

RISING CRIMINALITY AND CHALLENGES OF CRIME REPORTING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the upsurge in crimes in Nigeria as well as the challenges of crime reporting in major Nigerian newspapers. It establishes that the worship of money and the erosion of ethical, moral and cultural values have, to a large extent, contributed to the rising criminality in the country. The paper also finds out that organization's news slants, ethnic and gender prejudices have, in some instances, coloured efforts by some of the newspapers to achieve objectivity in their crime reports. It calls for ethical, moral and cultural reorientation of Nigerians, especially the youths, to curb the rising criminality in the country. The paper concludes that initiating more training programmes for crime reporters and some media managers will enhance their objectivity in crime reporting.

Keywords: *Rising Criminality, Challenges, Crime Reporting, Nigeria*

Introduction

The upsurge in criminal activities in Nigeria in recent times has, indeed, reached a frightening dimension that we do not need the services of a soothsayer to discern that the nation may slide into anarchy if nothing is urgently done by the government and relevant security agencies to curb the heinous activities of the undesirable elements in our midst. Extant studies and reports on crime show that the phenomenon is on the increase in Nigeria. The situation is no less in other countries in Africa and elsewhere. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Lagos State and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) reported a total of 58,566 crime cases in 2016, while Katsina and Abia states had the lowest percentage share of total cases reported.

While Lagos State reported 45,385 crime cases, the FCT reported 13,181 crime cases. A breakdown of the crime cases revealed that Lagos State reported 15,429 cases of offence against

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persons; 22,885 cases of offence against property; 6,768 cases of offence against lawful authority and 306 cases of offence against Local Acts. Similarly, the FCT reported 2,984 cases of offence against persons; 9,350 cases against property; 843 cases against lawful authority and four cases against Local Acts. In all, 125,790 cases were reported from the 36 states in 2016. Offence against property topped the list with 65,397 cases; offence against persons came second with 45,554 cases while offence against lawful authority and Local Acts reported the least with 12,144 and 2,695 cases respectively. Lagos State had the highest percentage share of total cases reported with 36.08 percent and 45,385 cases reported. FCT and Delta followed with 10.48 percent and 13,181 and 6.25 percent and 7,867 cases recorded respectively. Abia and Zamfara states had 0.29 percent and 364 cases and 0.38 and 483 cases reported respectively. Katsina State had the lowest percentage share of total cases reported with 0.10 percent and 120 cases recorded. (*Premium Times*, October 7, 2017). In "Coverage of Crime and Violence in Nigerian Media: Matters Arising", E.O. Soola argues that "the state of insecurity in Nigeria today is such that it is not an overstatement to conclude that the Nigerian nation is under siege" (1).

Soola agrees that the problem is more pronounced in the urban centres. However, he submits that "neither the urban, the sub-urban nor the rural is immune to civil, ethnic, political and religious violence which, in the last decade or so, have plagued Nigeria and currently threaten to tear communities and ethnic groups apart" (1). The Nigeria 2019 Crime and Safety Report (Lagos) says that crime is prevalent in Lagos and throughout Nigeria. The most commonly reported crimes, according to the report, are armed robbery, kidnap for ransom and fraud. In "Nigeria Crime Index Assessment and Classification", Gabriel Agboola Adetula observes that robbery and murder rank high in the list of Nigeria's crime index. Also, the 2011 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report revealed that there were 468,000 cases of homicides globally. Out of the figure, more than one-third or 36 percent occurred in Africa, 31 percent in the Americas, 27 percent in Asia, 5 percent in Europe and 1 percent in the tropical Pacific region. The report blamed the situation on global economic crisis, food insecurity, inflation, weak law enforcement and other factors.

Also, the extant media reports on crimes in Nigeria reveal the enormity of the problem. From the North West where bandits are literally in charge to the North East where the Boko Haram insurgents are daily baring their fangs on the society that has neglected them, the country is, indeed, at

war with various types of criminals who are probably on revenge mission. In the North Central geo-political zone, the killer herdsmen (whether they are Fulanis or their foreign collaborators) are having a field day, killing and maiming innocent Nigerians without adequate response by the security agencies. The South East, South South and South West geo-political zones are also not spared of the activities of the killer herdsmen.

The herdsmen have attacked farmers in Ekiti, Ondo, Oyo, Edo, Delta, Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Ebonyi and other states in the South. Also, in the three geo-political zones in the South, armed robbers and kidnappers can be said to be in charge. The enormity of the criminal activities in the country was recently revealed by the acting Inspector-General of Police (IGP), Mohammed Adamu. According to the nation's number one cop not less than, 1,071 persons were killed in crime-related cases across the country in the first quarter of 2019 (*The Punch* May 1, 2019 p.2). Also, other national newspapers such as *The Sun*, *The Guardian*, *This Day*, and *Vanguard* reported the story. And not less than 685 persons were kidnapped across the country between January and April 2019 while 767 of the persons killed were from the North.

Further distribution of the casualty figures showed that the North West topped the list with 436 deaths, North Central, 250 and South South, 130. On a national level, Zamfara State came top with 203 murder cases, Kaduna, 112 and Benue State, 90. The country also recorded 175 deaths from banditry between January and April 2019 with Zamfara State having 104 cases. While the bandits killed 21 people in Katsina State, Sokoto State had 19 cases. Kidnapping for ransom is another worrisome crime in the country. The menace which started in the Niger Delta region as a tool to protest the environmental degradation of the oil-rich region by international oil companies and official neglect of the zone by the Federal Government later became nurtured in the South East where some unemployed youths made it a thriving business. It is now a booming business in every geo-political zone of the country. The kidnapping business has almost rendered the Kaduna-Abuja Highway impassable in recent times. In the North West zone, not less than 365 persons were kidnapped within the period under review. The North Central recorded 145 kidnap cases. Due to the activities of the rampaging bandits in Zamfara, the state had 281 victims of kidnapping. In Kogi and Niger states, 65 and 51 persons were kidnapped, respectively during the same period. Of the 212 major armed robbery cases recorded during the

period under review, the North topped the table with 130 major robbery cases or 59.43 percent.

The North Central had 81 robbery cases, Niger State 32, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), 23 and Zamfara 18. The foregoing data came from official statistics reeled out by the Inspector General of Police. Considering our poor statistical culture, what is officially sanctioned may well be a tip of the iceberg. There may likely be many unreported cases. The following major Nigerian newspapers, *The Daily Sun*, *The Guardian*, *The Punch*, *This Day* and *Vanguard* serve as sources for data collection for the study.

Conceptual clarifications

Black's Law Dictionary defines crime as "An act that the law makes punishable; the breach of a legal duty treated as the subject matter of a criminal proceeding" (339). According to Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, crime is defined as "An act or the commission of an act that is forbidden or the omission of a duty that is commanded by a public law and that makes the offender liable to punishment by the law" (296). It also states that crime is a cross violation of law, a grave offense, especially against morality (296). Therefore, the meaning of crime in this study is as defined above.

The nation's worsening insecurity

The worsening security situation in the country has attracted comments from prominent Nigerians. The National Chairman of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Uche Secondus, recently decried the level of bloodletting in the country occasioned by criminalities across the country and said that these could only happen in a country without government. Secondus was unhappy that the problem had persisted from Kaduna to Zamfara, Benue to Taraba, Plateau and Lagos to Enugu. He even lamented that the President's home state of Katsina lost about eight local government areas to the bandits (*This Day* April 30, 2019, Pack Page). Perhaps Secondus is not alone in this lamentation of the country's degenerating security situation. In a recent interview, the Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese, Dr. Matthew Hassan Kukah, traced the nation's current travails to our leaders' inability to manage its diversity. According to the cleric, the quest for national cohesion has remained an illusion while marketing Nigeria has become an act of frustration as too many issues have not been resolved (*Saturday Vanguard* May 4, 2019 p.7). There is no doubt that Kukah's

observation is valid. However, we shall return to some of the issues he raised such as population explosion, national cohesion, marketing Nigeria, our inability to craft a narrative and unresolved issues later.

In a recent media interview, one of the surviving nationalists and First Republic Minister, Chief Mbazulike Amaechi, has equally expressed sadness on the Nigerian condition. Mbazulike expressed sadness that this was not the Nigeria he and others founded. He lamented that this was not the Nigeria in which they spilled their blood and went to prison, went to detention on many occasions (*Saturday Sun* May 4, 2019 p. 38). Chinedu Osakwe also observes that across the country, there is deadly game of kidnap and ransom as well as increasing incidents of violent criminality with many parts of Nigeria approximating the Hobbesian state of nature (5).

Social dimension to crimes

There is no doubt that the failure of any state to deliver the public good to its people can fuel high level of criminality in that country. Soala captures it very well by stating that many criminal acts of today are a reflection of social unrest, political repression, joblessness and systematic exclusion from 'the good life'(4). In their study, "An Assessment of the Relationship Between Crime and Social Exclusion in Nigeria," Agboti and Nnam hold that social exclusion rather than poverty causes crime in the society (158). The gap between the highest and the lowest paid civil servant in the country is so wide to contemplate. The salary of the political office holders is so high that there is even no need to do a comparison. Can one compare the take home pay of a Nigerian senator put at N13.5 million with the N18,000 but now N30,000 minimum wage of the lowest paid worker in the country? The rising unemployment in the country can partly explain the involvement of youths in crimes. It has been projected that the nation's unemployment rate is likely to reach 33.5 percent by 2020 (*This Day* May 3, 2019 p.6). While Nigeria's unemployment is rising, the country's population is also said to be increasing. Recently, the United Nations (UN) put the nation's population at 201 million (*This Day* April 30, 2019 p.9). Although the Federal Government has disputed this figure, there is nothing it can do in the absence of a national census figure in the past ten or more years. Our extant national population figure is based on projections by many UN agencies and it is not good for national planning and economic development.

There is no way an idle youth will not find something doing to keep body and soul together. This is true because nature abhors a vacuum. Some of the crimes committed in the country include armed robbery, kidnapping, rape, domestic violence, child abuse, murder, burglary, financial crimes, cybercrimes, fraud, terrorism and many more. Why do youths take to crimes? Why do people, especially youths, take to crimes? People usually commit crimes because of the following causes, which are not exhaustive, poverty, family conditions, peer pressure the society, drugs abuse, unemployment, deprivation and unequal distribution of wealth, unfair judicial system, inadequate policing and others. The Nigerian society of today is so materialistic than what it was many years ago. People now worship money even in the holy places. Our politics is monetized as politicians buy votes from impoverished voters willing to part their votes at the price of N1000 or more or even less depending on who is buying and who is selling.

Stemming the rising criminality

To stem the rising criminality in the country, the government (Federal and State) must address and improve the social conditions and welfare of Nigerians as enshrined in Section 14 (2) (b) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended). It should create many jobs to reduce the rate of unemployment, especially among youths. The crass materialism in the society must be curbed in favour of ethical orientation based on our cultures and values. It must ensure adequate security for all Nigerians. There must be a conscious effort to go back to our roots and internalize those cultural mores that make for an orderly and peaceful society. While globalization is good, we should not because of it forget our culture and things that worked for us before. We must take the best of the two worlds (Africa and Europe) and concretize them for our societal benefits. We must invoke and appropriate the benefits of the extended family system and Igbo spirit of enterprise and not our prowess in kidnapping and other social evils.

Crime reporting challenges

Like any other beat, crime reporters as journalists also face the same problems that other Nigerian journalists face in the course of performing their constitutional duties. The number one constraint is access to information, especially accurate crime statistics and incidents. Although the Nigeria Police Force have tried to give information to journalists but they do

so when it suits their image. What the typical crime reporter could not get from the police, his sources, the victims or witnesses, he will definitely make up. He must file stories to his editor of any major crime incident in the city. The lack of access to information can partly explain why crime statistics differ from one newspaper to another even though the body of the story is likely to be the same. Another major problem has to do with the uncooperative attitude of victims of crime. In most cases such as rape and kidnapping, the victims hardly cooperate with crime journalists in terms of divulging vital information. Egbuji (1998) states that some victims of crime may be devastated to talk to the media because of fears of what the media will make out of the story (49).

Arising from the above, when they talk to the media, they tend to hide vital information. The victims of kidnap are the worst hit in this regard. They hardly reveal the ransom paid probably because the kidnappers had warned them against divulging such information. To victims of rape, they feel that giving information to journalists on their ordeal will amount to double victimization which will further add to their trauma. And because of the way rape cases are handled in the country, the victims are stereotyped by the law enforcement agents and treated with derision. Our courts do not help matters. Proving rape cases in Nigeria is not easy. It will even be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than to prove a rape case in the country. The law on rape tends to favour the perpetrator rather than the victim. The journalist may be threatened in the course of investigating crime stories, especially fraud and murder cases. Such threats may adversely affect some crime reports.

Some journalists have lost their lives in the course of performing their duties and no compensation was paid to their families. Another problem crime reporters face, is how to achieve a balance between accurate reporting and sensationalism. It should be noted that the duty of every journalist is to file stories to his news medium, especially stories that will sell the paper and attract advert patronage. Therefore the duty of a journalist is to get a story, the more sensational the better. To a journalist, a dog bites a man is not a good story at all. But if a man bites a dog, that to the journalist is the good story.

Crime stories sell papers when they are sensationalized and dramatized. The same can be said of rape stories or stories involving women. Political stories also sell papers. Remember that most media outfits in the country are privately owned. As business concerns, their primary objective is

to make profit while informing, educating and entertaining the public. To make their stories acceptable to the news editor or whoever is in charge, crime reporters write their stories in such a way to attract the attention of readers, and they also sensationalize them. Dorfman and Thorson (1998) had rightly observed that "reporting on crime and violence has been a staple of newspaper diet since before the penny press." This view tallies with Soola's submission that since media owners are in business to make profit and since crime and violence sell newspapers, no media operator will likely spew out a juicy rape, commando-like bank robbery, murder, high-profile assassination or a monumental fraud (4). We also agree with Sandman, Rubin and Sachsman that crime and violence enjoy large space in the media (412). However, we do not agree with them that this is so because "they are ridiculously easy to cover" (412). We also agree with them to some extent that crime reporting favours the official viewpoint because the reports are obtained mainly from the police and the courts (412).

In addition, crime reporters behave like women who cook soup and add maggi, pepper, *ogiri* and other condiments to make it taste good. In an attempt to sensationalize the crime report, balance is sacrificed at times. Therefore, to make papers sell, crime stories must of necessity be sensationalized and even feminized if the female gender is involved and sometimes ethnicized if a target ethnic group is involved or religionized to achieve the set agenda of the medium involved. For instance, if an unknown Igbo man is involved in kidnapping, to cast an attention-grabbing headline, his ethnic group must be highlighted. At times, the perpetrator's town, parents, wife and children are brought into the picture. Stories of herdsmen will not be complete without the prefix, Fulani. In the same way, the story of any Igbo killed in Kano will not be complete without it being prefixed with Igbo.

Even the Federal Government is not free from this bias. We recall that a certain senior official of the government recently gave out names of Nigerian crime suspects in Dubai, all being Igbo and cleverly refused to reveal the identity of a Nigerian female drug courier killed in Saudi Arabia (*The Punch* March 31, 2019 p.12). This is a classical example of ethnicization of crime. For this deliberate omission, the official involved received enough bashing from the social media activists. It is this type of media reporting that hinders objectivity in crime reporting and should be discouraged. Crime stories published in mainstream media in the country at times tarnish the image of the country and these are the stories that foreign media show

much interest in. Let me reiterate that lack of access to official information on crime and other stories can make a crime reporter or any other journalist to write whatever he has and add up where necessary. This way, some of the reports have suffered from outright misrepresentation, falsehood or fake news as in the example of the death hoax of former Nigerian president, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe.

Ensuring objectivity in crime reporting

To ensure objectivity in crime reporting, the media professionals must go back and embrace one of the ethics of media practice, objectivity and the need for a balanced report. To achieve this, both sides of the story must be reflected in the report. The police should be more liberal in releasing crime reports to journalists. In the United States, the police can easily talk to the media but not so in Nigeria. Victims of crime should see a crime reporter as a friend and give him necessary information that will help him balance his story.

There is need for more training for crime reporters and some media managers to ensure more balance in crime reporting. The media in general must embrace developmental journalism by saying more what is good about us than what is bad. We tend to say more of the negatives. The western media say more good about their countries. We should emulate them and tell our own stories by reflecting more of our good side than the bad and the ugly. Every country has its good and bad sides as well. The American media paint America as the bastion of democracy and human freedom and the good life in spite of high crime level, institutionalized racism and sexism. The media should not twist report to impugn an ethnic group, religious body or the female. The media should report the facts and nothing but the facts. They should leave the family and ethnic group of a perpetrator of crime. They should not include the images of children in such reports. Government should regulate the ubiquitous social media which has literally made every person a journalist and a reporter without adequate gate keeping and training. A social media without regulation has bred information anarchy, fake news syndrome and numerous aberrations.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the rising criminality in the country and the challenges of crime reporting in Nigeria. The first aspect of the paper discussed the scope of the criminality, the causes and possible solutions

while the second aspect deals with the challenges of crime reporting and what can be done to rectify the situation. The paper concludes that ethical orientation and creation of more jobs can curb the rising criminality in the country. It recommends that adequate training for crime reporters and some media managers will ensure objectivity in crime reporting.

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