



Publisher

African Journal of Social Work

Afri. j. soc. work

© National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe/Autor(s)

ISSN Print 1563-3934

ISSN Online 2409-5605

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Indexed & Accredited with: African Journals Online (AJOL) | University of Zimbabwe Accredited Journals (UZAJ) | SCOPUS (Elsevier's abstract and citation database) | Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) | Society of African Journal Editors (SAJE) | Asian Digital Library (ADL) | African Social Work Network (ASWNet) | Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) - South Africa | SJR | CNKI - China | Journal Publishing Practices and Standards (JPPS) | EBSCO | DOI

Natural homes or not: investigating drivers of child delinquency as perceived by caregivers in Zimbabwe's residential care facilities

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to investigate the perspectives of caregivers regarding the occurrence of delinquent behaviours among children residing in care facilities. The research aimed to uncover the factors that caregivers believe contribute to delinquent actions in children placed in residential care institutions. The study used a qualitative research methodology, specifically a phenomenological research design, to collect data from purposefully selected caretakers and key informants. The study included semi-structured interviews as a means of gathering data from both participants and key informants. The research made use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for analysing the generated themes. The factors contributing to delinquent behaviour were insecure attachment, single parenting, psychological suffering, emotional resentment, physical abuse and violence, protracted institutional care, and spirit possession. The study's findings have implications for child protection and care, necessitating the creation of a national parenting manual for residential care institutions. This manual should be based on indigenous parenting practices and legal frameworks. Therefore, the results necessitate a revision of existing parenting systems, aiming to strike a balance between the inherent freedom of parents in raising their children and the guidance provided by professional parenting.

KEY TERMS: caregivers, delinquency, drivers, residential care, Zimbabwe

KEY DATES: Received: Sep 2023 | Revised April 2024 | Reviewed: December 2023 | Published: April 2024

KEY DECLARATIONS: Funding: None | Permission: UJ Grant 1819 | Conflict of Interest: None | Ethics approval: UNZA Ethics Committee

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HOW TO REFERENCE USING ASWDNET STYLE

Gozho, C. S., Muzingili, T. & Muridzo, N.G. (2024). Natural homes or not: investigating drivers of child delinquency as perceived by caregivers in Zimbabwe's residential care facilities. *African Journal of Social Work*, 14(2), 92-100. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v14i2.5>

INTRODUCTION

Institutionalised care for vulnerable children has emerged as a prevalent contemporary practice in parenting, with the primary objective of promoting the whole development of children in terms of their physical, psychological, emotional, and cognitive well-being. However, it is noteworthy that there has been a lack of academic investigation into the specific parenting style(s), parenting practices, and their consequent influence on the behaviour of adolescents in institutionalised care institutions in Zimbabwe. The ongoing increase in deviant behaviour among children in institutional care is indicative of the shortcomings in present parenting methods. Zimbabwe, like any other country, has undergone a modern transition through globalisation, which has had an impact on parenting practices as evidenced in various legislative frameworks. Although the significance of traditional parenting practices is undeniable, parenting in residential care centres embodies legal child-rearing. This study contends that there are still deficiencies in the parenting practices inside Zimbabwe's residential institutions, despite the crucial role that parenting plays in shaping children's growth and fostering their independence and excellent character. Given that parents are an essential aspect of human existence; it is crucial to comprehend the factors that contribute to delinquent behaviour in children residing in residential centres. Addressing the aforementioned deficiencies provides valuable information for reevaluating current parental methods that fail to consider Afrocentric ideals.

OVERVIEW OF DELINQUENT BEHAVIOUR IN RESIDENTIAL CARE CENTRES

The demand for alternative care options for vulnerable children in developing nations is consistently rising, leading to a corresponding growth in the number of residential care institutions (Day, 2021; Makhubele et al., 2021). Makhubele et al. (2019) observe that residential care facilities primarily prioritise the physical needs of children while neglecting their psychological and social needs. This lack of attention to their holistic well-being contributes to the development of delinquent behaviour among children in residential care. Despite the implementation of behaviour control measures outlined in Zimbabwe's National Residential Care Standards (2018), delinquent behaviours among children in residential care continue to persist as an ongoing social issue (Day, 2021). This maladaptive behaviour is associated with unresolved stress, anger, despair, emotional issues, bereavement, and anxiety experienced by children in care (Muguwe, 2018).

The incidence of delinquent behaviour in residential care institutions is increasing (Afifi et al., 2020). The matter has become a significant worry for caregivers in residential care (Mugedya & Maushe, 2021). Research has established a link between psychological characteristics and the development of delinquent behaviour in children in institutional care. Criminological, sociological, and biological studies have explored this association. Kroese et al. (2021) observe a significant correlation between parental separation and psychological suffering, social tension, and emotional resentment. It is a frequent occurrence for children in residential care to have become separated from their biological families. Given the first-hand experience of the crisis, it is probable that there will be an increase in antisocial behaviour. Children who undergo parental separation may develop feelings of animosity towards their caregivers, as they may be unable to substitute the absent figure, thus heightening the probability of developing insecure attachment and engaging in juvenile delinquency (Sogar, 2017).

Institutional care violence significantly contributes to delinquent behaviour (Better Care Network, 2019). Indonesian and Asian residential care institutions frequently experience staff violence, especially when they house younger children alongside older ones (Browne, 2017). The violence includes physical assaults, seclusion, constraints, sexual assault, stigmatisation, and degradation. Low-ranking priorities and insufficient manpower exacerbate this issue with a dearth of government oversight and inspection mechanisms (Day, 2019). Morales and Garcia (2018) emphasise that children who have endured physical and sexual abuse before being placed in residential care tend to exhibit rebellious and delinquent behaviour. A statistical investigation reveals a significant association between physical punishment and subsequent delinquent conduct. Furthermore, delinquent behaviours may result from various neural system problems caused by abuse (Singh & Azman, 2020). Lansford et al. (2007) assert that there is a significant correlation between early instances of physical abuse, neglect, and maltreatment and subsequent displays of aggression and delinquent behaviour. The enduring psychological effects of such experiences on children throughout their lives are responsible for this connection. Childhood experiences of this nature lead to disturbances in brain development, hence heightening the likelihood of cognitive and behavioural impairments (Afifi et al., 2020).

Residential care can lead to psychological issues in children, which in turn increases the likelihood of delinquent behaviour when compared to children raised at home (Andreopoulou et al., 2020). Children display various behaviours, including violence, running away, substance misuse, and engaging in illegal activities. Andreopoulou et al. (2020) note that an extended stay in care is considered detrimental to the healthy development of children because it exposes them to negative experiences before their admission into residential care institutions. Moyo et al. (2015) emphasise that time has detrimental consequences, leading to social and behavioural abnormalities such as autism, hyperactivity, and delinquent tendencies. These effects are a result of

the cognitive, emotional, and physical damage that occurs in institutional care. Browne (2017) observes that early institutionalisation increases the likelihood of delinquent behaviours in children compared to those placed in institutional care later. Tanzanian researchers conducted a study that revealed a higher prevalence of mental health issues and challenging behaviour in children placed in residential care from birth to four years of age, compared to a group of children institutionalized between the ages of five and fourteen (Mkinga *et al.*, 2022). The results showed a greater impact on the early-institutionalized children compared to their later-institutionalized counterparts.

The majority of residential care institutions frequently practice single parenting (Day 2021). In Chimene's (2018) research on Zimbabwean residential care institutions, it was discovered that children who are placed in these institutions are separated from their families and are cared for by personnel, primarily mothers, who work at these facilities. Singh & Kiran (2013) observe that children raised by single caregivers may experience exercise control, supervision, and socialisation over the child. Single parenting significantly influences children's behaviour. A study conducted by Mayowa (2020) found that single parenting has a psychological impact on children. This is because single parents and caregivers often miss the opportunity to develop strong parent-child ties and may struggle to manage the emotional challenges that arise from the absence of the other parent or carer. The study conducted by Makhubele *et al.* (2019) in Zimbabwe posits that children residing in institutional settings are more prone to exhibiting elevated levels of social difficulties in comparison to children raised by their biological parents. These obstacles have a detrimental impact on the mental well-being of children, resulting in depression, which manifests as violent and delinquent behaviour.

Ubuntu theory and child delinquency in institutions

The Ubuntu philosophy, which is often characterized by communal rationality, communal values, and human excellence, is part of how African communities and families raise children (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). In many African cultures, there is a well-defined ideology and way of life. Each individual grows up within a distinct civilisation and culture. Ubuntu is a way of life in Africa. The statement "I am because we are" expresses this. A person is completely human because of others' actions. This is similar to the English proverb "No man is an island." Ubuntu parenting is based on an African worldview and strategy that recognises the varied traditions, cultures, and lifestyles found throughout Africa (Shambare, 2021).

Children at residential childcare facilities, according to Magedya & Maushe (2021), are distanced from the most essential part of ubuntu, or Hunhu, because institutions base their socialisation on mission statements and aim to make orphans useful. Detachment from one's natural surroundings usually breaches the essential ideals and concepts that comprise Ubuntu's relationship philosophy. Modern social work, on the other hand, does not appear to recognise the full scope of the Ubuntu ideology. Mugumbate & Chereni (2019) highlight that the use of Western models of social work, such as care for children in residential care, limits the ability of community members to effectively contribute to the physical and social development of children. In contrast to residential care, relatives care for children without the assistance of experts. Furthermore, parents and communities can praise and punish children without the involvement of experts, judges, or juvenile detention facilities (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This study used the qualitative method to understand residential care for children's delinquency. Qualitative research was used since caregivers' experiences are subjective. The research was phenomenological. The study examined residential caretakers' experiences with delinquent children. A cohort of fifteen caretakers, ranging in age from 45 to 55 years was used. The chosen residential care facility maintained a caregiver-to-child ratio of eight children. The study also focused on three primary informants from different contexts: the director of a residential care facility, a government probation officer, and a representative of a non-governmental organization. A convenience sample method was applied to pick a group of 10 caregivers (mothers) who are engaged at a specific residential care institution. The caregivers were chosen based on their familiarity with the organisation. The study employed purposive sampling to select three important informants, including the probation officer from the Department of Social Development, Social Worker from selected institution, and the director from the Zimbabwe Care Leavers Network.

The study collected qualitative data from caregivers and key informants through in-depth interviews. Caregivers and key informants should be interviewed using semi-structured guidelines. Caregivers and key informants were asked open-ended questions about residential care children's delinquency.

The data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. The study employed six data analysis steps. The first step was to read interview scripts, while the researcher examined caretakers' experiences with children's delinquency. The second step was note-taking with observations of notes recorded. From the information in the transcript, descriptive and linguistic notes were collected with the aid of language. We

developed and summarised the themes, then categorised them by topics. The fourth step involved searching for topic links alongside sub-themes. Duplicate topics were removed, and unconnected ones were rejected. Finally, we used case-wide trends to describe the participant's experience.

Before conducting the research, the study obtained authorization and consent from the Ministry of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare. The study advocated for the voluntary involvement of all research participants. Coercion was absent, as the study participants had the freedom to voluntarily withdraw from the study. Prior to participating in the study, the participants received additional information about its objective.

FINDINGS

This section presents factors that lead to child delinquency in Zimbabwe's residential care centres as perceived by caregivers. Based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the following key themes emerged:

Insecure attachment

Caregivers noted that, due to the insecure attachment between children in institutional care and their caregivers, there is a high likelihood of delinquency. The parent-child relationship in residential care was considered poor and failed to cater to the child's healthy development. Due to insecure attachment, the caregivers revealed that the children end up being antisocial, hostile, and delinquent, as the children prove difficult to manage for the caregivers. One of the participants said:

There are challenges with building a rapport with children under our care, no matter how hard we try. From the children's eyes, we are mere carers and that has resulted in a spate of anti-social behaviours

Another caregiver mentioned that:

There are challenges in sustaining attachment with the children under my care, as at times I have to go on leave and contract breaks. Furthermore, the children have been under the care of another caregiver prior to my joining of the organisation.

It was further revealed by another caregiver that:

My house is a group of people living together, not a family. Despite my efforts to get closer to the children, they are either prematurely discharged or are resistant to the environment.

The key informants acknowledged that insecure attachment is pivotal to delinquent behaviour for children in residential care. One of the key informants stated that

Poor and insecure attachment is characteristic for children in residential care as they have lost their biological families and have been exposed to different environments. This is also exacerbated by constant change of caregivers.

It was learned that children developed delinquent behaviours due to insecurity and poor attachment between them and their caregivers. There was a likelihood of delinquent behaviour as the majority of children in residential care had lost their biological families. Another observation was that in residential care centres, caregivers constantly changed, which resulted in parenting shifts. This makes it difficult for children to develop attachment and trust.

Single parenting

Single-parent caregivers noted that the effects of single parenting had a strong relationship with delinquent behaviour for children in residential care. The majority of the caregivers noted that, due to single-parenting children in residential settings, caregivers found it difficult at times to fulfil both their roles as mother and father. The key informant corroborated this by noting that the institution's family structure negatively contributes to child development. This is because caregivers have challenges applying full control and enforcing discipline as per societal standards and expectations. We further noted that single parenting exposes children to emotional and behavioural challenges, including aggression and high-risk behaviours. Some caregivers expressed the following:

It is not easy for me as a caregiver to fulfil both the roles of a mother and father, as most of the time the children tend to take advantage of the absence of masculinity which ultimately leads to my lack of control and management of these children.

Compared with my family in the community, it has not been easy to provide proper child control socialization and supervision, especially with the absence of the father figure, as I am expected to take care of eight children.

The multiple demands the single caregivers have to cope with in the care institution make it difficult for them to spend time with their children, which affects the children psychologically, emotionally, mentally and ultimately results in delinquency.

The findings revealed that children growing up in single parents' families fail to get full socialisation with social norms and responsibilities. Both caregivers and key informants believed that a child who did not see much support and love from both parents was likely to grow up with a lack of trust, a spirit of revenge, and antisocial behaviour. The feeling among caregivers was that the absence of the masculine character (father) also affected the social control, supervision, and socialisation of the children in residential care.

Psychological distress and emotional resentment

The caregivers identified psychological distress and emotional resentment as drivers of delinquent behaviours for children in residential care. It was revealed that the loss of biological parents, relatives and the change of environment in institutional care result in a lot of psychological distress and emotional resentment for the respective children. It was attested that the depression, feelings of sadness, anxiety, and anger caused by placement in residential care contributed to bitterness and anger towards the caregiver. As a result, children responded by engaging in delinquent behaviours. One of the caregivers had this to say:

Just after admission into care, John (pseudo name) exhibited signs and feelings of sadness, anxiety, and anger tantrums, and this later on manifested into drug and substance abuse, stealing, and truancy.

Another caregiver had this to say:

The emotional separation of children who have biological families and relatives often results in behavioural difficulties as the children are eager to reunite with their families. The experience is that they become delinquent.

It was further revealed that

Children in residential care may not be happy to be in residential care due to separation from the environment of origin and their biological family. Despite the training to manage these children, institutional care is not adequate enough to deal with the children's psychological distress.

Researchers discovered that psychological and emotional resentment played a significant role in delinquent behaviour. Children placed in residential care face a lot of mental health problems as they lose their families and their natural environment.

Physical abuse and violence

Participants identified physical abuse and violence as drivers of delinquent behaviour. Researchers noted that children who have experienced physical abuse in the institution or prior to placement are more prone to becoming delinquent. Some of the research participants' accounts are listed below:

The children with a background of having been physically abused or any kind of violence are the ones with a trend of presenting anti-social behaviour. The psychological experience of constant abuse and trauma often leads unhealthy coping mechanisms such as delinquency.

I had an experience with one child who faced constant abuse from other children in the family house. He ended up replicating the same violence on other children and he developed a habitual tendency of truancy and delinquency.

Children who would have experienced abuse and other traumatising events tend to become delinquent and very abusive in the future. These children are at risk of further secondary traumatising that may result in development of antisocial behaviour.

The study discovered that physical abuse and violence prior to institutional care contributed to the development of delinquent behaviour. As a result, previous experience was regarded as an important factor in the development of delinquent behaviour.

Long-term institutionalisation

Both caregivers and key informants highlighted that prolonged institutionalisation was at the centre of delinquent behaviours for children in institutional care. The majority of the caregivers explained that institutional care has a damaging effect on the children's cognitive, emotional, and physical development, which ultimately results in anti-social behaviours. Caregivers also noted that the majority of the children lived more than ten years since the time of admission. To support this, some study participants made the following observations:

Children who have been in my care for a long time tend to exhibit delinquent behaviours and tendencies compared with those on short-term care. The behaviour is constantly reinforced by interaction with other delinquent children in the institutional care set up.

My experience with children in care shows that children who have been in my care since they were toddlers and babies show huge signs of anti-social behaviour due to constant change in caregivers which has a damaging effect on the children's cognitive, emotional, and physical development"

Long-term institutional care is damaging psychologically to children in care. The lack of consistency in care and social learning from other children and peers often leads to mental health disorders such as contact disorders and delinquent behaviours.

Key informants attested that institutional care influences the normal cognitive, psychological, and behavioural development of children in care. The participants noted that unstable parenting in residential care affects a child's normal development. As a result, children in residential care exhibit negative behaviour.

Spirit possession

Some of the caregivers revealed that the delinquency of children in residential care could be attributed to spirit possession. The caregivers noted that the behaviour of children in residential care has a strong nexus with evil spirits. Caregivers believed that children's undesirable behaviour was a result of spiritual issues, as children are tied to their biological family's beliefs. Disobedient parents could potentially victimize children in residential care. The study participants had this to say:

It could be that the behaviour of some of these children has something to do with spiritual and evil forces behind. It is sometimes difficult to explain the aetiology of the antisocial behaviour which we have concluded to be part of spiritual and evil spirits.

One child I had under care seemed to manifest a spirit from his family of origin as a cause for his delinquent behaviour. The child constantly refers to biological family's lineage contrary to his age.

Spirituality is one factor that we can't ignore as we try and explain the aetiology of delinquent behaviour in residential care. One common belief in our society is "Ngozi" which refers to avenging spirits from generational spirits that may also result in delinquent behaviours.

The study's findings demonstrate that spirituality can lead to delinquent behaviours in residential care for children. Some caregivers seemed to infer some delinquent behaviours from spiritual possession. The caregivers also noted that some children manifested bizarre behaviour, which for them was strange and unbearable.

Institutional care system

Institutional care system findings revealed that the care system is designed in such a way that caregivers are disempowered to provide discipline to the children, a task they noted is reserved for social workers. The key informants noted that poor remedial strategies by residential care institutions, through a combination of inexperienced caregivers, children with behavioural issues, and caregivers disempowered to handle the children, contribute to delinquency among children in residential care. Some of the participants' narratives are below:

I feel that I'm not empowered enough to handle behavioural issues for my children. The system usually allows reserves for the social workers and managers. Such as system disempowers me as I'm not able to influence positive behaviour within the children.

The residential care system breeds delinquency behaviour, with placement instability added to inexperienced caregivers and poor approaches to the management of anti-social behaviours increasing the incidence of delinquent behaviour.

Residential care institutions tend to hold children for a long time despite all the negativity associated with raising a child in an institutional environment. The institutional care system does not pay attention to the children's cognitive, emotional, and physical development which often breeds delinquent behaviours.

It was quite evident from the participants' narratives that the institutional care system is contributing to delinquent behaviours in children in care. Both caregivers and key informants concurred that the current institutional system indirectly reinforces delinquent behaviour through the disempowerment of caregivers who are unable to cater to the children, with all decisions mainly centralised for the office staff.

DISCUSSION

According to the study, insecure attachment between institutionalized children and their guardians increases the risk of delinquency. The study showed that caregivers must bond with their kids. This was due to their profession and the kids' backgrounds. Due to unstable attachment, children lack affection and become antisocial, angry, and delinquent, making them hard to manage for caregivers. Sogar (2017) suggests that children who have suffered parental separation may dislike their caregivers, leading to unstable attachment and delinquency. Thus, isolation from their families and care instability make residential care children inclined to become delinquent. Some caregivers leave residential care; therefore, parenting is not permanent. Thus, children struggle to form safe relationships that lead to trust and security. This parent-child connection breakdown allows for maladaptive behaviour and delinquency.

The study also found that caring for several children without a father undermines social control, monitoring, and socialisation, which leads to delinquency. Chinyenze (2018) asserts that mothers care for children in residential care after they leave their families. Single-caregiver children may have less control than biological children (Singh & Kiran, 2013; Mayowa, 2020), because physical abuse and violence can drive delinquency. Physical abuse or other violations in the institution or before placement increase the risk of delinquency. Browne (2017) asserts that the presence of aggressive older children exacerbates professional violence against children in residential care. Most children in their care have experienced sexual and physical abuse, according to the participants. Burneo-Garces *et al.* (2018) note that children who have experienced physical and sexual assault before entering residential care are more likely to act out. Childhood abuse has produced brain damage that impairs cognitive and behavioural development.

The study also found that extended institutionalisation causes delinquency in institutionalised children. Due to a variety of psychological issues, Moyo *et al.* (2015) found that children in residential care act delinquent after staying long. Delinquent behaviour is more common in early-institutionalised children (Browne, 2017). The study linked residential care children's delinquency to spirit possession. The research suggests that bad spirits and the beliefs of their biological families may influence children in residential care. Martin (2005) found that spirit possession explains juvenile deviance in New Jersey. Thus, the children's spirituality may impact their behaviour, leading to criminality. Most interviewees believed generational familial misconduct might lead to delinquency. Martin (2005) supports these findings, suggesting offences and delinquency are spiritual sins. Delinquent children have an unhealthy relationship with the supernatural world.

The study also discovered that operational care greatly encourages delinquency. The study also found that the care system disempowers caregivers to discipline and scold children, a role designated for social workers. The study also found that most children stay with the organisation for a long time. Colvin *et al.* (2020) found that structural constraints in residential institutions, such as low salaries and long hours, lead to significant staff

turnover, which further destabilises secure connections with new caregivers. Zimbabwean institutions pay caregivers poorly, which increases staff turnover.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy and legal framework: One of the key findings from this study was that delinquent behaviours are likely to emerge from increased stays in residential care. While institutional care can be a haven for children in need of care, the participants felt that there is a need to review and strengthen the existing legal form for the placement of children in residential care. There is a need for a review of the Children's Act (Chapter 5:06) to reduce the placement duration of children in residential care to a maximum of three years.

1. *Residential care centres:* As highlighted by the study participants, parenting models used in residential care breed delinquent behaviours because they are too liberal. The caregivers felt highly disempowered by the institution's internal rules and regulations. The aforementioned experience highlights the necessity to reexamine the parenting models employed in residential care facilities. Therefore, we should prioritize a positive parenting model that is culturally appropriate.
2. *Social work practice:* From the study, it was observed that poor attachment relationships with caregivers increase the risk of delinquent behaviour. Clinical social workers thereby need to work with caregivers to address insecure attachment. A positive parent-to-child relationship is key to ensuring positive behavioural outcomes. As experts in the provision of family therapy, clinical social workers can make use of a plethora of family systems approaches and techniques to foster secure attachment between caregivers and children under their care
3. *Community:* Given the large number of children placed in residential care and the detrimental effects of institutional care, it is necessary to revitalize community-centered alternative care systems. This could include foster care. There is also a need to develop family-strengthening programmes to prevent the incidence of parent-child separation in residential care.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that the drivers of delinquent behaviours for children in residential care comprise insecure attachment between the children and the caregivers, psychological distress, emotional resentment, physical abuse, violence, and prolonged institution factors that expose children to delinquent behaviours. The research concluded that delinquent behaviour is not a result of a single factor, but the findings revealed an interplay between parenting, spirituality, insecure attachment, physical abuse, and violence.

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