

POVERTY, HUNGER AND YOUTH CRIMINALITY IN BENIN CITY, NIGERIA

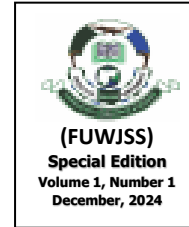
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Abstract

Poverty and hunger remain widespread and prominent in contemporary Nigeria; resulting in heightened criminal activities among the youths. This experience is becoming more complicated as reliable social support systems for significant others are dwindling. In Benin City-Nigeria, most of the youths are unemployed and they are trapped in poverty and hunger. To survive, most of these youths resort to crime. Employing the strain theory, this paper discusses crime and delinquency in Benin City as effects of the pressure of poverty and hunger upon the youths. The study wherein data for this paper emerged adopted the mixed survey method involving quantitative and qualitative research techniques. Statistical results confirmed 79.4% prevalence of poverty and hunger among youths in Benin City. The paper concludes that poverty and hunger are socially generated and these significantly influence the commission of crime by youths in Benin City. The paper recommends that governments at all levels in Benin City should create conducive and enabling environments for the creative involvement of youth in empowerment projects and support initiatives as this will enable the emergence of young entrepreneurs in Benin City.

Keywords: Poverty, crime, youth, hunger, social construction

Introduction

The poverty trend in Nigeria has surge from 9.8% in 2016 to 11.9% in 2023 leaving Nigeria as the poverty capital of the world (Statista, 2023). Though the government has been criticized for this, the upsurge is now ravaging the citizenry. The biting effect of this challenge consequently fall the heaviest on youth which has since become a motivation for them to recourse to crime as alternative to ameliorate the perceived socioeconomic plight (Longe, 2013). According to WHO (2001) poverty is multidimensional in nature. Generally poverty constitutes lack of opportunity which translates to lack of empowerment and insecurity. This particular inability makes people vulnerable in the society especially youths.

Poverty can be examine from two perspective according to Geertz (1968) the first being financial paucity which connote both an insufficiency of cash and chronic inadequacy of material resources to satisfy basic human needs such as, good diet, recreational activities, and warmth that keep the body and sold together and the second being powerlessness which mean lack of choices. Poverty is a condition that exists when people lack basic means to survive. (Gurr, 1970) believe that poverty is analogous to poor-health, deplorable condition of life, low level of education, lack of shelter and high unemployment rate. Youth are most affected by poverty because they are vulnerable and poverty has long-term impacts on their well-being even into adulthood. Given this condition, many youths are recruited into the world of crime and violence accompany with widespread desire to meet material and economic objectives (Mbah, 2001). Subsequently, youth in Benin City engage in crimes and other criminal activities to make up for perceive socioeconomic disadvantage.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) notes that 47.4 percent of family in Nigeria lives in households that spend less than 400 naira per day. In a multidimensional overlapping deprivation analysis approach approximately 54% of families in Nigeria are multidimensionally facing at least three deprivations across seven dimensions of individual rights including nutrition, healthcare, education, water, sanitation, adequate housing, and information. Benin City houses several families that are under privilege and materially disadvantaged (Longe, 2013). Popularly identified as those

living below poverty line, their lives represent socio-economic challenges unique to those in developing economies that often engage in different criminal activities as a means of survival. Howbeit though, several explanations appear to rationalize poverty and youth involvement in crime. These explanations range from biological (Gibson & Rafter, 2006; Rafter, 2018), psychological (Andrew & Bonta, 2014), situational (Wikstrom, Oberwittler, Treiber, & Hardie, 2012) and socio-economic (Cerin, & Leslie, 2008). The general idea suggests that poverty is a social product that occurs beyond traditional boundaries and influence youth involvement in criminal behavior and activities (Ajibade & Adenike, 2009). This premise suggests that poverty is a social current capable of influencing human behavior, quality of life and individual engagement (Oduwole, 2015). Crime is one of the faces of poverty that is rife among young people in Benin City. Nigeria is one of the poorest countries in the world with about 75% of her population living below poverty line coupled with extremely low per capital income (Longe, 2013). The spread and the galloping rate of crime and criminality among young people in Benin City has been linked as direct import of poverty which have severely not only harmed human capital development but also the economic, social, and political development in the society.

In Benin City, youth related subject matter has always appeared to gain economic, political and civil attention usually as a controversial topical discourse with serious implications for the economy and national development (Taiwo, 2016; Agunbiade, 2014). The youths are a major source of concern to the government on issues that bothers on unemployment, crime and poverty, and violence as well as a source of labour force to grow the economy (Oduwole, 2015; Nigeria-Socio Economic Assessment, 2011). There is no universally accepted definition of a youth, owing perhaps to events associated with demographic, economic, financial and socio-cultural circumstances. However, the United Nations defines a youth or young person as those within the age of 15-24 (United Nation Habitat, 2008). The African Youth Charter defines them as individuals within the age of 15-35 (African Union Youth Charter, 2006). For the Nigerian government, a youth or a young person is one within the age of 18-35 (National Youth Policy, 2001). This is as a result of the fact that this category

represents the most active, the most volatile, and the most vulnerable segment of the population socio-economically and otherwise. Majority of young people are faced with challenges that include poor education, inadequate parental up-bringing, gender discrimination, unemployment and poverty. The case of youth in Benin City captures this experience; they epitomize inventiveness and social disposition capable of affecting economic growth and development. If issues concerning youth in Benin City are not properly addressed, it could become the basis for social unrest and abtrusive extraction that might be difficult to comprehend for the society at large. To these also can be added moral decadence in the society, political manipulation of youth organizations, lack of appropriate role models and cult activities which leave them exposed and vulnerable.

Prevalence of Poverty and Hunger in Nigeria

Poverty is deprivative in nature. It creates a deep sense of dependence, lack of opportunities, and low self-confidence in people (Longe & Opelusi, 2016). Sen (1990) defines it as capacity deprivation; which the UNDP (2010) identifies in three dimensions of human development index: Health, Education and Standard of living. Poverty occurs where surplus is available to go round but it is appropriated by few to the detriment of many (World Bank & FOS, 2008). Statistic revealed that 3.9% of Nigerian population are extremely poor, 29.8% are poor, 59.1% are moderate households, 6.1% are fairly rich and 1.1% are rich (UNDP, 2010). This extrapolation arguably represents the reality in Benin City where incidence of poverty remains high with one out of every two person living under the poverty line (UNDP, 2010).

Delinquent, criminal behaviour and wanton engagement in social vices could be a reaction towards experiences of sustained poverty. Berating this challenge, Anasi (2010) maintain that poverty increases the likelihood that an individual will commit a crime; submitting that poverty is the most consistent predictor of crime. This means that crime is likely to exist in areas where there is high level of poverty and consequential social inequality. This is why Chinwokwu (2012) speaking about poverty contends that societies where poverty is pervasive tend to record high crime rate. Could it mean that people

will resort to crime if the profit outweighs the cost? If the proper way of obtaining material resources seems unavailable, young people might be tempted to search for alternative means of achieving set objective in-order to survive. Consequently, crime offers impoverished people avenue to obtain goods and services they otherwise could not get through legitimate means. Where young persons are dropping out of school and graduates seem to lack desirable quality in terms of engagement in white collar jobs and self-employment (UNESCO, 2012); poverty is rife, the setting it seems is created for crime to thrive. This provides a background for most youths to become part of an army of reserved recruits for criminal activities and social vices from which some opt for armed robbery, ransom kidnapping, assassination, hooliganism, thuggery, rape, et cetera. Statistics revealed that at various times between 2006 and 2015 armed robbery accounted for 50% of the overall crime fatalities, cultism accounted for 28%, assassination, kidnapping, rape together accounted for 22% of crime committed in Benin City (Shuaibu, Salleh & Shehu 2015; Nigeria Watch, 2011). This has continued unabated and is now creating a disabling environment for sustainable socio economic development and growth in Benin City.

Poverty and Crime: Implication for youth life in Benin City

It has been documented that several young persons are involved in clandestine behaviour in the society because of its perceived benefits Odapu (2008). It tends to offer some form of compensation that ameliorate poverty. In order words, youth involvement in crime in Benin City is an avenue to assuage paucity of socio economic desirables. The implication of this is that crime presents some benefits and fertile ground for young persons to try out their hands as offenders. The necessity to economically succeed and materially prosper, on the one hand, and the lack of opportunity on the other hand create especially among young people heightened criminal tendencies and behaviour. In Benin City, this brigandism occurs for the reason that there is inequitable social system, lack of opportunity and commitment to social obligation on the part of government (Longe, 2013; Kanbur, 2007). Crimes committed by young people depict this coloration most of whom are poor, underprivileged and socially

marginalized and or disadvantage (Akogwu, 2012). This suggests that youths who are poor could be restive and captures the proverbial 'idle hand that is the devil workshop'. The run-off rates of car snatching, armed robbery, burglary, ransom-kidnapping and violence *inter alia* suggest the existence of such reality in Benin City (Longe, 2019; Longe 2013).

Crime *sensu stricto* is one of the pressing challenges and perhaps the most threatening to social existence both for youth and the economic security of Benin City. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2010) and Africa Check (2013) reported that more than 36% of crimes committed in Africa are estimated to occur in Nigeria. The report submits that economic crises, limited rule of law, inflation among other factors drive crime. This quandary incident itself in different forms in Benin City South-Southern Nigeria, Edo State which is now branded as one of the leading areas in the nations where crime thrives.

To this end, US Bureau of Consular Affairs (2012), warn its citizen of the risk of travelling to Niger-Delta area given its high propensity for violent crimes committed by youths and youth gangs. This social predicament is allied to poverty (Osawe, 2015). The incidence of crime then is an aftermath of untold economic hardship as argued by Osawe (2015) who submit that crime is not pathological but socially generated. For most youth therefore, engagement in crime is materially and financially rewarding. It is perceived as productive and conceived as a means of livelihood into which the involvement of several youth has risen dramatically in recent times (Today, 2017; Hassan, Lass & Makinde, 2012). Incidents of crime in Benin City have negative implication far reaching in socio economic consequences. The increasing rate of crime among youth implies that the society has become a commercial system where their objective can be achieved from unassuming individuals (Okeshola & Adeta, 2013). This has not only impacted on human development but also on the economy and identity of young people in Benin City. The blossoming connection between crime and young people in Benin City is one predicated on socioeconomic challenge of which poverty is prime and pervasive (Ehimen & Bola, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

Strain theory of Merton (1957) explains responsive actions and why diverse types of criminal behaviour exist. It explains crime and delinquency in the society as effects of the pressure imposed upon individuals by the society. It explains different modes of individual adaptation in attaining desired 'ends'. It believes that crime is a product of frustration individuals feels when they are unable to achieve socially desirable goals. The theory argues that structural conditions create strain upon individuals in the society and predispose them to criminal behaviour. The theory sees crime has a social reality that cannot be divorced from social context of it existence. Material goals are a feature of the cultural environment in the society and societies usually place emphasis on wealth acquisition and fail to consider that people are positioned in different strata. Given this, the theory argued that crime can ensue if there is unequal access to means of attaining material wealth. In Benin City crime occurs among young people as a result of disparity between set goals and opportunities for achieving or attaining them.

Research Methodology

This study adopts the mixed survey method given that it uses both quantitative and qualitative techniques to gather data. The scope of this research covers Benin metropolis which is largely made up of Oredo, Egor and Ikpoba-Okha local government areas in Edo State. The population of study is homogeneous. Given that estimated population of youths in Benin City which is (767,226) and using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size formula for calculating known population, the study sample is 1,488. This is because the target

population is finite
$$S = \frac{X^2 NP(1 - P)}{d^2 (N - 1) + X^2 P(1 - P)}$$

Where:

S = Required Sample size

X = Z value (e.g. 1.96 for 99% confidence level)

N = Population Size

P = Population proportion (expressed as decimal) (assumed to be 3.5(95.%)

d = Degree of accuracy (3.5%), expressed as a proportion (.03)
 under 99% confidence level at 3.5% margin error, the study made use of the nearest population sample size of 1,000,000. This is because the difference in the sample size table value for 99% confidence level at 3.5% margin error is very minimal. Also, the population of youth in Benin City is less than a million but more than half a million. Hence, from the table, the sample size is 1,352 youths. Additional 10% of 1,352 shall be added for non-response = 1,352+135.2=1487.2 approximately 1,488 (See Krejcie and Morgan, 1970). Consequently, the total sample size adopted for this study is 1,488 youths.

Poverty and Youth Criminality in Benin City, Nigeria

Table 1 Respondents rating on poverty as a factor that predisposes youth in crime

	Frequency	Percentage
Very true	602	40.5
True	579	38.9
Neutral	139	9.3
Slightly not true	110	7.4
Not true	58	3.9
Total	1488	100.0

Field Survey, 2019

In table 1 above, 40.5% of the respondents believed it is very true that poverty is a factor that causes crime. This perception was similar to 38.9% of the respondents. 11.3% of the respondents opine otherwise while 9.3% were indifferent. The finding agrees with Osawe (2015) who submit that crime exists as a result of grievous economic challenges debating that crime is not pathological but socially generated. Again this finding tally with Ehimen and Bola (2010) that the burgeoning link between crime and youth in Benin City is traceable to socioeconomic condition such as poverty which appears to be pervasive. Poverty then is a factor that causes crime among youth in Benin City To this end, it can be establish that disadvantage youth have high propensity to commit crime. A respondent alluded that:

...Poverty is very terrible, it makes you feel less than human and it can cause a person to do bad things. Most people that are involved in kidnapping, armed robbery, internet crime etc are most poor people trying to survive. Though poverty is not the only thing that makes a person to commit crime, it is however the most notorious. **IDI: Male, 35, Egor, graduate, 2019)**

...put it this way crime exit because of poverty. If you take away poverty from a person and such a person still continue to steal then you should know that is covetousness but if such a person stops, then can tell it is poverty. Poverty i think is the root of all evil in human society. It influences behaviour negatively. If you're poor and you get the chance to be rich, you will most likely seize it; that is how most youth end up in internet crime. **(IDI: Male, 30, Egor, Unemployed graduate, 2019)**

Table 2 Question on whether youths are involved in crime in Benin City

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	1212	81.5
No	166	11.2
Indifferent	110	7.4
Total	1488	100.0

Field Survey, 2019

In table 2 above, 81.5% are of the opinion that youth in Benin City are involved in crime only 11.2.0% are of the contrary view while 7.4% are indifferent. The high level of youth involvement in crime in Benin City may have cascaded down from the need to survive and acquire materially desirable goals however without legal opportunities. Most acts of crimes represent youth who are underprivileged and socially disadvantage (Akogwu, 2012; Umar, 2010). The finding suggests that youths that are poor could become criminogenic and restive. Hence, the increasing experiences of car snatching, armed robbery, burglary, and ransom-kidnapping suggest young persons in Benin City are involved in crime (Longe, 2013).

...Most of the crimes committed in the society as it were today are traceable to young, able bodied individuals in their prime. Most

youth are more dynamic and dangerous than you can imagine. Age plays key role in the kind of crime a person commits but I am sure that some crime are also committed by older people too (**Male, 32 Years, Unemployed, Egor L.G.A, 2019**).

Table 2.1 Question on whether economically disadvantage youth engage in crime in Benin City

	Frequency	Percentage
Always	360	24.2
Often	590	39.7
Sometimes	455	30.6
Seldom	56	3.8
Never	27	1.8
Total	1488	100.0

Field Survey, 2019

Data revealed 39.7% are in the affirmative, followed by 30.6%, 24.2% and 3.8% respectively while 1.8 percent is at variant with the consensus. This shows that young people when disadvantage will endeavor to engage in ventures that enables them achieve their objective. The findings corroborate Longe (2013) that certain criminal acts occurs because young people sees themselves as lacking in opportunity and marginalized. Young people therefore recourse to crimes for the reason that they are poor and underprivileged (Akogwu, 2012). This implies that youths who are poor could be restless and typifies the proverbial 'idle hand that is the devil workshop'.

There is a significant difference in the perception of male and female respondents regarding the view that gender is a factor that influences youths' involvement in internet crimes. In testing this hypothesis, data collected on respondents' gender were used in cross tabulation with the data which measured the dependent variable (i.e. view that gender is a factor that influences youths' involvement in internet crime).

Summary of Kruskal Wallis Chi-Square statistical test showing low economic status and youth involvement in crime

		<i>Economically disadvantage youth engage in crime in Benin City</i>					
		Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	Total
<i>Several youths are involved in crime in Benin City</i>	Yes	311 25.7%	493 40.7%	376 31.0%	25 2.1%	7 0.6%	1212 100.0%
	No	33 19.9%	68 41.0%	41 24.7%	11 6.6%	13 7.8%	166 100.0%
	Indifferent	16 14.5%	29 26.4%	38 34.5%	20 18.2%	7 6.4%	110 100.0%
Total		360 24.2%	590 39.7%	455 30.6%	56 3.8%	27 1.8%	1488 100.0%

Chi-square value = 143.98; df = 8; p-value = 0.000; phi = 0.000; Cramer's V = 0.000

The Chi-square test value was 143.98, the degree of freedom was 8, and the p-value was 0.000 (< 0.05). Correspondingly, a Phi of p = 0.000, and Cramer's V of p = 0.000 confirmed a high strength of the relationship between the two variables. This confirms that there was a statistically significant relationship between the variables. The implication of this is several youths are involved in crime in Benin City which is the evident consequence of poverty.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Youth involvement in crime does not exist in a vacuum. The preoccupation in crime is to meet set economic need and material objective as provoked by poverty. From the foregoing, it is evident that the behaviour of youth in Benin City towards crime reflect it acceptance as a means of livelihood which support a system of dissenting values, behaviour and lifestyle among several youth. This may have been encouraged by the perceived socioeconomic challenge, material wealth and economic benefits. Given the importance of this social reality, the study therefore asserts that poverty in any society has destructive and dehumanizing tendencies. It is motivating factor either to commit crime or to labour legitimately to alleviate it biting effect. It is necessary therefore that poor or

underprivileged youth in the society be placed on welfare scheme such as monthly wage enough to enable them get-by with basic survival needs. Also, government should initiate scholarship scheme for economically disadvantage youth to acquire quality education. By this such youth becomes inspired, accountable and responsible members of the society. The idea of discriminating against a youth and segregating one as poor and another as wealthy in Benin City should be discountenanced because such social perception generate pressure on several youths to prove them relevant members of the society. This social pressure often results to most youth becoming criminals in order to realize socially acceptable objectives. Effective as well as efficient civil-government interactive communication system should be put in place to ensure that effort on the part of government to eradicate poverty among young individuals is achieving its predicated objective especially among youths in the society.

Socio-economic services that encourages the development of young individuals with special gift or abilities such as talent hunt and development should be periodically conducted to selected from among the bunch individual youth with promising future. Again, conducive and enabling environment for the creative (and healthy competition among youth) involvement of youth in interviewing for jobs, empowerment projects and support initiatives as well as right base approach should be established in Benin City, This will enable young entrepreneurs obtain rights to own business and patent their ingenious ideas. This measure will help in reducing the burden of poverty and discourage the menace of alternative adventure into crime among youth in Benin City. This will invariably create hope for the already bleak future of youth in Benin City.

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