

Building Resilience: A Holistic Approach to Reducing Crime and the Impact of Protective Factors in Mitigating the Strain-Crime Relationship

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Abstract

The relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and criminal behavior is well-established, with research consistently linking early trauma to increased delinquency and violent conduct. General Strain Theory (GST), developed by Robert Agnew, posits that life stressors—such as abuse, loss, and the failure to achieve valued goals—can result in negative emotions that may lead individuals to engage in criminal activity as a coping mechanism (Agnew, 1992). This qualitative study, an expansion of the author's previous doctoral research (Asongwed, 2023), explored the intersection of strain, adversity, and criminal behavior among eight college students (ages 21 - 28) from the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. Conducted during the ongoing Anglophone crisis, the study was grounded in GST and aimed to investigate the influence of protective factors in mitigating the risk of crime among youth in conflict-affected settings. Participants reported experiencing various strains, including poverty, displacement, violent victimization, and limited access to education. Despite these challenges, findings revealed that protective factors such as personal resilience, family and community support, access to education, employment opportunities, and religious beliefs significantly buffered the impact of strain. This research challenges the traditional emphasis on risk factors by expanding the GST framework to incorporate the role of protective factors in crime prevention. It offers a holistic approach that addresses both individual and structural dimensions of criminal behavior. Policy implications and recommendations for local application are discussed, emphasizing the integration of mental health services, youth employment initiatives, public sensitization campaigns, and community-based support systems in crime prevention and juvenile justice efforts.

Keywords

Adverse Childhood Experiences, Protective Factors, Risk Factors, Criminal Behavior, General Strain Theory, Holistic Crime Prevention, Cameroon, Strain-Crime Relationship, Youth Crime, Policy Implications

1. Background

In the midst of crisis, particularly in regions such as urban and inner-city areas where young people face violence, poverty, and social upheaval, emerging research offers hope by emphasizing the role of individual and environmental protective factors in preventing crime. A recent doctoral dissertation by [Asongwed \(2023\)](#) presents a phenomenological study focused on the protective factors that shield youth from engaging in criminal activity amid severe adversity. The study was grounded in the General Strain Theory (GST), which posits that individuals are more likely to engage in criminal behavior when subjected to particular types of strain—especially those that are unjust, uncontrollable, and severe, and which evoke strong negative emotions such as anger or frustration that can justify antisocial actions ([Campbell, 2020](#)). GST asserts that individuals under such conditions may resort to crime either as a coping mechanism or as an attempt to regain a sense of control, autonomy, or as a result of peer influence.

However, the core objective of the study was not merely to affirm the GST's assertion that strain leads to crime, but to explore the moderating role of protective factors—such as personal values, social support, religious beliefs, or educational aspirations—that can buffer individuals from resorting to criminal behavior in the face of strain. [Asongwed's \(2023\)](#) study specifically examined the role of protective factors in mitigating the relationship between strain and crime among college students in the Anglophone (English-speaking) regions of Cameroon during the ongoing Anglophone crisis. In response to the research question—What are the lived experiences of college students and their protective factors that reduced or prevented criminal activity during the Anglophone crisis?—the study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach, guided by General Strain Theory (GST) ([Agnew, 2013](#)). Data were collected through in-depth qualitative interviews with eight college students residing in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon.

The study was shaped by four theoretical assumptions inspired by GST: 1) Strain is a key predictor of criminal involvement. 2) Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)—such as abuse, trauma, or exposure to violence—have a direct influence on future offending. 3) Criminal activity among college-aged youth tends to increase in environments experiencing civil unrest. 4) Demographic and personal protective factors (e.g. social support, resilience, moral beliefs) can reduce or prevent criminal involvement even in strained circumstances ([Asongwed, 2023](#)). By focusing on the lived experiences of college students during the crisis, the phenomenolog-

ical approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of how some individuals managed to resist or avoid criminal pathways, despite being exposed to high levels of strain (Asongwed, 2023).

In the context of the study, the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon provided a real-world backdrop characterized by civil unrest, violence, and instability—conditions that align closely with the types of strain described in GST. The crisis exposed college students to multiple adverse and traumatic experiences, including violence, fear, and loss of personal safety, creating a fertile ground for the development of criminal behavior according to GST principles. The study's exploration of protective factors—such as personal resilience, family support, and access to community resources—provides new insight into how crime prevention efforts can extend beyond addressing risk alone.

Thus, GST provided a framework for understanding the risk, while this study sought to identify the resilience factors that mitigate that risk—contributing a protective perspective to a theory traditionally focused on vulnerability and risk.

2. Research Methods and Procedures

The study utilized a qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology, with the student-researcher adopting the dual role of participant-observer and primary data collection instrument. A purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy was employed to recruit eight participants, five females and three males who met specific inclusion criteria: individuals aged 21 - 28, currently enrolled in universities located within the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, and with no prior felony convictions. Participants who were enrolled in institutions outside these regions or who failed to meet the age or legal history criteria were excluded from the study. Recruitment was facilitated through institutional partnerships with local universities, where informational flyers detailing the study's aims, inclusion criteria, and researcher contact information were disseminated. Interested individuals contacted the researcher directly via WhatsApp or phone (Asongwed, 2023).

2.1. Data Collection

Data were collected using in-depth, semi-structured interviews based on a standardized open-ended interview protocol informed by gaps identified during the literature review (Patton, 2015). This protocol was designed to elicit rich, descriptive accounts of participants' experiences while allowing for the emergence of unanticipated themes. Interviews were conducted via video conferencing and audio-recorded with participant consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and subsequently deleted following data analysis to maintain confidentiality. Supplementary field notes were taken to capture researcher's observations and reflexive insights. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was conducted without breaks. Data collection was completed within a two-week period (Asongwed, 2023).

To enhance methodological rigor and ensure the adequacy of data collection

tools in addressing the research questions, the interview guide combined open-ended questions—designed to encourage depth and elaboration—with follow-up closed-ended prompts for clarification. The guide included demographic queries and experience-based questions structured around the themes identified in prior literature. Core data points derived from the interviews included variables relevant to criminogenic risk and protective factors: housing stability, employment status (self and family), health status and healthcare access, educational access, availability of basic needs, exposure to or perpetration of violence, familial support, parental involvement, bereavement, perceptions of safety, legal encounters, criminal history, and access to mental health services. This systematic and comprehensive approach ensured a robust exploration of the phenomenon under investigation (Asongwed, 2023) (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Participant Code	Age	Sex	Student Status	College Year	Employment Status	Living Arrangement
ILR	25	Female	Full-time	Senior	Unemployed	Off campus
2M	22	Female	Full-time	Sophomore	Unemployed	Off campus
3ST	25	Female	Full-time	Senior	Employed part-time	Off campus
4G	27	Female	Full-time	Senior	Unemployed	Off campus
5BR	23	Male	Part-time	Sophomore	Unemployed	Off campus
6N	21	Male	Full-time	Sophomore	Unemployed	Off campus
7YP	25	Female	Full-time	Freshman	Unemployed	Off campus
8CN	24	Male	Full-time	Sophomore	Unemployed	Off campus

Note: Codes were used to protect participant anonymity. No identifiable information was required or requested. Adapted from Asongwed (2023).

2.2. Data Analysis

The data analysis process employed a qualitative, inductive approach, integrating both verbatim transcription and the summative method to ensure a comprehensive and credible representation of participant experiences. Verbatim transcription captured participants' spoken responses verbatim, while the summative method allowed for the interpretation of nonverbal cues and underlying concepts, thereby enhancing the depth and contextual understanding of the data. These complementary strategies enhanced the reliability, validity, and rigor of the analysis. Semantic and pattern coding techniques were applied—semantic coding focused on surface-level meanings and participant language, whereas pattern coding facilitated the grouping of similar codes into broader thematic categories (Clarke & Braun, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldana, 2016).

The analysis adhered to Clarke and Braun's (2021) six-phase reflective thematic analysis framework: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) initial coding, 3) theme development, 4) theme review, 5) theme refinement and naming, and 6) report writ-

ing. This methodological rigor facilitated the systematic identification and interpretation of patterns and themes grounded in the data.

2.2.1. Coding Procedures

The data analysis process began with an initial manual coding of the interview transcripts using Microsoft Word, accompanied by handwritten memos and analytical notes. Each transcript was meticulously color-coded to identify and organize emerging themes in alignment with the study's aims. Specifically, statements that addressed the research questions were highlighted in turquoise, while those aligning with the overall purpose of the study were coded in yellow. Additional themes were also distinguished through color coding: participant references to risk factors were marked in teal; statements describing illegal activities by students were highlighted in pink; and comments concerning safety and security were coded in gray and dark yellow (Asongwed, 2023).

Following this initial phase, a second, more structured round of coding was conducted using Delve qualitative coding software. Delve coding software was used to organize and refine themes identified during the initial manual coding phase. Transcripts were uploaded into the Delve platform, where semantic and pattern coding were applied to systematically categorize participant responses. The software allowed for efficient coding of text segments, comparison of themes across interviews, and the identification of recurring patterns (Asongwed, 2023). Delve's organizational tools supported the development of a thematic framework, enhancing the analytical depth, consistency, and transparency of the qualitative analysis process.

Delve was selected for its robust features that support systematic organization, in-depth analysis, and the development of thematic relationships across qualitative data. Its user-friendly interface and visual tools facilitated the efficient categorization of codes, the comparison of textual segments across participants, and the iterative refinement of themes. This software was instrumental in enhancing analytic rigor, promoting transparency, and improving the traceability of coding decisions, all of which are critical in qualitative research (Asongwed, 2023).

In both coding phases, a two-cycle coding process was employed: the first involving semantic coding, which focused on the explicit meaning of participant statements, and the second involving pattern coding, aimed at identifying broader categories and relationships among codes. The integration of manual and software-assisted methods allowed for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the data while ensuring methodological consistency and credibility. This approach enabled a detailed yet holistic understanding of participants' lived experiences and the protective factors influencing their responses to strain during the Anglophone crisis (Asongwed, 2023).

2.2.2. Reflectivity and Triangulation

To mitigate potential researcher bias, reflexivity was embedded throughout the research process. Regular reflective journaling was used to critically examine per-

sonal assumptions, values, and potential influences on data interpretation. This practice helped maintain a conscious awareness of how the researcher's positionality might shape analytic decisions. In addition, data triangulation was employed to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. Multiple data sources—including individual interview transcripts, field notes, and contextual literature—were cross-referenced to corroborate emerging themes and interpretations. The convergence of evidence across these sources strengthened the validity of the findings and ensured a more nuanced and balanced representation of participants' experiences (Asongwed, 2023).

Together, the use of structured coding procedures, analytic software, reflexive practices, and triangulation techniques contributed to the overall rigor, transparency, and credibility of the qualitative analysis.

3. Results

The study explored the lived experiences of college students during the Anglophone crisis and the protective factors that reduced or prevented their involvement in criminal activity. Findings from the study sufficiently answered the research question and were consistent with prior research findings that have suggested that certain individual and environmental characteristics may buffer the negative effects of risk factors for criminal behavior (Barbieri et al., 2019; Kushner & Fagan, 2022). Findings showed that students faced numerous challenges, including exposure to violence, displacement, and economic hardship, but also identified protective factors such as personal and family values, religion, education, employment, and counseling that helped mitigate the risk of criminal behavior. Themes revealed the complex interplay between risk factors and protective supports, highlighting the importance of individual resilience and external resources like public sensitization and government aid. Despite facing significant adversity, many students were able to avoid criminal activity due to these protective influences.

The study identified four core thematic categories: 1) perceptions of the crisis and essence of lived experiences, 2) perceptions of protective factors, 3) supports and services as protective factors, and 4) public safety implications.

3.1. Theme One: Perceptions of the Crisis and Essence of Lived Experiences

Under Theme One, participants consistently described multiple interrelated risk factors for youth criminal behavior stemming from the Anglophone crisis. Notably, 100% of participants ($n = 8$) identified violent victimization as a primary driver of college-age criminality, followed by economic hardship (87.5%) and separation/displacement (75%). Violent victimization included incidents such as armed robbery, killings, and kidnappings, with 85% of participants reporting that male students joined armed groups for protection or social validation and engaged in theft and cybercrimes. Female students were more frequently linked to sexual

violence, including rape and STIs, as well as unplanned pregnancies. This theme was supported by 18 coded references to violent victimization across all eight transcripts (Asongwed, 2023).

Reports of separation and displacement appeared in 75% of transcripts, with six of eight participants referencing displacement and three offering personal narratives. These included internal migration, refugee status in Nigeria, and relocation to Francophone regions for safety and employment (Asongwed, 2023).

Economic strain was cited in 87.5% of transcripts (seven of eight), with a frequency count of 21, encompassing loss of income due to “ghost town” restrictions, market destruction, road blockades, and inflation in the costs of basic goods and services. One participant emphasized agriculture’s collapse, noting a youth’s reluctance to return to conflict zones for farming (Asongwed, 2023).

Additionally, findings showed that students engaged in a variety of criminal activities during the crisis, including exam fraud, theft, prostitution, cybercrime (e.g. scamming), gambling, drug use, and trafficking. Male students were more involved in scamming and theft, while female students turned to prostitution to meet basic needs. Cybercrime was specifically noted in four transcripts with a frequency count of eight (Asongwed, 2023). These findings quantitatively and qualitatively illustrate how conflict-induced stressors have contributed to increased criminal engagement among college-aged individuals in crisis-affected regions (see Table 2 and Figure 1).

Table 2. Risk factors for criminal activity.

Risk Factor	Transcripts Referenced (n = 8)	Frequency Count
School delays and interruptions	8/8	13
School dropouts	6/8	10
Idleness/lack of employment opportunities/lack of extracurricular activities	7/8	9
Kidnappings and ransoms	7/8	15
Violent victimization and exposure to violence	8/8	18
Separation and displacement	6/8	Not specified
Economic implications/hardship	7/8	21

Note: Adapted from the findings of Asongwed (2023).

3.2. Theme Two: Perceptions of Protective Factors

Themes Two and Three addressed the second part of the research question, identifying protective factors that reduced or prevented criminal activity during the Anglophone crisis. Key protective factors identified through participant narratives included: personal and family values, religion and Christianity, education and awareness, employment opportunities, family support, peer influences, counseling and mentorship, and awareness of legal consequences.

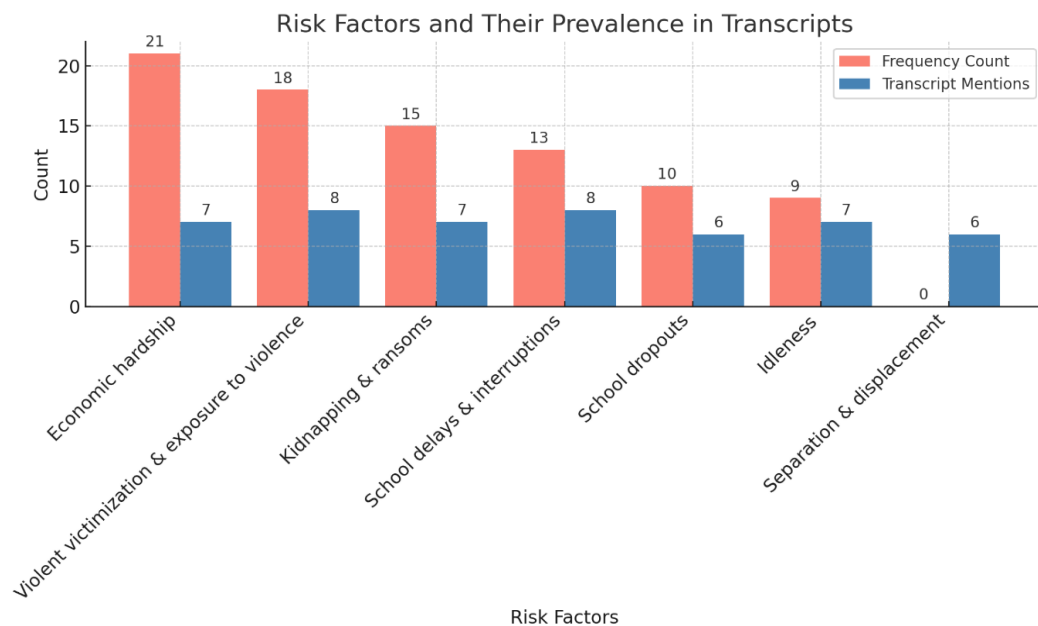


Figure 1. Chart showing both the frequency and the number of transcripts mentioning each risk factor for criminal activity. Results adapted from Asongwed's (2023) findings.

Personal Values and Family Background. All participants (8/8) emphasized that strong moral upbringing, family discipline, and personal goals acted as significant buffers against criminal behavior. These values fostered resilience and informed decisions during high-risk situations. A frequency of 19 references across transcripts confirmed this theme. Participants cited determination, ethical awareness, and structured home environments as key influences.

Family Support. Seven out of eight participants cited family support as a crucial protective factor (frequency = 11). Consistent with socio-ecological models, emotional, financial, spiritual, and academic support from parents, siblings, and extended family was reported to strengthen resilience against criminal temptation.

Counseling and Mentorship. Described using terms like “advice”, “guidance”, and “mentorship”, this factor had a frequency of 16 across five transcripts. Supportive figures, including parents and mentors, provided ongoing moral guidance and behavior modeling that reinforced lawful conduct.

Peer Influences. Both positive and risk-enhancing peer influences were reported by 4 participants. Positive peer groups acted as deterrents to criminal activity, particularly when peers modeled lawful and faith-based behavior. Conversely, negative influences were linked to a lack of family support and unmet needs, though some participants later reverted to positive trajectories through self-awareness and external support.

Religion and Christianity. Five participants referenced Christian teachings as protective, highlighting moral doctrines and faith-based behavior expectations. Religious affiliation helped reinforce moral standards and deterred actions considered sinful or unlawful.

Employment Opportunities. Participants emphasized that structured engage-

ment, such as part-time or holiday employment, helped reduce idleness—a major risk factor for crimes like gambling, drug use, and cybercrime. Employment was cited by 7 participants as both a protective measure and a financial necessity.

Legal Consequences. Four participants reported that understanding the legal repercussions of criminal acts—such as imprisonment or being misidentified as a separatist fighter—served as a deterrent. Legal deterrents were thus framed as cognitive-behavioral inhibitors.

Education and Awareness. Six participants identified education as a protective tool. Awareness of the law, self-awareness, and goal-setting were frequently mentioned as buffers against engagement in criminal activity.

3.3. Theme Three: Supports and Services as Protective Factors

Consistent with prior research, this study found that certain individual and environmental characteristics can modify the relationship between strain and criminal behavior. Participants identified several supports and services that could serve as protective factors against college-aged criminal activity. These include access to student employment, public education through mentorship and sensitization programs, and government subsidies such as reduced food and transportation costs, affordable student housing, and the provision of educational resources like books, computers, and financial aid (Asongwed, 2023; Barbieri et al., 2019; Kushner & Fagan, 2022).

A strong emphasis was placed on the need for government assistance by 87.5% of participants. This included not only housing support for students affected by displacement but also job opportunities to help students support themselves financially. The findings suggest that unemployment, poverty, and a lack of resources contribute to risk behaviors such as cybercrime, prostitution, theft, gambling, and drug use.

The need for financial assistance emerged as a significant theme. Participants noted the high cost of living and the strain it places on students' ability to succeed academically and stay out of crime. Access to basic academic tools such as laptops and textbooks was highlighted as a gap, with some students risking personal safety just to borrow these resources.

Participants also underscored the importance of public sensitization efforts, such as educational seminars and motivational programs, in raising awareness about the consequences of criminal behavior. These programs were seen as valuable in helping students make informed, positive decisions despite the pressures of their environment. Overall, the findings highlight the critical role of structural support systems in reducing students' vulnerability to criminal activity, particularly in contexts of economic hardship and social instability (Asongwed, 2023).

3.4. Theme Four: Public Safety Implications

The study revealed that threats to public safety, driven by the ongoing Anglophone crisis, are key contributors to criminal activity among college-aged youth. All par-

ticipants reported experiencing or witnessing safety concerns such as kidnappings, gun violence, armed robbery, rape, exploitation by both military and separatist forces, and restricted freedom of movement.

Public safety concerns were mentioned in all eight transcripts, with over 30 references, highlighting the severity of the issue. Participants expressed alarm over the widespread circulation of weapons, particularly among students, which has led to increased theft, violence, and fear on and around university campuses (Asongwed, 2023).

Despite these risks, participants reported a lack of visible or effective public safety measures. Many expressed hopelessness about the crisis, noting that living in danger has become the norm. However, participants also pointed to protective factors and support systems—such as employment opportunities, financial aid, and mentorship—as essential in reducing the likelihood of student involvement in crime during this period of instability (see Figure 2).

4. Summary of Findings

The study found that protective factors operate at both individual and environmental levels. Internal attributes such as personal values, religious beliefs, and educational aspirations, alongside external supports like family structure, mentorship, and employment, collectively mitigated youth involvement in crime during a high-risk sociopolitical crisis. Cognitive behavioral moderators such as moral reasoning, mentorship, and legal knowledge served as psychological mediators that altered the perceived cost-benefit analysis of engaging in crime. These findings align with General Strain Theory (Agnew, 2013), demonstrating how adaptive responses and social buffers counterbalance strain-induced tendencies toward delinquency.

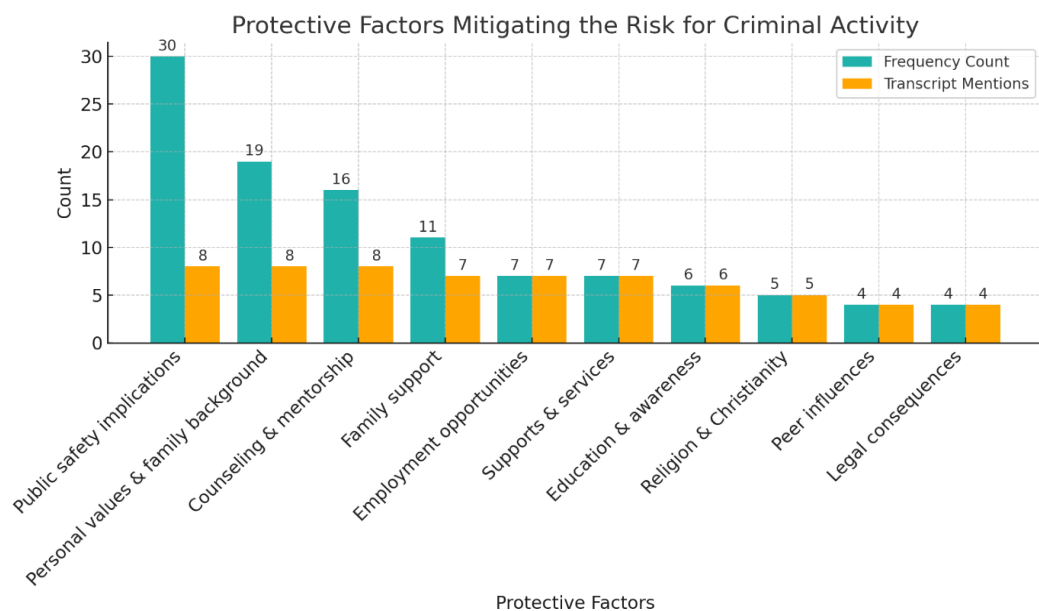


Figure 2. Comparative chart both the frequency and the number of transcripts mentioning each protective factor. Results adapted from Asongwed's (2023) findings.

4.1. The Strain-Crime Connection: Emphasizing Risk and Resilience

A substantial body of research has shown that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)—including poverty, victimization, unstable family environments, violence, and abuse—are strongly linked to future criminal behavior (Asongwed, 2023; Ashu, 2020; Freeze, 2019). Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST), a foundational framework in criminology, posits that when individuals are exposed to unjust, uncontrollable, or overwhelming stressors, they may resort to crime as a way to cope with frustration, anger, or feelings of helplessness. These strains, especially when unbuffered by support systems, can significantly increase the likelihood of delinquency and violent offending (Craig, 2019; Freeze, 2019).

Findings from this study align with existing research, highlighting the direct relationship between strain and criminal activity. In the context of the ongoing Anglophone crisis in Cameroon—which has been marked by violence, displacement, school interruptions, and systemic instability—students have faced heightened exposure to ACEs. As noted in participant narratives, many have experienced extreme economic hardship, homelessness, lack of family support, and separation from loved ones, all of which have contributed to a rise in youth criminality (Asongwed, 2023).

Participants described various forms of student criminal activity, including theft, exam fraud, prostitution, cybercrimes, and drug use/trafficking, gambling, and rape. Notably, male students were more frequently associated with cybercrimes, theft, and gambling, while female students often turned to transactional sex as a means of financial survival. Cybercrime alone was referenced in four transcripts with a frequency count of eight. These behaviors underscore the tangible ways in which strain manifests into illegal acts (Asongwed, 2023).

Despite the grim outlook, the study also points to a crucial gap in the literature—the underrepresentation of protective factors in discussions on crime prevention. While risk factors have dominated the criminological discourse, there is growing recognition that individual and environmental protective elements—such as family support, mentorship, education, employment opportunities, and access to public services—can serve as buffers that mitigate the impact of strain (Agnew, 2017; Kushner & Fagan, 2022).

The current findings suggest that in high-strain environments like conflict-affected Cameroon, the presence of these protective factors can play a pivotal role in interrupting the strain-crime trajectory. As such, future research should prioritize exploring how resilience-building interventions and structural support systems can reduce vulnerability to crime and foster more positive outcomes for at-risk youth.

4.2. The Power of Protective Factors in Mitigating the Strain-Crime Relationship

This study, grounded in interviews with college students from the conflict-affected Anglophone regions of Cameroon, highlights the critical role of protective factors in buffering the effects of strain and reducing criminal engagement. While students

reported intense and multifaceted stressors—such as violent victimization, displacement, poverty, and ongoing educational disruptions—many also identified key protective influences that helped prevent them from succumbing to criminal pathways.

Protective factors such as family support, religious involvement, personal values, counseling, access to education, and employment opportunities emerged as powerful deterrents to crime. These factors functioned as stabilizing forces in the midst of instability, offering emotional, psychological, and material support that reduced the appeal or necessity of engaging in illegal activities.

Family support, for example, provided both emotional encouragement and basic needs, helping students maintain focus on education and personal development rather than resorting to theft, scamming, or prostitution for survival. Religious involvement and strong personal values offered moral guidance and a sense of community, which participants described as sources of resilience during times of moral or financial crisis.

Access to counseling and mentorship enabled students to process trauma and stress in healthier ways, offering coping strategies that mitigated the risk of turning to crime as an outlet for frustration or desperation. Participants who had access to educational resources and employment opportunities also reported feeling more hopeful and empowered, reducing the psychological effects of strain, such as hopelessness and fatalism that often precede criminal involvement.

Importantly, these protective factors did not erase the challenges, but they helped students navigate adversity without resorting to harmful or criminal behavior. They served as buffers that interrupted the strain-crime trajectory proposed by General Strain Theory—by addressing emotional regulation, reinforcing pro-social values, and meeting basic needs, they directly reduced the risk of criminal engagement.

In essence, the presence of even a few protective factors significantly altered students' experiences with strain, underscoring the need for targeted interventions that prioritize support systems, opportunity structures, and emotional resilience. This finding points to a crucial avenue for policy and practice: enhancing protective factors can serve as an effective strategy in crime prevention, especially in conflict-impacted regions (see **Figure 3**).

4.3. A Holistic Approach to Crime Prevention: Integrating Individual, Social, and Structural Interventions

Findings from this study underscore the importance of adopting a holistic and integrated approach to crime prevention—one that acknowledges the complex interplay between individual, social, and structural determinants of criminal behavior. Drawing from the lived experiences of college students in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, and informed by both General Strain Theory and ecological systems theory, this research supports the argument that crime prevention strategies must extend beyond punitive responses to include proactive, supportive, and community-centered interventions.

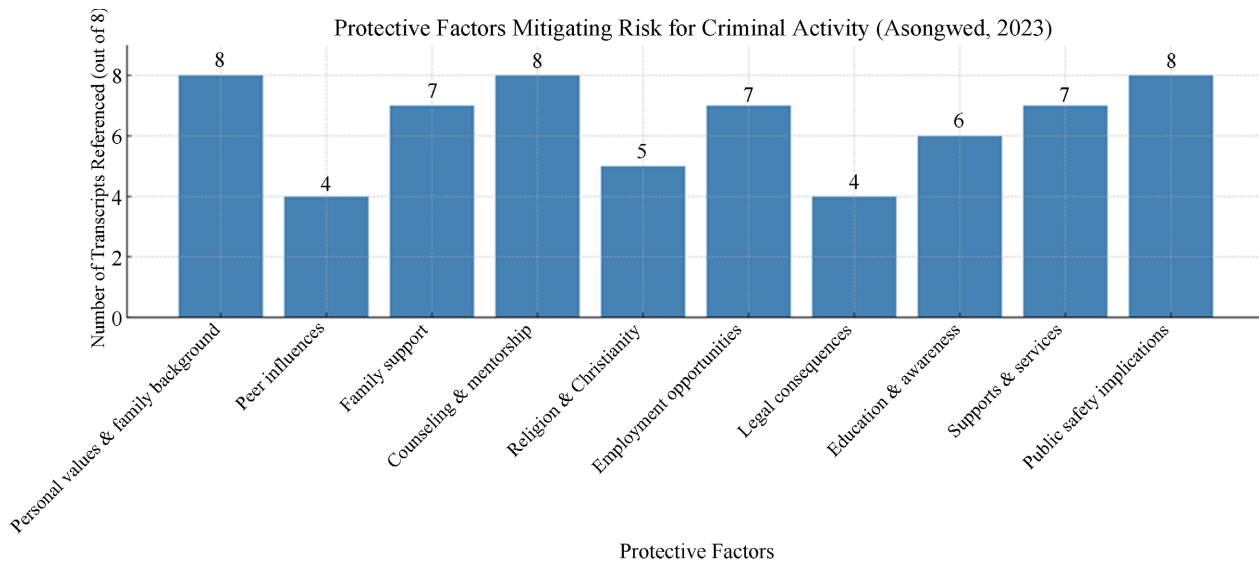


Figure 3. The number of transcripts mentioning each protective factor for criminal activity. Results adapted from Asongwed's (2023) findings.

Comprehensive Support Services. Participants emphasized the critical role of counseling and mentorship services, educational access, and employment opportunities in mitigating the impact of adversity and reducing the risk of criminal engagement. Many students described how counseling services, mentorship programs, and academic support helped them manage the psychological effects of trauma, including anxiety, hopelessness, and social isolation. Similarly, financial aid, access to basic academic tools (e.g. laptops and textbooks), and job opportunities provided a sense of agency and reduced the appeal of engaging in illegal activities for survival.

These findings reinforce existing literature that highlights the need for integrated social services as a foundation for crime prevention (Agnew, 2017; Kushner & Fagan, 2022). Holistic crime prevention must prioritize resource equity by ensuring that vulnerable youth, particularly in conflict-affected regions, have consistent access to health, education, housing, and financial support.

Strengthening Protective Social Structures. The protective influence of family support, religious involvement, peer mentorship, and prosocial community norms featured prominently in the study. These elements fostered resilience, identity formation, and a sense of belonging—critical factors in resisting the pull of antisocial behavior. Programs that encourage positive peer associations, support family cohesion, and facilitate spiritual or values-based development have shown promise in reducing delinquency, particularly among youth in high-risk settings.

A holistic approach, therefore, must engage multiple layers of a student's social environment, including family, school, religious institutions, and peer networks, to create protective systems that reinforce positive behavior and discourage criminal involvement.

Community Engagement and Collective Efficacy. Participants' narratives also pointed to the importance of community safety and collective efficacy. Concerns about public insecurity, weapon circulation, and lack of law enforcement accountability suggested a broader failure of the social contract. Yet, in the absence of formal protections, students leaned on informal networks for security and survival. This finding suggests the need to foster community engagement, build trust in public institutions, and support localized initiatives that promote safety, conflict resolution, and civic participation.

Community-based interventions such as restorative justice practices, youth leadership programs, and neighborhood safety patrols can empower citizens and contribute to a culture of accountability and mutual support.

Policy and Structural Reform. Finally, crime prevention must be embedded in broader policy reform and institutional strengthening. The research findings illustrate how political instability, displacement, and economic disempowerment—products of the ongoing Anglophone crisis—function as macro-level risk factors for crime. In response, policymakers must focus on long-term structural change, including investment in post-conflict reconstruction, education reform, equitable resource distribution, and legal protections for youth.

By addressing root causes—such as poverty, educational inequity, and institutional neglect—while simultaneously strengthening individual and community resilience, a holistic crime prevention model emerges that is sustainable, inclusive, and evidence-informed.

In summary, a holistic approach to crime prevention integrates support at the individual, relational, community, and policy levels. This multi-pronged strategy acknowledges the complexity of the strain-crime relationship and mobilizes protective factors—both internal and external—to disrupt pathways to criminal behavior. Rooted in the lived experiences of youth navigating adversity, this model offers a pathway toward not only reducing crime but also promoting social justice, healing, and community resilience in conflict-affected societies.

A Global Call for Holistic Crime Prevention

The findings from this study highlight the importance of a holistic approach to crime prevention—one that does not solely focus on mitigating risk factors, but also strengthens protective factors within individuals and their communities. Experts argue that criminological theories, including GST, must evolve to consider these protective elements more thoroughly. By incorporating both risk and resilience factors, we can better understand and address the complexities of crime.

The implications of this study go beyond Cameroon; they are globally relevant. Whether in areas of conflict, poverty, or systemic inequality, young people everywhere face challenges that could lead to crime. However, with targeted interventions that promote protective factors—such as mental health support, family strengthening, educational access, and community engagement—societies can better equip youth to resist the pull of criminal behavior.

4.4. Global Perspectives and Local Applications: Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Practice in Crime Prevention and Juvenile Justice

Globally, initiatives focusing on protective factors have shown promise. For example, in Detroit, a crime prevention program, ShotStoppers initiated in 2023 led to significant reductions in homicides and shootings in some of the city's most violent areas, with reductions reaching as high as 83%. This program employed strategies such as critical thinking education for youth, adult training, drug prevention, and community engagement (City of Detroit Mayor's Office, 2024).

Similarly, in Toowoomba, Australia, the Safer Together program recruited community champions from various cultural and language backgrounds to spread crime prevention messages and strengthen relationships between the community and the police. This initiative aimed to lower crime rates by addressing major concerns such as burglary, vehicle theft, and youth crime (State of Queensland Police Service, 2025).

The findings from this study have clear implications for policy-making and practical implementation in crime prevention and juvenile/criminal justice systems, particularly within conflict-affected contexts like the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. By illuminating the powerful role of protective factors—such as education, employment, mental health services, family support, and community engagement—this study underscores the need for a shift in focus from purely punitive approaches toward preventive, restorative, and resilience-based interventions.

Policy Implications: Strengthening Systems for Long-Term Impact in Conflict-Affected Contexts

1) Mainstreaming Protective Factors into National Crime Prevention Strategies and Youth Resilience Strategies

To address the increased vulnerability of youth in conflict-affected settings, national crime prevention frameworks should integrate protective factors—such as education, employment, mental health support, and family stability—as core components of long-term violence reduction strategies. Practical and context-sensitive implementation should include:

- Prioritized education access in displaced and conflict-affected regions, including mobile classrooms, tuition subsidies, and distribution of learning materials through NGOs and religious institutions. For example, the Education Cannot Wait initiative has provided emergency learning support in similar fragile contexts like Yemen and South Sudan.
- Expand youth employment initiatives, vocational training, and micro-enterprise support through programs tailored to local economies, such as agriculture, renewable energy, or digital services. This can be supported through public-private partnerships and donor-funded livelihood initiatives.
- Deployment of community-based mental health services, utilizing trained lay counselors, peer support groups, and trauma-informed care embedded within

schools and youth centers. Programs like War Child Holland have effectively implemented such models in conflict-affected areas.

- Family reunification and parenting support services, particularly for youth separated due to conflict or internal displacement. Collaboration with international aid agencies can help establish family tracing and psychosocial support programs.

2) Youth-Focused Justice Reform with Restorative and Trauma-Informed Approaches

In fragile settings, youth often face structural disadvantages and trauma that contribute to criminal behavior. Justice systems must shift from punitive to restorative models that prioritize rehabilitation over punishment:

- Implement diversion programs for first-time and low-risk offenders, offering alternatives such as counseling, vocational programs, and community service. Rwanda's post-conflict reconciliation courts provide a model for community-based justice involving youth offenders (Clark, 2010).
- Train judges and law enforcement in trauma-informed practices and contextual sentencing that considers the role of poverty, displacement, and psychological distress in youth offending.
- Establish multidisciplinary rehabilitation panels, involving social workers, educators, and psychologists to assess and intervene in youth cases, reducing recidivism and re-engaging youth with community services.

3) Embedding Evidence-Based Locally Informed Decision-Making into Policy

To ensure sustained impact, governments and international actors should institutionalize data-driven and context-responsive policy development:

- Develop national databases and community-level monitoring systems to track youth risk and protective factors, criminal involvement trends, and intervention outcomes. Partnerships with local universities and research institutions can support ongoing analysis.
- Use qualitative insights, such as those from phenomenological studies, to inform culturally grounded and community-accepted programming. These insights can fill critical knowledge gaps often overlooked in purely quantitative approaches.
- Invest in longitudinal research and participatory evaluations, particularly in post-conflict recovery zones, to assess the long-term efficacy of protective interventions and inform course corrections.

Practice Applications: Implementing Protective Factors through Community and Government Programs

Global programs like ShotStoppers in Detroit and Safer Together in Australia serve as models for designing context-specific, community-anchored interventions. These programs show how protective factors can be operationalized to create safer communities.

1) Community-Based Mentorship and Sensitization Programs

- Implementation Strategy: Establish partnerships between local schools, religious

institutions, and civil society organizations to train volunteer mentors. These mentors can facilitate school-based life skills workshops, anti-crime seminars, and resilience-building sessions.

- Objective: Offer consistent emotional support, mentorship, and guidance for youth navigating trauma and stress.

2) School-Integrated Mental Health Services

- Implementation Strategy: Deploy trained school counselors or psychologists in secondary schools and universities. Create trauma recovery support groups, crisis response teams, and peer-led mental health clubs.
- Objective: Equip students with coping strategies to handle adversity and reduce the emotional triggers that may lead to criminal behavior.

3) Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship Hubs

- Implementation Strategy: Government and NGOs can co-fund youth innovation hubs offering vocational training, startup capital, and mentorship in fields like technology, agriculture, and trades.
- Objective: Reduce financial strain and unemployment—both significant risk factors identified in the study—and foster economic independence.

4) Community Safety Alliances

- Implementation Strategy: Similar to Safer Together, recruit respected community members (e.g. teachers, elders, youth leaders) to collaborate with law enforcement and serve as “safety liaisons”. Train these leaders to mediate conflict, monitor community safety concerns, and bridge trust gaps.
- Objective: Build grassroots capacity for violence prevention and increase cooperation between communities and law enforcement.

5) Conditional Cash Transfer and Housing Support Programs

- Implementation Strategy: Introduce targeted financial assistance programs for students facing economic hardship, homelessness, or displacement—conditions shown to heighten vulnerability to crime.
- Objective: Alleviate immediate survival pressures that push students toward illegal activity.

4.5. Summary: Toward Resilience-Oriented Crime Prevention

The integration of protective factors into crime prevention policy and practice offers a sustainable pathway toward safer, more resilient communities. By investing in individual potential and strengthening social and institutional support systems, governments can not only reduce crime but also empower youth to thrive in the face of adversity. The research findings advocate for a holistic, preventative approach that sees crime not merely as a legal violation but as a symptom of deeper socio-economic and psychological strain—one that can be addressed through intentional, community-centered action.

5. Discussion

The findings of the phenomenological study provide critical insights into the lived

experiences of college students navigating the socio-political unrest of Cameroon's Anglophone crisis. Guided by General Strain Theory (GST), the study sought to explore how protective factors mitigate the strain-crime relationship among college-aged individuals in a conflict-affected setting. By focusing on participants' perceptions of their environment, personal coping mechanisms, and available supports, the study sheds light on the interplay between adversity and resilience in shaping behavioral outcomes.

Consistent with existing literature, the study reaffirmed GST's core proposition that certain types of strain—particularly those perceived as unjust, uncontrollable, and extreme—can precipitate criminal coping (Agnew, 2017; Campbell, 2020). Participant narratives revealed a range of strains, including displacement, fear of violence, unemployment, and loss of educational continuity, aligning with Agnew and Brezina's (2019) assertion that environmental hardship and past victimization increase the risk of offending (Asongwed, 2023).

However, this study also addresses a critical gap in GST by emphasizing the protective factors that may buffer against strain-induced delinquency. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of research critiquing GST's predominant focus on risk factors (Barbieri et al., 2019; Kushner & Fagan, 2022). Participants identified multiple protective influences—religious belief systems, family cohesion, access to education, mentorship, counseling, and social supports—which often prevented engagement in criminal behavior despite exposure to significant adversity. This aligns with and extends the work of Barbieri et al. (2019) and Freeze (2019), who underscore the importance of individual and environmental resilience mechanisms.

Moreover, participants emphasized the need for government and community-based interventions such as employment creation, subsidized housing and transportation, and public sensitization. These suggestions parallel successful community-based interventions in other conflict zones, where youth engagement, mental health support, and economic empowerment programs have demonstrably reduced crime (e.g. War Child's work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Education Cannot Wait initiatives in Yemen). Thus, this study provides practical insights that can inform policy reforms rooted in both prevention and protection.

Importantly, the findings also highlight the multi-dimensional impact of the Anglophone crisis—not only as a source of social strain but as a catalyst for systemic disruption. In line with the work of Amnesty International USA (2020), Amin (2021) and Bang and Balgah (2022), participants described devastating outcomes such as displacement, poverty, education loss, and reduced mobility, which create fertile ground for criminality among vulnerable youth populations. These findings illustrate how macro-level crises intersect with individual-level strain to influence behavioral responses.

In sum, the study validates core aspects of GST while offering a complementary lens that integrates the role of protective factors, ultimately suggesting a more holistic framework for understanding youth crime in conflict-affected settings.

6. Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of the study. First, the use of criterion sampling—though appropriate for identifying participants with shared experiences—limited the diversity and transferability of findings. This approach excluded individuals whose experiences may have added important nuance, particularly those aged 18 - 21 who were eligible but could not participate due to logistical or resource-related constraints (Asongwed, 2023).

Second, the study's recruitment from a single university—representing only approximately 55% of the Anglophone region—further limits generalizability. While participants were drawn from various academic disciplines (e.g. law, nursing, engineering, business), their shared institutional context may not fully reflect the heterogeneity of college students across the region (Asongwed, 2023).

Third, the study did not include students enrolled in private or independent postsecondary institutions, whose experiences may differ significantly. Additionally, the interview guide was designed in American English, and while all participants confirmed understanding, language nuances and cultural differences may have impacted the depth or clarity of responses (Asongwed, 2023).

Finally, the subjective nature of qualitative interviews presents limitations in terms of recall bias, social desirability, and interviewer influence (Asongwed, 2023). While reflective practices were used to address researcher bias, such subjectivity remains inherent in phenomenological research.

7. Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should aim to address the limitations outlined above and expand on the current findings in several key ways:

1) Broaden the Sample Base: Future research should include participants from multiple universities and diverse types of postsecondary institutions across the Anglophone regions. A larger and more diverse sample would enhance the transferability of findings.

2) Incorporate Funding for Broader Reach: Securing research funding would enable expanded recruitment, greater geographic coverage, and potentially mixed-methods designs that combine qualitative depth with quantitative breadth.

3) Explore Additional Theoretical Frameworks: While GST provided a useful lens, future research could benefit from alternative or complementary criminological theories. Social Disorganization Theory (SDT), for example, may offer additional insight into how community structures—or their breakdown—affect youth behavior, particularly in conflict-affected regions.

4) Examine Protective Factors More Deeply: Given that GST underrepresents protective factors, future inquiry should delve deeper into resilience mechanisms and post-traumatic growth. A strength-based approach could uncover how some youth not only avoid crime but thrive despite adversity.

5) Use Participatory and Longitudinal Designs: Employing Participatory Action

Research (PAR) or longitudinal qualitative studies could provide a more dynamic understanding of how protective factors evolve over time and across stages of conflict or recovery.

6) Culturally Adapt Research Instruments: Future studies should ensure that interview tools and communication strategies are adapted to the local cultural and linguistic context to enhance validity and participant engagement.

8. Conclusion: Building Resilience, Not Just Reducing Risk

The findings of this study contribute to an evolving body of criminological research that advocates for a paradigm shift from deficit-based models of crime prevention to more holistic, resilience-oriented frameworks. Traditional approaches have largely emphasized the identification and mitigation of risk factors associated with criminal behavior. While such strategies remain critical, this research demonstrates that equal attention must be given to protective factors—both individual and environmental—that enable individuals, particularly youth exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), to overcome adversity and avoid criminal pathways.

By systematically examining the interplay between ACEs, resilience, and youth recidivism, this study reveals that fostering resilience is not merely a supplementary intervention but a foundational component in disrupting the cycle of crime. Key protective factors—such as individual principles, foundational beliefs, supportive adult relationships, access to counseling and mentorship services, educational stability, and community connectedness—were shown to mitigate the negative outcomes associated with early trauma. These findings underscore the importance of embedding trauma-informed, strength-based strategies within criminal justice, social service, and educational systems.

Moreover, the implications of this research extend to policy and practice. A resilience-oriented framework calls for multi-sector collaboration to design interventions that are not only preventative in nature but also promotive of individual and collective well-being. Policymakers, practitioners, and scholars must reconceptualize crime prevention as an integrated process that addresses both structural inequalities and psychosocial development.

In conclusion, this study advocates for a reframing of crime prevention discourse—one that values resilience as a critical mechanism for long-term behavioral change. Future research should continue to explore the mechanisms through which resilience can be cultivated across diverse contexts, and how these mechanisms interact with systemic factors such as poverty, discrimination, and institutional response. By doing so, the field can move toward more equitable, effective, and sustainable approaches to reducing crime and fostering social resilience.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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