

Reassessing the Criminogenic Risk of the ‘Broken Home’: The Concept of ‘The Good Family’ From the Perspective of Young Offenders in Trinidad and Tobago

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This paper, based on a qualitative study with incarcerated male young offenders in Trinidad and Tobago, explores participants’ conceptualizations of the impact of family background on adolescent offending. The paper challenges the *civilized vs deviant* dichotomy often proffered when discussing the presence (and absence) of fathers and offers a nuanced account of what makes a ‘good family’ and a ‘good father’ according to young offenders. Findings demonstrate participants’ preference for the nuclear family, irrespective of whether they were raised within supportive familial networks. These findings raise questions about the continued strength of historically resilient matrifocal support systems in the Caribbean.

KEY WORDS: family structure, delinquency, absentee fathers, good family

INTRODUCTION

Family, denoted as the cornerstone of society, has long been a focal point for researchers exploring links between family life and delinquency over the past century. Through qualitative and quantitative, longitudinal and case studies, researchers have examined how family dynamics influence adolescent criminality. Factors such as broken homes, dysfunctional families and inadequate parental supervision have been identified as significant contributors to delinquent behaviour (Shulman 1949; Free 1991; Schroeder *et al.* 2010). Most studies were undertaken in American and Western European contexts. Freemon *et al.* (2023) note a lack of research on the relationship between family and delinquency in the English-speaking Caribbean. They advocate for empirical studies to explore how Caribbean culture, family structure and family processes influence delinquency, similar to investigations in high-income countries. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the family background of adolescent offenders from Trinidad and Tobago within the context of the country’s and the region’s history.

There is a belief, anecdotal, colloquial and political, that broken families and female-headed households in Trinidad and Tobago significantly influence criminogenic behaviour. The prevailing narrative blames a breakdown in morality and societal values, exemplified by broken homes and divorce, for driving young people towards deviance and criminality (Webb 2013; Asson 2014; Augustine 2018). This perspective is particularly interesting, given that despite the predominance of nuclear families (biological parents living together with their children) in many Caribbean countries, historically, great value was placed on extended and differently-constructed family types (Barrow 2001; Hodge 2002).

This paper examines the Trinbagonian family by presenting the narratives of participants, referencing the construction of their families and their beliefs about what constitutes a 'good family', and a 'good father'. It begins with a brief review of the extant literature regarding family structure and crime before moving on to a historicized discussion of the types of families existing within Trinidad and Tobago. It then outlines the dichotomous literature on the Afro-Caribbean family and differing views on the effects of slavery on Black families, concurrent with an exploration of the Indo-Trinbagonian family in the context of East Indian indentureship and current familial structures. Discussion of the Trinbagonian family provides a clear understanding of the different types of families that have existed and do exist, which is crucial to foreground before interrogating participants' understandings of 'family'. Thus, race and ethnicity are not categories of analysis, but context for analysis. The discussion then moves on to the study itself, outlining the aims, methods and methodology of the research and providing an overview of the data collection field. The paper presents participants' narratives about their family types, explores their conceptualization of family and discusses their views on the constituent elements of a 'good' family. The paper concludes with a discussion of the study's findings, highlighting the inadequacy of the single-parent/nuclear family dichotomy that has dominated discourse for too long.

FAMILY STRUCTURES AND CRIME

The development of research on family structures and crime is not linear, nor does it show a clear position on the criminogenic nature of families. Researchers such as Gove and Crutchfield (1982), Anderson (2002), Wong (2017) and Kroese *et al.* (2021) argue that single-parent families are problematic, potentially criminogenic and predictors of youth crime. These researchers link delinquent behaviour to family structures outside the traditional nuclear family framework, echoing sentiments that broken homes may contribute to juvenile delinquency. The narrative is generally that 'both parents are important and the absence of one weakens family functioning' (Anderson 2002: 575).

These studies are all based in the Global North—Canada, the United States and Western Europe—but Caribbean studies have taken a similar approach. Stuart (1996) laments that the Caribbean family is perceived to be in crisis because it does not conform to the Western ideal of a nuclear family. Holman and Woodroffe-Patrick (1988) found that children in Trinidad and Tobago from single-parent homes were less happy than children from homes with both biological parents. Freemon *et al.* (2023), after exploring the role of 'traditional and non-traditional family structures' on delinquency in eight English-speaking Caribbean nations (including Trinidad and Tobago), surmised that 'growing up in a household without two parents is an established risk factor for youth delinquency' (p. 2). Matthews's (2017) qualitative study in Antigua highlighted participants' perceptions that the breakdown of the family and community are key factors in rising crime rates. Participants were loath to attribute rising crime rates to structural factors like poverty, unemployment, poor education or class discrimination.

There emerges a consensus within this literature that non-traditional family structures are associated with higher crime rates. Social control theory, particularly Hirschi's (1969)

framework, is a useful lens to apply here. Hirschi posits that an individual's behaviour is regulated by societal bonds and the strength of these bonds—comprising attachment, commitment, involvement and belief—determines adherence to societal norms. Attachment, or the emotional bond between an individual and conventional entities such as parents and institutions, plays a crucial role in preventing delinquency. Strong child–parent attachments are linked to lower delinquency rates, as juveniles tend to align their behaviour with parental expectations (Kierkus and Hewitt 2009; Wang *et al.* 2013). So, children with strong parental attachment and strong societal bonds are less likely to be involved in crime.

Despite being conspicuous in the discourse, not all research focuses on parents as criminogenic agents; other researchers advocate a more nuanced understanding of how family life can negatively affect children. Shaw and McKay (1932), analysing their data from Chicago, questioned whether broken homes are a causative factor in juvenile delinquency, concluding that the evidence did not support this assertion. They do not dismiss the effect of family life on adolescent crime, but instead implore researchers to 'look for these influences in the more subtle aspects of family relationships rather than in the formal break in the family organization' (p. 524). Juby and Farrington (2001) also critiqued the binary approach of comparing two-parent versus lone-parent households, arguing that such a simplistic dichotomy fails to capture diverse experiences within family structures. Their analysis from the Cambridge Study indicated that factors such as household conflict, reasons for family disruption and the primary caregiver's identity significantly influence delinquency levels.

There has thus been a shift when exploring family structure and criminality, evidenced by a body of work that focuses on different aspects of family life, rather than the relative presence of fathers and crude understandings of family breakdown. Freemon *et al.* (2023), noted that both single parents and parents in nuclear families can provide adequate supervision to serve as a protective barrier against delinquency. They suggested that having an authoritative figure providing guidance, a listening ear and problem-solving skills made delinquent behaviour less likely, regardless of family structure. Wang *et al.* (2013), a study that was undertaken in the Bahamas, found that adolescents who communicated well with their parents and discussed their activities with them were less likely to engage in risky or delinquent behaviour. These two studies accord very closely with Hirschi's social control and attachment theories and provide a welcome respite from a focus on broken homes. Nevertheless, they retain focus on parents and ignore other key structural factors.

This pattern emerges again and again in studies of adolescent crime; studies that focus on family type, which have findings on structural issues, but these findings are overshadowed by family type. Eitle's (2006) study explores different types of single-parent family in the United States and their implications. The author notes that resource deprivation is a significant problem and one that is more likely to have an impact on single-parent families. Bailey *et al.* (1998), when speaking to their Jamaican cohort, determined that the financial struggle parents endured in urban communities put their children at greater risk particularly because there was no wider kinship network in these urban communities that parents could rely on, exacerbating children's vulnerability to crime. This was a key finding and was recognized by a majority of participants. Yet, despite clear associations between poverty, lack of community and crime, participants maintained that absentee fathers were the problem because boys needed to be disciplined by their fathers.

Langa's (2014) qualitative study in South Africa, explored the experiences of adolescent boys who grew up without biological fathers. Langa's work highlighted that despite (or, I would suggest, because of) the absence of fathers, his participants idealized the role of a father as someone who cares for, loves and provides guidance to their children. Langa's participants shared fantasies of how their lives would be different had their absent fathers been present. Langa cautioned

against the ‘idealisation’ of fatherhood as a panacea to all social ills associated with young adolescent boys and asserted that, in some families, fathers play a detrimental role in raising their children. [Silverstein and Auerbach \(1999\)](#) make a similar argument: that the essentialist framework is an unhelpful oversimplification of the complex relations between family organization and social problems. They argue instead that children need at least one responsible adult for emotional connection, suggesting a more flexible understanding of a good family beyond biological ties.

This paper is positioned alongside such scholarship, calling for a more nuanced understanding of the criminogenic effects of families on the lives of adolescents. Despite some inroads being made into seeking broader insights regarding the family organization, researchers too often ultimately revert to focussing on the presence or absence of fathers. Furthermore, in the Caribbean, social and political constructs beyond the academy disparage the single-parent (usually female-headed) household. In Trinidad and Tobago, public officials and societal leaders frequently attribute crime to the breakdown of traditional family structures, promoting the idea that intact families are essential for societal stability ([Webb 2013](#); [Asson 2014](#); [Augustine 2018](#)). Such statements may inadvertently create self-fulfilling prophecies, reinforcing negative perceptions of single-parent families and overlooking their unique strengths and adaptive capabilities ([Hodge 2002](#)).

What then is the history of the Caribbean family? This will be discussed with reference to the two majority ethnic groups in Trinidad and Tobago: the Afro-Caribbean family and the Indo-Caribbean family—the two groups that the participants came from. I emphasize here that I do not analyse participants’ narratives based on their ethnicity, but rather mention ethnicity to illustrate the types of the household that the majority of the population comes from and the familial structures arising from Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean culture and history. This contextualization is crucial, particularly for readers who are not familiar with the Caribbean and Trinbagonian context. It explains the types of families that existed historically, how they changed and what families look like today.

THE AFRO-CARIBBEAN FAMILY

Two primary perspectives dominate the discourse on the development of the African family in the New World. [Herkovits \(1958\)](#) asserts that African culture survived the plantation society (albeit, not fully intact), leading to the matrifocal, extended family and common-law unions observed in African-American families. Conversely, [Frazier \(1939\)](#) argues that slavery completely disrupted African culture and observable family structures resulted from societal norms imposed during slavery. Early Caribbean studies, such as those by [Simey \(1946\)](#) and [Smith \(1957\)](#), supported Frazier’s view, emphasizing the detrimental impacts of slavery on family stability. Afro-Caribbean unions were categorized as loose, unstable, incomplete and transitory, underpinning the matrifocal society and the female-headed household to a significant extent.

Nevertheless, [Craton \(1979\)](#) suggests that female-headed households are not ubiquitous within Afro-Caribbean families. He further contends that any matrifocality that is found in Afro-Caribbean families should not be disparaged as a sign of deviance or instability but lauded for the resilience with which the Afro-Caribbean family adapted and triumphed over adversity. [Safa \(1998: 203\)](#) also laments the stigma that is attached to the matrifocal family, identifying it as a Eurocentric phenomenon—‘the embodiment of modernity and progress that lead us to view female-headed households as pathological’.

THE INDO-CARIBBEAN FAMILY

Literature on the Indo-Caribbean family reveals its cohesive, traditional structure, in contrast to the more fragmented tropes of the African family during and post-slavery. The

Indo-Caribbean family generally mirrors the joint family structure of India, with land managed by a patriarch (Nevadomsky 1985). Brought to the Caribbean as indentured labourers in the 19th century, many East Indians chose to stay in the Caribbean post-indentureship after being offered land as compensation for their return passage. By the end of the indentureship period, approximately 144,000 East Indians had settled in Trinidad (Nevadomsky 1985). Post-indenture, many East Indians transitioned from plantation work to agriculture on privately purchased land, cultivating crops such as rice, sugarcane, cocoa and vegetables. The socio-economic advancements made by these communities facilitated a shift from extended to nuclear family structures. This transformation saw married sons establishing their own households, although traditional extended family arrangements persisted in some cases, with parents expanding their homes to accommodate married children (Nevadomsky 1985; Rampersad 2006). Klass (1961) notes that although East Indian culture in the Caribbean underwent significant structural changes, key social institutions like marriage and joint family patterns retained their core characteristics.

THE PRESENT-DAY TRINBAGONIAN HOUSEHOLD

In Trinidad and Tobago, the male-headed nuclear family is prominent, comprising 67.2 per cent of households as per the 2011 census (CSO 2011). Female-headed households are more common in urban areas and among working-class or unemployed families (Innerarity 2000). Besides nuclear families, other household structures include extended families, grandparent-led households and sibling households. Hodge (2002) offers the concept of familial networks as one that better captures a wider array of familial constructs and thus comes closer to capturing the true essence of the Caribbean family. According to Hodge, in addition to the family types already mentioned, these might include,

1. Adult family members who have moved to urban areas or who have migrated abroad and financially support the household.
2. Non-resident fathers who support the household financially and/or emotionally.
3. Godparents who support their godchildren financially. In the Caribbean, the godparent-godchild relationship confers duties and responsibilities that are often absent in European and American families. This can often include a financial commitment.
4. Macommères: Female friends who offer emotional support and assist with childcare.

Hodge (2002: 480) reiterates that the Caribbean family, unlike the traditional Western nuclear family, is 'as much an organisation for the support of adults as for the rearing of children'. The Caribbean family supports adults and children alike, fostering a sense of responsibility towards all members and enabling many to thrive despite non-traditional family structures (Hodge 2002). It is thus highly variegated in form—shaped by social, cultural and economic factors—utilizing both blood relations and kinship networks for the support and care of family members. Each variant, therefore, has great potential for being a 'good family'.

Extended families and kinship networks are seen as important beyond the Caribbean as well. Studies emphasize the value of responsible, emotionally involved adults who provide stability and guidance to children and fathers are particularly important in defining a 'good family'. East *et al.*'s (2020) research in Australia with men who grew up in father-absent households highlights that good fatherhood involves emotional involvement and strong relationships with children, supported by positive male role models. Yet East *et al.* also found that the transmission of family values often comes from extended family members, such as grandparents and uncles and through societal examples seen in media.

Fletcher (2020), working with minoritized families in Britain, discusses how notions of ‘good’ parenting are influenced by societal expectations and the need for parental recognition. Good parenting, in this context, includes being financially ready, providing quality time and being both physically and emotionally present. Fletcher also highlights the importance of context and the situational enactment of parenting practices, suggesting that being a good parent is an evolving and adaptive role. This finding was echoed by Green (2018), who, in his study of Afro-Jamaican fathers, emphasized the importance of fathers being physically present and participating meaningfully in their children’s lives, even if they are non-residential, thus adapting to their changing status. These fathers viewed their role as teaching, guiding and protecting their children, instilling values and ensuring their physical needs were met.

We see therefore that perceptions of what makes a good family are quite similar across the globe and include financial as well as caring elements. Crucially, although the role of the father is frequently cited as of great importance, scholarship on the ‘good family’ now extends beyond this perspective and pays judicious attention to alternative models of familial organization that also afford positive conditions for young people.

THE STUDY

This paper is based on research undertaken with convicted young men in Trinidad and Tobago. Through the use of mostly unstructured life history interviews, I sought to elicit the explanations, justifications and excuses provided by the participants for their pathways into criminality and their hopes and dreams for the future (whether or not this included a pathway out of criminality). The research explored and unpacked the perceptions held by participants about themselves, their families and communities, their criminal activity and society as a whole. It presented a sociological-criminological analysis of the subjective lived experiences of incarcerated juveniles in Trinidad and Tobago; how they feel, think, act and make sense of the world.

In terms of interrogating the Trinbagonian family, I considered not merely the composition of the families that participants came from—nuclear, extended, single parent—but also their views on the construction of a ‘good’ family. Did they see their homes as typical or atypical? Did they uphold ideals of the nuclear family as being ‘better’, and did they experience the more extended familial and communal support that Hodge (2002) suggests is an asset of Caribbean families?

The research was a qualitative case study of a census population—that is, all the *convicted* young men housed at Rockland Young Offenders’ Institution between November 2014 and April 2015. Rockland is used for the detention of convicted and remanded young men aged 16 years and older (the oldest participant was 25 and awaiting sentencing). I was fortunate to be afforded access for 6 months with ethical approval given by Cardiff University and access granted by the Trinidad and Tobago Commissioner of Prisons.

Copes and Hochstetler (2010) explain that to acquire data successfully, researchers in the prison setting must establish rapport, not just with prison officials, administrators and staff, but also with the offenders. This I did by addressing potential participants officially in small groups in my first week at Rockland whilst spending time engaging with and making myself familiar with the young men before I started interviews.

Participants ranged in age between 16 and 25 (no one was under 16; two participants who were awaiting sentencing were over 21). The process of recruiting did not vary and happened in two ways: young men either came and asked to be put on my list for an interview, or they were brought to me by one of the prison officers. The latter was a consequence of institutional culture as Rockland operates a militaristic regime and the convicted young men have no choice as to what they attend or do. I explained to the prison officers—my gatekeepers, in every sense of the

word—that participation had to be strictly voluntary. Having been met with scepticism about this approach, we came to a compromise whereby officers would bring potential participants to the interview room at which point I would direct proceedings.

This left me with a dilemma as I needed to make it very clear to the young men that they were not obligated to take part in the research. However, because of the nature of the institution, I did not think that it was enough for me to say that they could refuse; they might well think that whatever I said if they refused to participate, they would be punished in some way. [Plankey-Videla \(2012\)](#) notes that one important consequence of conducting ethnographic research in an organization is that, once gatekeepers grant access, subordinates may not have the right to refuse participation. To surmount my ethical conundrum, each individual brought to the interview room was told that if he did not wish to participate, we could simply sit in the interview room for a while and have a chat (or not have a chat) as he liked. Participants' presence for a sufficient period of time would signal to the officers that they had participated, even if they had not. In those circumstances, the only people who would know that they had not participated would be the young man himself and me. Still, every young man who was brought to the interview room agreed to take part.

There may yet be some concern as to whether they *truly* consented. [Henriksen and Schliehe \(2020\)](#) state that an in-depth understanding of the context and the power imbalances in which the research sits are both essential to ensuring voluntary participation and to judge accurately if the interviewee can indeed choose 'freely' to take part. Nonetheless, the openness with which participants shared and the fact that the vast majority of them spoke freely about many incredibly challenging issues, led me to accept their consent as genuine. This was further evidenced by the fact that on many occasions participants asked me to turn off the recording device when they wanted to share something that they did not want recorded (often very personal information about their families). That they felt able and empowered to do this led me to believe that they understood and were able to enact their agency in the process. If I had any doubts about an individual's consent, I would not have included their data.

Whilst at Rockland, I was conscious that I dressed like and spent many hours with the officers working within the school building where I was based. I was concerned that the young men would begin to associate me with the officers, see me as 'one of them', and become less interested in sharing their narratives with me. It was difficult managing distance between the two groups while attempting to cultivate trust and acceptance with both. Still, there was evidence that my participants did not link me too closely with the prison administration. They referred to me as an outsider, as someone from 'the free world', and often complained about how differently officers behaved when civilians were in the institution. Because my participants were aware that I lived and studied abroad and that my research was not funded by the Government, this lessened the perception that I was affiliated with the prison authorities.

The data presented in this paper comes from the interviews I recorded with participants. Although I drew from the ethnographer's toolkit in undertaking this research and engaged in observation and informal conversations outside of the interview room, none of this interaction is presented as data here. Conversations with officers, teachers, parents or remanded young men formed no part of my data; my focus remained on those convicted young men who had given consent. Like [Tilley \(1998: 323\)](#), I realized that through my research I was 'adding to the glare, a new set of eyes' to the ones the young men consistently lived with, and so I decided not to record activities that were not meant to be observed.

My analysis was based on Layder's adaptive theory ([1998: 1](#)) combining the use of pre-existing theory and theory generated from data analysis in the formulation and actual conduct of empirical research. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis. [Levi \(2015: 230\)](#) exhorts researchers to focus not only on the 'exciting and the unusual, but

also with the run-of-the-mill cases' and encourages researchers to analyse the normal without merely seeking the atypical. This was my approach. Where I do present data that is atypical, I make this patently clear and present atypical narratives within the context of the individual's experiences. I have given each participant a pseudonym derived from typically Trinbagonian names, endeavouring to give all Afro-participants traditionally Afro-Trinidadian names and all Indo-participants Indo-Trinidadian names. [Table 1](#) sets out some of the relevant demographics of the study's participants.

The section that follows sets out the narratives of just six participants. I have selected three participants from Afro-Trinidadian backgrounds (Andre, Derek and Keston) and three participants from Indo-Trinidadian backgrounds (Vishnu, Davindra and Anil). I have consolidated narratives about their families into short vignettes that present a holistic picture of their family life, including what they wished it looked like. These vignettes provide a snapshot of the typical stories presented by participants when they talked about their family life.

Before moving on to the findings, we return to the question of what is 'good', and what that word meant for participants. Based on their responses, a 'good' family, and a 'good' father meant the type of family and father that would have kept them out of the detention centre and kept them out of a life of crime. It was also the type of family they would want to be a part of when leaving the facility and the type of father that they wanted to be in the future.

Participants all had a positive sense of self and did not label themselves as bad people; nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe that their experience of the detention centre, 'the prison context', would have shaped their perceptions, views and responses. [Presser \(2004: 82\)](#) says that, 'one does not have a story. Rather, one makes a story in a particular context'. I am convinced that the institutional setting shaped participant responses and recognize the potential effects of interviewing my participants therein. Many of them openly revealed that had they been 'on the outside', they would never have engaged with me, and would never have taken part in such

Table 1. Demographics and family type of all participants

Demographics	Number of participants
Ethnicity ^a	
Afro-Trinidadian	39
Indo-Trinidadian	10
Mixed	3
Family type	
Single parent	20
Nuclear	
With birth parents	5
With a stepparent	8
Extended family ^b	4
Relatives ^c	9
Other ^d	6

^aParticipants self-selected their ethnicity.

^bExtended family refers to families that include one parent who lived with the participant and other relatives.

^cRelatives refers to families where the participant lived with relatives but no parent.

^dOther—A few participants lived in non-traditional settings: within care homes, with family friends, their own friends, a sibling or alone.

research. The institutional setting gave my participants not only the time but also the necessary tools to reflect on past behaviour and plan for a different future. This may have affected the type of stories that they told, the colour, tone and analysis they added, and even their recollection of events. Time spent at Rockland had, by their own admission, influenced participants' behaviour (notably by agreeing to participate in my research), but also may have affected their narratives and reflections in ways that are more difficult to pinpoint or assess. Brookman (2010) recommends allowing participants to construct their narratives in the way that best suits them and this approach is taken here. Whether 'good' would have meant something different to individuals before they entered the institution or after they left is not important for the purposes of this paper, but perhaps lays the groundwork for future research.

FINDINGS

Andre

'Rules without relationships equals rebellion'

Andre was 19 years old when I interviewed him. He had been convicted of robbery 3 years earlier and had 71 days left before getting out. Andre had lived with his mother and father when he was very little, but after his parents separated, his mother left him with his maternal grandmother and migrated to another Caribbean island to make a better life for herself and her children. Andre remembered being left by his mother—he was about five—and he talked about how sad he felt after she left,

In the morning, I didn't even know where she gone, she just disappear and I was crying ... At that age, watching television and thing and seeing how people is with their family, mother and father, son and daughter, seeing how everybody together, that's all I ever wanted, just to be with a family. I wanted my mother and father to be together with me.

Andre hated being left behind and lamented that he did not have the traditional nuclear family that he saw on television. Instead, he lived in a household with his grandmother, brother and a disabled aunt. Andre's mother returned to Trinidad when he was 13, but by that time, according to him, he was uninterested in her fulfilling a parental role again: 'I used to always say, rules without relationships equals rebellion', and Andre indeed began to rebel as a teenager.

I was giving real (a lot of) trouble, police only coming by the house. Robberies. Started to smoke when I was 13 and I started to rob at around the same age. I started through influence. I had a cousin and another friend, all of us around the same age. They were in it before me.

Andre started smoking and stealing, alongside his cousin and friends. The crimes were initially petty, robbing school children on the streets without weapons, but very quickly escalated. He got his first gun from his brother, who at the time of the interview was incarcerated in the United States for a shooting. Andre stole his second gun, and he got a third one from a friend. By age 16, his behaviour was so out of control that his mother and grandmother decided to send him to live with his father in the hope that he would straighten out his son.

Andre's father had spent three years at Rockland as a teenager and had managed to make lasting changes after his release, becoming a mason. So, Andre moved in with his father, stepmother and two sisters from their marriage. He loved his sisters but could not get along with his father or stepmother. Their strained relationship quickly ended in violence, with Andre physically attacking his father who then kicked him out of the house.

Derek

'Females can't really communicate good with a male'

Derek was 17 on the day of his interview and had already been in Rockland for over two years. He had been convicted of possession of marijuana for the purpose of trafficking after being caught with drugs at school. He grew up in a rural area, lived with his grandmother and mother and had two younger brothers who lived with them only intermittently. Derek's father left Trinidad when Derek was 10 and he never heard from him again. This made Derek feel like he needed to be his own man,

Living without a father, don't have nobody there to tell me nothing, so I feel I is my own man. I want to get what I want, and do what I want, and live how I feel like...I never really had no father figure in my life to tell me don't smoke, don't go and lime [hang out with friends] late, don't to do this, don't do that.

Derek made it clear that he never had a father figure to guide him or prevent him from making bad decisions. He acknowledged that his mother and grandmother tried to guide him, but stated that he needed a man in those circumstances: 'males does communicate much more better with their own sex. A female will communicate better with females. Females can't really communicate good with a male.' Derek explained that once he started drinking and smoking his mother and grandmother tried to get him to stop. They would talk to him, plead with him and sometimes beat him. I asked Derek how it made him feel to know that his grandmother and mother were upset with him. He said that at the time, 'I really didn't care. I was just living life, enjoying myself'.

Derek sold marijuana, got into fights and committed burglary. He associated with older boys and with his older cousin, who were all involved in criminal activity. I asked if his friends got in trouble with the police and he attested that every single one of them had,

Lock-up and in jail. Everybody. Everybody. Everybody had problems with the police and most of them end up in the jail... Get lock-up for robbery, weed, guns, some get lock-up just like me for fighting.

Derek got used to interacting with the police; it happened almost every week. Sometimes they would lock him up overnight and release him in the morning. Other times they would go to his home, talk to him and give him a warning. He thought that the police officers were fair to him, having given him so many chances when they arrested him.

When I asked Derek what might influence someone to get involved in criminal activity he listed family, friends and personal choice—all very relevant to his own pathway into crime,

Family, bad influence. No father, only a mother alone. Mother suffering. Sometimes it's just, you just choose that way, sometimes you just choose that life, you feel that is the life for you.

Keston

'If God know anything about forgiveness, he will not let my son be like me. I wouldn't know what to do'

Keston grew up with both his parents in a working-class community, but not one that was overrun with gangs and guns. He was articulate, confident and clever. Both parents were employed, but he described his childhood life as 'hectic' as he witnessed domestic violence. His

parents had physical fights, often over money and the police would be called. Sometimes they fought about Keston's behaviour, blaming each other for his waywardness,

Two of them would fight, argue, my mom stab my dad when I was younger, that was hectic. It had a time she was going and kill herself, she hold the knife to her belly. A time after that two of them get into a fight then police come. Most of the time when they start to disagree, I would just leave. Most of the time was argument over money, this, that, who didn't do this. Sometimes they would be quarrelling about me, how I was, disobedient, couldn't control, didn't used to listen, they used to throw the blame on each other. I used to be angry at myself at first then after a while I started to not care. I started to withdraw from communicating with either one.

Keston didn't get along with either parent. His father was strict, having grown up in a home where his life revolved around school, home, church, family and work. Keston thought that they were too different to get along: 'We does talk and thing but we not close; we too different. He is quiet, he doesn't drink, he doesn't smoke, he loves church. I do drink, I smoke'. Conversely, Keston said that he and his mother were too much alike to get along.

When Keston was younger, his father tried to instil a sense of morality in him by taking him to the police station to seek punishment for what Keston considered to be minor infractions. Keston's father took him there twice as a child for stealing chocolates from a shop after church, for taking an apple from a grocer without paying for it and once for coming home late. As Keston got older, he started physically fighting with his father: 'when he come to lash me, I would lash him back and we start to fight, scuffle. He was bigger than me, so it wasn't really that much of a fight I was putting up (laughs)'. The last time they fought Keston was 15 and he drew a gun on his father. He was told to leave home and never return.

Vishnu

'My father was a wicked man'

Vishnu was 17 at the interview and had been convicted of housebreaking. He was the fourth of 12 children and the household he originally grew up in was a violent one. Vishnu's father, entrenched in criminality, was notorious within the justice system having been imprisoned for various offences, including being remanded for murder. Vishnu was determined not to follow in his father's footsteps, viewing his own criminal behaviour as a temporary deviation. Vishnu regretted the fact that both he and his brother were detained at Rockland and vowed to never return,

I just don't want to go down that path because sometimes you does follow in your father's footsteps and it does pass down through the generations. How I seeing it, is only me and my brother out of the whole family in jail. Me and my brother charge here in Rockland for the same break and enter. But I is a man, this is the first and last stop here, it have no more coming back here.

Vishnu's father was violent towards him, his siblings and his mother. Despite community awareness of his father's abuse, no one intervened. Vishnu recounted the severe beatings and neglect his family suffered at his father's hands,

When I was small, my father used to real beat my mother and thing. When I was small my father used lift we up and slam we into the ground and thing. My father was a wicked man ... I

never used to like my father... But I was small then timing so none of we couldn't have do nothing. Everybody know my father was a madman, he used to want to fight with everybody, cuss up [swear at] everybody and thing. So nobody never really used to help.

Vishnu dropped out of school at age 10. A compassionate neighbour sometimes provided food—a rare act of kindness in his difficult childhood.

As Vishnu matured, he became fiercely protective of his mother and younger siblings. After his mother left his father permanently and formed a relationship with his stepfather, Vishnu often clashed with his stepfather over the treatment of his siblings. At 16, after a severe physical altercation with his stepfather, Vishnu was forced to leave home and move to a seaside village with friends. Life in the village was tough; ashamed of menial jobs like crabbing and fishing, Vishnu turned to robbery for survival.

Vishnu believed that the root of criminal behaviour lay in broken families. He expressed that a stable family, with both a mother and a father, was essential for proper upbringing and discipline. In terms of discipline, there were things that a father could do that a mother could not,

[S]ometimes families will split apart. Sometimes some of them grow up with no father, grow up with the mother, so they don't know how the father life is. Because when the father there the father can man you up. A father could talk to you and say, 'boy what you doing there is crap'. A mother could do it you know, but a mother can't do things what a father could do.

...

Up to this day I wish that I had a father who did care for me and used to be there when I want him to be there. It have father who does hug up their children and listen to what they saying and understand them and be there for them at all times. I wish I had a father like that ...

Reflecting on his life, Vishnu expressed a deep desire for a caring and present father and envied those whose fathers showed affection and provided consistent support.

Davindra

'Growing up I always feel like I was missing something'

Davindra was convicted of marijuana possession and committed to Rockland for just over 3 years. Before Rockland, he had lived in an extended family home. Davindra and his grandmother lived in one part of the home, one of his aunts lived upstairs and downstairs was another aunt, uncle and two cousins. Davindra was happy in his childhood home, and he rarely strayed from his family—so he didn't go out or party. His family was a good one, and Davindra was proud of that,

My family never had no violence, none in my family. My family, like all of them was like in one. Everybody will go out, they don't drink, them is not that kinda people. I used to be the only one... My family is strictly Christian. My whole father side does go to church in one church. My family is, as I say, them kind of people.

Davindra explained that he grew up going to church with his family. There was no violence, they didn't drink or smoke; they were good people. Yet he felt like there was something missing in his life. He was the only person in his family who grew up in an atypical household. He didn't have a real relationship with his father and felt there was no one that he could speak to about how he was feeling or what was going on in his life,

Growing up I always feel like I was missing something... The relationship a father and son should have, me and my father wouldn't have that. Me and my father would talk but we

wouldn't really talk personal stuff. So, for me is like I don't talk to nobody about my personal stuff... And I always looking for something to feel that comfort.

So, at 14, Davindra left his grandmother's home and moved in with his father; he found himself in a very different home and environment. Davindra's father drank, smoked and sold drugs. He was not used to taking care of a child, so Davindra was left to his own devices and had to provide for himself, dropping out of school to work in a nearby garage. This job was short-lived though. He started drinking alcohol, and smoking and then branched into selling drugs. Selling drugs proved to be more lucrative than working at the garage, so he stopped working there. Davindra was eventually caught in possession of drugs and sentenced to four years at Rockland.

Anil

'It was real hard growing up... all that sufferation... We was real poor'

At 23, Anil was one of the oldest participants that I interviewed. He pled guilty to a charge of manslaughter and was awaiting sentencing. He had committed the crime at age 17 and had spent 6 years at Rockland before our interview. Growing up in extreme poverty, Anil's mother did domestic cleaning jobs, although work was not always available. In the lean times, she would ask the neighbours for food for her children. She also experienced domestic violence at the hands of his father. Anil explained that he didn't really remember distinct incidents of violence, but expressed anger at not being able to protect his mother.

He was an angel before he get married but after, he turn violent because he was a drinker. He used to real drink, beat my mother; all kind of thing my mother had to go through to get money from he... I never used to like that and I couldn't have do nothing. Because I was small, I couldn't do nothing.

Anil explained that his father left the family when Anil was quite young, and he didn't really remember his father. He acknowledged that fathers should play an important role in their children's lives and had much to teach them, but believed that his mother played the role of father well,

He leave we when we was real small. If I see him now I can't remember him... I remember long time he making we brush we teeth with soap, salt water, we didn't have toothpaste. My mother come like a father to me too. Although a father have certain things to teach, just being around my mother just make me forget about he.

Before Rockland, Anil lived in a village with his mother, younger brother and an older brother. Anil's older brother was an alcoholic and Anil believed that he was also mentally unwell. He would go out to drink and return drunk, belligerent and abusive. Anil's mother would report him to the police, but they rarely intervened. Anil recounted an incident where his brother pushed him into a fire,

One time we was burning grass in the yard, leaf and thing, and I was looking to rake up the bush into the fire and he just come from behind me and push me into the fire. My whole back was in the fire. I thought my back was on fire but only my hand burn, me ain't get burn bad, but I went to the hospital.

In addition to enduring abuse at the hands of his brother, Anil was also often called upon to take care of him and ensure that he got home safely after drinking sessions.

Sometimes he real drink and my mother waiting for he and can't see he. All 12 o'clock in the night, my mother getting phone call, 'your son out the road drunk come and pick him up'. She send me and my brother to go and get him, he playing real mad to come home, lying on the ground, on the pavement. I feel embarrassed knowing that my brother over there playing real mad.

Anil's mother would get phone calls from the neighbours saying that her oldest son was drunk again, and she would send the two younger sons out to bring him home, causing Anil great embarrassment. Eventually, in a very sad turn of events, ('it just happen out of the blue') Anil killed his older brother.

DISCUSSION

The preceding accounts demonstrate the very challenging backgrounds of the participants. Family types varied, but trauma, violence and poverty proved a recurring theme. The data indicates that taking a simplistic, dichotomous view—comparing two-parent versus lone-parent households—is facile and inutile. The array of households that is presented with just six participants evidences the need to consider factors outside of the single-parent/nuclear dichotomy to understand the challenges faced at home that can be linked to adolescent crime. [Juby and Farrington's \(2001\)](#) suggestions of factors like household conflict and reasons for family disruption are important ones to consider in this area.

Some of the key challenges experienced by these participants included being victims of abuse, witnessing the abuse of family members, other conflict between family members, poverty, delinquent peers, criminal fathers, as well as having absent fathers. Resource deprivation and economic struggles were almost universally identified by participants as leading to their involvement in crime. It would thus be erroneous and negligent to focus solely on the presence or absence of a biological father when presenting a full picture of the potentially criminogenic family.

Theoretical frameworks of social control and attachment are much more useful. [Hirschi \(1969\)](#) asserts that behaviour is regulated by social bonds and delinquent acts result when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken. The narratives of participants presented here suggest quite weak parental attachment and few examples of social control. Andre resented his mother for leaving him with his grandmother and, even after she returned from abroad, he did not feel a connection to or respect for her—'rules without relationships equals rebellion'. Davindra felt like something was missing from his family and thought that moving in with his father would provide him with a remedial connection; this did not prove to be the case. Keston did not feel close to his mother or his father and his parents' perceived betrayal in taking him to the police station for minor infractions increased his sense of alienation. Anil was the only one who expressed attachment to his mother, yet this was, in part, driven by shared trauma and abuse.

Trauma and abuse are key themes that run through the vignettes. Participants who did not experience explicit abuse were often very harshly punished and exposed to, in their minds, overly strict discipline. Almost universally, the violence inflicted was perpetrated by a male figure in the home—a father or stepfather. [Barker \(2005: 62\)](#) explains that boys who come from violent homes learn two things through this violence: its appropriateness as a way to resolve conflicts, and that individuals within their environment have hostile intentions towards them. This results in a skewed sense of others' intentions towards them and more frequent violent behaviour.

The participants almost exclusively first learned violent behaviour within their homes. This shaped their perceptions of their mothers and siblings (as vulnerable and in need of protection),

of their fathers (as bad fathers, as bad men) and of themselves (at first, as too young and weak to fight back and then as too mature not to). Participants reported feeling powerless in responding to violent incidents as children, as well as their mothers' powerlessness to protect both themselves and their children in those instances. For those who experienced and witnessed violence within the home, almost universally their narratives included a turning point where they felt big enough and strong enough to 'fight back'. This was the point when they became 'real men' as they were able to defend themselves and others in the household. Thus, when they spoke about the makings of a good family, this included both parents in the home, being a provider, teaching, guiding, instilling values, but also, *crucially*, protecting those under their care.

The concept of 'the good family'—what that looked like and how that might have changed their lives—was important to participants. Andre lamented not growing up with both of his parents. Derek believed that his life could have been different if he had a father to guide him. Vishnu wished for a loving father who showed him affection. Davindra left a self-described loving home to move in with a criminally involved father because he felt something was missing in his life. For him, the good family would have included a father he could talk to, and relate to and one that provided comfort. Anil was the only participant who did not idealize the presence of a father in his life. For him, a good family would have been one without violence and where he did not experience extreme poverty. This all accords with the literature. Participants longed for emotional involvement and strong relationships (East *et al.* 2020); financial support, quality time, physically and emotionally present fathers (Fletcher 2020) and fathers who taught, guided and protected them (Green 2018).

Langa's (2014) caution against the 'idealisation' of fatherhood as a panacea to social ills is important and his suggestion that fathers can play destructive roles in raising their children is evident in the data presented. Nevertheless, participants' perceptions of the effects of the presence or absence of fathers cannot be ignored. We know that Caribbean families and Caribbean familial networks are resilient and their matrifocal nature is a great strength (Hodge 2002). However, participants here did not recognize wider familial and community support as being beneficial to their upbringing; they felt the absence of a good father in a tangible way and believed that it affected their pathway into crime. It must be stated, therefore, that whether or not academic literature and theory accord with their views, young, marginalized men in conflict with the law in Trinidad and Tobago believe that a father is necessary for a male's upbringing to keep him out of trouble.

This does not mean that we should return to dichotomous arguments about absent or present fathers, but it does prompt more rigorous scholarship on how the development of Caribbean societies, through post-colonialism, capitalism and globalization, has concurrently changed the framework and conceptualization of the Caribbean family. In this regard, it would be useful to explore qualitatively the perceptions of non-criminally involved adolescents on the constitution of a good family.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal participants' preference for the nuclear family and their strong beliefs regarding the (in)ability of women to raise young men without a father figure. This contradicts Caribbean literature on family, which highlights the benefits of extended and community-based familial networks (Barrow 2001; Hodge 2002). Rejecting simplistic explanations for this discrepancy invites further reflection on uncomfortable findings that raise more questions than answers for Caribbean society.

This paper provides a discussion of the types of homes that convicted young men come from in a cultural context beyond the Global North, centring the Caribbean. This is an important

contribution to empirical data and theory development, presenting a crucial analytical foundation upon which local, regional and international development organizations can base family support programmes (Freemon *et al.* 2023). Finally, this paper offers an alternative insight into the constructions of the good family and the good father through the perspective and voice of adolescent offenders. Much existing research is quantitative, and this paper represents a qualitative appreciation of the experiences of adolescents who offend. Such departures from conventional methods must be encouraged.

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