

Relationship Between Juvenile Delinquency and Students' Perceived Family Social Class in Selected Public Secondary Schools in Kisii County, Kisii Central Sub-County, Getembe Zone, Kenya

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Abstract

Juvenile delinquency is the practice of engaging in unlawful activities by youth below the legal age of adulthood; it is of critical concern to many governments, communities, and families. Globally, and even in Kenya, youth are accused of being the major perpetrators of crime and many other acts of violence and the behaviour is on a steady rise. The youth engage in crimes like drug abuse, suicide, murder, rape and other anti-social behaviours because of, among other reasons, peer group risk-taking behaviour, sensation seeking, age, gender, impulsivity, all leading to destructive life outcomes. The purpose of this study was to establish the relationship between juvenile delinquency and students perceived family social class. The study utilised descriptive research design and the sample size of 605 students, three principals, three counselors and nine parents were selected using purposive and simple random sampling. In this study, juvenile delinquency was measured using Juvenile Delinquency scale developed by Ageton and Elliot (1980) and social class was established by the respondents' own perception of their families' economic status. Findings of the study showed that 13.6%, 82.3% and 4.1% of the 610 respondents perceived themselves as of low, middle, and upper classes, respectively. Further, analyses showed that there were no significant differences in juvenile delinquency between low and middle class students ($p\text{-value}=0.359$) but there was significant difference between low and upper class students ($p\text{-value}=0.006$) and, middle and upper classes ($p\text{-value}=0.012$). The results also established that those from the upper social class were more delinquent than those from either the middle or the low class. Focus group discussions indicated that possession of excess money, peer pressure and access to negative information from the media influenced juvenile delinquency. The study recommends that parents of students from the upper class be sensitized on the possible negative impact of the digital gadgets they provide to their children.

Key words: Adolescent, Juvenile, Delinquency, Poverty, Social class

Introduction and Background

Juvenile delinquency is a problem that is crippling governments, communities and families. According to Otieno, Kombo and Bowen (2017), juvenile delinquency in Kenya is a major mental health concern that has been on a steady rise since 2006. Youth engage in crimes like suicide, murder, taking alcohol and drugs, stealing or disobedience because of peer group risk-taking behaviour, sensation seeking, age, gender or impulsivity (Gogua, 2020). Further, research indicates that youth get involved in major and minor offences because of: ease of access to weapons, substance addiction, unemployment (poverty), modern-day stress, breakdown of families, deviant role models, and a disregard for existing values (www.uia.org, 2022). Currently, juvenile delinquency is an issue of critical concern to many governments, communities, schools and families (Shoemaker, 2017). All adolescents world-wide have a tendency to engage in some form of antisocial, aggressive or delinquent behaviour which is normally frowned upon by adults (Moffit, 2016). The problem starts in childhood, increases during puberty and peaks in middle adolescence (MCord, Wisdom & Crowell, 2011).

Globally, youth are accused of being the major perpetrators of crime and many other acts of violence and this behaviour is on a steady rise. The number of adolescents involved in delinquent behaviour in Kenya has been on an upward trend in recent years. A few studies (<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk>, 2023 & Knifton & Inglis, 2024) have linked living in low-income families to poor mental health and problematic behaviour. Juvenile delinquency has far-reaching effects on families, communities, governments, and young people themselves. Affected adolescents end up getting involved in drug use and drug trafficking, theft, violent altercations, sexual misbehaviour, damage of expensive property, incidences of teacher and peer assault or even homicide. At many schools around the world, including some in Kenya, students have staged mass walkouts from school, an action suggesting a change in power dynamics where students now want to determine when to leave and when to return to school. Despite implementing guidance and counselling services in schools to address troublesome behaviour, a considerable gap still exists. Juvenile delinquency persists even when communities, families, religious organizations, federal and local governments work together to adopt policies that address it (Henning, 2018).

According to the 2018 National Police Service (NPS) crime report, there was a steady rise in crime from 2016 to 2018. Whereas theft, burglary, and cattle rustling were the most common crimes in 2017; violent crimes, assaults, general theft, rioting, possession of illegal narcotics, and malicious damage to property were on the rise in 2018. A total of 88,268 cases were reported to the police in 2018, an increase of 5.8% from the year before. A total of 93,411 cases were reported in 2019. However, according to the 2020 report, there were 69,645 instances documented for the year, which represent a drop of 25.4% over 2019.

A close relationship between juvenile delinquency and family social-economic status has been well established. In some social systems, where poverty is a consequence of deliberate human action intended to deny certain populations their human rights, the segregated individuals get dehumanized and traumatized. Trauma paves the way to depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as drug use later in life. These mental conditions sometimes drive certain individuals into delinquent behavior and even suicidal ideation (Rasmussen, 2015). According to Ratnani et al. (2015), poverty is a risk factor to a child's psychological well-being because it denies him the chances of flourishing to an acceptable healthy threshold in life. Among other negative effects, children living in poverty experience shame among their peers. Following such revelations, poverty can be considered a traumatizing experience.

In addition, Leavey, Rothi, and Paul (2011) state that children living in poverty suffer from a number of poverty related diseases (PRDs) linked to malnutrition, poor sanitation, lack of safe drinking water, improperly ventilated living conditions or illiteracy; all of which are directly associated with poverty. Poor families are also characterized by abusive parenting and family violence. These negative family attributes end up spilling down on the children who, once they are mistreated, turn to aggressive behavior in their teen years. Houle et al. (2013) found that adolescents seek help more from informal sources (Parents, friends, siblings and relatives) than from formal ones (the professionals). Their choice of help-giving sources could probably be because of the financial constraints in their lives. According to Hodgkinson et al. (2017), living in low-income families was linked to poor mental health problems. Poverty and social status were variables whose impact on juvenile delinquency was examined in this study. The study

treated poverty and low social status as synonymous. All respondents from the low socio-economic class were considered poor.

According to Jain and Jain (2020), poverty is the inability of an individual or a community to get the essential resources required to satisfy their basic needs. Impoverished individuals lack access to hygienic food, potable water, sufficient housing, quality healthcare, and education. Poverty, or low social class, according to Seymour (2009), is a condition in which a person's resources are so much less than what a typical individual or family would need that they are excluded from activities and living arrangements of others.

Bjerk (2010) conducted a research at the University of North Dakota and concluded that the economic qualities of an individual's family and neighbourhood might directly impact their aggressive and criminal behaviour. Extreme unmet wants due to poverty can lead to mental agony in certain people, and this mental torture can occasionally push people to commit crimes. Severe poor conditions can push some individuals to take what is not theirs, even by force, in order to satisfy their needs. A practical life example concerned a teenage girl who couldn't afford sanitary pads lawfully; such a girl would be forced to engage in unlawful sex in order to acquire money for these and many other necessities. Furthermore, if a school's ration of food didn't satisfy a secondary school boy's appetite, he would steal money from other students in order to purchase an additional item of food from the school canteen. Such a youngster would join a criminal group, while at home, in order to generate money for his different requirements.

According to Hagan and Daigle (2018), deviant behaviour is the inevitable result of an individual under stress because society does not reasonably provide them with acceptable ways of accomplishing culturally valued goals. In support of this claim, Krakauer (2018) notes that in societies where achieving economic success is valued culturally, but legally available only to a favoured population, the excluded population may be compelled to use illegal or unconventional means of achieving what they think they need. Apparent differences in the living circumstances of different demographic groups encourages adolescent misbehaviour. In these kinds of situations, young people who are raised in impoverished neighbourhoods by low-income families eventually turn to crime as a result of poverty (Raselekoane et al., 2019).

In an investigation of the impact of low-income neighbourhoods on people, Boardman (2011) discovered that living in such a neighbourhood created stress and increased the likelihood of committing crimes. According to Desta (2020), children and adolescents who experience harsh living conditions such as homelessness, family dissolution, lack of supplies, abuse in the home, orphan hood, and lack of adequate means of subsistence are most likely to become involved in juvenile delinquency. According to Nilsson et al. (2013), impoverished young people think that committing crimes is a means of pushing governments to ensure social justice for all.

Poverty, which also includes dysfunctional families, a lack of money, and insufficient education, are the root cause of these sorts of circumstances. These conditions affect young individuals psychologically as well as the society at large. For others, they even serve as the primary cause of juvenile delinquency as indicated by Rekker, Pardini, and Meeus (2015). The assertion is supported by UNICEF (2010) which states that several other variables, such as difficult financial situations in families, a high unemployment rate, and migrations from rural to urban areas in hope of getting employment, which never materializes, all contribute to the prevalence of delinquent conduct among young people. When such young people fail to get a good life, they anticipate getting into the towns, they turn to delinquency to survive. Similarly, Kaur, Saini, and Grewal (2021) assert that family dynamics and engagement in the lives of adolescents might impact their social behaviors.

Children from low-income homes are more likely to have behavioural problems in elementary and middle school as well as develop into delinquent teenagers (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). According to Compassion International (2019), teens from low-income households are forced to live in low-income areas that do not have many amenities such as job opportunities, financial aid, mental health support services, healthcare, and educational opportunities. Under such circumstances, young people are more prone to turn to crime in order to obtain what they need when essential life support systems are not there.

According to Anderson (2014), children and adolescents living in impoverished environments may not have the means to pursue their aspirations in terms of social and economic

advancement. The children usually attend disadvantaged schools because their parents have limited resources to support their education. Because these schools lack enough learning resources, the children end up performing poorly. The poor performance denies them good jobs. Similarly, teenagers brought up in households with low social and financial resources are more likely to have challenges at work and school, as well as to suffer from social isolation and unfavorable health outcomes (Piotrowska et al., 2014). This statement portrays a true picture of what happens, especially given the large number of females who abandon their education in order to marry expecting that their requirements will be met by their spouses, only to be disappointed by the reality on the ground.

Drug use, criminal activity, and delinquency have long been associated with significant risk factors such as poor socio-economic status and childhood poverty (Galloway & Skardhamar, 2010). Youth from low-income households are more prone to engage in delinquent conduct than their counterparts from wealthier homes (Seriesle, 2014). Young individuals from low-income families might feel deprived of and restricted from accessing necessary resources (Banovcinova et al., 2014). These children, like all other children, desire to have certain pleasant items or money, things which, unfortunately, they cannot afford. They need money to go shopping, visit cybercafés, buy cigarettes, and hang out with friends, just like their colleagues from rich backgrounds. The fact that they do not have the means to live like their schoolmates makes them feel like failures. In order to console themselves, they turn to illicit means of blending in (Shong et al., 2018). Children from chronically impoverished homes have more behavioural problems than their counterparts from well-to-do backgrounds.

Shong, Abu Bakar, and Islam (2018) in a Malaysian study discovered a strong link between behavioral issues and poverty-related juvenile criminality. The findings, however, are contested by Rekker et al. (2015) who claim that children from high socioeconomic positions had lower delinquency rates than those from low socio-economic status. Another study by Shong et al. (2019) found out that some young individuals turn to crime to obtain the things they require. Young people who behave in antisocial ways are frequently the outcome of tense parent-child relationships in which parents, either out of embarrassment or shame, hesitate to convey to their

children their financial restrictions. In some instances, delinquency results from children's inability to comprehend why their parents are unable to fulfil their needs.

Tremblay and Vitaro (2012) state that when youth lack the resources to live up to social expectations, they get upset and struggle, in any way possible, to establish positive social relationships with their peers. In addition, such youth may display aggressive conduct, show nervousness, have indications of depression, or damage property (Mwangangi, 2019). The current study observed that in impoverished communities, a general lack of financial resources may create a vicious circle of poverty and crime, with young people turning to illegal methods of acquiring money. Shong et al. (2018) also indicated that material, spiritual, and emotional deprivation are often brought on by financial stress and antisocial behaviour in youngsters. It is worth noting, however, that children from all socio-economic backgrounds can commit crime when their parents do not provide what they think they need.

According to Ngale (2009), a significant proportion of young criminals in Africa come from the lowest socioeconomic strata of the population. Typically, children from these homes cannot access basic necessities like food, clothes, books, school materials, health care, normal housing, or even parental guidance. Many urban low-income families are compelled to live in small spaces because they lack the money to afford a bigger house. Some of the men from such backgrounds deliberately avoid spending much time at home because they are embarrassed by their inability to support their families. Poverty has several negative effects, including extreme financial difficulties, parental divorce, strained parent-child relationships, family conflict, school dropouts and hanging out with individuals of antisocial behavior (Kalil & Wightman, 2011). All in all, in the African environment, poverty has forced most youngsters to the streets, where they continue to find strategies for surviving, such as joining juvenile gangs that engage in illicit activities.

Slamdien (2010) states that lack of jobs and overall poverty leads some African adolescents to engage in violent and dangerous sexual behaviour. Many jobless university graduates in Kenya have admitted that they turned to stealing and other criminal activities as a means of subsistence. According to Ndirangu and Kimani (2010), poor living circumstances, low levels of education,

hunger, illiteracy, unemployment, and a lack of leisure activities, all contribute to youth marginalization. Furthermore, Ndirangu (2011) in a study carried out at one rehabilitation centre in Nyeri, Kenya, observed that children residing in the facility mainly came from poor and dysfunctional households of either rural or urban origins. According to Marichen and Ignatius (2015), a vast majority of young Africans are unemployed and living in great poverty, which pushes them to join youth gangs and to participate in unlawful activities.

Another report by Rwanda (2017) states that children from low-income households are more likely to run away from home and participate in aggressive and delinquent conduct, which is consistent with earlier research. Another researcher, Ndaita (2016) states that children from dysfunctional and low-income households display delinquent conduct, which might eventually lead to criminal behavior. Furthermore, a study done in the Korogocho and Viwandani slum settlements of Nairobi by Kabiru and colleagues (2014) found that teenagers who grow up in impoverished conditions, substandard housing, and are frequently exposed to crime and violence in their communities and neighborhoods are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior than their counterparts from better environments.

The findings and assertions in this research work can be explained by the Trauma Theory by Ulman and Brothers (1988) which states that traumatic experiences shatter an individual's sense of self in ways that are intolerable. It is trauma which leads to display of impulsivity, irritability, inappropriate emotional reactions, and a lack of empathy for other people's struggles. This study focused on the influence of poverty/low social class on juvenile delinquency among secondary school students in Kisii County, Kisii Central Sub-County, Getembe Zone, Kenya.

Methodology

Descriptive survey research design, mixed methods, was used to investigate the relationship between juvenile delinquency and students' perceived family social class/poverty in selected public secondary schools in Kisii County, Kisii Central Sub-County, Getembe Zone, Kenya. Descriptive survey research design was used since the study's phenomena were only reported and described exactly as they were observed. In the study, low social class and poverty were treated as synonymous. Purposive sampling was used to select three schools: one a boys' school, one a

girls' school and another a mixed secondary school. The schools were selected because they had the highest enrolment from each of the three categories. Data was collected using questionnaires for students, counsellors and deputy principals, interview schedules were used with principals and focus group discussion questions for parents.

The target population of the study was 6,357 secondary school students (3,378 girls and 2,979 boys), from seven public secondary schools in the study location. Principals, deputy principals, teacher counsellors and parents were also included in the study. According to Kombo and Tromp (2009), a discussion group is made up of 9-12 members.

By use of purposive sampling, three schools were selected from among the seven. Simple random sampling was used to get the sample population from the boys' only and girls' only schools because their enrolment was high. Purposive sampling was, however, used to include all forms two and three students from the mixed school because of low enrolment. Sample size was obtained using the formula;

$$n = \frac{N}{(1 + N(\epsilon)^2)} \quad n = \frac{3180}{(1 + 3180(0.03432)^2)}$$

n=670 where is the error term.

Therefore the sample size used in the study was (n= 605). Only form two and three students were used because they were considered to have had enough knowledge of school surroundings. Form one students were excluded because they would still be adjusting to the new environment and form fours were considered to be too busy preparing for examination to make useful respondents. Besides, they would exit school before the end of the study. The study also used the three principals, three teacher counsellors and nine parents, three from each school.

Results

Table 1 below shows the findings from the Juvenile Delinquency scale among other scales as constructed using factor analysis.

Table 1: Factor Analysis of Results for Juvenile Delinquency and other Factors from the Questionnaire.

Scale	Items	Respondents	Percentage	Cronbach Alpha
delinquency	16	605	99	0.842

From Table 1, the results indicate that juvenile delinquency was determined using a 16 item self-report tool developed by Ageton and Elliot (1980). Respondents who returned properly filled questionnaires were 605 out of 610 (99%) producing a Cronbach alpha of 0.842. Factor analysis was used to show the consistency, and hence the reliability of the following 16 items in the questionnaire. The sixteen items used to measure juvenile delinquency are shown in Table two.

Table 2: The 16 items Factor Analyzed for Delinquency

How many times in the last one year have you:		Never	1-2	3-4	4 or more
		1	2	3	4
1	Stolen any property				
2	Stolen money				
3	Knowingly kept or bought stolen property				S
4	Voluntarily had sexual relations with someone				
5	Attacked someone with the idea of hurting them				
6	Sold drugs like bhang, cocaine, kuber, chang'aa				
7	Taken/used drugs like bhang, cocaine, kuber				
8	Used or taken alcoholic beverages like beer, busaa, changaa				
9	Hit or threatened to hit an adult				
10	Hit or threatened to hit fellow students				
11	Tried to have sexual relations with someone forcefully				
12	Used force to get money or other items from other people				
13	Been involved in a physical fight				
14	Used vulgar language				
15	Been paid for having sexual relations with someone				
16	Destroyed school property on purpose				

Table 2 above shows the items that were asked of the respondents to determine juvenile delinquent behavior. The average responses on a scale of 1 to 4 were found for each respondent and a score of the level of juvenile delinquency for all respondents tabulated. Respondents were asked to state their perceptions of their families' social status as either low, middle, or upper class. Their self-reported perceptions are shown on Table 3 below.

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents on their Family Socio- Economic Status

	Frequency	Percent
Low class	83	13.6
Middle class	502	82.3
Upper class	25	4.1
Total	610	100.0

From Table 3 above, 83 (13.6%), 502 (82.3%) and 25 (4.1%) of the respondents considered themselves to be from the low, middle, and upper classes, respectively. This shows that a majority of the respondents (82.3%) considered themselves to be from the middle class, followed by those that classified themselves as coming from a low class (13.6%) and a mere 4.1% considered themselves to be of upper class.

The research compared the group's levels of delinquency to ascertain if they were significantly different using one- way analysis of variance ANOVA). The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: One Way ANOVA for Differences in Delinquency According to Respondents' Social Class

	Sum	of			
	Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.707	2	.853	3.822	.022
Within Groups	134.209	601	.223		
Total	135.916	603			

Table 4 shows that there was a significant difference between the mean scores in delinquency according to perceived social status ($F=3.82$, $p\text{-value}=0.022<0.05$). This implied that levels of delinquency were not the same among the perceived self-reported respondents' social class.

A post-Hoc analysis was done to find the groups that were showing significant differences. The results are reported below in Table 5.

Table 5: Post Hoc Results of the Differences in Delinquency According to Social Class

(I)	(J)	Mean differences	Std error	Sig
Low class	Middle class	-.05147	.05604	.359
	Upper class	-.29581*	.10781	.006
Middle class	Low class	.05147	.05604	.359
	Upper class	-.24434*	.09686	.012
Upper class	Low class	.29581*	.10781	.006
	Middle class	.24434*	.09686	.012

From Table 5, the results revealed that there was significant difference in delinquency between perceived low class and upper class ($p\text{-value}=0.006$) and between middle and upper ($p\text{-value}=0.012$) and no significant difference between low class and middle-class students ($p\text{-value}=0.359$). Surprisingly, the positive differences between upper and both the low and middle classes that were significant indicate that those who perceived themselves as coming from upper class were more likely to be involved in delinquency than those from the middle or low classes.

Discussion

The current study assessed the variations in adolescent delinquency based on respondents perceived social class. It was established that the perceived self-reported socio-economic classes differed significantly in terms of delinquency levels. Delinquency rates were more significant among respondents from the upper class than from the middle and lower classes. There was little difference between the latter two. According to the study, 83 (13.6%), 502 (82.3%) and 25

(4.1%) of the respondents considered themselves to be from low, middle and upper classes respectively. This shows that a majority of the respondents (82.3%) considered themselves to be from the middle class, followed by those that classified themselves as coming from a low class (13.6%) and a mere 4.1% considered themselves to be of upper class.

Moreover, the results revealed that there were significant differences in delinquency between perceived low class and upper class (p -value =0.006) and between middle and upper (p -value = 0.012) and no significant difference was seen between low class and middle class students (p -value=0.359). Surprisingly, the positive differences between upper and both the lower and middle classes that were statistically significant indicated that those who perceived themselves as coming from upper class were more likely to be involved in delinquency than those from the middle or lower classes. These findings contrast with Seriale's (2014) assertion that youths from low-income homes are more likely to engage in delinquency than those from high income homes.

From real life experiences, upper class children have a lot of free time in their hands since there are workers in their homes who do work. A lot of free time available to any individual makes them think of making themselves busy, sometimes negatively. As the saying goes, "an idle mind is the devil's workshop." Those from poor backgrounds, on the other hand, are spared that because the setting in their homes is such that they have to work in order to support their parents in taking care of them. This scarcity, according to the researcher, ends up being a blessing in disguise for the poor children and their parents/guardians. The findings, however, contradict the assertion made by Ashley and Crossman (2021) who state that it is children from low-income families who were more likely to turn to crime in order to satisfy their basic needs since they lack legal ways of acquiring their wants and needs.

It is worth noting, however, that even children from poor backgrounds can become delinquent, out of a desire to fit-in with peers. Besides, all youngsters, rich or poor, are likely to succumb to peer pressure out of curiosity and a drive to experiment and age. Moffit (2016) states that all adolescents worldwide do engage in some form of delinquency. Ashley and Crossman (2021) also affirm this by stating that when the pressure is negative, the consequences are negative too.

The current study relied on self-reported data regarding socio-economic class, which may be subject to bias or inaccuracies in how adolescents perceive and categorize their social class. Self-reporting, particularly on sensitive topics like socio-economic status, may result in social desirability bias, where respondents inaccurately portray themselves to align with perceived societal expectations (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). This is a limitation that the future research could address by including more objective measures of socio-economic status, such as parental income or education level, to provide a more accurate understanding of the relationship between class and delinquency.

The study employed a descriptive research design which prevents conclusions about the causal direction of the relationships between socio-economic class and delinquency. Longitudinal studies would help establish whether socio-economic status precedes or follows delinquent behavior, providing greater insight into the dynamics between these variables (Cohen et al., 2003). Finally, the study focused on socio-economic class while neglecting other potential influences on adolescent delinquency, such as family dynamics, peer influence, and educational factors. Future research could adopt a more comprehensive approach by incorporating these variables into the analysis to better understand the multifaceted nature of delinquency.

Conclusion

The study aimed at examining the relationship between adolescents perceived socio-economic status and their involvement in juvenile delinquency. The findings revealed significant differences in delinquency rates across different social classes. Adolescents from the upper class reported significantly higher levels of delinquency compared to those from the middle and lower classes. The results from the one-way ANOVA showed that socio-economic status significantly influenced delinquency ($F = 3.82, p = 0.022$), with post-hoc analysis revealing that the upper-class students exhibited significantly higher levels of delinquency compared to the lower class ($p = 0.006$) and middle classes ($p = 0.012$). However, there was no statistically significant difference between the lower and middle classes ($p = 0.359$).

These findings challenge previous research, such as Seriale (2014) which suggested that adolescents from low-income families were more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour. The study's results imply that upper-class adolescents may be more prone to delinquency due to factors such as increased free time or peer influences, rather than economic need, as posited by Banovcinova et al. (2018).

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