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**JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY
AND
EDUCATION IN AFRICA**

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ISSN: 1116-0381, Vol 7 No. 2, June 2008

Journal of Sociology and Education in Africa – Vol. 7 No. 2: June 2008

JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY AND EDUCATION IN AFRICA

www.josea.org.bw

ISSN 116 – 0381

Vol. 7 No. 2

June 2008

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JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY AND EDUCATION IN AFRICA

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Printed by: Consult Info Services
P.O. Box 30129, Kampala, Uganda
+256-774-285-167, +256-782-724-233
consultinfoservices@yahoo.co.uk

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Parental Socio-Economic Status, Family Structure and Living Environment as Predictors of Violence against Children: Empirical Evidence from Benin City, Nigeria

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Abstract

Violence against children is of concern to the world at large, as a lot of behavioural misnomers have been linked to the experience of children in their growing years. This study adopted a survey research design to investigate how parental socio-economic status, family structure and living environment act as predictors of violence against children; a multistage random sampling procedure was used to select respondents for the study. Pupils from ten primary schools and six junior secondary schools were selected from Benin City. From each school twenty-five subjects were randomly selected making a total of 400 respondents. The instruments used for data collection were questionnaires tagged "violence against children scale, $r=0.80$ "; "parental socio-economic status scale= 0.78 "; "family structure scale, $r=0.72$ "; and "living environment scale, $r=0.79$ ". Data collected were analyzed using the linear regression procedure and three hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. The study found that parental socio-economic status, family structure and living environment predicted violence against children. Based on the findings, it was recommended that family support services should be designed to educate parents on how to provide safe and stable family environment for children.

Introduction

Violence against children is a broad term used to describe all forms of abusive and neglectful acts perpetuated by adults or older youths against children that may constitute harm or threat to the child's health or welfare. Violence against children may take place in homes, schools, orphanages, residential care facilities, on the streets and places of detention (e.g. remand homes). It can affect the children's physical and mental health, impair their ability to learn and socialize and undermine their development as functional adults and good parents later in life. In the most severe cases, violence against children leads to death (UNICEF, 2006).

The challenges of living in any society are considered enormous, but the child's level of dependency on others makes the challenges they face more enormous as they may not have the wherewithal to resist unfavourable behaviours by others toward them. These unfavourable behaviours are considered as a form of violence against the children. Social learning theorists like Bandura (1973), Siegel (1995) believe that mental or physical acts may predispose a person toward violence. They argued that the activation of a person's violent tendencies is achieved by factors in the environment. Therefore, the social learning theorists viewed violence as something learned through a process called "behaviour modeling". Bandura (1973) showed that children, who use aggressive tactics in their relationship with their peers, are those whose parents use similar tactics. Also Bandura (1977) stated the importance of social factors in the formation of personality.

Siegel (1995) pointed out that the following four factors from social learning theorists produce violence and aggression against persons:

1. An event that heightens arousal – such as a person frustrating or provoking another physical assault and verbal abuse.
2. Aggressive skills – where learned aggressive responses are picked up from observing others, either personally or through the media.

3. Expected outcomes – the belief that aggression will in one way or another be rewarded. Rewards can come in the form of reducing tension or anger, gaining some financial advantage, building self esteem, or gaining the praise of others.
4. Consistency of behaviour with values - the belief derived from observing others that aggression is justified and appropriate, given the circumstances of the current situation.

According to social learning theory, violence against children is both environmental and behavioural experiences. In the case of the environmental experiences, the theory argues that people who live in areas or neighbourhoods where violence against children is pre – dominant are more likely to behave violently than those who live in areas whose norms stress conventional behaviour. Fromm (1995) established that personality arises and it is shaped in its own social and economic context. He stated further that, an individual's attitude, values and ideas are usually consistent with and shaped by their family social class and background, even though they are not totally determined by them. Fromm's theory also asserts that personality does not form in vacuum, but it is intimately linked with the society in which it was formed. That is to say personality relationships are crucial to personality development as personality relationships are being influenced by wider social and economic factors. Kinard (1987) and Pecora, Whittaker and Malucio, (1992) have identified some social factors that are likely to predict violence against children; namely socio-economic factors, family structures and living environment.

Review of Literature

Child abuse is the physical or psychological damaged caused to the child by the abusive behaviour of others, or the failure of others to protect a child from such damage (Boss 1987). The vast majority of violence is carried out by people who are part of children's lives, they are usually known to children and trusted by them. They include parents, other youths, caregivers, teachers, school friends etc, while others are

strangers. Children are often afraid to report violence because of the shame they feel about it, fear of reprisals by perpetrators, or the possible consequences for themselves and others. In Nigeria, and in many cases, parents who should protect their children, are silent if the violence is perpetrated by a spouse or other family members or a powerful member of the society.

Pierson and Thomas (2002) see child abuse as physical or psychological harm done to a child through a deliberate act or neglect. Such actions can be a/or combination of threatening, aggression and intimidation. Gelles (1997) sees child abuse to include not only physical assault but also malnourishment, abandonment, neglect, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. In Nigeria context, child abuses include child abandonment, sexual abuse, child neglect, vagrancy, kidnapping and hawking of wares (Ebigbo, 1989).

Physical child abuse include violent assaults that utilize instruments that can cause injury to the child leaving bruises, bites, burns, break or fracture bones, abrasions (Brown, 1991; Minett, 1994; O' Hogan and Smith 1993; Dwyer and Strang, 2006). Sexual abuse are the carrying out of sexual acts by adults with children below the age of consent and are usually imposed on a child (Giddens and Dumeire, 2000; Dwyer and Strang, 2006). The child is considered to be unable to alter and/or understand the perpetrator's behaviour due to his/her early stage of development or powerlessness in the situation. The perpetrator's position or authority or trust enables him/her implicitly or directly to coerce the child into sexual compliance. Furthermore, child sexual abuse includes any type of molestation, penetration, fondling, inappropriate sexual talk or actions, exposure, sexual intercourse and exploitation, pornography etc. (Berlin, 2000; Brown, 1991; Hefferman, Shuttlesworth and Ambrosino, 1988).

Another form of child abuse is neglect. Child neglect is any act of omission or commission, either by parents/guardians or state which deprives a child of the basic necessities of life such as, care, love,

warmth, attention, food, shelter, clothing, education, medical (Goldman et al, 2003; Zurawin, 1989; Hefferman et al, 1998; Johnson et al, 1997). Child neglect can be deliberate, for example, locking a child out of the house, or keeping the child locked in the house; not realizing that children need to be feed at regular interval because he/she only eats when he/she is hungry. Also, there exist the psychological or emotional maltreatment. Psychological/emotional maltreatment is a constant attitude or behavior towards a child which is detrimental to or impairs the child's emotional and emotional development. This may take the form of scapegoat, emotional rejection, isolation, contriving verbal abuse, threatening, taunting or shouting etc (Brown, 1991; Dwyer and Strang, 2006; Trocm, 2005; O' Hagan and Smith, 1993; Hart and Brassard, 1987).

The socio-economic status of parents has been confirmed to be predictors of child abuse/violence. The presence of lack of economic opportunities for parents, low educational background, lowest skills, and financial problems has all lead to frustrations and unrest, potentially leading to violence against children. (UNICEF, 2006; Brown, 1991; Pecora et al, 1992). Economic distress, unemployment, low income, illness in the family and inability to pay adequate medical care are stressors in the lives of many abusive parents (Olson and Defrain, 2000), this tantamount to transfer of this aggression unto the child. Also, poverty leads to frustration and stressors constraining parents from providing the kind of stimulating and nurturing care they desire for their children and guide parents to becoming violent more often (Bradley, Whiteside, Mundfrom, Casey, Kellerher and Pope, 1994). Low income creates family stress, which in turn leads to higher chances of maltreatment of children (Plotnik, 2000).

Family structure in terms of marital conflict, family size, single parenthood, lack of social support has contributed to child violence (Goldman et al, 2003). Children living with single parents are at a higher risk of experiencing physical and sexual abuse and neglect than children living with two biological parents (Finkelhar, Moore, Hamby and Straus, 1997; Olson and Defrain, 2000; Goldman et al, 2003). Chronically neglecting families are often characterized by a chaotic household with changing

constellation of adults and children lead to child violence (Polansky, Gaudin and Kilpatrick, 1992). Parents who maltreat their children experience isolation and less social support from family members. Such social isolation further compound child maltreatment and violence (Harrington and Dubowitz, 1999).

The living environment encompasses the home and neighbourhood where the child lives. These phenomena can determine the violence against children. The availability of services and amenities that are supportive to family well-being has important bearing on social relationship within the community and on whether or not adults and children become prey to violence (Gardner and EL Bushra, 2004). Some incidents of physical abuse on children are outcomes of their stressful living environments. Inadequate housing and overcrowding within both dwelling and neighbourhoods are predictors of violence by children brought up under such conditions (Pecora et al, 1992; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunns, 2000).

Thus, violence against children such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and emotional maltreatment and its seriousness, attracts the writers of this paper to look at the predictability of these social factors (parental socio-economic status, family structure and living environment) on child abuse.

Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to find out whether parental socio-economic status, family structure and living environment are predictors of violence against children. Secondly, to recommend to stakeholders in children upbringing (Government, Parents, Guardians, Peer groups etc.) the importance of avoiding child abuse.

Hypotheses

Based on the above the following hypotheses were tested:

- Ho₁ Parental socio-economic status will not significantly predict violence against children.
- Ho₂ Family structure will not significantly predict violence against children.
- Ho₃ Living environment will not significantly predict violence against children.

Methodology

Research design

The research design for this study is the survey research design.

Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of all children in public primary four, five and six in primary schools and in junior secondary schools (JSS) within Benin City.

A multistage sampling technique was adopted for the study. First, ten percent of public schools (primary & junior secondary schools) within Benin-City were selected, giving a total of ten primary schools and six junior secondary schools. A random sample of twenty-five children was picked from each of the sixteen schools earlier selected; this gives a total of 400 respondents that were used for the study.

Instrumentation

The main instrument used for the research was a structured questionnaire tagged "Social factors and children violence questionnaire". Its items were derived from existing literature. The response scale in the questionnaire is such that the highest number '4' indicates a strong agreement, while the least '1' indicates a strong disagreement. Three experts in social work certified the content validity of the questionnaire. In order to determine the validity of the instrument, the cronbach alpha formula was used to

determine the reliability coefficient. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. Section A measured violence against children. The items were made-up of adapted version of ISPCAN and UNICEF (2000) questionnaire. The adapted version yielded, $r=0.84$. Section B measured parental socio-economic status. It was adapted from Adler (1997) instrument. The adapted version gave $r=0.78$. Sections C and D measured family structure and living environment respectively. They were adapted from Vissandjee, Desmeuleus, Cao and Abdol (2004) instrument. The adapted version yielded 0.72 and 0.79 reliability coefficient respectively. The researchers, with the assistance of the school teachers, administered the questionnaire to the subjects and collected their response immediately after completion.

Presentation and Discussion of Results

Hypotheses 1

Parental socio-economic status will not significantly predict violence against children.

Table 1: ANOVA Table on Parental Socio-economic Status and Violence Against Children

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (P value)
Regression	520.725	1	520.725	84.318	.000
Residual	2457.952	398	6.176		
Total	2978.678	399			
Parameter	Estimates				
Variable	B	SEB	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²
(Constant)	15.226	.655	.418	.175	.173
Parental Socio-economic Status	-.374	.041			

B = Regression coefficient, SEB = standard error of B, P < 0.05

Table 1 shows an F value 84.318 and $P < 0.05$. The null hypothesis which states that "parental socio-economic status will not significantly predict violence against children" is rejected. With an adjusted R^2 value of .173, therefore, parental socio-economic status accounts for 17.3% variation in violence against children.

This study showed that parental socio-economic status is a predictor of violence against children. Children from low socio-economic backgrounds are more prone to be victims of violence such as hawking of wares at tender ages etc. This is in agreement with the findings of UNICEF (2006) which established that lack of economic opportunity for those in the lowest educational, lowest skilled and lowest socio-economic groups has created circumstances favouring frustration and unrest, potentially leading to violence against children. Brown (1991) and Hay and Jones (1994) found that poverty is the most frequently and persistently noted risk factor for child abuse and that physical abuse and neglect are more common among the people who are the poorest. Ebigbo and Abaga (1990) showed in their study that poverty in the home have driven girls to sell goods from door to door there by exposing them to sexual molestations and other forms of violence.

Hypothesis 2

Family structure will not significantly predict violence against children.

Table 2: ANOVA Table on Family Structure and Violence Against Children

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (P value)
Regression	173.238	1	173.238	24.577	.000
Residual	2805.440	398	7.049		
Total	2978.678	399			

Parameter	Estimates				
Variable	B	SEB	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Constant	12.699	.695	.241	.058	.056
Family structure	-.240	.048			

B = Regression coefficient, SEB = standard error of B, $P < 0.05$

Table 2 shows an F value of 24.577 and $P < 0.05$. The null hypothesis which state that "family structure will not significantly predict violence against children" is rejected. With an adjusted R^2 value of .056, therefore, family structure accounts for 5.6% variation in violence against children.

The finding of this study shows that family structure is a predictor of violence against children. This is in agreement with the findings of Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, and Kennedy (2003) which confirmed that, specific life situations of some families- such as marital conflict, domestic violence, single parenthood, social isolation and family size, increases the likelihood of child maltreatment. Moreso, Olson and Defrain (2000) established that children who live with single parents are more likely to suffer abuse than those who live with two parents, perhaps due to the stresses often associated with single parenthood.

Hypothesis 3

Living environment will not significantly predict violence against children.

Table 3: ANOVA table on Living Environment and Violence against Children

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (P value)
Regression	434.519	1	434.519	67.975	.000
Residual	2544.158	398	6.392		
Total	2978.678	399			

Parameter Variable	Estimates		R	R^2	Adjusted R^2
	B	SEB			
(Constant)	14.556	.648	.382	.146	.144
Living environment	-.341	.041			

B = Regression coefficient, SEB = standard error of B, $P < 0.05$

Table 3 shows an F value of 67.975 and $P < 0.05$. The null hypothesis which states that "living environment will not significantly predict violence against children" is rejected. With an adjusted R^2 value of .144%,

therefore, living environment accounts for 14.4% variation in violence against children.

The finding of this study shows that living environment is a predictor of violence against children. Children with poor living environment are more prone to be victims of violence. This is supported by Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) who found out that seriously inadequate housing and overcrowding within both dwelling and neighbourhoods have a damaging effect on child nature. In addition, Zuravin (1991) affirmed that environmental stresses that interact to produce abusive behaviours includes the immediate environment, pervasive violence in the neighbourhood as an acceptable means of settling differences tend to contribute to a situation where physical abuse is more likely to occur.

Discussion

The level of parents social and economic functioning in the society in which they live could influence the perpetuation of violence against children. It is confirmed that available income and financial resources, level of education, groups within the society with which parents interact, things parents can afford for the family etc constitute reaction of parents to their children. This is why Pecora, Whittaker and Malucio (1992) asserted that low socio-economic status of parents form the risk factors associated with violence against children. Ebigbo and Abaga (1990), confirmed that girls driven to hawk wares due to poverty so as to sustain family survival are shown pornographic pictures/video during the course of trading and that fifty percent of 100 of such female hawkers ranging between 8 and 15 of age had sexual intercourse during the hawking. Bbigbo (2003) concluded that exposing girls to hawking in Nigeria cities make more than half of them to be sexually molested through and/or visual or enticement to sex.

Furthermore, inaccessible and unaffordable health care, fragmented social services and lack of support from family and friends and economic stress contributes to high rates of violence against children. Brown, Cohen, Johnson and Saizinger (1998) confirm this when they said that low socio-economic status has been recognized as a risk factor for abusive parenting. They affirmed that low-income families tend to have the highest rates of physical abuses. This study

also concludes that due to low-economic status, family stress become prevalent which in turn leads to higher chances of maltreatment.

Family structure is the pattern of relationship within the family or among family members that could expose children to all kinds of violence. Such factors include single parenthood, marital conflict, parental violence, family size, lack of social support etc. This study established that children from single parenthood suffer child abuse because of hardship of parenting borne by one partner without the help of the other partner. Social isolation and the resultant lack of support of the parents from family and friends create conditions that lead to child abuse. This is in line with the finding of Harrington and Dubowitz (1999) that social isolation contributes to child maltreatment because most abusive parents have less material and emotional support, do not have positive parenting role models and feel less pressure to conform to conventional standards of parenting behaviours.

Living environment is the home and neighbourhood where the child lives and could be a determinant of violence against children. The nature of a community physical fabric, its density of settlement and layout, and the availability of services and amenities supportive of family well-being have important bearing on social relationships within the community and on whether or not adults and children become prey to violence (Gardner and EL Bushra 2004). The study find out those children who live in an unsafe neighbourhood e.g ghetto, motor parks etc. that are characterized by high levels of violence are at greater risk of being abused than children growing up in a more peaceful neighbourhood.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Since social factors predict violence against children, the researchers make the following recommendations based on the findings of this study.

That public awareness activities as an important approach in reducing violence against children be facilitated by government agencies, civil society groups and other concerned stakeholders. These public awareness activities will raise community awareness of violence against children by providing information as to what constitutes violence against children and provide information about available resources and solution to those adults who perpetuate violence and the children who had suffered violence.

Family support services should be vigorously pursued to strengthen, stabilize families, and provide safe and stable family environment. Where these are lacking, children should be made aware of the existence of agencies and professionals such as the social workers, school counsellors, law enforcement agencies, public advocates etc that they could report to on violence against them.

On the part of government, appropriate policies and laws should be enacted to address the living conditions of the citizenry, as the less comfortable an environment and the poorer a family, the more violence is expected against children. Government should consider living wages that will help improve the socio economic status of her citizens as well as set up appropriate monitoring agencies to ensure that both government and non-government workers are adequately remunerated for their labour. Poverty Alleviation Programmes should be strengthened; these measures will help improve the living conditions of her citizens, which in turn will lead to prevention of violence against children.

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