
SOCIAL POLICY CHALLENGES IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA

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Among Low Income Youth in Trinidad**

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ABSTRACT

This study qualitatively examined the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and behavioral outcomes. Structural Delinquency theories argue that persons growing up in a disadvantaged environment will engage in delinquent behavior. This position fails to account for existing anomalies, such as achievers. Resiliency theory purports that protective factors explain their resistance and ability to transcend the negative elements of their environment. To understand the processes leading to these two opposing outcomes in similar structural environments, the study sought to uncover the meanings disadvantaged youth attribute to their own behaviors. In-depth interviews were conducted with young males between the ages 15-19, six of whom were inmates at the Youth Training Centre Arouca. The findings suggest that the young men's behavior relates to their attempts to establish a sustainable identity. Theoretical and policy implications are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing levels and pervasive effect of youth crime and violence in recent times has identified it as a serious social and economic problem facing Trinidad and Tobago. Daily, incidences of school indiscipline, school violence, gang warfare, murders, kidnapping and robberies are reported in the local media. These acts have heightened anxieties and threaten the fundamental social order, rendering crime a key security and public policy concern. Moreover, for a society on the cusp of social and economic transformation, it also presents itself as a critical developmental challenge given the enormity of its costs¹. Consequently, thinking and practice directed at reducing and eliminating the behavior currently preoccupy government, academics and the wider population.

¹ In 1996, partial estimates of the unit cost of crime amounted to TT\$42,217.00 (World Bank 2000). A 1999 IADB study further estimated the cost of crime at about \$16.8 billion per year or 14.2% of the region's GDP.

However, the largely quantitative nature of previous research has pointed to some shortcomings, which form the foundation of this study. Two of these issues will be briefly discussed.

1. The failure of structural delinquency theories to explain the non-delinquency of some poor or disadvantaged youth
2. The value of interpretive frameworks to our holistic understanding of delinquent behavior

In so doing, this paper reports on a qualitative study intended to provide a more comprehensive understanding of why some disadvantaged young people engage in criminal behavior and some others do not. The study adopted a risk-resilience framework, which allows for a dual exploration of both the risk and protective factors associated with delinquency and non-delinquency, and its qualitative design encourages the incorporation and appreciation of the views of the subject.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY – THEORETICAL ISSUES

Various reports² over the years suggest that the youth crime problem is characterized by a large percentage of young male participants, who are disproportionately from poor or low socioeconomic backgrounds, leading to its citation as a major contributory factor. The problem of crime is therefore popularly viewed as a problem of poor or disadvantaged male youth³.

Worldwide official statistics show that most forms of crime are higher in economically disadvantaged areas and that persons of deprived environments demonstrate a greater propensity to engage in crime⁴. Studies have also invariably substantiated this link between socioeconomic status and delinquency⁵. Theoretically, structural delinquency theories purport that economic stress, in some way, increases the motivation of these

² See World Bank 2000, Deosaran 1995, Cabinet Report 1994, Archibald 1991, Club L'Overture 1982

³ Delinquent behavior among females is, however, increasingly becoming more visible.

⁴ See Brooks-Gunn et al. (eds) 1997. *Neighborhood Poverty: Context and Consequences for Children*. Russell Sage Foundation.

⁵ E.g. Glueck, S. and Glueck, E. 1950, West, D. J. 1982, West and Farrington 1973.

individuals to participate in criminal behavior. At the forefront of this perspective are the strain theories of delinquency.

A leading proponent of this view, Robert Merton⁶ theorized that deviance is generated by the structure and culture of the society⁷. He posited that every society defines certain goals for which it encourages its citizens to aspire and simultaneously defines certain legitimate means of attaining these accepted goals. Merton noted, however, that there is an unequal distribution of opportunities to obtain these goals conventionally, thus there exist a discrepancy between the societal goals and the institutionalized means to achieve them. It is this disjunction, he postured, that increases the likelihood of criminal involvement and it is the economically disadvantaged who are more likely to experience this gap. His premise therefore being that greater 'strain' or pressure is placed on the disadvantaged individual to achieve the goals, but do so illegitimately, a means he referred to as 'innovation'. This argument was extended by Albert Cohen⁸ and Cloward and Ohlin⁹, in which they suggest that individuals who are alienated from the socially approved means and who perceive their opportunities to success as limited or blocked develop delinquent subcultures to attain status and recognition.

Cohen's theory of delinquent boys proposed that value conflict within the education system encourages lower class boys who were unable to attain the dominant middle class ideals, to reject these goals and pursue alternative means of success. The alternative, he saw, as being based on a delinquent subculture, where mainstream norms and values are inverted and deviant means are highly favored as a way to achieve the reputation and status previously denied. Cohen's theory therefore suggested that poor school performance as a result of 'cultural deprivation' encourages a delinquent response.

⁶ Merton, Robert K. 1938. "Social Structure and Anomie," *American Sociological Review* 3:672-682.

⁷ Haralambos, M. 1985. *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives* 2nd Ed. Slough: University Tutorial Press.

⁸ Cohen, Albert. 1955. *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*. Glencoe, Ill. Free Press.

⁹ Cloward, R. & Ohlin, L. 1960. *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Similarly, Cloward and Ohlin viewed delinquency as a mechanism for youths to achieve the social status denied by conventional society. Unlike Merton, however, they sought to explain deviance in terms of the illegitimate opportunity structure. Lower class boys, they believed, were more concerned with material success. But compared to their higher status counterparts they are faced with no or limited avenues for legitimately achieving their goals, (what they referred to as “blocked opportunities”), or they perceive their chances as restricted. A severe disjunction therefore exists between aspiration levels (what they want) and expectations (what they anticipate they will receive). Given this goals-means incongruity, criminal behavior presents an alternative, depending on the individual’s access to and the availability of illegitimate opportunity structures. Different delinquent responses are therefore based on the kind of illegitimate structure one is exposed to; where criminal behavior emerges out of the criminal subculture.

However, in all its variations, there remains on the part of strain theories an inability to explain the non-delinquency of many of the economically disadvantaged. With reference to the three arguments we can ask: *Why is it that not all economically disadvantaged individuals engage in criminal behavior? Why is it that some strained individuals who are exposed to illegitimate opportunity structures never resort to criminal behavior? And why is it that not all lower class students who perform poorly academically chose a life of crime?* If we are to look to our own societies, we are aware that there are many disadvantaged individuals who do not offend or who consciously refrain from criminal entanglements. In fact, there are examples of young men who in spite of their deprived background are achieving academically and/or socially. If we are to believe that the delinquents’ outcomes are as a result of their challenging environment then why is it that persons from similar backgrounds come to respond differently to their circumstance?

Research on resilience suggests that certain operant protective factors and processes can facilitate a successful adaptation in the face of adverse circumstances. The resilience approach seeks to identify the positive factors in a person’s life that help them cope with or overcome the challenges or risks that confront them. The concept of resilience first emerged in the mental health literature, where researchers sought to uncover why many

children exposed to various risk conditions and strongly predicted to develop a disorder did not. A comprehensive longitudinal study of children facing multiple risks later revealed that various individual and environmental factors led to their ability to overcome the odds to which others succumbed, this led to a subsequent focus on identifying the strengths that promote this ability to withstand varying stressors. Their resiliency came to be defined as ‘the positive pole of individual differences in people’s response to stress and adversity’¹⁰. As the concept developed, it was explained as the ability to thrive, mature and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances¹¹.

These circumstances have been categorized as either biological abnormalities or environmental obstacles, which may be chronic, consistent or severe and infrequent. To overcome these adversities a person must actively draw on all his/her resources – biological, psychological and environmental. Consequently, resilience has been labeled a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing both individual and environmental factors (Gordon 1995). Research has also identified three (3) domains through which resilience can be fostered – i.e. the family, the school and the community. Additionally, inherent to defining resiliency are protective factors, not merely the opposite of risk factors; they are those conditions or influences, which ameliorate the risk factors and promote characteristics of resilience¹². They are in effect those factors that act as a buffer or umbrella to degrees of vulnerability.¹³

Resiliency theory therefore points to the failure of the risk factor approach, heavily adopted by criminology over the years, to address diversity of outcomes in particular environments. This is largely because of the dominance of a positivist epistemology (Agnew 1989). This tradition, however, is riddled with several inadequacies. Given its portrayal of individuals as being constrained to engage in delinquent behavior by varying biological, social and psychological forces, critics of the approach argue that its preoccupation with measurement and control leads to an overemphasis on the influence

¹⁰ Rutter, 1987. Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms.

¹¹ Gordon, K 1995. “Self-concept and motivational patterns of resilient African American high School Students”, *Journal of Black Psychology*, Vol. 21 issue 3, p.239.

¹² Krovetz, M. 1999. “Fostering Resiliency”, *Thrust for Educational Leadership*, May/June 1999 28 (5)

¹³ Anthony, E. James. 1987. *The Invulnerable Child*, cited in Wright 1999

of structure, a denial of subjectivity and a disregard for the views of the young offender (Brown 1998). This practice, however, continues to underscore contemporary sociological thoughts of the problem, guiding much of the attitudes of practitioners and the structure of preventative and intervention programmes. Yet, it is apparent that years of this kind of research has brought neither consensus nor clarity on the factors related to involvement in criminal behavior and there further appears to be a paucity in our understanding of the processes by which these factors operate in the lives of young people.¹⁴, which in large measure is fuelling our inability to stem the increases in its incidence. The inclusion of a resilience framework, however, rather than a singular focus on risk, allows us to appreciate the interplay of factors and processes leading to difference in outcome.

Brown¹⁵ suggests that a greater perspective of the behavior can come through a fundamental rethinking of the ways in which we have framed the problem and our approach to its understanding. She argues that if we are to expose new dimensions of the problem, we must provide a space for the subject and legitimize their voice in the delinquency discourse.

Markedly, the voices of Trinidadian youth are significantly absent from our understanding of the behavior in the country. The perception of youth as immature, irrational, and an underclass¹⁶ has encouraged the adult/academic world to disregard their point of view. To understand their outcomes, it is critical that their perspectives be included. Creating a space for the views of these young people and listening to their stories will afford us the opportunity to understand the constructions that disadvantaged youth put on their own circumstance and how they come to react in different ways.

¹⁴Amstrong, Derrick. 2003. Pathways into and out of Crime: Risk, Resilience and Diversity.

¹⁵ Brown, Sheila. 1998. Understanding Youth and Crime: Listening to Youth? Buckingham: Open University Press.

¹⁶ Dadds, George K. et al. 1997. Tomorrow's Adults: A situational analysis of youth in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Commonwealth Secretariat: Marlborough house, London.

Methodologically, this kind of understanding calls for the adoption of a qualitative framework. Qualitative research is a broad naturalistic, interpretive approach that draws upon multiple methods of inquiry designed to capture the feelings, beliefs, intentions, interpretations and lived experiences of individuals¹⁷. Such an approach appreciates the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation and recognizes the existence of multiple realities in similar contexts.

THE STUDY

Method and sample

Given the above, the main question of the study was

Why is it that some disadvantaged male youths become involved in delinquency and some others do not?

The specific objectives of the study were therefore

- *To investigate the social and psychological risk factors of disadvantaged young males involved in delinquent behavior*
- *To explore the protective factors of disadvantaged young males not involved in delinquent behavior but who engage in achieving behaviors*
- *To discover the meaning of their behavior*

The data derives from in-depth interviews conducted with 12 young men between the ages of 15 – 19 years, all residents of communities within central Trinidad and therefore representative of the two major ethnic groups of the island – East Indian and African. Based on CSO data, the communities to which the boys belonged had significant levels of poverty and unemployment and were rated as ‘highly deficient’ or with ‘low or few deficiencies’¹⁸. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which was based

¹⁷ Rossman and Rallis. 1998. Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research.

¹⁸ 1997 CSO report on the Poverty Analysis of communities in Trinidad and Tobago

on specified criteria. Six (6) of the young men were incarcerated at the Youth Training Centre and had engaged in delinquent acts such as vandalism, pick pocketing, drug trafficking, breaking and entering and armed robbery (in the main property/violent offences). The remaining six boys had never engaged in any form of delinquent behavior and were achieving in various levels of their academic and social life. Two of the boys were enrolled at a technical institution, and the other four at a national programme that provides life and technical skills training to disadvantaged youth. Both groups of young men shared similar demographic characteristics. Of the 12, 8 came from households with two parental figures, all of whom were employed. Household sizes ranged from 2 to 8 persons. Eight of the young men completed secondary education and one never attained any formal schooling until his incarceration at the age of 17 years.

Interviews were carried out at the various institutions and at the homes of the young men, and where possible and permitted, friends and family members of the subjects were also interviewed. Each young man underwent a series of interviews, as much as three, each lasting 45 minutes to 2 hours, focusing on their life experiences (in their family, school, community, and with their peers), their motivations and the meaning of their behaviors in light of their experiences.

The stories of these young men were then compared and contrasted to identify their risk and protective factors, and to elicit the common themes and interrelationships that emerged, with a view to deriving the meanings that the young men attribute to their behaviors.

Main Findings

Risk Factors

Risk factors are defined as scientifically established factors or determinants for which there is strong objective evidence of a causal relationship to a problem. They are therefore those conditions that are associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes. It includes the experiences of stressors, i.e. stressful events and ongoing

stressful life conditions. Risk factors may range from personal or individual factors, to family inadequacies to school related factors.

The under-mentioned risk factors were identified from the stories of the young men and validated by the literature. Generally, both groups experienced a significant number of risk factors. Some of the factors confronting the groups were also the same, particularly at the family and community level (such as parental absence, violence and abuse in the home and negative community elements). The difference, however, is that most of the delinquent young men faced multiple risks at one time. Several of them deal with as much as 8 risk factors compared to the achievers. In fact, among the achievers only one young man faced as much as 5 risks. This is consistent with other research that support that single risk factors do not cause antisocial/violent behaviors but that clusters of or multiple risk factors combine to shape the behavior (see NIMH 2000, Office of Surgeon General, 2001).

Five (5) factors were recurrent among the delinquent group. These included faulty parental control, negative community elements, negative/no role models, negative peer influence and emotional strain. But, two factors proved most common among the achievers – parental absence and negative community elements.

DELINQUENTS	ACHIEVERS
<i>FAMILY LEVEL</i> • Parental Absence – through death, abandonment, incarceration • Poor affective relationship with parent figures and/or other family members • Absence of or fractured relationship with father • Violence and/or Abuse in the home • Faulty parental control mechanisms – lax monitoring, supervision and discipline	<i>FAMILY LEVEL</i> • Parental Absence – through death, separation, migration • Negative or limited relationship with father • Violence and Abuse in the home
<i>COMMUNITY, PEERS, SCHOOL LEVEL</i> • Negative elements of the community - drugs and crime • Negative or no role models • Negative peer influence and gang involvement • Academic Failure	<i>COMMUNITY, PEERS, SCHOOL LEVEL</i> • Negative elements of the community - drugs and crime • Negative peer influence • Dropping out of school • Academic Failure
<i>INDIVIDUAL LEVEL</i> • Presence of emotional strain – anger, resentment, abandonment and rejection • Low self esteem; external sense of self	<i>INDIVIDUAL LEVEL</i> • Presence of emotional strain – anger, resentment,

Protective Factors

Protective factors against delinquent involvement are said to:

- (a) decrease the influence of risk
- (b) modify individual response to risk
- (c) promote activities that are substitutes for or are incompatible with risk behaviors
- (d) and/or strengthen orientations toward prosocial institutions, such as church, school and family¹⁹

¹⁹ Jessor, Turban and Costa 1998

DELINQUENTS	ACHIEVERS
<i>RELATIONSHIPS</i> • Caring and supportive relationship with a significant other (particularly mother) • Positive Relations with Peers – peers served as a system of love, support and esteem • Connectedness to Family – they protected them from their negative behavior • Family Cohesion	<i>RELATIONSHIPS</i> • Caring and supportive relationship with a significant other (particularly mother) • Being shown positive interest by others (e.g. teacher, opposite sex peers) • Family stability
	<i>INVOLVEMENT & PARTICIPATION</i> • Involvement in positive extracurricular activities (e.g. football, karate, church group) • Meaningful participation in activities at home, at school and society – engaging in responsible acts with opportunity for responsibility and contribution. • Involvement with positive peers
<i>PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES</i> • Intelligence • Prosocial Beliefs – evident by their employment of neutralization techniques and their perception of targets	<i>PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES</i> • Intelligence • Relatively positive self-concept • Autonomy and sense of self • Sense of meaning and purpose • Prosocial beliefs

The delinquents demonstrated a limited presence of protective factors. Two factors were common among this group a caring relationship with another and relationship with their peers. However, what may have served as a protective factor for others was essentially a risk factor for them, particularly their relationship or bonding with their peers, since their peers formed members of their delinquent network. By comparison, the achieving young men had a significant presence of protective factors in their environment and 4 factors proved most common among this group – caring and supportive relationship with other,

involvement in positive activities and positive peers and personal sense of meaning and purpose.

The Meaning of their Behavior

Analysis of the interviews yielded several interrelating themes as it relates to the meaning of the young men's delinquent behavior. While financial gain was important to these young men and an essential part of their impetus to engage in delinquent behavior, it was not the only reason. For the delinquent young men in this study, activities such as vandalism, fighting, breaking and entering, robbery were motivated by a number of factors some of which were simply the rush of excitement and the thrill of getting away with it/succeeding at the crime gain. But at a substantive level, their behavior was representative of very real desires for **autonomy, belongingness and esteem, respect and power**; issues that are interlocked in their struggle for **self-determination** and issues that because of their age are also related to critical developmental tasks associated with the period of adolescence.

At the very base level, for these young men their criminal acts provided a means of **financial gain**, what they termed '*profit*'. Based on personal experience and that of other family members, as well as what they observed in their communities and the wider society, they came to have a disapproving view of legitimate work, since to them it meant hard work but small money. Robbery, however, was a means to obtain '*fast money*' or to earn money in a '*big way*' with the spin off benefits of '*fun*' '*action*' and happiness. For them, in their circumstance and environment, criminal activities seemed to be a rational means to earning a living. However, having money did not just allow them to improve their economic state; it was also tied to their notions of respect, power, esteem and a mark of their burgeoning manhood. Brana Shute²⁰ indicates that money has profound meaning among males as it often becomes an existential part of 'self', adding that money puts males in a position where they can be judged differently.

²⁰ Brana Shute 1979

According to 18 year-old Sonny, having money meant that he could now afford the ‘*brand*’ name clothing worn by his peers, and he could command the attention of girls as someone who “*could cut it*.”²¹ The young men stated that when they had money, they felt better about themselves, like a ‘*big man*’ worthy of respect from others. It also meant greater independence as they no longer had to ask their parents for money to purchase items, to go out or to support their other pleasures. Having money therefore meant that they were more in control and better able to make their own decisions. Sonny said: “*I feel nice when I have money in my pocket... I could buy a ~~s~~ag (a local beer) ...a biscuit... and rock back (relax)*”. Money provided them with a sense of stability and security. John indicated: “*I didn’t care how I geh de money, once I geh de money*” and Sonny added: “*...when yuh have money, yuh doh study who dead!*”

For these young men engaging in delinquent acts confers **status and popularity**, a strategy for establishing self as a “*big man*” worthy of respect. Sonny, who was once arrested for breaking and entering, explained that there is more than one way to gain respect. A person could gain respect by being polite and doing positive things or they could obtain respect negatively. He pointed out that to earn the respect of big men, he had to show that he was tough and that he was able to do whatever it takes. He said “*if yuh wan’ yuh respect long like a train, yuh ha’ to do to get respect.*”

Activities such as theft, breaking and entering and fighting demonstrated personal competence but it also provided recognition and affirmation by others, particularly their peers. Sonny admitted that without this he saw himself as a ‘*nobody*’. But he reveled in being seen as a *bandit*, since he considers “*a bandit is ah dread man, don’t go around he!*” Flash, another one of the young men who was the leader of a gang of about 10 youngsters between the ages of 14-16 who trafficked drugs and committed robberies, said that when he committed a robbery his friends would say: “*you is de man*”, which made him feel “*good*”. He added that being a member of a gang gave him “*pleasure*”, “*recognition*” and “*have people talking about you.*” He further declared that he wanted the whole of Trinidad to know him. This he believed would have been a challenge to

²¹ To impress by dressing in the latest brand name clothing.

other “*badder fellahs*” who would not have been able to “test” him. It is interesting to note that their role models included a known drug lord, a wanted criminal and an insurgent.

Along with this need for respect came a strong **sense of power** at being able to humiliate and dominate others. Flash revealed that: “*It does make yuh feel good when somebody begging yuh - you come like a king or somebody... people ha’ to have respect for you, buh you doh respect dem*”. With this sense of power also came a warped sense of esteem, since most of the other young men also said they felt “good” while they were beating up people and making them cry during robberies. Flash further added that being successful after a robbery filled him and his group with a sense of invincibility. They felt that “*nobody cyah come, nobody cyah test...is ah iron shield.*”

But it was also about personal vendettas and retribution. On more than one occasion Sonny also indicated that robbing persons is one way of getting back at them for being disrespectful to him. He said: “*I use to mediate and think these people treat me bad, I thinking these people getting tie up with me²²... I planning to go and rob them and thing.*” For John, on the other hand, it provided a means for him to act out his distaste for the rich. Armed with his perception that “*Rich people are dogs. I doh like dem at-all*”, he and his friends would break and enter and vandalize the homes of the rich. Often times, he never kept the spoils for himself but gave it away to his less fortunate peers.

On another plane, their own sense of powerlessness is also inverted as violence provides a means for them to deal with their own pain. One youth’s statement is clear “*when I am hurting I often hurt others.*” He admitted that to deal with his anger or pain of rejection he would become physically violent with others.

These acts of crime and violence therefore served to ensure that the young men were able to achieve and maintain a status as a ‘tough youth’ or ‘bad boy’ as a testimony to their social power and dominance, while protecting them against the possible threats and

²² Taking him for a fool, underestimating him, or being fooled with him.

victimization of others. This is in part because their environment is one in which the ethos of 'the survival of the fittest' prevailed or where the big and strong took advantage of the small and weak.

Being a part of the group and **gaining acceptance** from their peers was also a very real need for these young men. 19 year-old Martin, despite a stable family background, got involved in delinquent behavior to fit in with his peer group. He implied that there is a threat that if you don't do what the group does then you can't 'lime' with them: "*dem is the crew yuh like, ...yuh like dem vibes and thing, so I do wha dem doing. Thy yuh friends dem, yuh like the crew so when dem went and rob, I went with dem too*".

The group also provided a sense of togetherness and companionship that kept its members tied to the group. According to Flash, there were times when he wanted to and tried to leave but he found himself still being drawn to his friends who constantly told him that they needed him "*like a big brother*". Despite his guilt and of sometimes being "*fed up of doing things to people*", he did not stop because "*I keep on following de crowd because de crowd giving yuh support*". He further stated that surrounded by his peers he felt "*supported*", "*loved*" "*like a boss*". For 19 year old Ramlogan, who was abused and disowned by his father, being the youngest member of a delinquent gang, made him feel accepted, supported and a part of something. When questioned as to why he became involved in delinquent behavior, he bluntly stated "*I wanted to be apart of the group.*"

The peer group also gained significance over the parental relationship and parent's ability to manage the youth. Ramlogan remarked that "*I thought my friends was the best thing. I didn't use to study my parents.*" Martin, heavily influenced by his friends and his community, came to disregard his parents and a lot of what he was taught at home:

"It does come like if yuh home and they teach yuh something and I see wha' going on in the community, yuh doh study yuh family. I feel muh queen (mother) and dem talking stupidity...crap...I didn't use to listen to wha' dem say I start to groove in to wha' going on in the community."

The views of these young men stand in direct contrast to the insights gained from the young men who can be described as achievers. In the main, these young men avoidance of criminal entanglements relate to their heavy commitment and involvement in prosocial activities, their perception of delinquent behavior and their views regarding the importance of achieving.

For three of them, involvement in church and its related activities proved to be a strong and stabilizing force within their lives. 18year-old David, who attends church regularly and has been a member of a choir for the past two years, admitted that while he liked liming and hanging out with his friends in the community, after the death of one of his friends he felt safer in church – *“It ain’t making sense out in d’ world when yuh in church yuh in a safer place. In ah party fight could break out and thing.”* Another youth Mario spends most of his free time involved with religious matters. On average, he spends more than eight hours a week devoting himself to bible studies, lectures and service. He frankly indicated that he was not involved in crime because of his religion. He believes that

“There is a God, you can’t hide from him. Crime doh geh you nowhere. I have a heavy conscience, if I thief somebody thing it go bother me. ... I know the consequences I doh have to feel to learn that (crime) is nothing good...you know de truth so yuh pick it or go the worldly way.”

Sean as a consequence of his religious upbringing has a similar outlook. He pointed out that

“It (crime) is not beneficial to me as a person ...it says nothing at all ... it not good for you as an individual to carry on in that kind of way...everyone has a will and in the end crime will lead to trouble it is a dead end.”

For some of the other young men their interest lay in sports. 18-year old Curtis, who had to drop out of secondary school to care for his younger brothers, found his release mainly through football. The focus and discipline required for success motivated him and the others to keep in line. But it also helped to calm flaring tempers when conflict situations arose. According to 19-year old Andrew, his involvement in martial arts taught him to *“think before yuh act. ...to think fast.”* These young men also devoted significant time to their sports, most if not all week-day evenings. For some, this intensity is based on their desire to play the sport professionally or because of their membership in clubs. Furthermore, their devotion to sports did not lessen their commitment to school. According to Mario, who has won various sporting medals *‘I does balance myself.’* Andrew too when faced with the choice between doing well in school or excelling at karate, reasoned *“If I have to go to a job interview I can’t impress the person with how high I could kick. I said I have to have meh passes so better ah study my school work.”*

These young men therefore fail to see crime as a rational or viable solution. In fact, they did not see crime as being profitable or in keeping with their life goals. Instead, they saw success as a reward for hard work and commitment. Curtis, despite growing up in a community overrun with drugs and criminal behavior, and who had to secure a job at the age of 15 to support his brothers revealed that *“I doh want to be in jail or for people to say I is a bandit...I doh want my name all over de place....”* Now that he lives with his aunt, he is pursuing a trade to secure a better future for himself. In the same vein, Andrew whose mother died when he was in his early teens resisted an involvement in crime because *“I never wanted to do anything because I doh want she hear I lock up and she on she death bed.”* But his desire to be successful came through wanting a better life than his parents:

“Well, I see whey meh parents come from and I don’t want to end up in tha’ situation. I determined to be a success. Doh tell meh ah cyah do something. I determined to do It; thy just me.”

Jerome also never saw the value in stealing. He believes in working for what he wants. As a young man growing up in a youth culture marked by the wearing of brand name clothing, Jerome owns no “brands”. He admitted, “*Sometimes I does want it, but I would have to work for it.*” Stealing is not an option “*I never grow up like that. Yuh buy yuh things.*” Jerome believes that the mark of a man is in earning what he has rather than stealing it.

Like the other young men in the study these young men desire the same things – a sense of independence, respect and appreciation, control over their circumstance. Their behavioral choices, however, were conditioned by a drive to make their parents proud and to secure a ‘good’ stress-free life.

Explaining the Difference

The stories of the young men were compared and contrasted to extract the factors that explain the difference in their outcome. Both groups of young men came from similar backgrounds and confronted similar issues, but made different choices. On the whole, what the young men’s stories suggest is that the way they sought to negotiate their circumstances relates to the identity they were seeking to construct for themselves and the availability and access to tools that aided them in this process.

The experiences of these young men reaffirm the perspective that identity issues commingle with crime commission. Various approaches to understanding youth suggest that the central developmental task of this period is the creation of a sense of self that supports the transition to adulthood (Erikson 1968). It is also argued that the possibilities afforded by the social environment influences the successful creation of a desired identity.²³ Oyserman and Saltz (1993) propose that it involves a process of looking to the past, the present and the future to determine the possible self to create. The data suggest that the “possible selves” these young men were seeking to create were in a large measure related to their relationship with persons important in their life. The young men’s relationship with their parents and with their peers is instructive in this regard.

²³ Cantor et al 1982 cited in Oyserman and Saltz 1993

In all cases, both achievers and delinquents, the young men's relationship with their fathers was either absent, limited or antagonistic. But for the delinquent young men, the main issue seemed to be some level of abandonment by their father figures. The young men were physically and/or emotionally abandoned by their fathers. This neglect and rejection had a tremendous impact on the young men's self-esteem and sense of self and thus made them vulnerable to the negative elements in their environment. In the absence of strong relationships with their fathers, they looked to other male models outside of their home. By their own accounts these models were bandits, drug dealers and other notorious criminals. But the absence or inadequacies of the relationship also created a void within the young men which their criminal behavior was to perhaps fill. One young man's statement is telling *"The one thing I could not steal was a father."* Additionally, the young men also turned to their peers to satisfy the deficiencies of their relationship. The peer group acted as a substitute or surrogate family system, in which their need for love, support, belongingness and self-esteem was achieved. Their peers, however, comprised members of their delinquent networks.

In the case of the achievers, it is the mother-son relationship that is critical. For all cases, the mothers were noted to have a more involved relationship with their sons. The mother took on the role of disciplinarian, counselor and the one the young men identified as more likely to provide them with love and support. However, for the delinquents, their relationship with their mother's ranged from closed and secretive to outright conflict. The achievers, on the other hand, had good strong warm relationships with their mothers and thus identified their mother as the one motivating them away from crime mainly through moral instruction or indirectly through a desire not to endanger his relationship with her or in some way lose her approval, and by comparison they interacted with positive peers who like them were engaged in constructive activities.

Thus, both the parent-child relationship and peer relations are significant in explaining the young men's behavioral difference. This study therefore reinforces the notion of the importance of significant others in the lives of youth, particularly at the time of identity formation.

Summary and Concluding Remarks:

In light of the prevalence and seriousness of youth crime and violence, it is imperative that we understand the varying dimensions of the problem in order to guide the delivery of care to youth and to support communities and families as they attempt to protect their youth. An appreciation of the lived experiences of these young men can serve also well in the design of effective and relevant policy that promotes the positive development of disadvantaged youth. In addition, protective factors need to be elucidated in order to provide guidance and strengthen interventions. This study therefore sought to extend our understanding of the problem, in terms of providing valuable insights from the youths themselves.

This paper examined risk and protective factors associated with delinquency and non-delinquency among a sample of disadvantage male youth. A number of factors relative to individual, family, social and environmental influence were identified as contributing to the behavior of these young men. However, the major finding of the study relates to the quality of the parent-child relationship, where in the case of the delinquents it was and absent or deficient relationship with father, and with the achievers it was the importance of the maternal relationship.

With respect to policy implications, the findings suggest that in dealing with the problem of youth crime and violence significant attention therefore needs to be paid to these relationships. There also needs to be a provision of support systems to strengthen families and assist young men in the creation of positive identities. This kind of assistance is needed for all young men, inclusive of those who have already infringed the law. As a consequence, relationship building should also be encouraged as critical component of institutional and intervention programmes. And a space should also be created for parents and peers to be included in rehabilitation initiatives.

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