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EXAMINING THE REASONS BLACK MALE YOUTHS GIVE FOR COMMITTING CRIME WITH REFERENCE TO INNER CITY AREAS OF LONDON

Abstract

This paper presents a mini research carried out by the Focus Learning Support (FLS) team on reasons why young black males in the community commit crime. Knife and gun crime is seen as a serious problem in the black community involving black males in the inner London city areas – many of whom are both victims and offenders of knife and gun crime. One of the primary aims of FLS is to focus on engaging the youths in positive activities such as career development. Youth crime is a big issue hindering some of the youths who are victims of crime from developing a career, as most of the offenders spend their lives in prison and miss out on what matters. The paper examines the reasons why young black youths engage in criminal activities and suggests ways to prevent such criminal acts, thereby enabling them to be focused on their career aspirations and becoming good citizens. The study uses quantitative and qualitative research methods, quantitative method aimed to explore existing literature and research on reasons behind youth crimes in inner London cities. The use of qualitative method is designed to find out the reasons young black males give for committing crime instead of focusing on their career development. The paper uses case studies to share the experiences of the black youths on reasons why they are forced to commit crime. The findings from the study identified factors contributing to youth crimes such as fatherless families, self image, relationships with police, education system and negative influences. Other factors include unemployment, lack of career engagement and bad gangs. One of the measures to prevent youth crimes amongst black male youths is to continue to ensure that knowledge on crimes is made compulsory in schools and shared at home. Other suggestions are to fully engage the youths on positive activities such as career development, sports, employment opportunities and community policing.

Context

The issue of knife and gun crime is predominately present among young black males with a huge body of literature written and reports about youth crime. Although, what is considered as youth crime or youth offending is difficult to explain because the phrase is continuously being '(re) invented and (re) defined', for instance, the phrase Juvenile delinquent was established in the 19th century and was linked to 'unemployment, lack of discipline and moral degeneration'. Adolescence as troublesome was created in the 20th century and later 'troubled offender' was introduced to describe - the latter association with youth crime – a behaviour that is deemed to be undesirable and which may or may not hold the same penalty as adult crimes (Muncie, 2009: 79). Criminal acts that were commonly committed by adults are now being committed by youths, for instance the two 10 year old boys who murdered the two year old Jamie Bulger in 1993 and the two brothers (aged 12 and

13) that murdered the 10 year old Damilola Taylor (2000). In 2009, 16 year old Shakilus murdered by young males aged between 17-19 and Ben Kinsella 16 was killed by three young males aged between 18-19. Crimes committed by youths today vary greatly, the Youth Justice Board survey found that the total number of offences committed by 10 to 17 year olds was 277,986 in 2007 and 2008. A considerable amount of these crimes included drug related offences, robbery, arson, violence against another person (Youth Justice Board, 2008). This demonstrates general crimes committed by youths of all ethnic minority groups and how young the offenders are, information like this highlights the seriousness of crime among young people. Discussing youth crime provides an understanding of the phrase and exactly what crimes are carried out by youths in society today. As useful as the statistics provided above are they fail to explain why young people commit crime. Some of the factors identified in the literature that contribute to youth offending are: lack of parental supervision, low family income conflict within families, low attainment, exclusion from school, lack of community togetherness, opportunities to offend, youth character, troublesome friends (Metropolitan Police Service, 2003-2008), these are only a few general causes of youth crime. However, the paper specifically focuses on the knife and gun crime committed by the young offenders. 'Knife crime, is any crime that involves a knife, this includes: carrying or trying to buy a knife if you're under 18, threatening people with a knife, carrying an illegal kind of knife, murder or assault in which the victim was stabbed with a knife, robbery or burglary where the thieves carried a knife as a weapon,' this definition was cited from the Directgov website[1]. Knife and gun crimes have persistenly occurred in our society particularly in countries like United Kingdom, America and Africa. It is growing issue of concerns for the above mentioned countries. It is an issue that requires educating those involved to resist from the act, as it leads nowhere than either life imprisonment and for some countries execution. Hence engaging the youths on a career development such as creating employment, education, sports activities and talent development can help prevent knife and gun crimes found in youths.

Literature indicates that crimes involving weapons is a serious matter in society today because it involves young people carrying them. Most young people that commit knife crime are often victims, the British Crime Survey (BCS) in 2006-07 revealed that young people were four times more likely to be victims of violent crime compared to adults who were 3.6 per cent at risk of victimisation. Such victimisation is common among young males aged between 16 and 24, this group experienced 13.8 of violent crime (Nicholas et al., 2007). In particular, victimisation of knife crime is more common among black and minority ethnic communities (Eades et al., 2007), and has become a well-known crime committed by most young black males. Statistics produced by Scotland Yard revealed between April 1st and June 30 of 2008 that 124 out of the 225 people, under the age of 18 proceeded against or accused of knife crime were black (Wright, 2008).

Gun crime is another serious crime that predominately occurs in the black community, this criminal act is defined as: An offence that involves the use of a gun in the following situations, a murder where the victim was shot, any situation where a gun was fired, even if no one was injured, any robbery or burglary where the

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[1] http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/CrimeJusticeAndTheLaw/Typesofcrime/DG_181675

thieves carried a gun, any case in which people where intimidated with a weapon, any body found carrying a banned gun, such as a handgun, or using imitation gun[2]. Such crimes affect young people and the community and to try and prevent such incidents from happening especially in the black community Operation, Trident was set up in 1998, to stop murders and shooting among young black people in London[3].

Causes of Youth Crime

Literature presents that the presence and involvement of a father in a young black male's life is essential within the home, those youths that are fatherless are prone to offending (Okoronkwo, 2008). Concerning single parent families and crime, studies have revealed the definite link, for instance 70 per cent of young offenders come from single parent families (Youth Justice Board, 2002 in Social Justice Challenge, 2007: 6). Academics like Murray (1984) and Wilson (1987) suggest the development of such families are the consequence of relationship break down between African-Caribbean men and women, which have caused them to be reliant on governmental provisions. They suggest the deterioration of the family has contributed to high levels of offending amongst second and latter generation of African-Caribbean youths and has brought about ineffective parenting and lack of parental guidance for young children (Smith, 2005). Smith's (2005) study relies on quantitative research which does not provide rich accounts of the reasons for high crime rates amongst British African-Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani males which are the groups he researched. His explanation for high crime rates among African-Caribbean's does not consider class which can help understand crime levels and offending among certain groups.

Family structures in contemporary society have changed, which shows it is not just a phenomenon within the black community, in fact this is happening all around the world this trend of multiple family structures is apparent. One can argue that the society that we live in today – is made up of several divorced families, lone parent families, same sex families, to mention a few (Webster, 2007), although this research does not suggest that the traditional nuclear family does not exist anymore, in fact there are many families that still embrace this family structure. The work of Smith (2005) provides a historical explanation of how African-Caribbean family structure has changed and the consequences that it has left. His account of family breakdown lays the foundation for black family structure and helps to understand how the majority of these families are governed today. However it is also essential to demonstrate affection and show interest in children while they are growing up.

This advocates a more theoretical approach to investigating the causes of knife and gun crime. Within the umbrella of positivist criminology there are two approaches that explain the causes of youth crime. The individual positivist criminology argued that the causes of youth crime are related to youth character. They suggest that crime is the result of adolescence lack of emotional development meaning the status quo way of behaving has not been installed into the child causing them to act inappropriately. Freud (1952) suggests that adolescence is seen as a problematic stage in life because youth struggle between 'natural instinct' and

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[2] http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/CrimeJusticeAndTheLaw/Typesofcrime/DG_181544

[3] http://www.stoptheguns.org/whatistrident/index.php

'cultural constraints', which is manifested in their behaviour (cited in Muncie, 2009: 94). This can be understood as their psychological development has not yet manifested in them causing them to be controlled by their own behaviour. The process of adolescence is one that is not easy for youths; it is a self-battle for the adolescence between 'ego identity' and 'identity confusion'. Erikson further mentions that this is a process that needs to be resolved sooner rather than later because it can affect the child's way of life in the future. He concludes that adolescence as a theory consists of 'emotional disorder, impairment and pathology' that is irregular and inevitable (Erikson, 1968 cited in Muncie, 2009: 94). Erikson's analysis of youth personality can be applied to this work on young black males and crime because some black males often find themselves struggling to find out their identity, Anderson (1999) asserts that inner city black males usually look to the streets to find out who they are; in order words, many of these young black males are longing for identity at quite an early age.

Black males and their relationships with institutions

Another cause is related to police and the education system and the effects that they have on their behaviour. The education system as an institution, illustrates why young black males may face difficulty in obeying teacher's authority and why they lack in academic attainment. The second institution is the police. Connections between exclusion and delinquency have been established; this can also be linked to other phenomena such as 'lack of parental supervision, truancy, poverty and weak commitment to education' (Giddens, 2007: 721). Those that faced high levels of permanent exclusion in 2002/03 were black Caribbean and other black students. Exclusion among them 37 and 32 per ten thousand students in compulsory education (Social Trend, 2004: 42 cited in Giddens, 2007: 722).

Methodology

The mini research uses quantitative and qualitative approach, quantitative method aimed to explore existing literature and research on reasons behind youth crimes in inner London cities. The use of qualitative method is designed to find out the reasons young black males give for committing crime instead of focusing on their career development. Focused group discussions and debates through media and interviews were relevant in gathering perceptions of the participants.

Findings

When discussing factors that cause knife and gun crime amongst young black males a factor that appeared most frequently was the lack of fathers in their lives. Most of the respondents stressed the importance of father and son relationships being away of deterring crime. Another factor that featured most was family up bringing; most participants suggested that parents need to teach their children the correct norms and values of society which includes teaching them right from wrong. Comment from a respondent: *'fatherlessness within the black community is common and their family structures are weak compared to other ethnic groups who have close family ties which keep their children away from crime especially knife and gun crime, she further highlights that firm values within their family structures deter*

their youth from crime'. The above response is in line with what Okoronkwo (2008) asserts about black males and how fatherlessness puts them at risk of offending.

The findings also demonstrates that all of the factors mentioned in the literature review in some shape or form contributed to knife and gun crime among young black males, however factors that emerged frequently throughout the interviews were fatherless family structures, self image which is linked to revenge and respect and black male's relationship with the police. In terms of preventive measures, many suggested that the youth need to be feed with information on such crime and the consequences by their parents and education system, although in terms of group preventive, everyone needs to partake for knife and gun crime to stop it happening. However prevention of fatherless families is one that seems difficult to be solved easily because as it seems to be a problem beyond control and no laws to prevent divorce or prevent people from having children in unstable relationships. Self image is another difficult factor to prevent because the culture is part of the personality and to change the image is to change ones mindset, which is difficult. Therefore young black male's mentality is a phenomenon that will have to be worked on from early childhood if attitudes towards carrying out such crimes are to change. In regards to the police and young black males, relationship could possibly work better if the police can see them as friends; this will help to build trust and openness to information.

Conclusion

The mini study focused on investigating the causes of knife and gun crime amongst young black males, this was achieved by conducting focus group interviews with twenty black and five mixed race male youths. The main causes raised in the literature were fatherless families, self image, relationships with police, education system and negative influences. Other factors leading to crime brought to our knowledge by the participants in the study include the flaws in the criminal justice system, inability of children to defend themselves, and the problem of drugs. These factors are considered the root causes of knife and gun crime in the inner city areas of London. The second part of the study which looked at ways in which knife and gun crime could be prevented, suggested by the participants, is that knowledge on such crimes should be made compulsory in schools and shared at home. Preventive measures were discussed such as stop and search, which according to one of the participants, can be effective in preventing the youth from carrying knives and guns. However, it is important to note that this is an on-going research, which is in its early stage.

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