or unexplainable phenomena. Supernatural phenomena refer to religious, cultural and mystical forces or events that people believe metaphysically influence reality, such as unclean spirits. When asked what they think influences delinquent behaviour, participants had this to say:

Sometimes, it is difficult to identify what drives a child to behave in certain ways. There may be no concrete root causes, but the child just does it for reasons that are hard to explain. (Caregiver 7)

Caregiver 8 expressed the same view:

The separation between my first wife and me was not amicable, and I believe she may have influenced my child negatively. I have had pastors from our church pray for him, and I have noticed an improvement following those prayers. (Caregiver 8).

Key informant 1 said that:

Many parents believe that their child's delinquent behaviour is caused by evil spirits. In some instances, parents report that their child's behaviour improved after consulting spiritual healers. Conversely, others attribute a child's tendency to steal to an uncle who supposedly had a spirit of stealing. They believe that a traditional cleansing ceremony is necessary to drive away the evil spirits that compel the child to steal.

These narratives illustrate the belief that supernatural phenomena can influence behaviour that contradicts the law. Participants also expressed the view that when delinquent behaviour is attributed to supernatural causes, the solutions should similarly involve supernatural methods. A key informant highlighted numerous cases where caregivers cited spiritual phenomena as the reasons behind delinquent behaviour. Additionally, this informant noted that caregivers sometimes observe positive changes in behaviour following spiritual interventions. Both the primary participants and key informants indicate that many Zimbabweans, along with other Africans, have a strong tendency to attribute delinquent behaviour to supernatural phenomena. These narratives also suggest that if the source of delinquent behaviour is seen as supernatural, then the appropriate solutions should also be supernatural. This viewpoint is supported by Kermen (2018), who points out that Christians often use interventions such as meditation, prayer, fasting, retreats and reflective exercises to address behaviours that conflict with the law.

Media

The participants of this study noted that the media are another determinant of juvenile delinquency. When participants were asked about the role the media play regarding juvenile delinquency, they had this to say:

In my view, the internet and related media can negatively impact children's character. Often, children are left home alone, and the television does not distinguish between a child and an adult viewer. As a result, children are exposed to violent scenes in movies, which can shape their behaviour. For instance, boys may be more likely to engage in violent play, which I believe stems from what they watch. Additionally, I think that the music children listen to, which often glorifies drug use, encourages them to engage in delinquent behaviour. (Caregiver 6)

Caregiver 8 said:

In my opinion, as parents, we do not protect our children from harmful sites that may have material such as pornography. When they learn inappropriate behaviours from the internet, they then act them out on other children.

A key informant expressed the view that:

Influencers make it look like smoking drugs is cool, and children want to be accepted and fit in society and engage in delinquent behaviour... they want to have content to post on their media pages, which often includes content on deviant behaviour... media has played a major role in juvenile delinquency. (Key informant 1)

From the narratives presented above, the media is among the contributing factors to juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe. The participants expressed how exposure to inappropriate content, such as explicit sexual content on the internet, violent films on television, and music that promotes deviant behaviour, pushes children to engage in delinquent behaviour. Children are easily influenced by media and tend to imitate the behaviours modelled by their favourite social media influencers or celebrities around the world.

Abusive home environment

Participants in this study highlighted that the home environment influences delinquent behaviour. A home environment characterised by conflict and abuse could influence children to come into conflict with the law. When asked on what influences juvenile delinquency, participants had this to say:

My child was sexually abused by our maid, ...I think he is still traumatised by the abuse to this day because he often has nightmares, ...we became aware of the sexual abuse incidents after he raped a 12-year-old neighbour, and this is when he revealed the story of how the maid used to sexually abuse him (Caregiver 5)

Caregiver 6 mentioned that:

I am often abused by my husband at home, and my child is often exposed to his father's behaviour. I think he has adapted to the behaviour he sees his father portraying... he has developed a habit of beating anyone who makes him angry.

A key informant noted that:

A child may come from a home where they are abused or a home in which interparental conflict and abuse occur and this may influence delinquent behaviour (Key informant 1)

The narratives show that a home environment where a child is abused leads to juvenile delinquency. The narratives also highlight how being exposed to parental conflict influences a child to engage in delinquent behaviour through the child mirroring such behaviour. Liu et al. (2019) postulate that dysfunctional family processes occurring in childhood and early adolescence, especially interparental conflict and ineffective parenting practices, are frequently precursors to unlawful behaviour in children.

DISCUSSION

The study explored the socio-economic factors contributing to juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe, and findings indicated poverty, poor parenting skills, bad peer influence, drug use, out-of-school environment, supernatural phenomena, media and an abusive home environment as influencing factors. Poverty in Zimbabwe is a reality and this study linked it to the growing problem of juvenile delinquency. To show the scale of poverty in Zimbabwe, UNICEF (2021, p. 4), estimates that 61 per cent of children in the country live in multidimensional poverty, with the situation worse in rural areas, high-density peri-urban informal settlements, and among those with disabilities. Recent estimates also point to 33 per cent of Zimbabwe's population being food-poor or insecure (Sky News, 2022). It is possible that such high levels of poverty influence children to engage in delinquent behaviour as they are pushed to provide for themselves and their families through unconventional and delinquent means in harsh socioeconomic environments. Anjaswarni et al. (2019) agree with the current finding that places high poverty rates as congruent with high rates of juvenile delinquency, pushing children to engage in delinquent behaviour. Dako-Gyeke et al. (2022) and Omboto et al. (2013) show how poverty pushes children to the edge and exacerbates the chances of them engaging in delinquent behaviour. For example, as shown by the participants' verbatim comments, a child may steal food from a grocery shop not because they are career criminals, but because they are hungry and need to feed themselves and their family. The magnitude of the impact of poverty as a factor contributing to the phenomenon of children in conflict with the law may be debated; however, the research findings graphically show that poverty contributes to children's engagement in unlawful behaviour.

Chipatiso (2023) characterises Zimbabwe as a country with a very high cost of living, a volatile economic environment, policy inconsistency, political instability, corruption, poor working conditions, poor health services, costly health services, and lack of professional and family opportunities as factors contributing to delinquent behaviour. Apart from poverty, such a situation can also be linked to poor parenting. Perhaps parents exhibit poor parenting skills when they make the painful and often risky decision that meeting the child's survival needs supersedes providing emotional or physical support. Parents spend most of their time trying to make enough money to meet their family's survival needs and, in the process, negate or ignore the psychosocial needs of other family members. This shows the nexus between poor parenting skills and negative peer influence as a determinant of juvenile delinquency, since children are likely to be vulnerable to negative peer influence when their parents are absent. This view is supported by Tomar and Kumar (2018), who postulated that bad parenting contributes to juvenile delinquency. The authors believe that striking a balance in this regard helps ensure that the child's needs are met holistically, which may help to curb juvenile offending behaviours.

The influence of peers came out strongly as a contributory factor to juvenile delinquency. During adolescence, children have a heightened sense of needing to belong to peer groups (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2018). Belonging to these groups often means children must adopt the group's patterns of behaviours and styles. If children are involved with a peer group that manifests behaviour contrary to the law, their chances of engaging in risky and antisocial

behaviour are heightened. This increased propensity may arise because they would do whatever it takes to fit in, even if this means breaking the law. In low-income areas in Zimbabwe parents engage in cross-border trading, truck driving and vending, making them unavailable to nurture their children around the clock. Parents engage in such trades and at times even have two jobs to try and ensure they meet their families' needs despite Zimbabwe's ailing economy (Chagonda, 2020; Mashaya, 2022). The void parents leave is filled by peers, who may increase the child's chances of behaving contrary to the law. There is thus an established relationship between peer influence as a driver toward the phenomenon of children in conflict with the law and poor parenting skills, as absent parents make children vulnerable to negative peer influences.

Drugs and substances such as alcohol impact negatively on a child's frame of mind and stimulate delinquent behaviour, as they reduce the child's inhibitions about deviant behaviour. This argument is supported by the finding in Rocca et al. (2019) that children may act unreasonably while intoxicated and commit crimes. In Zimbabwe, this view is corroborated by Urombo and Kasimba (2018), who note that drugs blur the users' awareness of the differences between right and wrong. This research's findings as shown in the narratives demonstrate that drug use in children triggers violence and other behaviours conflicting with the law. Chidume and Mugambiwa (2024) and Marandure et al. (2023) paint a troubling picture of the escalating prevalence of drug use in Zimbabwe. There is thus strong evidence of the nexus between drug and substance abuse and children's engagement in unlawful behaviour. In a study conducted in Swaziland, drug use was reported to be a significant behavioural problem among children (Malindisa & Winterdyk, 2015). The researchers argue that for those children who already exhibit behaviours contrary to the law, drug use heightens their propensity to commit further crimes.

The findings of the study also show that when children are out of school, they may engage in deviant activities with the primary goal of finding something to do. Zimbabwe's poverty described above is linked to children dropping out of school. Other reasons why children in Zimbabwe fail to attend school include the remoteness of their homes and child marriages. In Zimbabwe, 47 per cent of adolescents (13-18 years) are not in school (UNICEF, 2021). A break in their studies may also occur as a result of unforeseen circumstances such as the COVID-19 lockdowns that occurred globally in 2020. These lockdowns periodically confined children to the home environment (Muronzi, 2020). When children are idle, as is the case when they are out of school, they may redirect their energy elsewhere (Manik, 2020).

Supernatural explanations were suggested, indicating that Zimbabweans, among other African populations, have a strong propensity to attribute delinquent behaviour to supernatural phenomena. The views of the participants have clearly shown that when the source of delinquent behaviour is supernatural, then the solution lies equally in adopting supernatural approaches. Supernatural phenomena include deities, evil spirits and ancestral spirits amongst other things. The view that juvenile delinquency is influenced by supernatural phenomena is corroborated by Kermen (2018), who notes that resorting to spiritual solutions is also used to deal with delinquent behaviour amongst Christians, which include meditation, prayer, fasting, retreats and deep-thinking exercises.

This study has shown that exposure to inappropriate content, such as explicit sexual content on the internet, violent films on television and music that promotes deviant behaviour pushes children to engage in delinquent behaviour. These views are echoed by Walters (2019), who states that exposure to explicit material may lead children to replicate the disturbing behaviours they see on the internet and various other media platforms. These sentiments tally with social process theory, which explains delinquent behaviour as a result of socialisation. The findings of this study could be instrumental in developing strategies to mitigate juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe. By understanding the impact of exposure to inappropriate content, policymakers and practitioners can design positive parenting training strategies and media regulations that mitigate these harmful effects and promote healthier, more constructive environments for juveniles.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Social workers are involved in the juvenile justice system at various levels (Ruparanganda & Ruparanganda, 2016), making the current findings relevant to social work practice and education. By understanding the specific socio-economic factors that contribute to delinquent behaviour, social workers can develop more targeted and effective strategies to address these issues. The study has implications for practitioners and caregivers in understanding why children commit crimes and the nature of crimes children commit. When caregivers and practitioners know why children commit crimes, they can effectively put in place measures at home, in schools and in communities that can impeded the development of behaviour contrary to the law. Therefore, this study helps nip the problem of juvenile delinquency in the bud. Through this study, social workers can be aware of what factors may increase young people's chances of being involved in crime, thus knowing whom and what to avoid.

Ruparanganda and Ruparanganda (2016) suggest continued research in the field of juvenile delinquency to keep up with changes and dynamics in the field. Research can inform prevention strategies by identifying early warning signs and risk factors associated with delinquency. This knowledge allows social workers to implement early intervention programmes that provide support and resources to children and families before delinquent behaviour occurs (Kurevakwesu et al., 2022). By identifying the socioeconomic risk factors associated with juvenile delinquency, social workers can develop prevention strategies that aim to address these factors before delinquent behaviour can manifest (Kurevakwesu, 2017; Kurevakwesu et al., 2022). This could include implementing early intervention programmes that provide support and resources to children and families living in disadvantaged communities.

Knowledge of socioeconomic factors can help social workers identify the root causes of delinquency and design interventions that address these underlying issues. For example, this research shows that poverty and lack of access to education are significant factors, social workers can develop programmes that provide educational support, job training, or assistance with basic needs for at-risk youths and their families. The study can also help in supporting advocacy efforts and policy development. Social workers can use this research to advocate for policy changes that address the underlying issues contributing to delinquency, such as few economic opportunities, lack of access to education, and social inequalities. By working with policymakers and community leaders, social workers can promote systemic changes that have

a broader impact on reducing delinquency rates. Armed with knowledge about the socio-economic factors leading to juvenile delinquency, social workers can advocate for policy changes and reforms that address these underlying issues. They can work with policymakers and community leaders to develop and implement policies that promote economic opportunities, improve access to education and healthcare, and reduce inequalities.

Kaseke (1993) identifies flaws in the juvenile justice system that require changes and social workers can be catalysts to bring about these changes through advocacy initiatives that include addressing the definition of criminal behaviour, age of criminal responsibility, legal representation of juveniles and the role of the probation officer in the disposition process. This study can also enable social workers and other professionals to provide individualised support to at-risk children by understanding their specific challenges and needs (Kurevakwesu et al., 2023). By connecting them with appropriate resources and services, such as mental health counselling or substance abuse treatment, social workers can address the consequences of the underlying socio-economic factors that contribute to delinquency on an individual level. They can assess the specific challenges and needs of each young person and connect them with appropriate resources and services, such as mental health counselling, substance abuse treatment, or housing assistance. Understanding the socio-economic factors leading to juvenile delinquency enables social workers to collaborate with other professionals and organisations in related fields. By building networks and partnerships, social workers can enhance their ability to provide comprehensive support and resources to at-risk youths and their families.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored the socio-economic factors that lead to juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe. Some of these factors include poverty, poor parenting skills, peer influence, drug and substance use, out-of-school environment, supernatural phenomena, media and abusive home environments. The paper recommends that the government ensure that all children of school-going age have access to education services. The researchers also suggest that social workers provide positive parenting skills training to caregivers to help protect children from engaging in unlawful behaviour.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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