

RELIGIOUS IMPERATIVES AS A PANACEA TO CRIME AND VIOLENCE AMONG YOUTHS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

It is an undeniable fact that Nigeria as a nation is witnessing a paradigm shift as far as the issue of crime is concerned. Nigeria is now ranking among the terrorists nations and this calls to question the issue of security in the nation. The different militant groups and the recent Boko Haram insurgency is a major challenge the country is facing today. Incidentally, those perpetrating these dastardly acts are youths and this is why the paper focuses on Youth involvement in crimes. Youth involvement in various crimes is fast assuming an alarming rate. Many factors have been said to be responsible for or influence the high incidence of crime among the youths. They include the following which will be systematically considered– Personal, Family/Parents factors, School based/Education factors, Socio-Economic and Political factors, Religious, peer Influence, Media and Career related factors. The paper however, posit that religion is vital in curbing most, if not all, of the excesses exhibited by the youths by providing a proactive approach to helping the youths to overcome the violent behaviours they exhibit. In this regard, religion becomes a veritable tool in solving the problem of crimes as the Holy writs negate these acts among the youths.

Keywords: Youth, Crime, Violence, Religion

Introduction

The world we live in today to a significant extent has lost its sense of security, due to many factors. The rising wave of crime in the form of lawlessness has become one of the major issues of great concern in our society today. The youth is the future of the nation and as such it is pertinent to focus on the violent crime rate and youth involvement in the same and the implication it projects for the future. An increasing number of youth are getting more criminally oriented and involved. It has become urgent to ask questions and find solutions to such unfortunate negative trend in our leaders of tomorrow. Is the legacy of honesty and well-behaviour being passed on to our youth today? Are parents taking their responsibilities seriously towards their children and wards? Is civilization and technology age affecting our getting our priorities right and training our young ones effectively?

Peer group seems to be taking the place of parents, as adolescents spend more time outside with their peers rather than at home with their parents and elders, and as a result of this youth get influenced by their vulnerable peer group as evil communication corrupts good manners. For a long time now social scientists, psychologists and educationists have sought specific predictors of violent crime behaviour in the young ones.

Violent behaviour is an increasingly key topic of public concern, it is worthy to note that it is so because it is costly and damaging to the majority of the society, even though it is committed by minority of the same. Alarmingly, recent research and happenings have revealed that about 80 or more percent of crime committed in the nation and worldwide is perpetuated by youth and this is worrisome, because it has a serious indication for the future of the nation as a whole. Factors responsible for violent behaviour are many and inter-connected and these factors combine to make probability of criminal behaviour in youths more likely.

Research into persistent offending of adolescent involvement with alcohol drugs, tobacco, sexual relationships and gang violence is now beginning at increasing younger ages. However awareness of the dangers and consequences of such antisocial behaviors alone has not helped to reduce such tendencies in youth - that is- knowing that such behaviors and activities have adverse consequences for the society have not had a strong deterrent effect on adolescent involvement in the same.

It appears that the psychosocial milieu of the youths include the family, peer, school and the immediate environments. These psychosocial factors contain the opportunities and barriers for the individual to explore various roles and responsibilities associated with being a responsible member of the community. As the child moves into adolescence, he/she may experience changes within the family structure and functions as caregivers and siblings also mature.

Crime and Violence among the Youths

Crime can be described as an action which is against the law, or put more generally, it is bad or unacceptable behaviour. Crime can be committed against humanity or property. Many attempts have been made to formulate an accurate definition of crime such as “an of anti-social act” or “failure or refusal to live up to the standard of conduct deemed fit and binding by the rest of the community”, or “sure act of omission in respect of which legal punishment may be inflicted on the person who is in default whether by acting or omitting to act”.

There are different categories of crime ranging from theft which is crime involving stealing, to bribery, fraud and corruption which are crimes committed by people in business or influential jobs. Another type of crime is violence which is referred to as assault in legal terms. Other forms of crimes evolve in the use of violence or threat to get money which is used by bank robbers and gangs. There are crimes committed for political reasons – political killings and treason – which is plot to overthrow a government. Crimes can also be connected to lure with drugs and car crimes and recently there has emerged cyber crimes which have to do with fraudulent and sharp practices on the internet. People that involve themselves in these different forms of crimes are described as criminals.

Violence is an outwardly directly destructive behaviour either to a person (including self) or to properties. It is a learned behaviour pattern and the family has been labeled to be the primary training grounds. The family is the most frequent single focus of violence of all types including murder. This represents not only a direct danger to the family members involved but also is a danger to generations to come and to parents or surrogate outside the home such as police, teachers and political leaders. Violence occurs in mentally and non-mentally ill persons. However, the mentally ill person is inaccessible and uncontrollable than non-psychotic violent persons.

Violence, crime, vandalism, car theft, hooliganism and other antisocial behaviour are closely associated with images of young people. Children often test the limits and boundaries set by their parents and other authority figures. Among youths, rebellious tendencies and experimentation is common. However, a few children consistently participate in problematic behaviors that negatively affect their family, academic, social and personal functioning. These children present great concern to parents and the community at large. Youth violence may be defined as any intentional physical sexual or psychological assault on another person (or persons) by one or more young people aged 12 to 19 years.

The most common perpetrators of youth violence are young, heterosexual males. Although a growing number of female youth are violent, the abusive behaviour of males is more frequent and severe. Youth violence can be perpetrated collectively by groups or gangs, or committed by individuals.

Similarly, the victims of youth violence can be groups of gangs of youth, or individual youth. The most common victims of youth violence are peers, including girlfriends, boyfriends and other young people, family members, including siblings and parents, and members of ethno cultural groups or sexual minorities (homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals).

Victimization has been linked to the increased use of drugs and alcohol, eating disorders, tobacco use and mental health problems. Experiencing abuse can cause low self-esteem and other emotional problems, which in turn can result in difficulties in academic performance, in the work force and in personal relationships.

Experiencing violence early in life can set a pattern which extends throughout an individual's life. Young women who have experienced abuse during childhood or adolescence may direct the resulting pain inward, developing various forms of self-destructive behaviour, such as self-mutilation and eating disorders. Young men who have experienced abuse during childhood or adolescence may express this pain outward, being violent toward others. Many of the youth who are violent also engage in self-destructive actions, such as suicide attempts.

For many reasons, it is difficult to attain an accurate picture of the extent of youth violence. Since there is no consensus on the definition of “youth violence there has been a tendency to rely primarily on official crime statistics when defining the issues. But these statistics usually account only for crime that is reported to the police and only when a charge is laid under the Criminal Code.

Many variables influence both the reporting of crimes and the laying of criminal charges. Many crimes are unsolved or unreported. Moreover, some of the behaviour included in the definition of youth violence discussed so far is not criminal offences (for example verbal humiliation).

Despite these limitations, youth violence continues to receive significant attention from the media, the police and the general public. There is no gene for violence. Violence is a learned behaviour, and it is often learned in the home or the community from parents, family members, or friends. Children are more aggressive and grow up more likely to become involved in violence-either as a victim or if they witness violent acts.

The home is the most fertile breeding place for this situation. For example, a child who sees a parent or other family members engage in fight often is more likely to see violence as a way to solve problems and subsequently be more likely to abuse others.

However, studies do suggest there is a connection between violent behaviour and some inherited traits. Research has shown learning difficulties, low IQ, or fearlessness can make someone prone to violence.

Additionally, rates of violence vary in all groups, but are highest among males. Psychological research has not only demonstrated that violence is learned. It has also identified the factors that put children at risk of perpetrating or being victimized by violence, along with the prevention and intervention programs that work.

Causes of Crime and Violence among the Youth

It will be apposite to examine some of the causal factors of violent behaviours exhibited by youths in the country. They include the following:

Parental and Family Factor

Parental influence has been shown to have notable impact on adolescent behaviour, directly during early adolescence and indirectly as the adolescent becomes allied with peer groups. Family factors, which may affect the development of violent behaviour/delinquent acts, include intense and relentless family conflict. Such conflict could be characterized by domestic violence, dysfunctional family cohesiveness, child abuse and neglect, parental inability to express appropriate affection toward a child, lack of adequate supervision of a child, and rigid and non-democratic child rearing practices.

First, Lobber (1990) and Stouthammer & Loeber (1984) pointed on the role of neglect, whereby parents spend too little time with their children and are therefore unaware of what they are doing, and with whom they associate. Two elements of neglect identified are: parents being neglectful in failing to supervise their children or they may simply be uninvolved in the lives of their sons and daughters. Secondly, conflict in the home appears to be a key factor either through direct aggression, disharmony or violence or because of harsh, erratic or inconsistent discipline.

Akorede (1999) emphasized the significance of continuing conflict between parents after divorce as being a key variable determining adjustment. According to him those people who felt caught in the middle and whose parents continued to fight after separation were much more affected by divorce than those whose parents managed their relationship in a more constructive manner. Thus, this has long-term consequences on the children such as, higher rates of delinquency, poor education attainment, higher rates of drug and alcohol use and increased risk of mental health problems.

Parenting Style and Violent acts

Parenting method of upbringing appears to be receiving greater attention today than in previous decades. In Africa today especially Nigeria, parenting practices has hold the key to the problematic or antisocial behaviour of young people while this recognition has dawned rather more slowly in developed countries. One important difference between parents of teenagers and parents of younger children has to do with uncertainty about the parenting role. For parents of young children there is little difficulty in defining roles and responsibilities, yet this is not the case with parents of adolescents.

Icheke (1998) in his study reported that many parents do not realize the importance of taking good care of their children at their early stages of development by way of appropriately molding their future behaviour. He went further saying while some parents are too authoritative, others are permissive, somewhat careless. Children from impossible homes grow up harboring frustrations and anxiety in their heart. In order to deal with the anxiety state and other trauma they suffered, they usually end up in antisocial activities such as drug use.

Nwachukwu buttress his point basing his fact on the adolescent's strives for increased independence primarily because its achievement means he has reached adulthood. Parents have sometimes heard the adolescent asserting, "after all I am no longer a child". This indicates that he is grown up, self-sufficient and able to choose between alternatives. Any blocking of the adolescent's goals result in frustration with accompanying hostility towards the parents especially on some disciplinary problems like drug use, immoral dressing styles, truancy, smoking, alcoholism, sexual perversion and so on.

Olanrewaju (1999) found that the parenting style has been shown to be related to high-risk behaviors among Nigerian youths. According to him, authoritative parents provide clear boundaries and expectations for the children. As a result, the children of such parents in general engage in less antisocial behaviour, display greater psychosocial maturity and perform better in school than children who parents are indifferent or uninvolved.

Broken Homes

Many children in Africa and other developing countries are from one broken home or another. Many of them do not receive good parental upbringing. To them often times life is boring and meaningless and the only way to cope with "unfavourable life" and stress associated with their broken homes; is to engage themselves in antisocial activities such as drug abuse, alcoholism, vandalism and crime of all sorts etc.

Child abuse and Neglect

In our modern societies today children suffer more victimization than do adults including more conventional crime, more family violence, and some forms unique to children, such as family abduction. The abuse here is causing harm to or maltreating another while neglect is not meeting a child's basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, love and belonging.

Societal Factor

The society is divided into three principal categories – ‘sustenance driven’, outer directed’ and ‘inner directed’ People in the sustenance driven group struggle to meet their basic needs. They are mostly poor, underprivileged and excluded from main stream societal decision making. Their immediate priority is to maintain, or better still, improve their quality of life. Over half of the world’s population would be classified as ‘sustenance driven’. Outer directed people have all their basic needs met and are motivated by their perceived, relative societal status. In a western style society this means they not only enjoy the materialistic benefits afforded by modern technology but they literally revel in them. In fact, in their eyes, status in society is directly measured in terms of the external signs of economic affluence. Basically they are self-centered people who could quite afford not to be so. ‘Inner directed’ people are much more values driven, demonstrating a considered inner sense of purpose. They are generally sensitive to ethical concerns and tolerant of alternative cultures. Their purchasing patterns and life styles reflect their more compassionate nature.

Poverty/Living in Impoverished Area as predictor of violent Activities

Poverty places the adolescent at risk of indulging in illegal illicit and antisocial activities. Many have dropped out of school and have turned to the streets for identity and for seeking a way out of the downward spiral of poverty in the country today. As adolescents spend more time away from home, parents and family and more time with peers, opportunities to become involved with groups who exhibit high-risk behaviors for violent activity such as gangs increases. Gangs are most likely to develop in areas where there is little adult supervision and where violent activity is accepted as the primary means of control (Earls, Cairns & Mercy, 1993).

Onyejiakwu (1991) found that most families in Nigeria do not have the quantity of money, which they need to provide for themselves basic needs for survival. This poverty situation breeds hunger and starvation and predisposes member of such families especially our youths to engage in illegal means of survival. These could be manifested in stealing of money, food, and material things to either eat if they are food or use in buying or selling, if they are material things. The potency of poverty to cause or lead to delinquent acts could be inferred from the fact that in our society, there is a class of haves who have more than enough. Seeing this people frustrates the poor people and makes them sad especially s they are recognized in society. This may lead to their having low self concept. At times poor individual engage in delinquent acts like stealing to reduce pent-up tension, or to simply survive in life.

Researches on the link between poverty, living in an impoverished area and antisocial behaviors revealed that when families live in impoverished neighborhoods, parents are less effective in providing support and in monitoring the behaviour of their children/wards. Poverty undermines the social fabric of a neighborhood, making it more difficult for adults to provide role models, leisure and avenues for young people to move into adulthood. Poverty and unemployment being closely related and unemployment makes it more difficult for young men to find appropriate roles, as well as encouraging aggressive behaviour as an alternative mark of status and power in the community. Therefore, there is a high incidence of violence in areas of great poverty and exposure to this either in the home or the neighborhood has an impact on the behaviour of young people.

Advancement in Technology and violent behaviour

Osinowo (1989) cited by Icheke (1998) found that due to technological innovations in the developing countries today, children are exposed to all kinds of things. For instance, most families in urban and even in rural areas today have video and television sets. These gadgets usually expose children to all manner of crimes. Some movies that are shown in television or home videos usually portray adults who indulge in drugs as heroes.

The technological innovation in the developing countries today has exposed children to all kinds of things. For instance, most families in urban and even in rural areas today have video and television sets. These gadgets usually expose children to all manner of crimes. Children are particularly susceptible to television images to be real especially if they are authoritatively prevented by an adult.

Substance Use and Addiction

In a study of adolescent assault behaviour and drug use, it was found that their sample of 63 adolescent males were usually intoxicated during the rape episode or stated they had used alcohol or marijuana on the same day as the rape. The former National Drug, Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) boss (Bamayi, 1997) has observed an increase in the involvement of youth in drug abuse. According to him about 67% of people arrested for abuse of cannabis or trafficking drugs are youth. The youth are not even left out in the abuse of other substances such as alcohol, tobacco, stimulants depressants and even hallucinogens. While the incumbent boss is NDLEA in person of Bello Lafiaji on September 9, 2002 says. "Nigeria does not consume any of the hard drugs – cocaine, heroin etc but our main problem in Nigeria and Africa is cannabis because it is grown in some part of the country.

Ayodele (1999) have all reported that teenagers/youths who abuse substances like alcohol, cigarette tend to reveal certain general characteristics: they have family members and friends who smoke, drinks, snuff etc. they are more likely to come from single-parent families, they may have low self-esteem, less confidence, more anxiety and poor educational aspirations; and their leisure time is spent in 'hanging out'.

Study of rural youth participants talked a good deal about drinking and the role that alcohol played in contemplating health concerns. Young people drink for a variety of reasons including the availability and acceptability of drinking within the general cultural milieu. Like adults these young people talked about drinking to relax, to increase their sociability and for the sensory and cognitive changes it produces.

There is a growing trend on the misuse of illicit substances among the youths in Africa and other developing countries, especially in Nigeria. Delinquents act often results from drug abuse. This predisposes them to violent behaviour, which makes them a nuisance at home. This way, they become a problem to the entire society. Youths that abuse drugs, have been found to be prone to other crimes such as armed robbery, rape, bullying, stealing, cultism and examination malpractice at schools.

Peer Affiliation and Violent Behaviour

Akinboye (1987) in his study remarked that unlike childhood when there was a considerable strong bond of interaction between the child and his parents, the adolescent is less social tied to his parents. The weakening bond of social interaction between the adolescent and his parents seems to be replaced by the adolescent interaction with peers. The peer group is very important to the adolescent, as it tends to provide a new social context for him to try his interpersonal strategies. The peer group is very important to the adolescent, as it tends to provide a new social context for him to try his interpersonal strategies. The peer group therefore replaces the apparently ineffective family context, which the youngster had criticized so many times. In addition, the peer group is so important and crucial to the adolescent with a free forum

among equals to share his problems. Invariably, the peer group functionally provides the growing youngster a social contact to develop his values, roles, aspirations and social interaction styles that are adaptively relatively permanent for his life goals.

Studies have found that some young people have goals relating to illegal activities). Involvement in delinquency has been seen as self-presentation in which a message of defiance is conveyed to and consequently rewarded by delinquent peers (Blackburn, 1993; Elmer, 1983, 1984). For some individuals, breaking the rules or the law seems attractive and motivating, whereas for others delinquent behaviour and necessary or convenient as a means of attaining other ends, for example stealing provides the funds to meet material desires (Carroll, 1995). As Carroll rightly said, these young people focus on attainment in illicit antisocial activities, partly to meet material needs and to maintain peer status. Another study on peer group and influence explain that young people with deviant attitudes cluster together, so that those with similar propensities and interests are drawn together, without anyone exerting an antisocial influence on anyone else. That said, there seems to be little doubt that there is a close relationship between delinquent activities of a young person and those of his friends. In the American National Youth Survey by Elliott, and Acetone (1985) it was shown that having peers was the best independent predictor of self-reported offending behaviour.

If offending behaviour is a group activity, then delinquents will inevitably have delinquent friends. This does not mean that the peer group necessarily leads others to offend; it is safer to conclude that having delinquent friends is an indicator of delinquency, rather than a cause of it.

Religion as a Panacea

Over the past decade, considerable research has emerged that demonstrates the benefits of religious practice within society (Fagan, 1996). Religious practice promotes the well-being of individuals, families, and the community. Regular attendance at religious services is linked to healthy, stable family life, strong marriages, and well-behaved children. The practice of religion also leads to a reduction in the incidence of domestic abuse, crime, substance abuse, and addiction. A small but growing body of research has focused on the links between religious practice and decreased family violence. For example, men who attended religious services at least weekly were more than 50 percent less likely to commit an act of violence against their partners than were peers who attended only once a year or less (Brown & Gary, 1991). No matter how the data were analyzed, regular attendance at religious services had a strong and statistically significant inverse association with the incidence of domestic abuse. Similarly, after controlling for all other factors, Wilcox found that of all groups studied (unaffiliated, active conservative Protestant, active mainline Protestant, nominal conservative Protestant men were least likely to engage in domestic violence. Studies have found that youths who frequently attend religious services and have a high level of spiritual support from others in their community have the lowest levels of depression (Marshall & Handel, 1997) conversely, a lack of religious affiliation correlates with an increased risk of suicide (Toyato, 1990). Immigrant youth likewise enjoy the benefits of a higher level of general well-being when they attend religious services frequently. Even against the odds, in neighborhoods of disorder and poverty, religious practice serves as a significant buffer against drug abuse and juvenile delinquency. A study of 2,358 young black males from impoverished inner-city Chicago and Philadelphia found that a high level of religious attendance was associated with 46 percent reduction in the likelihood of using drugs, 57 percent reduction in the probability of dealing in drugs, and a 39 percent decrease in the likelihood of committing a crime that was not drug related. Thus, religious attendance was associated with direct decreases in both minor and major forms of crime and deviance to an extent unrivalled by government welfare programs. In at risk, destabilized communities, religious practice was found to be a buffer against youth crime in the same way that it reduced

the likelihood of substance abuse among adolescents. Even in communities where there are no strong social controls against delinquent behaviour, religious commitment and involvement protects youth from antisocial behaviour – both minor and serious. In the Health Survey, a major national survey of adolescents, a 6 percent reduction in delinquency was associated with a one-point increase on an index that combined adolescents' frequency of religious service with their rating of the importance religion. Mothers' religious practice is also an influence in reducing the likelihood that children will become delinquent. The implication of this is that parents should take as a matter of urgency to inculcate religious values into their children right from their tender ages and this will be a springboard for a well adjusted individual in the society. The Bible lends credence to this when it says "teach your child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6). In the same vein, Eph 6:4 admonishes parent to bring up their children in the training and admonition of the Lord. The essence of this is that a well cultured child is very much unlikely to be involved in acts contrary to laid down rules and regulations.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that the youths of today are the leaders of tomorrow. It is however, imperative to accord them a pride of place at the social and at the family level by giving the best of care and affection so as to shape their future. In this regard, a Yoruba adage is apposite here. It says "*omo ti a bi ti a ko to, ni yoo gbe ile ti a ko ta*". This means that an untrained child will be a liability on his parents. Consequently, the onus rests on the parents, the government and the society at large to look at issues affecting the youths so as to ameliorate these problems with a view to providing an enabling environment for the youths to maximize their potentials thereby reducing the menace of youth restiveness and their involvement in criminal activities.

In addition to this, our religious organizations should be alive to their responsibilities by providing avenues through which the youths can adequately express themselves on matters that affect them. Religious bodies should also place emphasis on the moral aspect of their religions and so encourage the youths to emulate and imbibe these moral teachings with the view to making them better citizens of the country. The Churches, the Mosques and all the traditional religious worshippers should be alive to their responsibilities in inculcating values into the youths. It is in this respect that our dream of a virile society could be achieved.

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