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Abstract

More than three decades of war in Angola has created a generation of disaffected children, poorly educated and living in crime-infested urban neighbourhoods where violence appears to have become the norm. This article is based on a self-report study of 30 juvenile offenders housed at the Observation Centre in Luanda. The article examines the children's views on what accounts for their delinquency. What emerges from their narratives is the central importance of the neighbourhoods in which they live. In these neighbourhoods, the children have developed delinquent relationships and encountered experiences of serious violence. Most of the children attributed their offending to the economic and social problems created by the war. The study agrees with Wessells and Monteiro's (2006) position that, in order to address this problem, a proactive approach is required in Angola that supports youth, prevents violence, and enables sustainable neighbourhood development.

Key words: Children, Juvenile delinquency, neighbourhood violence, post-conflict Angola, war.

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INTRODUCTION

The phrase 'juvenile delinquency' is a colonial invention in Africa. It is a term that was introduced into legislation in the 1920s and 1930s, by African colonial governments determined to curtail the emerging problems of public disorder and street crime by children and young persons who have migrated into the colonial towns and cities from the rural areas (See Heap, 1997; Burton, 2001; Campbell, 2002; Fourchard, 2005). Faced with social problems similar to those of nineteenth-century Europe, the colonial governments enacted laws that set up new judicial structures and social welfare services for delinquent children (Fourchard, 2005). The image of juvenile delinquency frequently highlighted in the African colonial literature is that of unemployable, poor, desolate and often parentless rural youths 'who have come into town on their own accord, living on their wits and are not under the care or control of their parents or any recognised guardian' (Burton, 2001:201). Some were believed to be orphans, runaways from home, or children brought to the city by older people (Fourchard, 2005:124). It was also imagined that some of them 'came to town to make money, in order to relieve the indebtedness of their rural households' (Waller, 2006: 91). The colonial governments in Africa generally believed that the main cause of delinquency was the lack of parental supervision. There was also a prevailing perception that the problem resulted from a weakening of 'tribal' constraints on young people ('detribalisation'), 'characterised by diminishing respect for elders, a newly found independence of mind or self confidence, and a general lack of discipline by young people' (cf. Burton, op.cit: 202-216; see also Weinberg, 1965; Campbell, 2002). Thus, the problem was viewed essentially as one that had resulted from intergenerational tensions brought about by rapid urbanisation.

The colonial perceptions on juvenile delinquency in Africa were not based on research. They were informed by 'moral panics' created by local newspaper reports on the criminal activities of youths in the colonial cities (Heap, 1997; Burton, 2001, Fourchard, 2006).

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Empirical research into juvenile delinquency in Africa did not begin until after colonial rule was over. However, the earliest post-colonial studies simply continued in the colonial tradition of blaming the problem of juvenile delinquency in Africa on the breakdown of traditional forms of social control, especially familial authority and rapid urbanisation. Many of these studies claimed to have found correlations between juvenile delinquency and various familial variables, such as inadequate parental supervision or control, 'poor' parenting styles, parental separation ('broken' homes), lack of parental discipline, parental conflict, family size and parental attachment (see Weinberg, 1964, 1965; Clifford, 1966; Oloruntimehin, 1973; Odejide, 1976). These studies were strongly influenced by western theories on delinquency: the most popular being Robert Merton's (1938) 'strain theory', Cohen's (1955) 'subcultural theory' and Shaw and McKay's (1942) 'social disorganisation theory' (see, for example, Clinard and Abbot, 1973; Weinberg, 1976; Abbe, 1984, Breetzke and Horn, 2008). For example, in relation to Ghana, Weinberg (1965) argues:

> Delinquent behaviour may be seen as an adaptation by youths who have become alienated from the family, and are thrust into a marginal social position for which the urban community lacks the institutions and agencies to channel the youngsters' needs and energies into conventional outlets. In this anomic state, some boys become attracted to deviant peers in the street society and look to them for guidance. (Weinberg, 1965:85)

As the field of sociology, and later, criminology, developed in African universities, more delinquency studies were conducted by researchers who appeared to be primarily interested in testing the extent to which the 'risk' and 'protective' factors popularly used in the Western delinquency literature are applicable in the African context. Accordingly, in spite of

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no concrete evidence of their cross-cultural validity, later studies claimed to have found different levels of correlation between delinquency in Africa and several individual and environmental risk factors, including lack of, or low levels of (western) education, educational failure – mostly resulting from truancy and a negative attitude towards schooling, low family socio-economic status (SES), and association with delinquent peers and adults in disorganised urban neighbourhoods (See Bamishaiye, 1974; Abbe, 1984). Personality/behavioural or psychological factors have featured more prominently in the most recent literature on juvenile delinquency in Africa For example, in a comprehensive study conducted in Ghana, Boakye (2010) found delinquency to be significantly influenced by individual variables such as hyperactivity, impulsivity and attention problems, academic difficulties resulting from low intelligence, low self-control, low or lack of empathy, high levels of daring, lack of guilt, and low religiosity (see also Odejide et al, 1980).

Boakye (2010) has warned against the danger of drawing inferences from western studies to explain juvenile offending in Africa; especially given the extent to which 'these factors are constrained by the specific social context within which they emerge remains largely unknown' (Boakye, 2010:7). Moreover, there is a danger in attempting to generalise about the continent of Africa based on empirical studies conducted in individual African countries. Africa is one of the most culturally diverse continents in the world. Such extensive diversity cannot be generalised upon in a single national or local study. However, what is missing, or yet to be fully explored in the literature on juvenile delinquency in Africa, is how politics and significant political events within Africa now shape the lives of children and young people in Africa, and the extent to which these events might explain delinquency in affected African countries. Many African countries have had turbulent political histories since independence, including military coups and civil wars; ineffective and corrupt governments have plunged many African countries into the problems of unpayable debts and

consequent poverty. Although several studies have examined the impact of wars and civil conflicts on children and young people in Africa (IRIN, 2007), and although some have argued that there is a relationship between these events and violent criminality amongst affected children (See Langa, 2007 on post-apartheid South Africa), no empirical studies have been carried out on the effects of civil conflicts on youth criminality in the several other affected African countries. This article is an attempt to redress this somewhat, reporting on findings from a study of juvenile delinquents in Angola. The aims of the study were not to test-known western theories of delinquency in an African context nor to assess the strength of the association between popular delinquency 'risk' variables. Instead, the article attempts to explain these children's law-breaking through an analysis of what they viewed to be crucial in accounting for their pathways into delinquency. In addition, the article seeks to investigate the extent to which the history of civil wars in Angola might have contributed to these children's delinquency.

Angola's turbulent political history

A former Portuguese colony, Angola is located in southern Africa. The country is often remembered for its long years of wars and internal conflicts. It has been said that in Angola today, 'no man or woman has lived totally during peacetime' (Rodrigues, 2010:5). In the 1960s, the struggle for independence from Portugal ended in the exit of Portugal in 1975. However, during the struggle, three nationalist groups emerged which, after independence from Portugal had been achieved, became engaged in political rivalry for control of the country. In 1975, one of these groups, the Movement for the Popular Liberation of Angola (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* – MPLA), took control of the capital, Luanda. The two remaining groups – The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (*União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*, UNITA) and the National

Liberation Front of Angola (*Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola* – FNLA) – joined forces in opposition to the MPLA government. The political rivalry inevitably became a prolonged armed conflict between the MPLA government and UNITA which lasted 27 years. The conflict was finally brought to an end in April 2002, after much destruction to property, infrastructure and lives (see Wessells and Monterio, 2006).

The effects of these wars on the children and young persons, especially those who were combatants (child soldiers), and the hundreds of thousands brutalised as a result of separation from families, bereavement, forced migrations and population displacement, have been the topic of much international debate and humanitarian efforts in Angola (see Christian Children's Fund, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2002). The plight of refugee children escaping from these wars, and their experiences of physical and sexual violence, maltreatment and exploitation, has also been documented (see Human Rights Watch, 2001). According to Wessells and Monteiro (2006: 124-125), 'others who mired in poverty, facing high levels of unemployment, and desperate to meet basic needs, [have been] drawn into crime'

Reports on the situation in post-conflict Angola spoke of how ex-child soldiers were discriminated against or excluded from the disarmament demobilisation and reintegration efforts to re-settle ex-soldiers after the war (World Bank, 2003; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2004; IRIN, 2007). Children who were disabled through military action also did not receive benefits (Human Rights Watch, 2003). A significant consequence of the war was the migration of large numbers of rural youth into urban areas in search of employment. This placed considerable strain on social infrastructure, especially schools and housing, and led to the mushrooming of urban slums (Eyber and Ager, 2003). Many of the migrant families encountered extreme poverty, and many of their young ones ended up on Angola's urban streets, engaging in all sorts of illegal and dangerous activities – some in gangs – in order to make ends meet. Many Angolan youths have had to postpone education and take on

greater responsibilities within their families. Rodrigues (2010) writes about the significant population of orphans from the war who have become street children and the proliferation of youth street gangs and prostitutes in many of the main cities, especially in Luanda. Many children have had to take on additional responsibilities as heads of households. According to the Angolan National Institute for Statistics (*Instituto Nacional de Estatística*), 'In the early 2000s, an estimated four million households in Angola were headed by young people aged 16 to 20' (INE, 2001, cited in Rodrigues, 2010:7). Furthermore, Honwana (2005) describes how traditional institutions that have played a significant role in the initiation of children into adulthood in Angola have been destroyed, and that the young people's perceptions of social reality have been distorted by the experience of war. Wessells and Monteiro (2006:125) assert that all Angolan youths have grown up amidst normalised violence at multiple levels, and that they are placed at risk of continuing cycles of violence. Whereas the literature has identified that the youth in Angola face significant problems in terms of exposure to poverty, social exclusion and violence, however, no empirical research has been carried to explore the link between these experiences and juvenile delinquency in the country.

THE STUDY

The authors set out to conduct a survey of juvenile delinquents in Angola. The aims of the study were: (a) to attempt an explanation of these children's offending based on their own accounts of what they claimed was responsible for their offending behaviour; and (b) to assess the extent to which the civil wars in Angola might have been responsible for their delinquency. From the outset, it was clear that the study would have to be limited in scope due the following reasons: (a) there are no reliable official records on the population of juvenile delinquents in the country, especially those supervised in the community; and (b) there are no prisons or detention centres for young people found guilty of criminal offences

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by the courts. Juveniles found guilty of a prisonable offence and who have not yet reached the official legal age of criminal responsibility (16 years) are supervised in their homes; those above 16-years-old are detained in adult prisons (usually at half-sentence), but access to such young offenders in African prisons is known to be difficult (see Human Rights Watch, 2007). Access to those under supervision in the community is also difficult, as they can be in any part of the country, including areas where communication is difficult. Moreover, where an under-16 has committed a very serious crime, it is not unusual for attempts to be made to hide their identity for fear of reprisals from victims or their families. This left the researchers with the only viable option: the Juvenile Observation Centre in Luanda.

The Observation Centre is a secure accommodation for boys aged between 12 and 17 awaiting trial by the courts. There are no such facilities for girls. The official reasons given for this are: the lack of available land upon which to build a centre for girls and the apparently low numbers of girls offending. However, it needs to be said that the youth justice systems in Africa have been gendered since colonial times (see Konate, 2007). For example, corporal punishment, a common judicial sanction used exclusively for juvenile offenders during the colonial period, was reserved for boys. Ocobock (2012) reports on how African colonial governments operated on the premise that:

African girls never came of age; that girls never matured to a stage of personal freedom because they are transferred from the authority of their fathers to husbands. [Thus] for the state to order the canning of girls, betrayed the gendered authority of fathers and husbands; a responsibility the state dared not question. (Ocobock, 2012:38)

Angolan girls under 16 remain with their families during trial and after sentence; those above 16, like their male counterparts, are, upon conviction, detained in adult women's prisons, also at half-sentence. The researchers regarded their inability to make gender comparisons a significant limitation of this study, and consider this a key area for future research

At the time of the study (February-March 2012), there were 75 juvenile offenders kept at the centre. Permission to access the centre was obtained from the Provincial Court of Luanda. All 75 detainees were approached to participate in the survey, but only 30 (40%) agreed and consented verbally to do so. In addition, a consent form, which also set out the aims of the research, was read out to each child, who signed it before any questions were asked. Being detainees, additional parental consent was not required. The survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire that was administered face-to-face by researchers who were of Angolan nationality, but who also spoke fluent English. The questionnaire consisted of a mixture of closed and open-ended questions, but mainly the latter; this decision was based on the premise that children are more likely to provide more accurate information when they are given the time to narrate their stories freely, rather than when they are being asked direct questions (see Powell and Snow, 2007). However, the closed questions were helpful in focusing the minds of the children on key research topics. The language used in the survey was Portuguese, which is the *lingua franca* of Angola, understood by most residents. However, where children did not understand questions, efforts were made to translate them into local languages. As the researchers were also fluent in both Portuguese and local languages, it can be said that the translations were mostly accurate. All responses were recorded, in writing, by the researchers. No tape recorders were used. However, in order to ensure that what the researchers recorded were true records of what the respondents said, the responses were read back to the children in both Portuguese and local languages. Respondents were asked to append their signatures to the completed questionnaires only

when they were satisfied with the content. The centre's staff was not involved in the research. Moreover, the children were approached individually, and the interviews took place behind closed doors, in an interview room that was set aside by the centre for the research. This was to ensure that the children were comfortable and able to tell their story without pressure from the centre's staff or inmates.

The data collected cover the following variables: demographic characteristics; offence history; family and home environment; education and employment; peers; drug and alcohol misuse; neighbourhood conditions. Specific questions were asked about the children's experiences of crime, what or who they thought was responsible for their offending and their reasons for believing this, and their knowledge of the war and how they thought it had affected them or their families. In addition, the interviewees were asked to comment on what they thought might help them desist from future offending, and how being in the Observation Centre had helped them towards attaining this goal. The children's responses were recorded verbatim. Prompts were used only to clarify issues; no form of coercion was used to elicit answers. The children were told that they did not have to answer any of the questions, and could leave at will if they felt uncomfortable, pressurised or intimidated. The ultimate intention was to have as natural a conversation as possible with the children, and to move at a pace that kept them engaged. No time limit was specified. Although the children were given the option of whether or not to report on sensitive issues, some were willing to give detailed accounts of events, especially of incidents of violence that they had witnessed both during the war and afterwards.

However, as this was a self-report delinquency study, the researchers were aware of common flaws: for example, the fact that respondents were likely either to under-report or exaggerate their experiences, (see Thornberry and Krohn, 2000; Bryman, 2008). Although the respondents were assured of anonymity and told that the information was required only

for research purposes, this error could not be totally ruled out. The criminal records and demographic characteristics (for example, age) of the sample were confirmed by the centre's staff; however, the participants' accounts of home situation, criminal activities and experiences of violence in their neighbourhoods could not be verified. This is a common flaw in juvenile delinquency research in Africa, where corroborating evidence, such as from parents or local authorities, is generally unavailable or unreliable (see Boakye, 2010).

Participants' characteristics

Of the sample, 21 children were awaiting trial for violent crimes against the person, including eight for murder/manslaughter, two for robbery, eight for wounding and one for rape of a six-year-old; two children were on trial for possession of a weapon, six for theft and one child for burglary. Fifteen children were first-time offenders, eight children had criminal records of between two and six previous offences, and seven have committed more than six previous offences. The average age at first conviction for those with previous convictions was 13.

Fourteen children lived with both biological parents, and two in single-parent households. Seven children were being fostered by relatives, including the three orphans in the sample. One of the orphans lost his parents during the war; the other two, shortly after the war, in 2003. Four children had left home and were living with siblings and friends when they were arrested, and three were homeless (street) children. Two of the street children said that they had lived on the streets of Luanda since they were seven- and eight-years-old respectively; the third child since he was 14-years-old. The majority of the children' parents were self-employed petty traders (n=11; 36.7%), four were police officers (13.3%), six were civil servants/clerks (20.0%), three were in the army (10.0%), four were unemployed (13.3%), one was a judge (3.3%), and another an oil engineer (3.3%). In response to questions about their family members' lifestyles, six of the children said that their parents

were alcoholics, two had parents who were drug addicts, and four had parents with criminal records. Five children also had older siblings with criminal records. With regard to schooling, two of the orphans said that they had never been to school. They both grew up in war-torn rural areas where schooling had been severely disrupted since the war. Only four of the children were attending school at the time of arrest. Most of the children (n=24; 80.0%) had dropped out of school, the majority just before or after completing primary education. Out of this figure, 13 (43.3%) left school because of poor performance or failure; eight of these children confessed to being persistent truants, and five said that they were expelled from school for bad behaviour. The remaining 11 children (36.7%) had dropped out of school because their parents or carers could no longer afford to fund their education. Schooling in Angola starts at the age of five and is free up until the end of primary education (age 11). Free education implies that the books and schooling materials needed by school children are provided by the state. Afterwards, at secondary school, parents must pay a nominal registration fee and fund their children's education.

Eight of the children (26.7%) said that they came from neighbourhoods that they would describe as poor, deprived or disadvantaged (for example *Rocha, Cassasquel, Boa Fe and Cantito*), but the majority (73.3%) lived in areas generally described as suburban or 'a nice place to live' (for example, *Vila Alice, Cazenga, Viana, Benfica and Petrangol*). What is significant is the fact that, in spite of the differences in levels of neighbourhood affluence, most of the children (n=23; 76.7%) described their neighbourhoods as having significant adult and/or youth crime problems. A noteworthy problem, also identified by most (22 out of the 30) children, was what they described as the proliferation of criminal gangs in the city. Criminal gang activity seemed to be widespread in Luanda (see Rodrigues, 2010). Eight children confessed to being members of known neighbourhood youth criminal gangs. Thirteen children said that illegal drugs were easily available in their areas, and a further

three children said that firearms were also easily available in their neighbourhoods. Twenty-two children (77.3%) admitted to under-age alcohol abuse, while 14 (46.7%) admitted to illegal drug misuse. The main illegal drug used was cannabis (eight users). Three children admitted to having 'sniffed' petrol, and a further three to having used crack cocaine. Only two children admitted to still misusing illegal drugs.

Questions were asked about the children's experiences of crime. All 30 children said that they had been victims of various types of crimes, mainly street crimes. In spite of being reminded of the survey's opt-out option, many of the children were willing to talk freely about specific instances when they were either victims or perpetrators of various crimes; the majority reported experiences of witnessing violent crimes. Ten children said that they had witnessed someone being violently attacked in their neighbourhoods; 13 others claimed that the assaults they witnessed resulted in deaths; the majority (n=15; 65%) claimed to have witnessed these events between the ages of 12 and 14. One child recalled witnessing death at the age of seven; another said that he saw someone being seriously wounded at the age of five. Three others said that they had witnessed the death or serious wounding of other people when they were between the ages of 10 and 11. Seventeeen children reported having been severely attacked by a stranger; the majority of these children (n=10; 59%) were between the ages of 14 and 15 at the time. One child said that he was attacked at the age of seven; five others said that they were attacked between the ages of 12 and 13. In addition, 19 children said that they had been attacked with a knife or other weapons – the majority (n= 9; 47%) when they were 14-years-old. Three children claimed to have been assaulted with a weapon when they were 12, and two children said that they were attacked when they were 13-years-old. There were additional isolated accounts of experiences of violence: for example, one child reported having witnessed the fatal shooting ('liquidation') of a neighbour, allegedly by the police, and another, the rape of a female child. One of the children also said that he

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witnessed his mother being murdered by a neighbourhood criminal gang when he was six-years-old. A total of 14 children admitted to having attacked someone with a weapon when they were between the ages of 12 and 16, the majority (n= 7; 50%) at age 14.

REASONS FOR OFFENDING

Very few studies have examined African children's views on crime from their own perspectives. Boakye's (2010) comprehensive cross-cultural study in Ghana simply tested the extent to which findings in British and American delinquency studies were comparable with his own in Ghana, adopting similar risk variables. However, in the field of social psychology, a few studies have been conducted. Pfeffer et al (1997) conducted a cross-cultural study of 196 British and Nigerian adolescents' explanations for the causes of youth crime using an attributions-theory framework; they found that British adolescents tended to blame the individual for youth crime. In contrast, Nigerian adolescents tended to blame 'other persons' and environmental factors for youth crime. The reason given by the British adolescents included: 'because they are bored' 'for fun', 'just for the sake of it', 'for drugs', 'there is something wrong in their lives that has not worked out'. The Nigerians responses included: 'no home training', 'because they are poor', 'people don't care for them', 'the devil is using them', 'the economic/political situation in the country' and 'the way that they are treated by society'. However, although Pfeffer et al. (1997) obtained data about what children attributed to other children's criminal behaviour, no study has been conducted that allowed African children to account for their own offending. It has been argued that there is an over-emphasis on internal attributions in western societies (Moghaddam et al, 1993). In contrast, in non-western cultures more emphasis is placed on external (situational) attributions (Fadipe, 1970; Weisz et al, 1984). This difference is thought to be due to a focus on individual and personal responsibility in western societies and collective responsibility in non-western societies.

In accordance with previous literature, in our study, it was expected that the explanations for crime given by the children would demonstrate external attributions; in other words, they would blame other persons or other factors for their offending behaviour. The results were interesting in this regard. On the one hand, all of the children accepted responsibility for their criminal behaviour and blamed themselves for their criminal acts. As one of the children put it, 'I am to blame because there are so many people living a difficult life and they do not commit crime' (no. 21; aged 16). On the other hand, when asked what they thought was responsible for their offending behaviour or life of crime, several cited 'other persons' and factors (see Table 1). A total of 66% of the children (n=20) blamed their offending on their association with delinquent peers ('being in a bad crowd'); this figure included the eight children who also admitted to being gang members, and who specifically linked their criminal activities to the criminal lifestyles of their gangs. Example responses included: 'I want to show everyone that I am not a coward. I don't like being made out as a coward in front of girls', 'I don't say no when my friends invite me to rob; I don't want to lose their company'. One point of note was the insistence by all 20 children that these relationships were formed in their neighbourhoods, rather than in school. There was a generally positive feeling amongst the children about schooling, even though most of them had dropped out. School did not feature at all in their accounts of the reasons for offending. In fact, when asked what would make them to stop offending, 73% (n=22) said, 'If I go back to school'.

The next most frequently mentioned reason for offending was alcohol misuse (n=6; 23.3%). Alcohol use by under-aged children is illegal in Angola, but the enforcement of the law is rather weak. Those who attributed their offending to the effect of alcohol used it to explain their violent behaviour, and the three children who were addicted to drugs stressed that their crimes were also drug-related. Some of their comments included: 'when I drink

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alcohol I become violent', 'I need money for drugs', 'it is because I was using cannabis', 'drinking alcohol gets me into trouble. I wound people', 'alcohol makes me fight and wound people'. Five children said that the government is to blame, for not doing enough for poor families and not caring for poor neighbourhoods and young people, especially street children. Comments included: 'there is lack of social services to take care of the youths in the streets', 'there is unequal distribution of wealth to families', 'if the government had provided electricity to my neighbourhood I would have stayed at home instead of going out at night looking for entertainment', 'the government does not support the youth. No education or training courses for youths'.

A significant finding was that the family or home environment was very low on the list of causes identified by the children. Twenty-five children (83.3%) described their home environment as 'normal'. This figure included 16 children who said that they had experienced physical discipline growing up, but who claimed that their parents were 'just simply disciplinarians'. In fact, one child said that he committed crimes because his parents were 'too soft'. Direct references to the home situation were made by two of the fostered children, who said that they were maltreated by their carers, as a result of which they left home and were living on the streets, where they eventually got involved in crime and drug-taking. Their accounts included: 'my uncle always beat me. He would not give me food. So I ran away to live on the street; it is tough living in the street and I have to survive', 'I left my aunt's house in Malange because she was using me as a slave for her children. I came to Luanda and started living rough on the streets. It is here that I started using drugs, mingling with bad crowds and doing crime'. Two other children reported having lived in domestically violent families, but said that their experience of domestic violence at home had played no part in their delinquency. They both said that even though their parents were violent towards each other, they actually learnt to be violent from associating with violent peers in their

neighbourhood. The majority of children (n=27; 90%) said that they were very much attached to their parents. As one child put it, 'living with parents is the best thing in the world' (no 21; aged 16). Those who had parents with criminal records believed that their parents' criminality did not incite their own criminality. These children also mentioned association with delinquent youths in their neighbourhoods as the main cause of their own delinquency. It was initially thought by the researchers in the present study that these children's responses might have been influenced by the respect for the privacy of family life that is expected in African cultures, and therefore that they must have underplayed the effects that their family environments might have had on their offending, but only one child specifically blamed his own violent behaviour and drug abuse on his stepfather's drug use and violent behaviour. Another child blamed his criminality on the influence of his criminal brother; he was living with this brother when he was arrested. Various other individual reasons were given by the interviewees, including admitting to having serious anger management problems, boredom, laziness, 'playing too much with iPods' and 'watching dangerous films'. One child said that he loved offending – that 'committing crimes is hilarious' – and another child said that he thought that his policeman father would always get him out of trouble.

Impact of the war on offending

Five of the children claimed to have had direct experience of the war. They told of many gruesome incidents directly experienced and witnessed during the war, including the deaths of parents and siblings, hunger, disease, and separation from family members. The majority (n=25; 83.3%) had only heard about the war on television or read about it in the newspapers. However, all 30 were of the opinion that the war had had some impact on their lives. Many of the children spoke of how they believed that the war had made their families poorer and

affected their education. Uneducated youths form the core of the juvenile delinquent populations in most of Africa's post-conflict countries (see Keen, 2005). The education system in Angola is yet to fully recover from the damage done to it during the war.

The four children who attributed their criminality to poverty specifically said that the war was partially responsible. As one of the children explained: 'My father told me that he lost everything in the war. Every time I am provoked I remember what my father told me and I imagine what my life would have been if my father had not lost his livestock… and I fight like a lion' (No. 23; aged 15). The only child in the sample who attributed his offending to parental loss had lost his parents during the war. As he put it: 'If [my parents] were alive I would have stayed in Malange and I would not have any need of stealing and end up in this place' (No. 1; aged 15). A child whose father was a soldier during the war also blamed the war for his poverty, saying: 'My father is 42-years-old. He would have been a better person had he not been a soldier during the war, and my life would have been better' (No 21; aged 16). Two out of the three street children in the sample had migrated from the rural areas where the wars had had the most devastating effects (see Eyber and Ager, 2003; Rodrigues, 2010). They spoke vividly about the dangers of living on the streets; one of them related stories of how he was 'chased all the time' by the police; and how he ended up stealing 'because you have to survive' (see Veale and Dona, 2003 on similar experiences of street children in post-genocide Rwanda).

For most of the children, it was the war's impact on their neighbourhoods that they thought had affected them most. As reported above, most of the children had had various experiences of violence in their neighbourhoods. Many of the children talked about the subculture of crime and the cycle of violence that had developed in the inner city neighbourhoods of Luanda, environments into which children and young people were increasingly becoming socialised. Five children specifically said that it was the war that had

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created these subcultures of crime and violence. Specific reference was made to the availability of arms to young people. As one child reported, 'handicapped war veterans are not receiving enough support from the government. As a consequence, they are selling guns and bullets to young people' (no 21; aged 16). Most importantly, perhaps, was the normalisation of violence, alcohol abuse, drug-taking and gang activities in their neighbourhoods, which most of the children said was the aftermath of the war. As one child put it: 'Now, there is some kind of seeing what is abnormal as normal. In Luanda, the youth easily wield any kind of weapon to resolve their conflicts and commit crime. In fact it is quite normal to resolve problems like that' (no. 27; aged 17). All the children said that their experiences of violence had affected them greatly, mainly in terms of fear of being harmed or even killed in the future. Other comments included: 'these events have just made me more aggressive' (no 10; aged 15) and 'I am always prepared' (no 22; aged 15). Whereas the argument that violence begets violence is contestable (see Widom, 1989), there is research evidence that the chances of replicating violence are high where one is already immersed in a violent culture (Shaffer and Ruback, 2002; WHO, 2002; IRIN, 2007).

The neighbourhood effect is the least researched of all the variables that have been associated with delinquency. Whereas, many western studies have found some correlation between delinquency and living in poor, disadvantaged or 'disorganised' neighbourhoods (see Shaw and McKay, 1942; Sampson, R.J. 1993; Loeber and Wikstrom, 1993; Ludwig, Duncan and Hirschfield, 2000; Farrington and Welsh, 2007; Wacquant, L. 2008), it is generally acknowledged that conclusions that have been drawn from ecological correlates of delinquency rates, 'although useful in several respects, do not necessarily reflect factors underlying individual offending behaviour' (Boakye, 2010:123-4). According to Boakye (2001:127), neighbourhood factors are generally only marginal factors that exert their influence on delinquency through other variables, such as family or individual factors. Whilst

agreeing with Boakye (2010) that direct ecological explanations of individual delinquency are problematic, this study contends that the nature and extent of the exposure to neighbourhood violence revealed by this small sample of children calls for a deeper examination of the effects of neighbourhoods on youth offending in Africa, particularly in countries that have recently experienced violent political conflict or wars.

Wikstrom and Loeber (2000) have argued that the neighbourhood context within which crime takes place does have some bearing on the perception of alternatives and choices made, regardless of the other risk and protective factors (both family and individual) (cf. Wikstrom and Loeber, 2000:1132). Wikstrom and Loeber (2000:1134) conclude that it is only when children reach adolescence that a seriously disadvantaged neighbourhood environment has any strong, direct effect on their involvement in serious criminal behaviour. At this stage of child development, 'protective aspects – for example, the individual's family and school situation – may be at risk of being overpowered by the influence of bad neighbourhood conditions'. Recent writings by Wikstrom and others also demonstrate recognition of the need to start taking neighbourhood factors even more seriously in delinquency research. The new situational action theory that has developed from Wikstrom et al's (2012) recent study in Peterborough, England supports the valid concept that behaviour is the outcome of an interaction between people and the environments to which they are exposed. In a recent publication on youth violence, the World Health Organisation (WHO) also maintained that 'the communities in which young people live are an important influence on the nature of their peer groups, and the way they may be exposed to situations that lead to violence' (WHO, 2002:34). The involvement in street gang activities and association with delinquent peers are ways by which these children express their frustrations at the conditions of their neighbourhoods.

The position of this article is that the criminal behaviour of these children cannot be distanced totally from the crime and violence that they see, often frequently, in their neighbourhoods, and that this is a direct legacy of the war. Disconnected and disadvantaged as a result of inadequate education and severe poverty, these children find in their neighbourhoods similarly circumstanced peers with whom they engage in risk-taking activities (alcohol and drugs misuse) and criminal behaviour.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that juvenile delinquents in Angola have identified a variety of factors to account for their delinquency. Even though peer pressure was mentioned as the key influence, it was clear that their criminalised neighbourhoods provided the milieu within which these delinquent relationships are formed. Many of the children experienced crime and violence in their neighbourhoods and perpetrated violence on others. Not only do these children see their offending as inextricably connected with poverty and exclusion, they also make the connection with the country's past experiences of political violence. The culture of violence that is believed to have developed in some neighbourhoods in Luanda is generally regarded to be a direct consequence of the war. Some of the children in this study believed that they were socialised into this subculture, and now see violence as normal. A key finding is that some of the children felt let down by their government, mainly with regard to inadequate support for children and families that have been impoverished by the war – especially the street children. They felt that inadequate support in terms of educational provision led many of them to lose faith in the future, and associate with similar children in their neighbourhoods with whom they engaged in delinquent behaviour and street gang activities. These findings call for the inclusion of the role of the state in studies on the

criminalisation of children in Africa where rapid political changes and upheavals are deeply affecting the life choices that the young are having to make.

This pioneering study sets the parameters for further research on youth offending in Angola and, perhaps, other African countries that have experienced recent internal conflicts. There is a need for more studies to explore these variables longitudinally, in order to obtain data that could help plan effective juvenile interventions and support in the country. More qualitative (participatory) research is needed with delinquent children; further research on youth gang activities will also be beneficial as this has been identified in the literature as a key problem in Angola. Most importantly, the article challenges future researchers to initiate more thorough investigations, which might explain the African situation, theoretically. Finally, this study supports the view expressed by Wessells and Monteiro (2006) that, in order to assist these war-affected youth and help them desist from offending, 'proactive, holistic approaches are needed that protect youth, prevent violence, and enable sustainable community development' (Wessells and Monteiro, 2006:126-127). Punitive interventions are important, but in countries like Angola they should be seen as coming in a remote second to social integration, education and political action to help meet the physical needs of marginalised children, alleviate their poverty, and give them positive skills and competencies needed for them to be able to participate meaningfully in society (cf. WCRWC, 2000).

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