

## **Family Instability and Juvenile Delinquency in Nigeria: A Study of Owerri Municipality**

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**Abstract:** *The increasing rate of juvenile delinquency has become a major social problem globally and locally. Researchers and concerned individuals have traced the preponderance of juvenile delinquency to the increasing rate of family instability among other factors. However, concerted inquiries into the influence of family instability on juvenile delinquency have resulted in a raging controversy. While some researchers have found a significant relationship between family instability and juvenile delinquency, others have suggested otherwise. Against this backdrop, this study set out to fill this yawning gap in literature and also to examine the relationship between family instability and juvenile delinquency in Owerri Municipality. Using the multi-stage sampling method, 510 senior secondary school students were selected for this study from 10 comprehensive secondary schools in Owerri Municipality. The questionnaire and the interview guide were used for data collection. 2 hypotheses were formulated to guide this study. The hypotheses were tested with the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) statistic. The results of the analyses have shown that children from unstable homes engage more in juvenile delinquency than their counterparts from more stable homes. As expected, inadequate parental supervision predicted delinquency. This study recommended among other things that Governments, counselors and concerned agencies should routinely develop programmes aimed at sensitizing parents and care-givers on parent roles and obligations.*

**Keywords:** *Juveniles, Juvenile delinquency, Family instability, Juvenile crimes, Broken homes.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Juvenile delinquency is an intractable problem worldwide and has been increasing phenomenally by as much as 30 percent since the 1990s (World Youth Report, cited in Sheryln, 2008). Anti-social behaviours of young people have been posing a lot of problems to the wellbeing of the people in Nigeria. Citizens, researchers and public officials perceive juvenile delinquency as a major social contemporary concern in Nigeria. Juvenile crimes witnessed in Nigeria include: drug abuse, cultism, bullying, truancy, examination malpractices, prostitution and theft (Ugwuoke, 2010; Sanni, Udoh, Okediji, Modo & Ezech, 2010).

Shoemaker (2010:3), defined juvenile delinquency as “illegal acts, whether criminal or status offences, which are committed by youth under the age of 18”. From this definition, it is pertinent to highlight the two types of delinquent offences associated with young people, herein referred to as juveniles/children. The first type of offence is a conduct that would be a criminal law violation for an adult, such as rape, burglary, robbery, etc. The other type of delinquent offence called ‘status’ offences are delinquent conducts that do not apply to adults, such as running away from home, truancy, etc (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2001; Alfrey,2010).

The origin of juvenile delinquency in Nigeria dates back to the 1920s when youth crimes such as pick pocketing and prostitution became predominant issues in Nigerian newspapers in that period. This ugly trend led to the establishment of judicial administrative processes by the colonial administrators to deal with juvenile delinquents (Fourchard, 2006).It is appalling that the worrisome issue of juvenile delinquency still plagues the contemporary Nigerian society in a serious dimension (Muhammed, Salami , Adekeye, Ayinla and Adeoye,2009).

However, the problem of juvenile delinquency is not peculiar to Nigeria. In 2007, the law enforcement agencies in the United States of America reported 2.18 million arrests of juveniles (Alfry, 2010). Alfry also reported that the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics found out that 72% of jailed juveniles came from fragmented families. According to World Youth Report cited in Sheryln (2008), the rate of criminal activity among juveniles in groups in the Russian Federation is about three to four times higher than that of adult offenders. Motivated by the increasing rate of juvenile delinquency in Britain, Juby and Farrington (2001), examined juvenile delinquency and family disruption in a longitudinal survey of South London males from age 8 to 46. The researchers found out that 29% of the boys from disrupted families were convicted as juveniles compared with 18% of the boys from stable families. The researchers concluded that family disruption was one of the contributory factors to the upsurge of juvenile delinquency in Britain.

In Kenya, Muola, Ndugu and Ngesa (2009) cited in Kimani (2010) in a study of the relationship between family functions and juvenile delinquency in Nakuru municipality in Kenya found out that the incidences of juvenile delinquency have increased in recent years in Kenya. Juvenile delinquency was found to

be significantly related to family instability and mode of discipline. The researchers suggested that there was a relationship between family functions and juvenile delinquency in Kenya. Fourchard (2006) has also decried the increasing trend of juvenile delinquency in South Africa, attributing the upsurge to familial factors amongst contributory variables.

In view of the foregoing issues and trends globally and locally, many researchers agree that the foundation of juvenile delinquency is rooted in the kind of home the child is brought up (Okorodudu, 2010; Igbo, 2007). Muhammed et al (2009) have observed that family instability is on the increase in Nigeria and that the increasing crime trends among the youths may be attributed to this. Based on the foregoing, this study aims at examining the relationship between family instability and juvenile delinquency in Nigeria with focus on Owerri municipality.

### **Problem Statement**

Juvenile delinquency in Nigeria is a major social problem which affects the whole society and constitutes a serious impediment to development (Muhammed et al 2009). For instance in Owerri municipality today, crime is common among the young people, many of who are caught in one criminal act or the other such as examination malpractice, armed robbery, assault, rape, house breaking, forgery, truancy e.t.c. (Nwankwo, Nwoke, Chukwuocha, Iwuagwu, Obanny, Okereke and Nwoga, 2010).

Muhammed et al (2010) have observed that young people in contemporary Nigeria are mostly involved in armed robbery, cultism, kidnapping, drug abuse and other criminal activities. In corroborating this fact, the Imo state commander of National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) lamented that the young people were the most involved in illicit drug usage and dealing (Nkwopara, 2011). The consequences of this malady and other juvenile crimes such as; examination malpractice, alcoholism, forgery, rape, e.t.c in Nigeria include; social violence among youths, armed robbery, mental disorders, lack of respect for elders and other numerous social ills. In the light of the nauseating problems of juvenile delinquency in Nigeria and Owerri Municipality, scholars and concerned citizens have attributed the menace to various factors such as; poverty, peer pressure, family instability, drug abuse and so on (Nwankwo et al 2010). While recognizing these other causes, this study seeks to focus on family instability and its contribution to juvenile delinquency because “the family has a crucial role to play in the development of a conforming or delinquent personality (Igbo, 2007:89)”.

Inadequate supervision arising from family instability seems to be associated with juvenile delinquency (Alfrey, 2010). Alfrey further explained that those children in single-parent families tend to receive lower levels of supervision. According to him, this inadequate parental supervision has a tendency to increase the likelihood of juvenile delinquency. Dogget (2004), has it that when there is one parent living in the home as opposed to two, it is more difficult to supervise children all the time. According to Dogget, every day activities like errands and work must be completed by the single parent, which leaves no parent in the home. Because of this, children in single-parent homes tend to receive lower levels of supervision (Sanni et al, 2010). Lack of parental monitoring contributes not only directly to children’s anti-social behaviours, but also indirectly as it contributes to exposing them to associate with deviant peers, which is predictive of higher levels of deviant acts (Okorodudu, 2010). From observation, it seems that parents and care givers are not doing much in the supervision of their children in Nigeria because of their numerous economic and social engagements. This scenario tends to be giving impetus to juvenile delinquency in Nigeria and Owerri Municipality in particular.

Children from broken homes are more likely to run away from their family than children who come from more stable families (Uwaoma & Udeagha, 2007). Uwaoma and Udeagha further explained that a broken home has an imbalance and as a result is detrimental to a child’s socialization and personality adjustment. The resultant effect is that a child may be more vulnerable to negative peer pressure and may ultimately commit delinquent acts not committed by children from stable families where there is a balanced structure of two parents who act as good role models in the child’s acquiring proper roles (Odebunmi, 2007).

Children growing up in unstable families are at a greater risk of experiencing a variety of behavioural and educational problems, including; smoking, drug abuse, vandalism, violence and criminal acts than children from stable families (Sheryln, 2008). According to Sheryln, changes in the family can affect the levels of self-control in children. The transitions in the family structure also lead to changes in the organization, monitoring and disciplining of the children. If the changes are widespread, the resulting changes in the adolescents’ levels of self-control will likely lead to anti-social behaviours (Mullens, 2004).

Single-parent families are often financially vulnerable as compared to two-parent families. This unfortunate economic circumstance can draw these families to disorganized neighbourhoods where crime and delinquency are rampant (Alfrey, 2010). The implication according to Alfrey is that the children may be exposed to learning delinquent behaviours and they may also be enticed into joining delinquent gangs. It is the opinion of the researcher that financial vulnerability may also be a source of strain to children in single-parent families. Hence, they may not have some of their needs met by their single parent. The effect is that children in such a situation may be pushed to engage in theft, extortion and other delinquent actions to make ends meet.

Muhammed et al (2009) have also attributed the rise of anti-social behaviours among young people in Nigeria to family instability among other factors. They noted that children from unstable families have multiple behavioural problems which impel them to engage in delinquent behaviours. This, according to them is because the warmth, direction, love and protection which the parents would have provided for them are lost and then sought in anti-social behaviours such as drug abuse.

However, there seems to be a controversy on the relationship between family instability and juvenile delinquency. While Alemika and Chukwuma's (2001) study, among other studies found no relationship between broken homes and juvenile delinquency, Kimani's (2010) study found a positive relationship between broken homes and juvenile delinquency. As a result, this study aims at bridging the gap in studies on juvenile delinquency and also to investigate the relationship between family instability and juvenile delinquency in Owerri municipality.

## II. Literature Review

This review of literature discussed various aspects of family instability and their influence on juvenile delinquency.

**Broken Homes and Juvenile Delinquency:** Broken homes have been mostly associated with juvenile delinquency. Although some other factors such as lack of parental control and ineffective parental behaviour have been attributed to the rise in juvenile delinquency, most of the literature on juvenile delinquency returns to the ultimate breakdown of the family as the main causative factor (Fry, 2010).

Mullens (2004) has it that juveniles from broken homes are more likely to run away from their family than children living in stable families. The core assumption is that a broken home has an imbalance and as a result is detrimental to a child's socialization and personality adjustment. As a result, a child may be more susceptible to negative peer pressure and may ultimately commit acts of delinquency not committed by children from stable families where there is a balanced structure of man and woman who act as good role models in the child acquiring more law abiding roles.

Alemika & Chukwuma (2001), in their study of juvenile administration in Nigeria averred that there is no significant relation between broken homes and juvenile delinquency. This assertion contradicts Kimani's (2010) findings from a study of family influence on juvenile delinquency. Kimani found a positive relationship between broken homes and juvenile delinquency. This contrast may be as a result of differential focus of research and the methodologies adopted in the research.

**Inadequate Parental Supervision:** Inadequate parental supervision arising from family instability has been adduced as a risk factor for juvenile delinquency. Alfry's (2010) has asserted that children from fragmented families are scarcely supervised. He further elaborated that this inadequate supervision gives leverage to juvenile delinquency. This assertion is in agreement with that of Sanni et al (2010) who suggested that juveniles were likely to be delinquent if their activities are not adequately monitored.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical anchorage of this study is the **Social Control theory**. Social control theory in criminology was developed by an American criminologist; Travis Hirschi in the late 1960s. The theory posits that criminal behaviour and delinquency result from failure of individuals to bond with conventional social groups such as the family and schools (Miller, 2009). In other words, a person is less likely to choose crime if he/she has strong social bonds. Miller (2009:2) has it that "social control says that to the extent that a youngster fails to become attached to the control agencies of society (for instance, the families and the schools), the youngster's chances of engaging in delinquency are increased".

Travis Hirschi identified four key concepts in his social control theory, viz: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief (Alemika and Chukwuma, 2001). According to Hirschi, attachment to others in the society provides the individuals insulation from committing deviant acts. Commitment entails an investment in conventional activities and norms. Involvement is behavioural and measures one's tendency to participate in conventional activities while belief in the legitimacy of social norms and values minimize delinquency (Winfre and Abadinsky, 2003; Alemika and Chukwuma, 2001).

The relevance of this theory could be linked to the main tenets as it applies to juvenile delinquency and family instability. Hence, the inability of the family as a social institution to bond with the children as a result of instability and disruptions could be associated with the problem of juvenile delinquency. However, social control theory has been criticized for ignoring the effects of parental behaviour in modeling youth conduct (Winfre and Abadinsky, 2003).

### III. Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population of the study consisted of 510 senior secondary students in Owerri municipality who were between the ages of 13 and 17 years at the time of the study. A sample size of 510 was statistically determined while the multi-stage sampling technique was adopted in the selection of 51 senior secondary schools in Owerri

Municipality. The instruments used for the study were the questionnaire and the interview guide.

The analysis of the data involved descriptive and chi-square statistics. The two hypotheses of the Study were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

### IV. Findings And Discussion

Hypothesis 1 states that children from broken homes are more likely to engage in juvenile delinquency than children from stable families. To test this hypothesis, family arrangement (gotten from the marital status of respondents' parents) was cross-tabulated with delinquency.

**Table 1: Family Arrangement \* Delinquency**

Family Arrangement	Not Delinquent	Delinquent	Total
Stable family	77(15.1%)	206(40.4%)	283(55.5%)
Broken Home	40(7.8%)	187(36.7%)	227(44.5%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>117(22.9%)</b>	<b>393(77.1%)</b>	<b>510(100%)</b>

$X^2 = 6.549, df = 1, Sig = .010$

**Decision:**

The chi-square value shows that the level of significance (sig.) is .010. It indicates that children from broken homes are more likely to engage in juvenile delinquency than children from stable families. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is upheld. Hence, there is a significant relationship between broken homes and juvenile delinquency.

**Hypothesis 2**

Hypothesis 2 states that there is a positive relationship between inadequate parental supervision and juvenile delinquency. To test, parental supervision (adopted from responses from the 12<sup>th</sup> question in the questionnaire, thus: "Are you usually left alone without the supervision of your parent(s)/guardian(s)? Responses, 'yes, all the time' and sometimes were collapsed into 'inadequate' and 'no, never'=adequate) was cross-tabulated with delinquency.

**Table 2: Parental Supervision \* Delinquency**

Parental Supervision	Not Delinquent	Delinquent	Total
Inadequate Parental Supervision	74(14.5%)	308(60.4%)	382(74.9%)
Adequate Parental Supervision	43(8.4%)	85(16.7%)	128(25.1%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>117(22.9%)</b>	<b>393(77.1%)</b>	<b>510(100%)</b>

$X^2 = 10.970, df = 1, Sig = .001$

**Decision:**

The chi-square value shows that the level of significance (sig.) is .001. This indicates that there is a significant relationship between inadequate parental supervision and juvenile delinquency. Therefore, the second hypothesis which states that there is a positive relationship between inadequate parental supervision and juvenile delinquency is hereby upheld.

The result from the first hypothesis of the study showed that there is a significant relationship between broken homes and juvenile delinquency. This finding is in concert with the findings of Kimani (2010). Kimani found out that children from broken homes had a tendency to engage in juvenile delinquency than children from the ideal two-parent family. Furthermore, this finding is also corroborated by Videon's (2002) assertion that children who live in homes with only one parent or in which marital relationships have been disrupted by divorce or separation were more likely to exhibit a wide range of behavioural problems including delinquency than children who are from a stable two-parent families.

In contrast to the present findings, Alemika and Chukwuma (2001) in their study found no significant relationship between broken homes and juvenile delinquency. This divergent finding by Alemika and Chukwuma contrary to the finding of this study might be due to the methodology and sample adopted by the researchers. In view of the present study and from the results of some studies reviewed herein, it is logical to accept the finding that broken homes predicted juvenile delinquency.

The analysis of the second hypothesis indicated that there was a significant relationship between inadequate parental supervision and juvenile delinquency. This finding is in line with that of Heck and Welsh

(2010) who found out that lack of supervision by parents and care-givers and absence of close relationships between the teenager and his parents were factors that influenced delinquency.

This study also found out that the rate of family instability is gradually increasing in Owerri Municipality; parent(s)/guardian(s)-Child(ren) communication level was abysmally poor and that parent(s)/guardian(s) were not adequately supervising and monitoring their children and wards in Owerri Municipality.

## V. Recommendations

**Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:**

1. Governments should formulate and implement policies that will consolidate the integrity of the family. This is in view of the integral role the family plays in the socialization and moral grooming of the children.
2. Governments, social workers and counselors should provide assistance to families in need of resolution of conditions of instability and social disruptions in their families.
3. Alternative institutions such as day care centers and special schools should be considered for children of unstable families where other efforts to help them have failed.
4. Governments, counselors and concerned agencies should develop programmes aimed at sensitizing parents and care-givers on parent roles and obligations, child-care and development and ways of building a healthy family environment.
5. Parents and care-givers should endeavor to make out sufficient time to spend with their children in order to monitor and supervise their activities especially what they watch on television and their internet use.

## VI. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the relationship between family instability and juvenile delinquency. The findings of this study showed that family instability is a risk factor for juvenile delinquency. Results from this study showed that children from broken homes are at the greatest risk of becoming delinquents. This is because a broken home is mostly characterized by transitions in parenting and role conflicts. This condition predisposes children in this kind of family settings to delinquency.

Although research has shown that a majority of delinquents come from fragmented families, this study found out that juvenile delinquency is also fostered by inadequate parental monitoring and supervision. Children who are inadequately supervised and poorly socialized, whose parent(s)/guardian(s) do not monitor their movements and activities are more likely to be delinquent. Furthermore, adequate parental supervision and monitoring breeds positive interaction between the parent(s)/guardian(s) and the children which is essential for a healthy child-upbringing. It therefore becomes imperative that parent(s)/guardian(s) should create adequate time for the supervision of their children. Also, familial conflicts have a positive relationship with juvenile delinquency. This means that children who experience conflicts in the forms of fights, quarrels and violence are prone to a delinquent lifestyle.

From the foregoing, it is pertinent to note that there is need for the family to rise up to the performance of its primary roles of positive child rearing and socialization and to create a healthy social environment in order to insulate the children from delinquency. **view of the integral role the family plays in the socialization and moral grooming of the children.**

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