

THE URBAN RECIPE FOR CRIME AND DEVIANCE IN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

Urban life is viewed by many with ambivalence. While the bright lights remain irresistible, the feeling of insecurity and vulnerability to violent crimes and/or the fear of raising deviant children are common reasons for abhorring urban life. Yet, many Nigerians feel compelled to live in these crime-prone cities. Scholars have for decades had to grapple with the causes and consequences of high rates of crime in cities all over the world. Albeit in a covert manner, there appears to be some consensus on some factors which make urban dwellers more prone to criminality and deviance. Some of these features include unemployment, anonymity, crowding inter alia. The inability of the state to keep records of its population size and distribution gives a peculiar tint to the study of criminality and deviance in Nigerian cities as well as other cities in peripheral states with similar experiences. This not-too-well explored angle to urban criminality and deviance is the focus of this academic exercise. Through a survey of urban dwellers, the study explores the manner in which impersonality, anonymity, heterogeneity, crowding, conspicuous consumption and unemployment combine to create an atmosphere in which crime and deviance thrive. The study closes with a discussion of policy initiatives on ways of checking urban crime and deviance with the view to ameliorating the overall human condition.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Population registers are virtually non-existent in Nigeria. Attempts by the government to initiate a process that ensures the registration of all citizens and a compilation of data on persons have always been thwarted by corrupt government bureaucrats and politicians. In addition to this unwholesome reality, very little is known about spatial distribution in Nigeria, also because the collection of data has been largely politicized and intertwined with other corrupt practices in Nigeria. Policies aimed at checking rural-urban migration have failed and urban centres in Nigeria are now home to a large chunk of the population. The exact proportion of Nigerians resident in urban areas remains unknown and estimates in common use are largely unreliable as a result of some trends in intra-city movements which are hardly factored into projections. The result is an urban population whose size and composition are unknown. This state of ignorance about population size in urban areas and the manner of people resident in the areas lies at the heart of the problem of urban deviance and criminality in Nigerian cities.

Methods

The study adopts a method that combines FGDs with a survey. A cluster of urban dwellers is identified in Surulere, a town in the city of Lagos. A questionnaire is used to elicit information on specific aspects of urban life that turbocharge deviance and criminality. The survey is replicated for a cluster of rural dwellers in Agunfoye-

Lugbusi, a village on the outskirts of Ikorodu, a Lagos suburb to give room for comparison. Furthermore, FGDs are conducted to probe into sanctions employed to ensure that members of society live by societal norms. This combination of a quantitative and a qualitative method strengthens the study, giving room for findings which shed light in a special way on the theme of urban deviance and criminality.

The Urban recipe crime and deviance

Against the background of urban areas without records of inhabitants, it is not difficult to apprehend the special way in which unemployment, anonymity, heterogeneity, crowding, conspicuous consumption contribute to the creation of a criminogenic atmosphere.

Nigerian urban centres attract more manpower than they have the capacity to absorb. A city with the absorptive capacity for a thousand attracts a million. The result is the creation of a pool of unemployed able-bodied men merely seeking to survive. These may not be sufficiently dissuaded from criminality.

The consideration of the pros and cons of involvement in criminal practices often go in favour of the pros as intending criminals stand very little chance of being apprehended as a result of the high level of anonymity provided by urban life. Moreover, the intensification of nervous stimulation as Simmel would put it makes urban dwellers unduly calculating and prone to deviant and criminal acts.

Urban centres in Nigeria are almost synonymous with squalor and children raised in such areas often lack good education. This propels the cycle of poverty which in turn makes for the creation of a criminogenic environment.

The study also explores the role of perceived freedom in urban areas. Urban dwellers exercise their rights to own property and sometimes end up indulging in conspicuous consumption even when they find themselves surrounded by people who can barely feed. This and other expressions of freedom such as choice of clothing are in some ways invitations to assailants.

The study raises a question on the specific ways in which ICT has contributed to urban criminality and deviance while recommending better urban planning, regulation of rural-urban movements and the creation of an urban data bank for major cities in the state.