

Peer Relationships and Delinquency among Adolescents Incarcerated in the Central Prison of Yaounde

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on delinquent behaviour among young people in prison. More specifically, it addresses the learning mechanisms within peer groups with regard to adolescent delinquency. The hypothesis tested is as follows: learning mechanisms (observation, imitation and identification) are at the root of the increase in delinquent behaviour among adolescents. Data collected through a questionnaire administered to 30 adolescents incarcerated at the Yaoundé Central Prison were used to verify this hypothesis. The results allow us to conclude that learning mechanisms such as observation and imitation are at the root of the increase in delinquency among adolescents. These results suggest that a multifactorial approach should be taken into account in the study and prevention of juvenile delinquency, in order to ensure appropriate care.

Keywords: Peer group, Adolescents, Learning, juvenile delinquency.

INTRODUCTION

Juvenile delinquency is a behavioural disorder that is much more prevalent in adolescence. Michaux et al. (1967) define it as 'all antisocial acts committed by minors, from simple offences to serious crimes'. In developing countries, in conjunction with the dual phenomena of population growth and rural exodus, the combination of inequality, marginalisation and exclusion leads to problems such as social maladjustment among children and adolescents from diverse backgrounds. In urban areas, for example, there has been an increase in crime committed by young people, such as racketeering, theft and rape (UN-HABITAT, 2002). An exploratory survey related to this study revealed several forms of youth crime. The most common of which are theft, running away, acts of violence, sexual offences and drug consumption. Depending on the context and the target, these acts are either expressed in their simplest form or with a high intensity that can cause harm to the victim or those around them (Djigou et al., 2023).

In reality, the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency is not new in Cameroon. Not a day goes by without the public and private media reporting cases of delinquency among adolescents, whether at home, at school or even on the streets. As early as 1959, just before Cameroon's independence, the International Children's Centre published the results of a study on the living conditions of African children in urban areas and their influence on juvenile delinquency. The study found that, acts of delinquency involved theft of all kinds in the cities of Douala and Yaoundé. Of the nearly 361 cases examined, 355 revealed that among the youngest children, theft accounted for the majority of offences (91 per cent among 10-12 year olds); for the 13-14 age group (80 per cent) and 15-18 years old (81 per cent). Updated data show that the percentage of thefts varies very little from one age group to another. In recent years, the Ministry of Justice recorded 7 minors convicted out of a total of 1,449 minors prosecuted before the Court of Appeal between 1 October 2004 and 30 September 2005, and 2 per cent of minors

convicted out of a total of 2,441 minors prosecuted before the High Court and Court of First Instance. Furthermore, in 2017, the National Institute of Statistics of Cameroon (2019) reported that nearly 910 female prisoners were minors in the country's prisons, with the Central region accounting for the highest number of cases (208 prisoners in total). These statistics only include offences reported to the police or judicial authorities. The number of offences that go undetected, unreported, trivialised or hushed up before these authorities may be higher. However, it is clear that they are on the rise, which gives an indication of the scale of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the Cameroonian state and civil society claim to be making considerable efforts and resources available to combat and prevent this phenomenon. For example, Decree No. 2001/109/PM of 20 March 2001 establishing the organisation and functioning of public institutions for the supervision of socially maladjusted minors introduced specialised public structures, reception and transit centres, known as listening centres and Reception and Social Rehabilitation Centres for Street Children (CARSER). In addition, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS), which is responsible for dealing with juvenile delinquency in Cameroon and overseeing the fight against this phenomenon, has a department responsible for the safeguarding and protection of young children and socially maladjusted individuals. This ministry has recommended two approaches to combating juvenile delinquency: a deinstitutionalisation approach based on three main areas, namely prevention, the curative approach and the reintegration or aftercare approach, and an institutional approach that consists of creating institutions specialised in the supervision of socially maladjusted individuals (reception and observation centres, rehabilitation centres, reception and transit centres, accommodation centres and home workshops). In addition to these actions, there are those of the United Nations (UNICEF, UNESCO and UNDP), non-governmental organisations (SNV, PLAN-CAMEROON, etc.) and associations (the EDIMAR Social Centre at Yaoundé railway station, the « Foyer de l'Espérance » in Mvolyé, the « Foyer de l'Arche de Noé in Kondengui », etc.).

In light of these facts, the question arises as to what factors explain juvenile delinquency. Several theoretical approaches address this question.

Theoretical perspectives on juvenile delinquency

In ancient times, Greek philosophers and poets, such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Hesiod reflected extensively on crime. Summarising their thinking, Larguier (2005, p.11) states that 'we find the idea of a higher curse, common in tragedy and legend (Oedipus); the notion of fatality (cursed races: aspect of heredity) and the problem of moral freedom'. In the 20th century, several theories explaining the phenomenon were developed, namely: psychosocial, criminological, developmental and clinical perspectives.

According to Born (2005), the psychosocial perspective is based on the idea that all criminal acts, i.e. acts that contravene legal or sociological norms, evolve in space and time. Juvenile delinquency thus develops as a result of a gradual breakdown in social ties with family and school.

From a criminological perspective, it is the social and legal context that defines the seriousness of the acts committed by the individual. Indeed, delinquency is a matter of law and human society (Glowacz & Born, 2017). According to these authors, intervention strategies must take into account risk factors as well as the specific needs of young people.

From a developmental perspective, the act of delinquency must be understood in its genesis, since it occurs at a certain point in life (Fishman, 2008). This perspective highlights two points of view: macrogenesis and microgenesis. Macrogenesis considers the individual's entire life prior to the act. Here, we attempt to identify the mechanisms that, in the long term, led to the act. Microgenesis focuses on the sequences before and around the act of delinquency. It is the events and mechanisms in the immediate vicinity of the act that cause delinquency.

From a clinical perspective, the primary focus is on understanding the individual's internal functioning. This approach takes into account both family and individual factors and allows for reflection on the possible components of criminal personalities. It also examines personality traits, psychological disorders and risk factors associated with criminal behaviour. It is from this perspective that psychoanalysts situate the emergence of delinquent and maladaptive behaviour in all situations where the superego is no longer able to exert its prohibitive

and normative function on the ego in a fierce manner, while favouring complacency and permissiveness (Laplangue & Pontalis, 1997).

We can clearly see that these reflections revolve around the 'nature versus nurture' debate. But a second question remains: which factor explains delinquency more than any other? For a long time, hypotheses about the family environment and the primacy of parental education have been at the forefront of psychological thinking. For example, between 1939 and 1950, studies conducted on family characteristics and delinquency by Sheldon and Glueck, cited in Born (2005), highlighted links between family dysfunction and delinquency. Farrington (1992, 1997), cited in Glowacz and Born (2017), also demonstrated the long-term impact of family factors among subjects in the Cambridge Longitudinal Study. Conflict between parents, separation of the couple, and absence of the father are risk factors for delinquency in adolescence and adulthood. However, he believes that it is not the single-parent structure itself that is responsible for the negative effects, but rather the conflicts that preceded the break-up and the lack of discipline following the separation. Similarly, he observes that family size during childhood is another risk factor. However, multivariate analyses lead him to believe that the negative impact is attributable to the low level of parental supervision in these large families.

However, these authors seem to overlook the important role played by peer groups in the socialisation of children and adolescents. This is why Beaudier and Céleste (1990) assert that the study of relationships between children is a relatively recent field of investigation. For a long time, these relationships remained a domain of concern only for educators, before taking on the place they currently occupy in psychological research. It was in seeking to better understand the mother/baby relationship and, above all, the effects that can result from a lack of maternal bonding that psychologists were drawn to this study. Observations of young children raised in institutional settings very different from the traditional family model highlighted the importance of life companions as emotional anchors and sources of security. However, these group influences become more significant during adolescence. According to Berthe Reymond-Rivier (1997), the group allows adolescents to assert themselves in complete safety. Surrounded by people who think and feel like him, he knows he can let his guard down and express himself freely, without fear of being misunderstood or met with the ironic, condescending smile of an adult that crushes him. What's more, in a peer group, adolescents can find friends with whom they can have more or less confidential relationships or share their emotions. In other words, the group can be both a (temporary) solution to the adolescent's conflicts and a remarkable preparation for adulthood, as long as it does not veer towards antisocial activities and its influence does not go so far as to prevent any personal expression. So, if an adolescent joins a gang of delinquents, he or she could also become one. This is why Sutherland, cited in Sils et al. (1968), author of the differential association theory, believes that people become delinquents or criminals through contact with criminal role models. Behaviour is acquired through association with other people who are already delinquents. In 1955, Cohen, cited in Sils et al., (1968) also believed that peer group relationships were a major factor contributing to youth delinquency. This is because adolescents' moral judgement is often influenced by peer group pressure. Judith Rich Harris (1999) also shows the limits of parental influence on children's personalities and development. She states: 'One of the goals that motivated me to write this book was to free parents from the guilt that child-rearing experts have instilled in them.' Bandura (cited by Born, 2005) has also described the reinforcement system through which children acquire an understanding of the social world and adapt their behaviour to it. They socialise through social reinforcement (mother's smiles, voice intonations) that rewards behaviour. They thus adopt the ideas, attitudes and behaviours considered appropriate and desirable in the eyes of other members of the social group to which they belong (Paul, 2020; Paul et al., 2024). These reflections led us to raise the issue of the influence of peer groups in the learning of delinquency among adolescents. This is why we asked the following research question: does learning within peer groups promote juvenile delinquency? Based on Bandura's social learning theory, we formulated the following general hypothesis: learning within peer groups promotes juvenile delinquency. This general hypothesis gave rise to three research hypotheses, namely:

Hypothesis 1: Observing the behaviour of peer groups encourages delinquency among adolescents

Hypothesis 2: Imitation of peer group behaviour encourages delinquency among adolescents

Hypothesis 3: Identification with the peer group encourages delinquency among adolescents.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study were collected at Yaoundé Central Prison from 30 adolescents' prisoners, selected using the purposive sampling technique. In reality, prisoners differ from street children, who are sometimes abandoned children and adolescents in distress and moral danger. The age group selected for this study is based on the fact that adolescence is a period of life particularly marked by the concept of development, during which all areas of biological, cognitive and social life undergo major changes, each requiring adaptation and compromise throughout this period (Tsala Tsala, 2002). Our sample consists of adolescents aged 14 to 18 who have been tried and sentenced (offenders) to prison. The average age of respondents is 17.16, revealing the predominance of adolescents aged 17 to 18 affected by juvenile delinquency. In terms of educational attainment, 9 participants had completed primary school, 20 had completed secondary school and 1 had not attended school.

An interviewer-administered questionnaire was designed for the purpose of data collection. That is the type of questionnaire where an interviewer asks the questions and notes the respondent's answers. This questionnaire consisted of questions about the type of company the subject kept, the role played by the subject in their peer group, and the different types of learning that the subject had undergone within this group. It also included questions about the reasons for the subject's conviction and the possible causes of their delinquency. The questions asked offer a series of answers for some, and for others a series of suggested answers that allow respondents to answer outside the predefined choices.

The questionnaire finally selected for our study was first administered to ten adolescents incarcerated at Yaoundé Central Prison. It was administered to these subjects in one of the rooms temporarily prepared for this purpose by one of their supervisors. Following this preliminary survey, the questionnaire was modified in terms of its length, the ambiguity of certain words (which needed to be clarified) and the mistrust shown by some subjects towards certain questions.

After an appointment had been made and the time agreed with the prison authorities, we visited the premises a few days later to collect data for our study. Under the orders of the Head of Discipline, Socio-Cultural and Educational Activities, we were led by a prison guard to the juvenile boys' wing (more specifically, to a room where our subjects had already been gathered for this purpose) to administer our questionnaire. Once in the room, their supervisor introduced us as people who had come to work with them to see how their living conditions in prison could be improved. He informed us that initially, 32 subjects were expected to take part in our activity, but that only 30 were present. This was because two of them had been selected for chore duty. We then explained to the participants that they would come up to us one by one to answer a few questions. To guarantee their anonymity and ensure the confidentiality of their responses, no participant was identified by name. Although they were in detention, the participants were free to take part in the study and to withdraw at any time.

After we had settled down in a corner of the room, a fun activity was proposed to all the subjects, namely a drawing of their choice. Once the subject was seated in front of us, we asked them questions from the questionnaire, one per subject. And we noted down the answers to the questions ourselves. Once the interview was over, the subject was invited to return to their neighbourhood. This was to avoid the contamination effect. The interviews began with the first subject and continued until the n subject. At the end of the interviews, we collected all 30 questionnaires, put them in our bag and thanked our ad hoc collaborators. Thus was completed the field data collection session.

As the variables are nominal, the preferred analysis tool for testing the hypotheses was Pearson's chi-square test.

RESULTS

This section presents a description of the participants' behaviour within their group prior to their incarceration, followed by verification of the study's hypotheses. To do this, we carried out a simple sorting process. This sorting was done in tables known as frequency distribution tables.

Table 1: Distribution of subjects by age

Age (years)	Frequencies	Percentages
14	1	3,3%
15	0	0%
16	1	3,3%
17	19	63,3%
18	9	30%
Total	30	100

According to the results in Table 1, 63.3% of respondents are aged 17. Those aged 18 account for 30%. Finally, 14- and 16-year-olds account for 3.3% respectively. There are no subjects aged 15. This shows that adolescents aged 17 to 18 are the most affected by juvenile delinquency.

Table 2: Distribution of subjects according to their level of education

Level of education	Frequencies	Percentages
No schooling	1	3,3%
Primary	9	30 %
Lower secondary	19	63,3%
Upper secondary	1	3,3%
Total	30	100%

The results in Table 2 show that 63.3% of respondents have a lower secondary education, 30% have a primary education, 3.3% have an upper secondary education and 3.3% have no schooling. We can conclude that lack of schooling is not a factor explaining juvenile delinquency.

Table 3: Distribution of subjects according to their region of origin (place of birth)

Origin	Frequency	Percentages
Adamaoua	2	6,7%
Nord	3	10%
Extrême-Nord	3	10%
Nord-Ouest	0	0%
Sud-Ouest	0	0%
Ouest	6	20%
Sud	2	6,7%
Centre	12	40%
Littoral	0	0%
Est	2	6,7%
Total	30	100%

Table 3 shows that subjects from the Central region come out on top with 40%. Next are subjects from the West region with 20%, and those from the North and Far North regions with 10% each. Finally, subjects from the Adamaoua, South and East regions account for 6.7% respectively. Subjects from the Littoral, South-West and North-West regions are not represented. In view of these results, we note that almost all regions of Cameroon are represented and that all these juvenile offenders are part of the Cameroonian population. This suggests that rural

exodus may be a cause of juvenile delinquency, as some authors believe, and that they are all subject to the same endogenous and exogenous factors (ICT, gangs, acculturation, inculturation, etc.). It is important to note here that the common characteristic of all these participants is that they experience roughly the same cultural realities, due to their interaction with their peers.

Table 4: Description of the subjects' behaviour within their groups prior to insertion

Categories	Types of behaviors	Frequencies	Perrcentages	Total
Submission Group constraints	Share everything with other group members	11	36,7%	100%
	Do not betray a group member	2	6,7%	
	Do not fight with a group member	6	20%	
	Respect elders	4	13,3%	
	Show solidarity	7	23,3%	
Penalties reserved for traitors	A beating	8	26,7%	100%
	A punishment	10	33,3%	
	Permanent exclusion from the group	3	10%	
	Others	9	30%	
Behaviours copied from members of the group	Theft	1	3,3%	100%
	Running away	19	63,3%	
	Drug use	9	30%	
	None	1	3,3%	

The results obtained from Table 4 show that 36.7% of participants were forced to share any information useful to the group, 23.3% stated that solidarity, 20% was required in their group with a ban on fighting, 13.3% felt it was respect for elders, and 6.7% stated that it was not betraying others. These statistics reveal that once adolescents join a peer group, they submit to a number of rules (explicit or implicit) in order to remain in it.

Similarly, with regard to punishments for betrayal, 8 (33.3%) participants said they had been subjected to caning, 10 (30%) mentioned other types of punishment depending on the severity of the betrayal, others said they had received reprimands, warnings or no punishment, 9 (26.7%) said they had suffered other forms of abuse, while 3 (10%) mentioned permanent exclusion from the group. We can say that the group is governed by norms that each member must respect.

Table 4 also shows that several types of behaviour were imitated by other members of the group, notably running away, which is the most common behaviour in the group (63.3%), followed by drug use (30%) and theft (3.3%). However, 3.3% of subjects reported not copying any role models in the group.

Table 5: Distribution of subjects according to their reaction when decisions are made in the group

Ingroup conformism	Frequencies	Percentages
Yes	16	53,3%
No	14	46,7%
Total	30	100%

The results in Table 5 show that 53.3% of subjects acted like others when it came to decision-making within the group, while 46.7% of subjects reported that they tended to express their own opinions within the group. This means that within the peer group, when it came to decision-making, most adolescents conformed rather than expressing their opinions.

Table 6: Distribution of subjects according to the reasons for their conviction

Reasons for incarceration	Frequencies	Pourcentages
Attempted robbery	3	10%
Simple theft	5	16,7%
Armed robbery	11	36,7%
Assault and battery	3	10%
Receiving stolen goods	1	3,3%
Rape	1	3,3%
Forgery and use of forged documents	2	6,7%
Others	4	20%
Total	30	100%

The results in Table 6 show that, regarding the reasons for the subjects' incarceration, 36.7% of subjects stated that it was armed robbery, 20% of subjects chose other (assault, joint action in robbery, complicity in aggravated robbery and aggravated robbery), 16.7% chose simple theft, and 6.7% said forgery and use of forged documents. Attempted theft and assault and battery each accounted for 10%, while receiving stolen goods and rape each accounted for 3.3%. We can see that theft is the main reason for incarceration among our participants.

Table 7: Hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Calculated X ² value	Read X ² value	P.Value
HR1	48.20a	32.67	.0000
HR2	45.83a	32.67	.0000
HR3	6.58a	14.07	.0961

The central concern of our study is to determine whether learning within peer groups is the cause of juvenile delinquency among young people in the city of Yaoundé. To this end, we studied the links between observing peer group behaviour and juvenile delinquency, between imitating peer group behaviour and juvenile delinquency, and between identifying with peer groups and juvenile delinquency.

INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Observation of peer group behaviour and delinquency among adolescents

Statistical analysis of the research hypothesis that observing peer group behaviour promotes delinquency among adolescents showed that there is a dependent relationship between these two nominal variables, as $X^2_{cal} > X^2_{lu}$ ($48.20 > 32.67$, $p < 0.05$). Indeed, among adolescents, observing a peer commit a criminal act that results in positive reinforcement (rewards) can lead them to do the same in a similar situation. Bandura (1977) refers to this as vicarious learning. Born (2005, p.192) defines it as 'adopting a behaviour because one has seen that a similar behaviour was effective or had desirable consequences for another person'.

Imitation of peer group behaviour and delinquency among adolescents

The hypothesis that imitation of peer group behaviour encourages delinquency among adolescents was also verified, as $X^2_{cal} > X^2_{lu}$ ($45.83 > 32.67$, $p < 0.05$). Considered by Bandura (1977) as learning by modelling, imitation can have several explanations: depending on whether the imitator intentionally wants to achieve a personal goal; whether they want to be recognised within their group or gain prestige; and whether they want to feel that they belong to their group (sense of belonging). According to Born (2005), modelling is defined as the simple imitation of the behaviour of another person who serves as a model. From Table 4, we can see that running away (63.3%) remains the most copied behaviour among our survey subjects. It is easy to understand why this type of behaviour remains the most valued among adolescents, as it is during adolescence that children generally

come into conflict with adult values and their parents. True social values are personal judgments based on freely chosen principles (Kolberg, cited in Florin, 2003). For adolescents, the only people they can get along with are their peers, because they can play, talk, share their emotions and confide in them. This is why they start running away from home to join their peers.

Identification with peer groups and delinquency among adolescents

Statistical analysis of the research hypothesis that peer group identification promotes delinquency among adolescents showed that there is no independent relationship between peer group identification and juvenile delinquency, i.e. $X^2_{cal} < X^2_{lu}$ ($6.58 < 14.07$; $p > 0.05$). This means that identification with peer groups does not promote delinquency among adolescents. According to Born (2005, p.171), "identification is a process by which a person individualises, specifies and differentiates themselves to become an inseparable and original whole, a phenomenon that occurs in interaction with the environment and its multiple influences. [...] The process of identification and identity construction is fundamentally dynamic and interactive. It involves the individual taking parts of models and integrating them into their own "self". The individual thus adapts these contributions to what they were previously. Identification therefore means the presence, within the individual's psychological organisation, of certain attributes, characteristics and goals of a model (this model may be an individual, a group, a more abstract entity, etc.). We believe that the mechanism is less significant because of the difficulties of self-disclosure (e.g., it would be difficult for an offender to openly say that he identifies with a robber or a criminal...). Similarly, the method of administration, namely the hetero-administered questionnaire, may have introduced biases related to the presence of the interviewer or the way in which questions were asked.

In general, and in light of these results, it is clear that within peer groups, certain learning mechanisms such as observation, imitation and, to a lesser extent, identification, lead to delinquency among adolescents.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to determine whether there is a causal relationship between learning within peer groups and juvenile delinquency. We took a developmental psychology perspective, but one that departs from the idea that parental education is paramount in the development of a child's personality. In fact, according to Harris (1999), in the hypothesis of the primacy of parental education, the socialisation of children is the responsibility of parents. In other words, it is parents who transmit cultural knowledge (including language) to their children and prepare them to become full members of the society in which they will spend their adult lives (Mbede, 2005). However, in recent years, studies in criminology, educational psychology, sociology and developmental psychology have highlighted the influence of peer groups in the socialisation of children and adolescents. This is why Harris (1999, p.239) states: "Children are born with certain characteristics. Their genes predispose them to develop a certain type of personality. But their environment can change them, not their family or parental environment, but the outside environment, the one they share with other children. Bandura, cited in Goslin et al. (1996), had already shown in his studies on aggression that behaviour is learned through observation and imitation of role models. We drew on this theory of social learning to show that juvenile delinquency is the result of learning within the peer group. At the end of our study and based on our results, we can conclude that learning within the peer group encourages an increase in delinquent behaviour among adolescents. However, in order to better prevent this phenomenon, it is important to take into account all the factors that may explain it, as the peer group, which is an agent of socialisation for children and adolescents, is only one factor among many. In this study, in addition to the scientific interest in understanding how certain psychological mechanisms can encourage delinquent behaviour, the anticipation interest can enable the prevention of such behaviour through youth education and practical intervention such as peer mentoring, community engagement programmes, and rehabilitation strategies, to redirect peer influence toward prosocial outcomes.

This study examined the effect of peer relationships on juvenile delinquency among adolescents incarcerated in prisons in Yaoundé. The explanatory variable 'peer relationships' was theorised through the work of Bandura (1977) and encompasses three dimensions, namely observation, imitation and identification with the peer group. The results revealed that peer group identification had little significant effect on adolescents' adoption of delinquent behaviour. It appears that although the identification process is present among adolescents in

detention, it has very little influence on their decision to commit offences. In reality, young offenders observe and imitate the acts committed without actually identifying with their peers or group leaders. We note that the sample (N=30) was not sufficiently representative, which is the main limitation of this study. Future research could be extended to a larger population, including the concepts of gender, cultural influence and group dynamics, which are not strictly part of this article. It could also build on these results to further explore this issue in other contexts, in order to propose an approach that explains and predicts the phenomenon of delinquency among adolescents.

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