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The Nexus between Victimization and Offending among Children in Conflict with the Law at Shikusa Borstal Institution in Kakamega County, Kenya

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Abstract

Juvenile offending is a global problem. With a focus on the multidimensional approach in the overlap of victimization and juvenile offending. The study aimed to establish the effects of childhood victimization on juvenile offending on a social structural level. The study's specific objective was to investigate the effect of family victimization on juvenile offending. The study adopted the general strain to elaborate on the link between childhood victimization and juvenile offending. The study adopted a cross sectional study design. A sample of 224 respondents was obtained through simple random sampling. Quantitative data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically and presented concurrently with quantitative data. The findings of the study revealed that family victimization and juvenile offending were significantly correlated ($r=0.618$; $P<0.01$) with regression analysis revealing a coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.318 implying that 31.8% of the variance in juvenile offending in Kakamega County. In light of the study findings, it was concluded that childhood victimization had a significant effect on juvenile offending in Shikusa Borstal Institution, Kakamega County, Kenya. The study recommends the implementation of family-based interventions targeting childhood victimization risk factors, engaging community support for at-risk youth, and adopting evidence-based interventions in schools to combat victimization.

Keywords: *Victimization, Juvenile offending, Family-based interventions, Risk factors*

1. Introduction

Childhood victimization is increasingly recognized as a potential risk factor that intersects with other influences to shape the trajectory of juvenile offending (Kariuki et al., 2019). The relationship between juvenile offending and victimization is multifaceted. While juveniles may become victims due to their involvement in delinquent activities, they can



also become offenders as a result of prior victimization experiences. This cycle, often referred to as the "victim-offender overlap," highlights how victimization can lead to feelings of anger, powerlessness, and a desire for retaliation, ultimately leading to engagement in criminal behaviors (Junger-Tas et al., 2003). Juvenile offending is a global concern with profound implications for millions of children. Sawyer and Wagner, 2020 report that incarceration rates among young offenders in penal institutions are alarmingly high.

Globally in New Zealand Fergusson et al. (2008) highlight the lasting impact of childhood victimization on psychological well-being and behavioral outcomes. This study underlines the potential for victimized children to develop deviant coping mechanisms, which may increase their susceptibility to juvenile offending. This pattern has been corroborated by a cross-cultural study by Piquero et al. (2003) who conducted a meta-analysis across multiple countries, reinforcing the notion that victimized children are at a heightened risk of engaging in delinquent behavior during their adolescence.

The African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (2018) further establishes a basis for the skyrocketing forms of victimization in the country. The correlation between substance abuse, academic decline, and deviant acts among young individuals is documented by The National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (2019). Research conducted by Ayot et al. (2018) in Nigeria demonstrated a positive correlation between childhood sexual abuse and later involvement in juvenile delinquency. Wambua and Mutisya (2018) conducted a study in Nairobi that explored the experiences of youth in juvenile detention centers. The study found that a significant proportion of the incarcerated youth had experienced various forms of childhood victimization, including physical and sexual abuse. Moreover, these experiences were often linked to the development of aggressive and delinquent behaviors.

Statement of the Problem

Childhood development ideally takes place in environments that prioritize safety, nurturing relationships, learning opportunities, emotional well-being, and the autonomy and identity affirmation of children. Despite preventive programs and policies, juvenile offending rates remain high. Ndikaru (2021) highlights that over half of reported offenses in Kenya are committed by young people, illustrating the prevalence of juvenile offending and raising concerns about the effectiveness of current interventions. Data from Kenyan juvenile institutions show a troubling increase in admissions, suggesting a link between early-life victimization and subsequent criminal behavior. This study sought to investigate the effect of childhood victimization on juvenile offending, addressing a critical gap in data that could inform more effective intervention programs and policies aimed at breaking this cycle

1.1 Research Objective

To investigate the effect of family victimization on juvenile offending in Shikusa Borstal Institution Kakamega County, Kenya



2. Literature Review

Central to a child's development, families play an integral role in nurturing values, skills, and self-perception. Across the globe, family victimization of children emerges as a widespread concern. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), a staggering one in four adults experienced physical abuse during childhood, with rates of sexual abuse reaching one in five women and one in thirteen men. This issue is particularly pronounced in Africa, where prevalence rates range from 35% to 55% (Fulu et al., 2013). Even within this context, studies in Kenya by the National Crime Research Centre (NCRC, 2017) unveil that 63% of juvenile offenders underwent family victimization.

The ripple effects of family victimization extend deep into the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of juvenile offenders, (Bonner, et al., 2020). Those who endure such trauma are more susceptible to mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Caldwell et al., 2012). Consequently, they are more inclined towards risky behaviors such as substance abuse and delinquency (Afifi et al., 2016). Furthermore, family victimization casts a long shadow into adulthood, increasing the likelihood of continued criminal behavior (Widom, & Osborn, 2021).

In the realm of social structural theory, individuals are shaped by cultural norms, societal practices, and beliefs (Nielsen et al., 2021). The social structure, encompassing various facets like culture, class, roles, and institutions, profoundly molds attitudes and behavior (Martin & Côté, 2019). Children navigate a multi-layered social structure that encompasses family, neighborhood, and institutional influences (Laing, 2018). Effectively addressing family victimization necessitates a holistic grasp of the interplay between social structure, behavior, and the family's significance in children's lives.

2.1 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1.1 Stake Holder Theory

The study is hinged on general strain theory which is based on three factors; failure to achieve a goal, the existence of harmful impulses, and the removal of positive impulses. General Strain Theory suggests that experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect within the family can create strain that may lead to juvenile offending. According to Agnew (2019), strained relationships with family members can result in negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, and depression, which may motivate individuals to engage in delinquent behavior as a coping mechanism. Children who experience victimization within their families may feel a lack of social support, which can exacerbate strain and increase the likelihood of engaging in delinquency.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

Independent Variable

- Family victimization
- Parental victimization
- Sibling victimization
- Family poly-victimization

Dependent variable

- Juvenile offending
- Violent offending
- Non-violent offending
- Drug offending
- Sexual offending

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



3. Methodology

The study adopted a cross sectional research design, as it is suitable for investigating human behavior and conditions. Cross sectional research aims to identify the relationship between two variables and the extent to which a change in one lead to a change in the other (Seeram, 2019). The researcher was interested in identifying recurring statistical patterns connecting the variables, rather than the cause-and-effect relationship. The research design sought to explain the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable, rather than causality where positive, negative or zero correlation can be achieved between variables. From a target population of 356, simple random sampling was employed to select 198 juvenile offenders who were included in the study. To obtain the sample of the juvenile the researcher utilized the Taro Yamane formula. A sample size of 224 participants was recruited from a total population of 412 to respond to the questionnaires.

4. Results

Results from the study indicated that nearly half of the sample 48.99% (97) of the respondents were between 17 and 18 years, 40.90% (81) of the respondents were aged 18 and above years, 10.11% (20) of the respondents were between 15 and 16 years of age.

The analysis of data indicates that a large proportion of juvenile offenders come from single-parent families (63.13%) or are total orphans (30.81%), with only 23.23% having both parents. This lack of stable family support leaves many juveniles more vulnerable to negative influences, increasing the likelihood of crime. Additionally, 86.87% reported experiencing some form of victimization before incarceration, emphasizing that victimization is a common factor among these juvenile. Family victimization, affecting 53.03% of respondents, emerged as the most prevalent type, often inflicted by close family members such as parents, siblings, and caregivers. Institutional (32.32%) and neighborhood victimization (14.65%) further contribute to these juveniles' exposure to harmful influences. Research underscores that these forms of victimization, particularly within the family, intensify emotional distress, prompting behaviors like rebellion and running away, which often lead to criminal activities as juveniles seek to survive in adverse environments.

The study reveals that victimization has deep psychological effects on juveniles, with 58.45% of the 142 respondents feeling severe emotional pain and rejection, leading to isolation and resentment, while 27.46% developed hatred toward their abusers. Alarming, 14.08% of respondents reported suicidal thoughts and eventually left home to survive on the streets, often becoming entangled in crime. A sad example highlights one juvenile who fled home after being physically abused by his father, illustrating how the absence of familial support drives juvenile toward high-risk environments. These findings support general strain theory, which links stress from victimization such as feelings of hatred, shame, and neglect with increased tendencies toward offending behaviors. The study emphasizes the urgent need for family-focused interventions to mitigate victimization's damaging effects on vulnerable youth and prevent subsequent



criminal activities.

The study found that a significant number of juvenile offenders in Kakamega County were convicted of property-related offenses (31.31%), as well as violent (31.31%), sexual (21.72%), and drug-related offenses (23.23%). Property offenses, such as burglary and theft, were often committed out of necessity, with juveniles resorting to theft to meet basic needs like food and clothing, highlighting their socioeconomic struggles. Firsthand accounts from the juveniles revealed how hardships, including food insecurity and familial neglect, drove them toward crime. These findings align with prior research indicating that juveniles who leave unstable homes often face basic survival challenges, pushing them toward delinquency. The study underscores how traumatic family dynamics and unmet needs are major factors contributing to juvenile criminality, supporting the need to address these root causes to prevent offending behaviors.

Analysis of the data reveals that parental verbal abuse was the most common form of victimization among respondents, affecting 81.82% (162), followed by parental physical abuse at 59.09% (117) and sibling verbal abuse at 51.01% (101). These findings highlight the severe emotional and psychological impacts of verbal abuse from key family members, especially parents. The study also underscores how parenting styles particularly neglectful or improper practices are crucial in determining child victimization, with factors like parental alcoholism increasing the likelihood of both neglect and physical abuse, while also elevating the child's risk of early substance abuse. Additionally, sibling victimization, although less prevalent, poses a serious concern as it can escalate to physical violence, fostering further aggression among children. The combination of verbal and physical abuse within the family structure not only deepens the victim's trauma but also underscores the urgent need for addressing family dynamics to reduce juvenile victimization.

The study findings highlight a troubling pattern of repeated familial abuse among respondents, with many reporting multiple instances of victimization by parents and siblings. Specifically, 18.2% experienced parental physical abuse more than twice, 25.3% endured repeated parental verbal abuse, and 3.5% faced parental sexual abuse multiple times. Additionally, 22.7% reported recurrent sibling physical abuse, and 21.2% experienced sibling verbal abuse more than twice. These findings suggest a cycle of chronic victimization within family environments, with substantial impacts on juvenile development and a heightened risk of future offending behaviors due to ongoing exposure to abuse.

The study found a statistically significant correlation between family victimization and juvenile offending ($r = 0.618$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that juveniles who experienced family victimization were more likely to engage in criminal behavior. The moderate positive relationship suggests that higher levels of family victimization are linked to an increased likelihood of offending, although it does not establish causality. Further linear regression analysis revealed that 31.8% of the variance in juvenile offending could be attributed to family victimization. While family victimization plays a role in juvenile crime, the strength of this relationship is moderate, suggesting that other factors also contribute to juvenile offending.



5. Discussions

The findings from this study reveal critical insights into the connection between family victimization and juvenile offending in Kakamega County. A large proportion of juvenile offenders come from unstable family backgrounds, with 63.13% from single-parent families and 30.81% total orphans. The lack of stable family support, combined with high rates of victimization within the family (53.03%), puts these adolescents at a significant disadvantage, making them more susceptible to negative influences. The study also highlights the psychological toll of victimization, with many juveniles experiencing severe emotional pain, rejection, and even suicidal thoughts. These findings resonate with general strain theory, suggesting that the emotional distress caused by family victimization can lead adolescents to engage in delinquent behaviors as a way to cope with their difficult circumstances. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of addressing family dynamics, as the trauma experienced at home can have lasting effects on juvenile development and behavior.

Additionally, the study emphasizes the socioeconomic struggles that often drive juveniles toward crime. Property-related offenses, such as theft and burglary, were committed out of necessity by 31.31% of the respondents, highlighting the critical role that unmet basic needs such as food and clothing play in juvenile criminality. These findings align with prior research, indicating that juvenile offenders often turn to crime to meet survival needs when they lack familial support or face food insecurity. The study also indicates that various forms of victimization, including parental verbal and physical abuse, as well as sibling abuse, contribute significantly to juvenile offending. The correlation between family victimization and juvenile crime ($r = 0.618, p < 0.05$) further supports the argument that family dynamics play a significant role in shaping juvenile behavior. However, while family victimization contributes to juvenile offending, the moderate strength of this relationship suggests that other factors, such as peer influence and environmental stressors, also contribute to juvenile offending. These findings call for comprehensive interventions targeting both family structures and broader social support systems to prevent further victimization and reduce juvenile crime.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

In conclusion, the study underscores the significant role that family victimization plays in the development of juvenile delinquency in Kakamega County. The findings reveal a high prevalence of victimization among juvenile offenders, with the majority coming from single-parent families or being total orphans, which leaves them vulnerable to negative influences and criminal behavior. The emotional and psychological effects of victimization, particularly from close family members, contribute to feelings of isolation, resentment, and in some cases, suicidal thoughts, pushing juveniles toward high-risk environments like the streets where they often engage in criminal activities. The study highlights the cycle of abuse, with many juveniles reporting repeated instances of victimization by parents and siblings, leading to heightened trauma and an increased likelihood of offending. While family victimization is a significant factor in juvenile crime,



the moderate correlation ($r = 0.618$, $p < 0.05$) between family victimization and juvenile offending suggests that other factors, such as socioeconomic struggles, peer influence, and institutional victimization, also contribute to juvenile delinquency. The study emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that address family dynamics, provide emotional support, and tackle the root causes of victimization to prevent future juvenile offending.

6.2 Research Recommendations

The study recommends the implementation of comprehensive, family-centered intervention programs that focus on addressing the underlying risk factors and dynamics contributing to childhood victimization. These programs should provide tailored counseling services for both juveniles and their families, with an emphasis on improving communication, conflict resolution, and emotional support within the home. Additionally, parental training and support initiatives should be introduced to help caregivers develop healthier parenting practices, particularly in cases of neglect or abuse. Educational resources aimed at increasing awareness of the detrimental effects of family violence and promoting positive family dynamics will also be crucial. By fostering healthier family environments, these interventions can help prevent victimization, break the cycle of abuse, and significantly reduce the likelihood of juvenile offending. Furthermore, integrating community-based support systems, such as mentorship programs and after-school activities, can provide positive alternatives and reinforce rehabilitation efforts. Ultimately, these initiatives can lead to better rehabilitation outcomes, enhance the social reintegration of offenders, and contribute to the long-term reduction of juvenile crime in Kakamega County.

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