

POVERTY AND CRIMINALITY IN NIGERIA: THE NEXUS

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Abstract: The study analyses the nexus between poverty and criminal activities in Nigeria. The data for the study were gathered from secondary sources, including textbooks, academic journals, newspapers, and information from the official website of the Nigerian government. These data were subjected to content analysis. The study revealed that the increase in criminal activities is a result of inequality, caused by the conversion of state resources to personal ones by a few powerful elites who are serving their interests against that of generality. And that, the increase in the rate of crimes across the country was a reaction by the poverty-threatening population to have basic needs. The study further showed that more than 70 percent of Nigeria's youths who engaged in criminal activities realized that criminal activities are veritable economic activities. The study equally revealed that systemic poverty keeps people perpetually in drought, and traumatized them. And, that poverty has a psychological influence and controls people's thoughts, it pushes people to look for alternative ways of solving their problems, including harming others. And, those who have their desires and expectations in the areas of economic survival thwarted and cannot get their needs through legal means, may alternatively seek illegal means. The study concluded that there are strong connections between poverty and criminal activities that permeate the country. And if proactive steps are not urgently taken, the criminal perpetration may submerge the country. The study recommended that an economic summit should be convocated to discuss the economic future of the country and to address the issue of inequality.

Keywords: poverty, crimes, criminal activities, inequality, basic needs, and economic

Introduction

Crime and poverty are part of the challenges confronting many countries across the world. Even though different studies have shown that poverty alone is not a driver of crime, but rather crimes are usually propelled by inequality (Sugiharti, Purwono, Esquivias & Rohmawati, 2023; Fleming, 2011), yet, poverty and crime are believed to normally occur simultaneously (USAID, n.d.). Crime perpetration is not an issue limited to poor countries; there are highly rich countries that have high rates of crime. For instance, the United States is one of such countries with an unusually high homicide rate despite its prosperous economy. This notwithstanding, most of the highest rates of crime come from developing areas including Africa and South America (Fleming, 2011).

Poverty and low income have been among the most debated subjects at the international level, especially by the United Nations, as regards economic development and governmental policy. While food, clothing, and shelter remain major parts of physiological needs, otherwise referred to as biological needs, many people across the globe still do not have access to them. These are the needs that are essential for life, and people naturally have the desire to have them for their survival. Given the importance of the aforementioned

basic needs to human survival and stability, every human strives to have them, yet they do not.

Many countries of the world, Nigeria inclusive are well endowed with natural resources. While these resources are well managed and have brought about transformations in some of these countries' economies, as well as; reduced the issue of poverty, the story has not been the same with Nigeria. With the poor management of Nigeria's resources, the country's economy has either been fluctuating or remained stagnant. Consequently, the problems of low, or lack of basic needs for the survival of the people have become the order of the day. In other words, the poor management of Nigeria's resources has continued to slim down the chances of people having access to basic needs. Accordingly, the desire by the people, the majority of whom are youths to have a means of survival has been found to have contributed to the high level of crimes being perpetrated in Nigeria (Adegbami & Uche, 2016). As such, the rate at which crimes are being committed in Nigeria, especially in contemporary times is unparalleled. Hardly can a day pass without a case of crime being reported across the nation.

The situation has continued to affect individuals, communities, and the country as a whole. Corroborating the extent to which the youths are involved in crimes in Nigeria, the International Organisation for Peace Building and Social Justice (2022), as reported by David, states that more than 70 percent of Nigeria's youths engaged in criminal activities as a result of low, or lack of economic opportunity, the result of which is poverty that has continued to bite hard on the country. There is, therefore, an underlying connection between poverty and crime-induced insecurity that has continued to ravage the country (David, 2022).

In Nigeria, criminal activities have continued to increase due to weakness in the country's administrative institutions. Put differently, the weakness in the administrative mechanism of Nigeria which has allowed it to be commandeered by a few powerful elites has contributed to the breeding of crimes. These powerful elites have continued to convert state resources to personal ones, thereby serving their interests against that of generality. This has consequently increased the inequality gap (Adegbami and Uche, 2016). The poor governance system being operated in the country has continued to bring untold hardship to people; especially, the youths who are the most vibrant faction of the population of Nigeria. The increase in the rate of crimes across the country appears to be a reaction by the poverty-threatening population, who now divert their energy to criminal activities which they see as economic activities to be able to have basic needs. It is on this note that the study analyses the nexus between poverty and criminal activities in Nigeria.

Poverty and Crime: Clarification of Concepts

Poverty has become a continuous problem that has continued to pose political and ethical challenges to societies. Therefore, the concept has continued to be a subject of debate for centuries, and so, the explanation and classification of the word have, to a large extent, directed the development of approaches and policies to alleviate it (Ramphoma, 2014). Poverty is surely a familiar word that people believe they understand, but they do not. For this reason, the meaning ascribed to the word is largely dependent on the basic idea of people about it. In other words, poverty is experienced by different people in different ways; this has informed different meanings given to the word (Dixon & Macarov, 1998).

Poverty is no doubt a multidimensional concept that measures stages of deprivation being encountered by an individual, household, or community. Poverty could be viewed from the perspective of people's needs that are not adequately met. In other words, people could be said to be poor when they do not have their required needs, or when they lack the resources to get the things they need. The 1995 World Summit for Social Development under the auspices of the United Nations defines poverty thus:

Poverty has various manifestations, including lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihoods; hunger and malnutrition; ill health; limited or lack of access to education and other basic services; increased morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterized by a lack of participation in decision-making and civil, social, and cultural life (United Nations 1995a para. 2). Baratz & Grigsby (1971), see poverty as "a severe lack of physical and mental well-being, closely associated with inadequate economic resources and consumption" (Baratz & Grigsby, 1971, p. 120). For them, poverty is beyond physical as people could also be said to be poor when they are mentally inadequate. The International Labour Organization (1995) sees poverty from the perspectives of individuals or families who are not living well. Not living well in this context means, living below a particular standard, this is measured in terms of income versus consumption. According to the UN (1995), poverty is a condition whereby people are severely deprived of essential needs for their survival. These survivals need include - food, drinking water, sanitation services, health care services, shelter, and education, among other needs. These essential needs not only depend on their income but also on services provided by the government.

Ringen (1988) on his part avers that poverty is 'a standard of consumption which is below what is generally considered to be a decent minimum' (Ringen, 1988, p.354). That is, when one style, or pattern of living is below a minimum standard or is not appropriate enough, such a person is considered poor. The World Bank definition is not at variance with the one offered by Ringen. According to the World Bank, poverty is 'the inability to attain a minimal standard of living' (World Bank 1990:26). Thus, when an individual cannot meet the standard of living, or meet the international benchmark, such a person is considered poor and impoverished.

From the above, poverty can be seen as the inability to acquire one's basic needs. It is a situation of the lack of required resources that subjects one to physical deprivation. People in this situation cannot realize their basic survival needs including food, clothing, and shelter, which are considered as the needs of the lowest order, but of paramount importance.

Having attempted the conceptualization of poverty, there is a need to do the same for crime. The word "crime" could be seen as a broad word of wide significance that has no universally adopted or precise definition. Crime, for instance, is defined by Sowmyya (2014), as "a public wrong". That it is, it is an act of wrongdoing that contravenes the law of the state, which is strongly objected to by the society. According to Opp (2020), crimes are various actions or non-actions that flout criminal law. In other words, crime remains an act or omission prohibited by law that can attract punishment by fine or imprisonment. In the same vein as Opp, is Morrison (2013), who sees crime as some actions or omissions that causes harm to others, and as such, the person that causes harm is held to account for his or her misdeed and be punished accordingly in line with the laws of the land. According

to Williams, cited in Simester & Sullivan (2007), a crime can be seen as anything that is prohibited by criminal law. Tappan cited in Lanier & Henry (2001), defines crime as a deliberate act of violation of the criminal law (statutory and case law), committed without defense or excuse, and penalized by the state as a felony or misdemeanor. For Simester & Sullivan (2007), crimes, in essence, are wrongs that, cause or force people to contemplate deserting their normal socially stable behavior in their bid to defend themselves. According to Shankar (n.d.), crime is seen as an act contrary to a state's legal code or laws. Crimes may be categorized as legal or illegal. Crimes are illegal when they are punishable under the law, because, it has violated the rule of administration or law of the state. It is illegal as it involves the practice of wrongdoing that is harmful to self or against third parties, as documented in criminal law. Legal crimes, however, are not punishable because they are considered crimes committed in a bid to defend oneself (Sowmyya, 2014). Flowing from the above, crime is an unlawful act, a gross violation of law, or a legal wrong by someone or a group of people against individuals, group of people, or state, that contravenes the laws of the land and is punishable in the public interest.

Theoretical Framework: Economic Theory of Crime

The study adopted the economic theory of crime as its theoretical framework. The theory was developed through a seminar article presented in 1968 by Nobel Laureate Gary Becker. The theory emphasizes the fact that crimes are committed by the offenders for economic motives or economic gain. Put differently, economic crimes are conceived by individuals or groups of people who deliberately act illegally for financial rewards. According to Becker's postulation, people preferred to engage in criminal activities when they considered the expected benefits and rewards from committing crimes to be more than the expected costs of perpetrating crimes, which include the costs of any foregone legal alternatives. In essence, the economic theory of crime is interpreted to be a unique case of the general theory of rational behavior under uncertainty. In other words, from an economic viewpoint, criminals are considered rational economic agents, because of their ability to weigh the probability of being arrested and apprehended before they commit any crime. And, the likelihood of getting arrested and apprehended should deter criminals, but the expected gain they assumed exceeded the costs of committing crimes encouraged them to go ahead and commit crimes (Garoupa, 2014, Raj & Rahman, 2023).

The knowledge of Becker's economic theory of crime shows that crime is induced by diverse reasons, pressures, and difficulties besetting different people in different environments. The difficulties faced by the people, especially the economic difficulties force them to make a "rational economic model of criminal behavior". That is, people commit crimes when they realize that the margin between criminal benefits and a criminal penalty exceeds benefits from legitimate employment (Kang 2016).

Nigeria can be viewed from the lens of the economic theory of crime, the country is populated by over 200 million people (Nigeria Bureau of Statistics, 2023), many of whom are not faring well in terms of the economy. And so, poverty and crime are some of the key challenges faced by the country and its people, and this has become the bane to national development. Nigeria is no doubt a blessed country with vast oil riches, an expanse of fertile land, and good vegetation. Despite the country's naturally endowed blessing, it has not reflected in the lives of many Nigerians, as many of them still wallow in abject poverty. The naturally endowed resources could have earned the country a special place among the

comity of developed economies of the World, however, the resources are been shared among a few political officeholders and their top civil servants' counterparts (Adegbami & Adepoju, 2017). It is not surprising, therefore, that currently more than 133 million, in other words, 63 percent of Nigeria's citizens are in abject poverty. This set of people are experiencing deprivations in basic amenities including - safe water, a balanced diet, and adequate sanitation (Nigeria Poverty Map, 2023). The situation has got the people frustrated. Out of their frustration, they became aggressive, and desperately needed to survive. And so, "they end up in crimes as alternative and profitable business activities" (Adegbami & Adepoju, 2017, p. 2).

From the above, it is evident that poverty in Nigeria has continued to push many Nigerians into criminal activities, as these set of Nigerians especially the youths have found out that criminal activities are veritable economic activities. The need to survive has forced many Nigerians to be involved in inordinate activities such as hostage-taking, armed robbery kidnapping, human trafficking, baby-making factories, ritual killings, hired assassins; hooliganism, banditry, and insurgent groups. This has continued to threaten the corporate existence of the country. In essence, Becker must have probably had Nigeria in mind for the postulation of the economic theory of crime, for the theory accurately suits the contemporary situation of the country.

Poverty and Criminality Activities: The Connectedness

Discusses concerning causes of crime have continued to rage, but revolve around causal inference in economic models that deal with the utility of crime. The discussions have shown the relationships between social and economic structure, and the frequency of crime being perpetrated (Neubeck, 2006). Although some scholars have argued that poverty has multiple causative factors, many of these factors are established in society's economic, social, and cultural structures. Therefore, the relationships between crime and poverty centered on two key premises, that is, economic inequality, as well as, social stratification. Since economic growth and development in many countries are stunted, it leads to categorizing people or creating classes in society. In essence, the categorization, vis-à-vis social and economic inequality does breed relative deprivation, as well as, social exclusion of certain people who are considered as the lower classes. This always results in higher levels of poverty, which are directly proportional to high waves of crime in society (LawBirdie, 2023).

The relationship between poverty and crime is contentious and controversial. While it is increasingly believed in some quarters that poverty does not instigate crime, there is much evidence linking them together. Suffice it to say that, the lack of access to necessities of life, coupled with the lack of opportunity for social, as well as, economic improvement, do create a breeding ground for criminal activity. As such, it is well established that those who live in poverty tend to be attracted to crimes, as a result of a lack of resources to satisfy their needs, and the poor law-enforcement structures within the state (Insidetime, 2024). In other words, poverty can push people to commit crimes, as more of the people who live in poor areas are more likely to be involved in crimes when compared with their wealthier counterparts, as these set of people are frequently driven by their need to survive and have access to basic needs for themselves and their families. The aforementioned was duly corroborated by David who unequivocally affirms the contemporary situation in Nigeria. According to him:

With around 70% of the population under 35 years of age, poverty and a lack of economic opportunity are driving many younger people to turn towards criminality and terrorism to earn a living, to confer status, and to survive. Extensive qualitative research has established a clear causal link between poverty and insecurity (David, 2022, para. 3).

In essence, systemic and protracted poverty keeps people perpetually in dearth or drought, and when this happens people are traumatized because of the lack of basic needs. The condition tends to push people to commit crimes (Nnam & Arua, 2021).

In their studies, titled “The Plight of Female Prisoners in Nigeria and the Dilemma of Health Right Violations”, Solomon, Nwankwoala & Ushi, found that most of the female offenders in many of Nigeria's prisons are poor and uneducated. They state further that woman, particularly in rural areas are poor carrying the burden of providing basic needs for their families, their inability to provide these essential needs drives them to commit crimes. (Solomon, Nwankwoala & Ushi, 2014).

Lieberman & Smith, in their studies, put forward that a high rate of poverty is a correlate of high crime rates (Lieberman & Smith, 1986). In essence, a poor standard of living, vis-à-vis lack of basic needs for the people can make them react and involved in illegal activities. Poverty, which is caused by different reasons, can make people not to be happy as a result of their inability to have what they want, and at the time they want it. Thus, poverty does determine a person's thoughts (Walton, 2018), such that, when it dawns on a person that he or she cannot get his or her basic needs, such a person can choose the easiest and alternative way of solving his or her problem by harming other people. In essence, poverty has a psychological influence on people and can make them depressed (Knifton & Inglis, 2020), and so, desperate to do anything to solve their problem, especially through crimes which are considered veritable economic activities.

According to Johnstone (2021), although measuring people's personality and success cannot be based solely on money, however, money can be the root of many challenges. Money, for instance, has the propensity of luring people into criminal lust, pushing them to lose their humanity, and violating the healthy progress of society. This is so because, most of the poor people are probable not to have access to quality education, skills acquisition, and job training. As such, they are most likely not to have a chance of being gainfully employed or underemployed. These set of people cannot afford decent accommodation, and so, are likely to be on the street where gangs and drug misuse are predominant, where they can easily dip their hands into criminal activities as the only means of getting their basic needs (Johnstone, 2021). Crime has been an aspect of people's life and is more common in poor inner-city neighborhoods when compared with more affluent environments. Crime can be seen as a complex issue that stems from various sources that are not far-fetched from lack of education, and generational poverty among others (Holzman-Escareno, 2009).

In their studies titled “Good Governance and Prison Congestion in Nigeria: The Case of Maximum-Security Prison, Ilesa”, in Nigeria, Adegami & Uche gave a detailed analysis of the connection between poverty and crimes. According to them, the majority of the prison inmates in Nigeria were youths within the age range of 18 and 45. Most of these inmates, although from poor family backgrounds managed to attend higher institutions, after which they got married with families to take care of. Most of these inmates, however, have no stable job or means of livelihood; while a few of them were underemployed earning between N11,000 and N15,000 as salaries monthly. Many of them would have

loved to work in standard government establishments including – The Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPC Ltd), Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Customs Service, the Military, and the Universities; while some would have wished to work with banks and other multinational companies. Thus, the inmates find themselves in prison because of their desires to make money, and to keep their bodies and souls together through illegal means. The set of inmates committed crimes such as - armed robbery, burglary /stealing, forgery, impersonation, and obtaining by false pretence, in order to have food on their tables (Adegbami & Uche, 2015).

In a similar vein, Bakare attributed the rising wave of crimes in Nigeria to poverty. According to him, all the crimes in Nigeria are executed by youths most of whom have had no means of sustenance or livelihood for years. He further states that poverty is forcing the youths to become members of evil organizations. And that Nigeria is now a colony of banditry, where bandits operate at will. To him poverty is a twin sister to leprosy, while leprosy attacks the body, poverty attacks the mind, and attacked minds engage in criminal activities (Bakare cited in Nwannah, 2022).

As poverty continues to mount in Nigeria, so also do criminal activities. Once poverty is widespread, coupled with high levels of economic and social desires or expectations, the stage has already been set for criminal activities. Those who have their desires and expectations in the areas of economic survival thwarted and could not fit into the expected social status of his or her environment, through legal means, may alternatively seek illegal means for his or her advantage. He further stresses that poverty is a social problem that calls for special attention which the country's managers have not been able to adequately attend to (Odumosu, 1999).

From the foregoing, it is evident that poverty has contributed in no small measure to crime perpetration in Nigeria. As the population continues to increase without commensurate development strategies or policies from the government, the high rate of unemployment becomes the order of the day. Given the continued increase in the unemployment population, poverty continues to set in, as many people have no job, and so, have no access to the means of livelihood. Their desires to survive by all means push many of them to be involved in illegal activities to make ends meet.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

Crime and poverty have constituted some of the challenges facing many countries across the world. Crime commission is not an issue limited to poor countries only; there are highly rich countries that have high rates of crime. While food, clothing, and shelter remain major parts of physiological needs, otherwise referred to as biological needs, many people across the globe still do not have access to them. Given the importance of the aforementioned basic needs to human survival and stability, every human strives to have them, yet they do not. While many countries across the world managed their resources well, and have brought about transformations to their countries' economies, and reduced the issue of poverty, the story has not been the same with Nigeria. With the poor management of Nigeria's resources, the country's economy has either been fluctuating or remained stagnant. The desire by the people, the majority of whom are youths to have a means of survival has been found to have contributed to the high level of crimes being perpetrated in Nigeria. Poverty has continued to push many Nigerians into criminal activities, as these set of Nigerians especially the youths have found out that criminal activities are veritable economic

activities. The need to survive has forced many of them to be involved in inordinate activities such as hostage-taking, armed robbery kidnapping, human trafficking, baby-making factories, ritual killings, hired assassins; hooliganism, banditry, and insurgent groups. This has continued to threaten the corporate existence of the country. The study concluded that there are strong connections between poverty and criminal activities that permeate the country. More than 70 percent of Nigeria's youths engaged in criminal activities as a result of low, or lack of economic opportunity. And, if proactive steps are not urgently taken, the criminal perpetration may submerge the country. The study, therefore, recommended that an economic summit should be convoked to discuss the economic future of the country and to address the issue of inequality. Any act of misgovernance should be discouraged by overhauling the anti-corruption agencies, and stiff penalties should be meted out to corrupt leaders. This could only be achieved, if Nigerian legislators can be forced by the “mass movement” to make laws in line with the above-mentioned recommendations.

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