

CRIME MANAGEMENT/PREVENTION IN THE SOCIETY: THE ROLE OF  
THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT ACTIVISTS

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**Abstract**

*Many people assume that the high level of crime in Nigeria must have its roots in material conditions, such as poor employment opportunities and shortage of adequately-funded programmes. However, many cannot understand the root causes of crime if they insist on viewing it purely in material terms. At the heart of crime explosion in Nigeria is the absence of adequate parental care and attention to the children being brought into the world. This paper discusses the issue of crime in the society and ties it down to the breakdown of the marriage and family life in Nigeria. The paper discusses fundamental family conditions that lead to the breakdown of marriages and the resultant effects on crime and criminality in the society. The paper concludes by identifying the role theatre activists can play in curbing the menace of family breakdown in order to ensure a society where crimes are kept to the barest minimum level.*

**Keywords:** Crime Management, Crime Prevention, Theatre in Society, Theatre for Development.

**Introduction**

Policymakers at last are coming to recognise the connection between the breakdown of Nigerian families and various social problems. The unfolding debate over welfare reform, for instance, has been shaped by the wide acceptance in recent years that children brought up by single parents are much more likely to fall into poverty and welfare dependence themselves in later years, than children brought up in homes that are intact. This explains why Tor-Anyiin (2004: 142) is of the view that "the family serves as the avenue for the cultivation of the values that guarantee national stability." It is unfortunate that such families are few and far between. There is the need to appreciate the link between

illegitimacy arising from the lack of parental attachment and crime. Without an understanding of the root causes of criminal behaviours, the society cannot understand why our societies are being torn apart by crime, thus making crime management an uphill task. A close look at the issue shows that the rise in crime parallels the rise in families abandoned by fathers. Moreover, crime within the neighbourhood is characterised by a high concentration of families abandoned by fathers, resulting in single parenthood. Interviews conducted in and around Makurdi, the Benue State capital, reveal that, criminals capable of sustaining marriage gradually move away from a life of crime after getting married. This is indicative of the fact that marriage comes with positive developments. The mother's strong affectionate attachment to her child is a child's best buffer against a life of crime. In the same vein, the father's authority and involvement in raising his children can help to keep them away from the path of crime. Every human being is born into a family. The family is made up of the father, mother and their offspring, living in a household. Stark (1985: 388) asserts that "the family is a fundamental social institution occurring in all societies, although its particular form differs significantly from place to place." The main function of the family is to produce, nurture and socialise children under the institution of marriage before they are able to stay on their own to raise their families for the continuity of the society.

The family serves as the avenue for the cultivation of the values that guarantee national stability. National stability is linked with what Njoku (2000: 413) refers to as "twelve high values. These include cooperation, freedom, happiness, honesty, humility, love, peace, coexistence and unity." It is rare to find families encompassing all these values. Moreover, the increasing rate of unstable marriages does correspond with increasing rate of crime and social instability. This is why Esere (2002: 64) points out that "instability in marriages and the resultant impact on all family members are among the most pressing problems facing the society today." This affirms that the family, which is constituted through the marriage institution, has a significant influence on crime and its control in the society.

At the heart of crime explosion in Nigeria is the loss of adequate parental control over the children being brought into the world. This loss of love and guidance at the intimate levels of marriage and family has broad social consequences for the children and the wider community. Theatre activists can bridge this gap by directing their theatrical ingenuity to the fundamental issues that bring about crime in the society, particularly as regards broken marriages and single parenthood with a view to arresting these towards creating a crime free society.

### **Public Opinions on Crime**

Following the oral and semi-structured interviews conducted for this research, many respondents assume that, the high level of crime in Nigeria must have its roots in material conditions, such as poor employment opportunities and a shortage of adequately-funded social programmes. However, many do not seem to understand the root causes of crime which they insist on viewing in purely material terms. This view blinds many people to the personal aspects of crime, including moral failure, the refusal to exercise personal responsibility, and the inability or refusal to enter into family and community relationship based on love, respect, and attachment both to the broader community and to a common code of conduct. According to Sutherland and Donald (1960: 80) "Crime is rooted in the social organisation and it is an expression of that social organisation." They further define crime as "an offence against the state, while in contrast a tort in violation of civic law is an offence against an individual" (Sutherland and Donald, 1960: 8). Crime is thus simply an act or behaviour that violates or breaches the rule of political, moral or criminal laws and is liable for punishment and public prosecution.

In Nigeria, poverty is generally considered the primary cause of crime. If poverty, defined by the *World Book Encyclopedia*, as the lack of enough income or resources to satisfy a person's minimum needs, is truly the major cause of crime in the society, then there should have been more crimes in the past, when more people were poorer. Furthermore,

the crime rates should have been higher in the poorer communities in the country than in the affluent communities. More significantly, history belies the assumption that deteriorating economic circumstances breed crime, while improving conditions reduce it. For instance, Nigeria's crime rate rose gradually during the period of real economic growth. A closer look at crime shows that the real variable is the family structure based on commitment and love between pairs of consenting adults. The institution of marriage commands high social recognition in Nigerian communities. According to Gbenda and Akume (2002: 58)

Traditional marriage grounds itself in an arrangement between families and not essentially a union of two individuals. It is also regarded as a union between a man and a woman for the duration of their lives and also as a forum for wider association between two families or two sets of families.

The basic aim of marriage is for procreation whereby the parents nurture and bring up their offspring in a manner devoid of crime. The percentage of single parent households with children between the ages of 12 and 20 is significantly associated with rates of crime and burglary. It is the failure of marriage, that is, the failure to keep families intact, that accounts for the incidence of high crime in the society. On the whole, the rates of perpetration of violence, especially by juveniles, are usually determined by variations in family structure. The effects of family structure are strong and cannot be easily dismissed by reference to other structural and cultural features of urban environments.

### **The Development of Criminal Behaviour**

The propensity to crime develops in stages associated with major psychological and sociological factors. These factors are not caused by poverty, and the stages are related to the normal process of growing up that every child confronts as he or she gets older. In the case of future criminals, this process, in the absence of complementary parental love and affection, is perverted, thus frustrating the child's psychological needs and stunting his moral growth and social adjustment. These stages

can be summarised as follows: early infancy and the development of the capacity for empathy, followed by early school life and the development of peer relationships based on mutual cooperation and a sense of social awareness. There is also mid-childhood stage and the experience of a growing capacity to learn and cooperate within the community as well as the stage of adolescence, preparatory to the final stage of adulthood which completes the socialisation process. This stage is also the propagative stage, leading to the begetting of the next generation through intimate sexual union and the integration of others into the family, as the smallest social unit.

In all of the above stages of human development the lack of parental dedication and the atmosphere of rejection or conflict within a family diminish the child's self-esteem, and he or she fails to see the home as a place of love, affection and devotion. Instead, such a child is afflicted by an increasing sense of rejection, abandonment, isolation, and even abuse. Such a child is compelled to seek solace outside the unhappy home, and most frequently finds it among others who have experienced similar rejection, with whom an unhealthy alliance is formed.

Teenage behaviour has its roots in habitual deprivation of parental love and affection going back to early infancy. This is the basis of the assertion by Gbenda and Akume (2002: 59) that the issue of "unhappy marriages and marital breakdown in Nigeria is not an individual affair. It involves the entire family and even the village or community. Marital breakdown therefore affects the health of the society." Future delinquents invariably have a chaotic, disintegrating family life. Most delinquents may be depressed but not withdrawn; rather, they are actively involved in one form of violence or the other. This anti-social attitude is established in the first few years of life. By age six, habits of aggression and brewing anger might have largely been formed. By way of contrast, normal children enjoy a sense of personal security derived from their natural attachment to their parents. The future criminal is often denied that natural attachment in a broken family.

The relationship between parents has a powerful effect on very young children. Children react to quarrelling parents by disobeying, crying, hitting other children, and in general being much more anti-social than their peers. Parental hostility plus the physical and emotional abuse of the child shape the future criminal. Most criminally-minded children are those who have been abandoned by either of the parents, and have been deprived of love and affection. Inconsistent parenting, family turmoil, and multiple other stresses that flow from these disagreements compound the rejection of these children by parents, many of whom became criminals during childhood. Odoemelam and Okafor (2004: 115) lament the above situation in the following words:

The disinclination of the family's values and roles has resulted in the breeding of irresponsible children who now outplay their parents in crimes and other anti-social behaviour. Children no longer have respect for people and law. Honesty is replaced by advanced fee fraud ('419'). They are insensitive to human feelings. No wonder, they can be easily co-opted to maim and kill in order to be rewarded either financially or materially.

However, children raised in supportive, affectionate, and stable homes are less likely to become criminals. Family disintegration resulting from the death, desertion, or divorce of parents, often leads to undisciplined children who grow up to become criminals.

The absence of the father is the single most important cause of family poverty, with consequences for criminal behaviour. This is because discipline, which is a form of 'inner control', a set of internalised code of conduct, a state of mind which ensures that a person does what is right purely out of personal volition, is lacking in such families. Self-discipline is based on self-control, which must evolve in the course of personality development in the formal institution of marriage. The father's absence is associated with a host of other problems which include lower intellectual development on the part of the

offspring, higher levels of illegitimate parenting in the teenage years, and higher levels of welfare dependency.

In a normal family, a father gives support to his wife during childbirth and in the course of the children upbringing when heavy demands are made on her. A single mother does not have this support, and the added emotional and physical stress may result in inadequate parenting on her part, resulting in the risk of emotional distance with the child. The single mother generally is less able to attend to all her child's needs as quickly or as fully as she would if she were well taken care of by a husband, and this makes her to be less empathetic to others. Given such a scenario, the child is at risk of becoming a criminal, with implications for the larger society. Theatre activists have the capacity to promote family cohesion and thus reduce the tendency towards violence and criminality among our youth.

### **Crime Management/Prevention through Theatre**

The family characteristics most strongly associated with delinquency are: parental criminality, ineffective supervision and discipline, family discord and disharmony, weak parent-child relationships, large family sizes, and other psycho-social factors. Parents of delinquent children are often too authoritarian or too permissive in disciplining their children. Physical punishment rather than a logical discussion of consequences is frequently and inappropriately employed. Furthermore, when the emotional bond between children and parents is weak, or when a child feels unloved or unwanted, delinquency is likely to set in. There is also clinical evidence that children of mothers who have been assaulted by their husbands are more likely to be in trouble with the law and are to batter their own partners when they are older.

### Theatre Interventions

Specific dramatic initiatives, which address the above problems, are geared towards supporting the families to remain united, developing positive parenting skills, promoting family love and preventing domestic violence. Family support services include education, parental training, as well as family stress management techniques aimed at providing assistance in dealing with family relationship. Theatre activists are encouraged to employ theatrical activities towards assisting families in developing their basic home management skills. They should also direct their theatrical searchlight towards emotional and social support services aimed at alleviating a wide variety of stressful situations, such as alcohol or drug abuse by family members, single parenthood, the plight of widows, unemployment, child abuse, and other domestic crises.

Practical examples of these initiatives are evident in the activities of the Department of Theatre Arts, Benue State University, Makurdi through the Theatre for Development (TfD) programmes with the rural communities. The programmes have been organised with the aim of helping the rural communities to improve their self-esteem and manage their lives. Theatre activists can encourage community members and give them opportunities for developing problem-solving skills that will help them manage fundamental issues that breed criminal behaviour at the family level. Through the use of facilitators the concept of positive parenting skills can be incorporated into the programmes in an acceptable manner. Positive parenting programmes are also offered through social education.

Such services can equally be provided through other agencies. For example, "Proper Parenting for Crime Free Society" can be a Television (TV) drama programme, which can provide an informal learning opportunity, combining television programmes, reading materials and discussion groups. The programme could be developed to assist parents in the following ways:

- Acquiring greater understanding of discipline and communication.
- Recognising family behaviour which may affect children negatively, and proposing means of changing those patterns. The programme could stress six key concerns: children and television, communications in the

family, discipline, parenting styles, problem behaviour, and seeking advice or counselling

### **Suggestions for Action**

- Governments should initiate a review of the impact of policies and programmes on disadvantaged families.
- Social intervention initiatives, especially those dealing with families and children, should be developed and supported by non-governmental organisations.
- Family crisis intervention services should be expanded to areas where they do not currently exist.
- "Positive parenting" programmes should be developed and promoted.

### **The Role of the School**

Schools are major proponents of a society's norms and values. When the standards being taught are perceived as being too impersonal and irrelevant to one's life experience, or beyond a person's capabilities, the student can quickly become frustrated and bored. There is a consistent association between lower intellect (IQ) and increased risk of delinquency. At age 10, persistent delinquents are often more daring and aggressive than average, and as young teenagers, they are often under-achievers and truants. Failure in academic work often leads to low self-esteem, emotional disturbance and antagonism towards school. Those predisposed to delinquency are always looking for alternative forms of excitement and challenges to gain self-esteem.

Most educational systems attempt to assist students with special needs by providing remedial support for those with special learning disabilities and opportunities to develop self-esteem. Drama and theatre can be employed to help project the special educational needs of youth. Initiatives undertaken by boards of education tend to focus on special adaptations within the mainstream education process. The key educational principle should be individualised learning. Teaching

networks should be identified and courses designed to overcome the fear of failure as well as to remedy various learning disabilities.

Another form of alternative education focusing more on personal development could be evident in Theatre in Education. This programme is intended to stimulate young people to think and talk about their concerns and problems, and to raise awareness among teenagers and adults about these issues. The programme includes intensive rehearsals where theatre skills are integrated with education. The actors themselves create skits based on their greatest concerns. Problems addressed include teenage pregnancy, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, difficulties in communicating with parents and peers, sexual assault, and pressures to have sex. People should be encouraged to participate in workshops with Theatre in Education groups. Remedial support programmes directed to socially and economically disadvantaged children and youth should continue to be developed. In addition, curricula which focus on life skills, including parenting, sexual behaviour and other areas of social development, should be evolved and implemented in schools as found necessary.

### **The factor of unemployment**

Work is one of the principal means of establishing self-esteem and acquiring material possessions. There is little evidence indicating a general cause-effect relationship between unemployment and crime. However, there is evidence that individuals confronted with failure in the school setting, combined with an unstable job record, are susceptible to continued involvement in crime. Furthermore, unemployment may lead to low self-esteem and to violence in the family, which in turn may lead to violent responses by the children when they grow older.

The theatre can be made to intervene here as well. The youth project concept is a highly successful employer initiative supported by government and the private sector. Secondary-school drop-outs are given the skills necessary to obtain and retain gainful employment. Theatre community projects are designed to assist socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged youth in qualifying for continuing

employment. Participants could be under 25 years of age with less than tertiary education. They are encouraged to develop a mindset towards self employment in the current dispensation where regular jobs are hard to come by. Furthermore, employment for disadvantaged youth should be developed with the cooperation of government, the private sector and voluntary agencies. Projects should emphasise the development of a young person's sense of involvement and participation in the work setting. The government has the ultimate responsibility of initiating general economic policies to reduce unemployment to the barest minimum, and encourage fulfilling alternatives for those unemployed.

### **Conclusion**

While each of the factors discussed above has been considered independently, the research suggests that delinquency develops over time in the context of overlapping conditions and multi-problem situations. Historical patterns of family and child development often reflect parental mishandling, other criminals in the family, failure at school, and economic deprivation. Thus, the impact of each variable is often not understood. However, if a number of problems exist, they can provide a multiplier effect in influencing potential criminal behaviour.

Effective crime prevention policies must be put in place to address social causes of crime, because persistent and serious offenders have many similarities in their psychological disposition. This paper has identified a number of areas where action could be taken to help modify and improve the experiences and ways of life of young Nigerians, particularly those from broken homes. It is now up to our leaders – politicians, community workers, public servants or ordinary citizens – to ensure that crime prevention becomes a more effective part of the Nigerian response to crime. With concerted action, and through the Theatre for Development initiatives, we can reduce the number of Nigerians who suffer as victims of crime.

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