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Article in *World Journal of Public Health* · February 2024

DOI: 10.11648/wjph.20240901.18

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School Systems in Trinidad and Tobago: A Cause of Deviant Behaviours/Violent Crimes and the XYZ Model of School Violence

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To cite this article:

Mandreker Bahall. (2024). School Systems in Trinidad and Tobago: A Cause of Deviant Behaviours/Violent Crimes and the XYZ Model of School Violence. *World Journal of Public Health*, 9(1), 56-63. <https://doi.org/10.11648/wjph.20240901.18>

Received: January 3, 2024; **Accepted:** January 20, 2024; **Published:** February 5, 2024

Abstract: The aetiology of violence is manifold (genetic, personal, environmental, and situational) and of major concern to Trinidad and Tobago. The school system itself (the main conduit for overall child development) might be a major contributor to poor performance, deviance, and violent behaviour. Primary and secondary school education is a strategic instrument for promoting or hindering children's growth and development. This study aims to show the possible relationship between the school system and school performance and the potential for deviant and violent behaviour. Data were collected on the school system, school performance, and national crime levels. A literature search was also conducted on school systems, performance, and violence. Results indicate that primary school training focused on academic performance and did not cater to universal accessibility or 'legitimate structural accessibility' for all children, and focused on obtaining places in prestigious institutions for higher education. Since 2018, approximately 40% of the students have failed the secondary entrance assessment exam, with approximately 11% scoring less than 30%. With universal secondary school enrolment, students may be deprived further of accessibility. This may become compounded by the mixing of students of varying tendencies, behaviours, and otherwise. This continued reliance on academics satisfied the students at prestigious schools. The secondary school system brings added challenges such as the mixing of students (academics, non-academics, students with violent or deviant tendencies, etc.) of varied backgrounds and continued lack of 'legitimate structural accessibility'. A large section of the non-academically inclined (half passing fewer than five subjects) may find themselves doing inappropriate things, eventually leading to deviance or even violent behaviour. This is further complicated by contributions from the public health system. In the public school system, students, especially those who are not academically inclined, endure further stress, anger, frustration, and eventually ending in deviant/violent behaviour. A school system with an academic focus effectively decreases 'legitimate structural accessibility' and opportunities. This subsequently leads to 'non-performing students' affecting their psyche and confidence and disturbing other students, eventually leading to deviance and criminal activity. Such a dysfunctional school system must be corrected to allow student education to be holistic. Additionally, a need exists to develop a system to screen and identify students who are at risk or display deviance, and implement corrective measures.

Keywords: Deviance, Criminal Behaviour, Holistic Education, Risks, Positive Factors, XYZ Model of School Violence, Crime Aetiology

1. Introduction

Violent crimes are a major concern in Trinidad and Tobago, which ranks as the sixth most violent country in the world [1]. In 2022, the homicide rate in Trinidad and Tobago was around '39.4 homicide victims per 100,000 populations' [2]. Similar

to other national communities, schools are also experiencing an increase in violence. Globally, 'half of students aged 13–15, approximately 150 million, report experiencing peer-to-peer violence in and around school' [3]. The rate of school violence in Trinidad and Tobago is unknown but seems to be increasing [4]. There were also reported cases of teenage pregnancy (38

of every 1000 girls aged 15–19, 2021) [5], underage marriages (11%) [6], child molestation (an average of 1395 reports to the Children’s Authority each year) [7], and bullying (‘15% of adolescents aged 13–17 were bullied on one or more days in the past 30 days’, 2017) [8].

The aetiology of school violence is manifold: biological [9], psychological [10], and environmental [11]. According to Ferguson, school violence may be attributed to negative factors in the community and society, such as violence in media (TV shows, movies, and video games) [12], exposure to violence in communities [13, 14] and gang violence [15]. Hirschfield identified school failure, educational expectations, engagement, school bonds, and grouping practices as processes through which illegal behaviour begins [16]. A study by Sutherland reported seven ways in which education can lead to youth crime: inadequate transition to school, unhealthy school climate, schools’ contribution to academic failure, forming of anti-social peer relationships, negative relationships between students and school personnel, mistreatment by school personnel, and school policy abuse [17]. Beyond enrolment, the school system has to be expanded to cater to the needs and holistic development of children. This study’s hypothesis is that, in Trinidad and Tobago, there is a real possibility that the school system itself may create a platform for poor performance, and subsequently, criminal behaviour.

Deviant behaviour/criminal violence = f (biological, psychological, environmental, school system, and others).

This study aims to explain and explore Trinidad and Tobago’s school systems as major contributors to students’ performances and their deviant/criminal tendencies/behaviours.

2. Materials and Methods

This is a descriptive study that analyses the educational system (reliance on academics or student inaccessibility and mixing of students), secondary data on school education/performance, national violence from 1990 to 2021, and available school violence. A literature review and data were obtained using various search engines, including Google, PubMed, EBSCOHOST, and the websites of the Pan American and World Health Organizations. Data (published and unpublished) were also obtained from the Ministry of Education, Central Statistical Office of Trinidad and Tobago, and Inter-American Development Bank. Search terms such as ‘crime’, ‘school violence’, and ‘deviant behaviour’, were used. We analysed the school curriculum, student performance, and national and school violence to determine links between the school system, academic performance, and students’ deviance/criminal behaviour. The results are presented as graphs.

3. Results

3.1. Background of School Operating System

3.1.1. Limited Enrolment

Education was limited in Trinidad and Tobago

after slavery and indentureship were abolished. Non-academic education was, therefore, pursued by the vast majority in fields such as plumbing, welding, carpentry, gardening, and labour. With the implementation of universal primary education in 1961 [18], formal educational opportunities became available to all children, up to 13 years old. Post primary education was limited by affordability. This system implies that many academically oriented students were unable to pursue their academic ambitions because of their economic status.

3.1.2. Universal Enrolment/Education

With formal education becoming desirable across the globe as a means to success and the enforcement of student education in schools up to the age of 15 years [19], the demand for broader options and holistic education increased. This resulted in higher enrolment under universal primary school education in the UK (99%; 2017) [20], USA (95%; 2017) [21] and Canada (100%; 2017) [22]. Low-income countries such as Liberia, Ethiopia, and Guinea had much lower primary school enrolments with 44% in 2017 [23], 85% in 2015 [24], and 76% in 2016 [25], respectively. Trinidad and Tobago, a high-income country, had primary and secondary school enrolments of 99% and 73%, respectively, in 2010 [8]. In 1997, the goal was for all children to attend school [26–28]. Academic performance was reinforced by motivation through rewards, scholarships, status, and well-paying jobs. By 2000, the school system included primary and secondary schools (prestigious and non-prestigious) for all and easier access to tertiary education through paying and non-paying means [18]. However, there has been limited use of non-academic training in secondary schools. Some tertiary centres, such as the Polytechnic Institute, offer this option [29]. Prestigious schools were high-performing academic educational schools mainly controlled by religious organisations, although a few were government-controlled. The rest of the schools vary widely in academic achievement but are generally classified as non-prestigious schools.

3.2. School System and Crime Germination

3.2.1. Institutional Accessibility and Mixing of Students

During the first five years of primary school, the school system in Trinidad and Tobago focuses on producing students for prestigious secondary schools because of the greater chance of both academic educational achievement and less dysfunctional behaviour among students. This has resulted in many non-academic-oriented students being unable to perform optimally and even performing poorly, providing the potential to encourage them to create mischief or remain apathetic. Even high performing students are pressured to compete for limited places in prestigious schools. Many parents feel that failure to obtain a place in such institutes will subject their child to a non-prestigious school environment and culture, leading to poor academic performance, deviance, or criminal behaviour tendencies. This competition has caused some students to experience stress and depression [30]. Between 2018 and 2023, approximately 40% of the students

entering secondary school would have failed or scored less than 50% in the secondary entrance assessment (SEA). Furthermore, an average of 11% of students scored 30% or

lower. This academic performance worsened in 2022, when 27.81% achieved 30% or less at the SEA level, while 62.94% failed (<50%) (Figure 1).

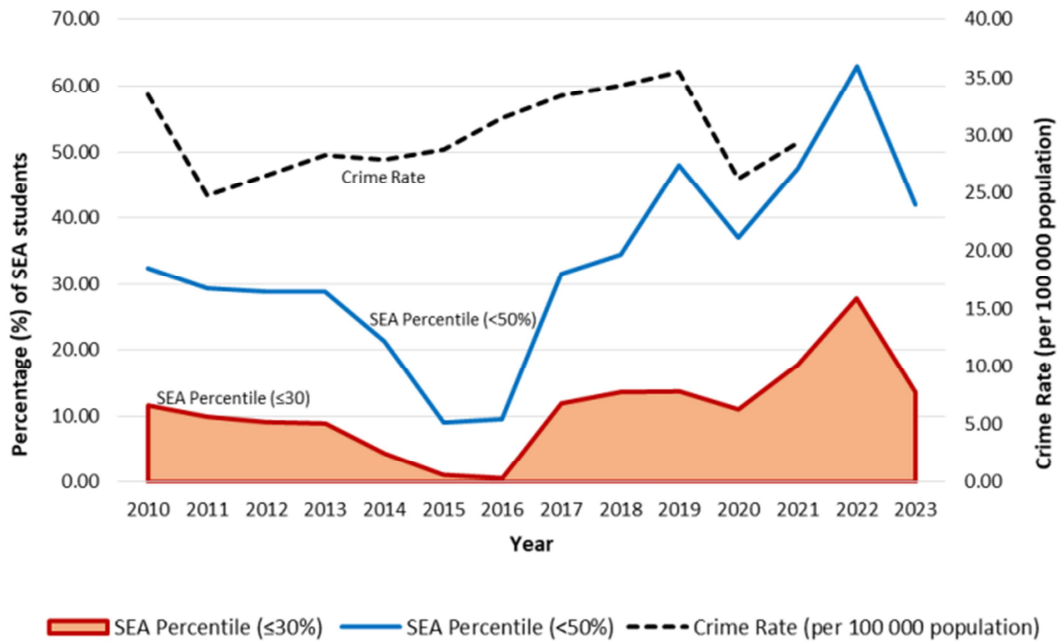


Figure 1. Percentage of SEA Students who scored $\leq 30\%$ and $< 50\%$ from 2010-2023 [31-35].

The path to SEA was effectively only for the brightest students, with the greatest stamina to prepare for the best schools. The goal of attaining a place in a prestigious school has led to fierce competition, bitterness, mental stress, and, in rare instances, suicide [36]. This system largely ignores many children’s innate talents, which necessitates the creation of an institutional capacity for overall child development. As the focus of this system was on school placement, the academic focus was greater, with increasingly poor performance from many students (Figure 1). This lack of ‘legitimate structural accessibility’ and student inaccessibility was worse in many special groupings that faced unique challenges and consequences such as:

1. People with learning and developmental preferences; people with genetic challenges [37].
2. Students who suffer emotionally, mentally, and socially [38].
3. Students from physical and social environments which are more prone to drugs, noise, traffic, and other social stressors [39, 40].
4. Students who come from various backgrounds (social, cultural, religious, and economic) [27] to the same classroom.

Additionally, many students attend schools where there is a general lack of open-air, physical, and cultural activities that are required for well-rounded schooling [41]. Such a lack of ‘legitimate structural accessibility’ and student inaccessibility has the potential to develop underperformers in the SEA (Figure 1), with consequences such as deviant behaviour with criminal implications [42]. According to Carnegie Mellon University, students’ lack of interest in academics can result

from subject content, lack of confidence that their efforts will improve academic performance, focus on academic rewards, unsupportive classrooms, failure of non-academic priorities, and potential physical, mental, and personal issues [43]. According to Deblaey, the lack of institutional accessibility or ‘legitimate, opportunity structure’ may be the biggest contributor to violence [39]. Institutional accessibility requires effective infrastructure [44, 45] and equal access to academic and non-academic interests, strengths, and capabilities. The failure of this infrastructure leads to negative social consequences, such as crime [46]. Data on school violence were not available; however, the high levels of national crime are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Secondary-school education poses additional challenges in this system. Due to their limited prestige school slots and unaffordability, many academically inclined students have to enrol in non-prestigious schools. Universal secondary education means that students continue academic paths regardless of their calling. In fact, ‘the movement’ to secondary school, designed to improve the child, may further worsen their development if it fails to provide a platform for educational accessibility, development, and discipline (avoiding distractions/obstacles). SEA performance reflects the academic state of students entering secondary school, with 62.94% failing (<50%) in 2022 (Figure 1). Attempts to educate children with non-academic potential in a highly academically driven environment can be challenging, and often counterproductive. This has the potential to not only be non-productive but also to make students frustrated and angry, with violent consequences. With universal secondary education, in addition to the continued institutional

inaccessibility, or not having 'legitimate, opportunity structure' academic and non-academically inclined, deviant and docile, ambitious and non-ambitious students become mixed. These add to the strain on classroom education caused by distractions and negative peer pressure. Children who are disengaged from academia often fail or feel broken due to lowered self-esteem [47]. Many times, this translates into rebellion or boredom, turning into negative peer pressure, resulting in bad behaviour, violence, and misdemeanours.

Non-prestigious schools have a wide mix of students and negative issues: absenteeism, suspensions [48], bullying, fights, sex, drug usage, etc. Many students who have little or no interest in formal academic schooling can lead to distractions (Y2 arm) (Figure 3). As the years pass, many students become

more frustrated and feel useless, unless some form of intervention is implemented [49]. A few interventions, such as the Military-Oriented Youth Programme of Apprenticeship and Re-Oriented Training and Military-Led Academic Training Programme, were implemented to help 'at-risk young men' (at risk of deviant/criminal behaviour). Schools such as Service Volunteered for All (SERVOL) also assist students with special needs. Nevertheless, they are not part of the standard educational system and have only been used sparingly. The results of the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examinations revealed that, on average, 45% of participants passed fewer than five subjects. In fact, in 2022, 37.28% of students obtained failing grades (Grade IV and below), which is 2.54% worse than in 2021 [50] (Figure 2).

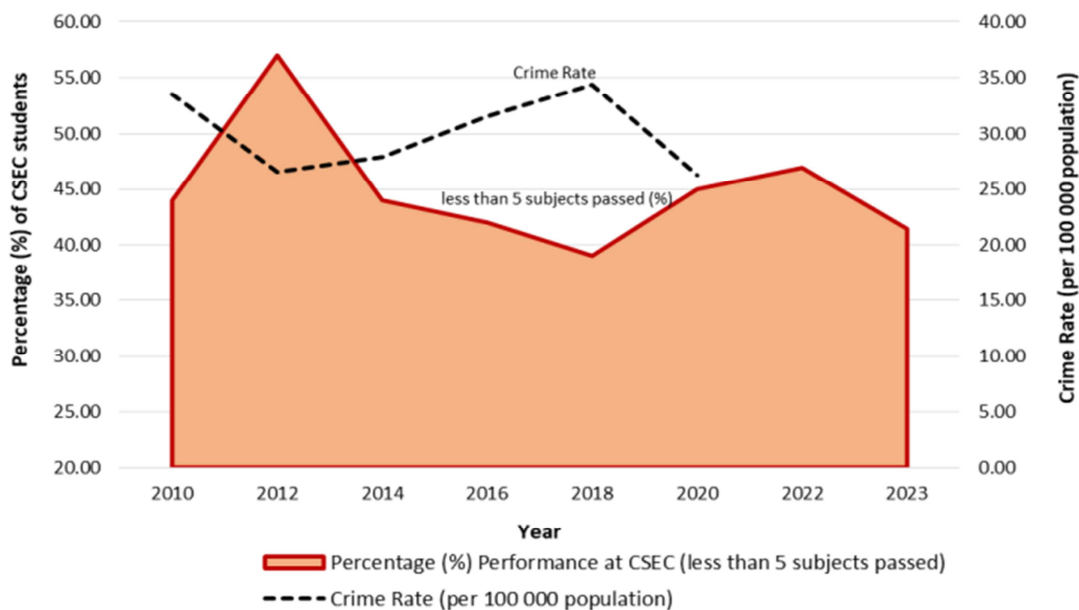


Figure 2. Percentage (%) of CSEC students who passed less than 5 subjects over ten years [31, 51-53, 35].

In the absence of school violence data, high national crime levels and worsening academic performance can be assumed as reasonable proxies. The outcomes of the educational system manifest as violent behaviour and psychosocial stress [54]. Furthermore, deviant or violent behaviours may be solidified, increased, or show a contagious nature, affecting other children without these tendencies by association. Secondary school students ended up in one of three groups by graduation: good performers, poor performers/non-violent (silent tolerators), and poor performers/violent.

While the public health system was not the focus of this study, poor parenting, unemployment, poverty, drugs, murders, and poor environmental infrastructure also play a major role in children's deviant behaviour (X arm) (Figure 3). Many studies interpret or see the school system as replicating a larger society [55]. A report from the Ministry of Education of Trinidad and Tobago stated, 'schools are considered to be the microcosms of society; thus, the societal trend of interpersonal violence has also been noted at schools in terms of deviant behaviour, choices made, or infractions committed by students'

[56]. Quetelet wrote that 'society itself contains the germs of all the crimes committed. It is the social state, in some measure, that prepares these crimes, and the criminal is merely the instrument that executes them' [57].

3.2.2. Common Pathway

Both the violent public health culture and the school system (both primary and secondary) described above make many students anxious and stressed. Both of these pathways encourage or create individuals with negative tendencies. A negative state can consequently lead to the development of deviant or criminal-like behaviour. According to Thomas, failure to provide a positive learning environment (equal opportunities/adequate resources/stream lining of students) encourages a mental state of anger and stress in students [58]. Deviant behaviour developed by a poor public health system (X arm) or through the school system (Y arm) leads to frustration, anger, stress, and a lack of motivation, resulting in deviant or criminal behaviour (Z arm) (Figure 3). Some students with such pent-up feelings may experience depression, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, etc.

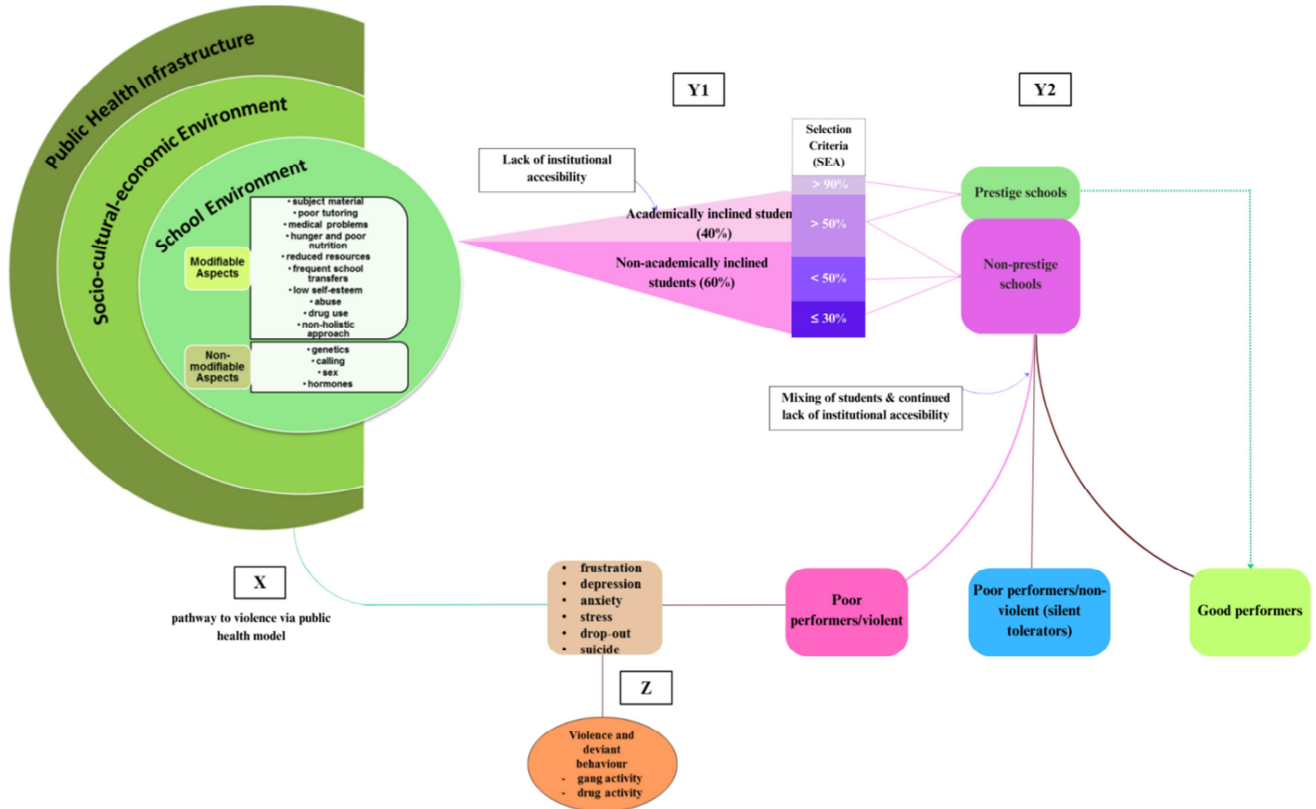


Figure 3. The XYZ model for School Violence Aetiology.

Key:
 X: School: Public health issues (domestic violence, lack of social and economic support, poor parenting, noise pollution, violence in the neighbourhood etc).
 Y1: Primary school – Student specific development training, evaluation and reassessment.
 Y2: Secondary school – continued student specific development training, evaluation and reassessment.
 Z: Psychological states (anxiety, stress, frustration, depression etc.–deviance/criminal behaviour)

4. Conclusion

While the genesis of deviant and criminal-like activities is complex and stems from many factors, including the public health environment, genetic predisposition, peer pressure, and drug trade, the school system plays a major role in contributing to further criminal activity. Although the school system is part of the public health environment/model, it can separate and independently fuel violence and deviant behaviour, if it becomes a dysfunctional platform for holistic educational development. There is an urgent need to address the school system in Trinidad and Tobago and to identify and address ‘red flags students’ through proper diagnostics.

5. Limitations

Data from government agencies on violence in schools are difficult to obtain and are largely inaccessible.

Availability of Data and Materials

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the premedical students Lamiya Islam and Alexia Mahadeo, who assisted in data collection.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

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