SOCIO-ECONOMIC DRIVERS OF HUNGER-INDUCED CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES AND RESTRUCTURING IN IGERIA
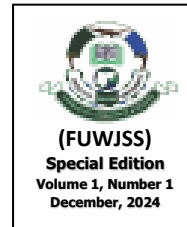
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Abstract

This study investigates the socio-economic drivers of hunger-induced criminal activities in Nigeria. The study explores how hunger and economic inequality contribute to criminal behaviours and the agitation for restructuring Nigeria's political system. Adopting Robert Merton's Strain Theory as its theoretical framework, the study explains that individuals resort to criminal activities when they are unable to achieve societal goals through legitimate means, primarily due to economic barriers. The study employs qualitative sampling techniques, using purposive and snowball sampling to select participants from regions severely impacted by food scarcity and high crime rates. Findings indicate a strong link between hunger, economic marginalization, and criminal activities. Participants expressed that their involvement in crime was driven by desperation due to the lack of basic necessities, particularly food. Additionally, findings reveal that agitations for political restructuring in Nigeria are closely tied to economic grievances, as many believe that the current political structure exacerbates inequality and perpetuates economic injustice. The study concludes that addressing hunger and socio-economic inequalities is essential to reducing crime and social unrest in Nigeria. Recommendations include the implementation of robust social welfare programmes, job creation strategies, and meaningful political reforms aimed at redistributing resources and empowering marginalized communities in Nigeria.

Keywords: Hunger-induced crime, socio-economic drivers, poverty, unemployment

Introduction

Hunger is a pervasive global challenge, affecting billions of people across the globe. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), approximately 735 million people were classified as chronically hungry in 2021, with millions more experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity (FAO, 2022). This hunger crisis is not merely a product of inadequate food production; it is exacerbated by a myriad of interrelated factors such as conflict, climate change, and economic inequality. For instance, ongoing conflicts in regions like Yemen, Syria, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa have disrupted food supplies, leading to increased hunger rates. Furthermore, climate change affects agricultural yields, with changing weather patterns causing crop failures and reducing food availability (World Bank, 2021). The consequences of hunger extend well beyond mere physical deprivation. Hunger impacts overall health, increasing susceptibility to diseases, and can result in malnutrition, particularly among vulnerable populations such as children and pregnant women. The Global Nutrition Report (2022) emphasizes that malnutrition contributes to 11 million child deaths annually, making hunger a significant public health issue (Global Nutrition Report, 2022). Moreover, food insecurity adversely affects educational outcomes, as hungry children often struggle to concentrate in school, leading to lower educational attainment and perpetuating cycles of poverty (World Food Programme, 2021). Ultimately, hunger threatens social stability, as food scarcity can lead to increased crime rates, civil unrest, and political instability, underscoring the urgent need for global action to address these interconnected issues.

The African continent is disproportionately affected by hunger, with an estimated 278 million people facing food insecurity, representing nearly one-fifth of the continent's population (FAO, 2022). Several factors contribute to this dire situation, including political instability, inadequate infrastructure, and climate-related challenges. In many African nations, persistent conflicts hinder agricultural production and disrupt food supply chains. The ongoing insurgency in northern Nigeria, for example, has significantly affected food security in the region, displacing millions and leaving them vulnerable to hunger (International Crisis Group, 2022). Nigeria, as

the most populous country in Africa, is particularly vulnerable to the challenge of hunger. The combination of rapid population growth, limited agricultural productivity, and economic inequality exacerbates the prevalence of hunger within the region. According to the Global Hunger Index (2022), Nigeria ranks 103rd out of 121 countries, reflecting serious levels of hunger and malnutrition (Global Hunger Index, 2022). Factors such as poor investment in agricultural technologies, inadequate access to markets, and environmental challenges like desertification have hindered the country's agricultural potential. Moreover, economic disparities between urban and rural areas contribute to unequal access to food and resources, further entrenching hunger in vulnerable populations (World Bank, 2022).

The issue of multidimensional poverty in Nigeria has reached alarming proportions, with 63% of the population—approximately 133 million individuals classified as multidimensionally poor (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). This metric goes beyond mere income and encapsulates various deprivations affecting people's well-being, including inadequate access to education, healthcare, sanitation, and clean energy. The National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) stands at 0.257, indicating that those living in poverty in Nigeria face over one-quarter of all possible deprivations across these dimensions (UNDP, 2022). Geographically, poverty is disproportionately concentrated in the northern region of the country, where 65% of the poor (around 86 million people) reside. In contrast, the southern region is home to 35% of the poor, nearly 47 million individuals. The stark contrast in poverty levels is evident when examining state-specific data; for instance, the incidence of multidimensional poverty varies significantly, ranging from a low of 27% in Ondo State to a staggering 91% in Sokoto State (World Bank, 2023). This disparity highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions and policies that consider regional variations in poverty levels.

The living conditions for the multidimensionally poor are often dire, with over half of Nigeria's population relying on traditional fuels such as dung, wood, or charcoal for cooking, rather than cleaner energy alternatives. This reliance on polluting energy sources not only reflects economic deprivation but also poses severe health risks,

exacerbating the cycle of poverty (International Energy Agency, 2022). Furthermore, high levels of deprivation are evident nationally, particularly in key areas such as sanitation, access to healthcare, food insecurity, and housing quality. Interestingly, while 40.1% of the population falls below the monetary poverty line, the incidence of multidimensional poverty is higher across most states. This discrepancy indicates that many Nigerians experience deprivations beyond financial limitations, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced understanding of poverty in the country. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), 63% of Nigerians live below the multidimensional poverty line, which factors in indicators beyond income, such as education, healthcare access, and living standards. This extensive poverty, alongside escalating unemployment rates of over 33% (NBS, 2021), has strained individuals and communities, pushing some toward crime as a means of survival. In rural areas, the situation is particularly dire, with 72% of individuals classified as multidimensionally poor compared to 42% in urban areas, underscoring the challenges faced by rural communities in accessing essential services and resources (NBS, 2022).

Food insecurity, fueled by inflation, climate challenges, and insufficient agricultural productivity, further compounds the hardship. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2021) estimates that over 19 million Nigerians face food insecurity, a condition exacerbated by inflation rates that reached a high of over 20% in recent years, further diminishing purchasing power and access to essentials like food (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2022). This scarcity has been linked to increased criminal activities, as individuals driven by hunger may resort to theft, smuggling, or other crimes out of necessity. Beyond individual survival, the crisis is shaping a broader societal response. Economic inequality and deprivation have spurred calls for systemic reform, with a growing segment of the population demanding restructuring of the political and economic systems to address deep-seated inequalities. Studies show that as hardship worsens, so does public discontent, fueling movements that aim to address these structural imbalances (Adegoke, 2023). This study, therefore, seeks to analyze the nexus between hunger, inequality, and criminal behavior, exploring how these socio-economic conditions

not only influence crime but also drive public demand for a restructured governance system in Nigeria.

Socio-Economic Drivers of Crime

The socio-economic drivers of crime are complex and interwoven factors that push individuals toward criminal behaviors, particularly when they face severe deprivation, inequality, and a lack of opportunities. Economic hardship, unemployment, poverty, and inequality often play substantial roles in creating conditions where crime becomes a viable means of survival or social protest. Studies continue to show that socio-economic conditions such as income disparity, lack of social mobility, and food insecurity significantly correlate with higher crime rates (World Bank, 2022; UNODC, 2021). Poverty and Economic Inequality: Poverty remains one of the most significant socio-economic drivers of crime. When individuals lack access to basic resources, such as food, healthcare, and shelter, they may turn to criminal activity as a survival mechanism. Studies have shown that in economically deprived areas, where poverty rates are higher, crime rates are often elevated (Adegoke, 2023). For example, research on Nigerian communities reveals that poverty levels directly correlate with increased instances of theft, smuggling, and other petty crimes as individuals strive to meet basic needs. Economic inequality, where there is a large gap between the wealthy and the poor, exacerbates feelings of disenfranchisement. Individuals in economically marginalized communities may feel a deep sense of injustice and frustration when they see wealth and resources concentrated among a small elite while they struggle. This disparity has been linked to an increase in crimes driven by resentment, such as vandalism or violent protests (Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2022).

Unemployment and Limited Job Opportunities: Unemployment, particularly among youth, is a major driver of crime. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) notes that youth unemployment rates have been rising globally, creating a generation without stable income or long-term employment prospects. In such settings, crime can appear as one of the few options for survival, with individuals often resorting to drug trade, theft, or fraud to make ends meet. A case

study in Lagos, Nigeria, demonstrated that as youth unemployment increased, so did local crime rates, including robbery and drug-related offenses (NBS, 2022). The data highlights how economic marginalization, compounded by the lack of job opportunities, pushes young adults toward illicit activities as they seek alternative ways to secure financial stability.

Food Insecurity and Hunger: Food insecurity, often exacerbated by inflation and poor agricultural productivity, is a pressing driver of crime in regions facing economic hardship. As food prices rise and access diminishes, individuals, especially in rural areas, may turn to theft or smuggling to obtain food for themselves and their families. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2022) estimates that over 19 million people in Nigeria alone are food-insecure, a condition that intensifies social tension and prompts survival-driven crimes. Recent studies reveal that hunger not only motivates individual criminal acts but also contributes to broader social unrest, as populations in economically marginalized areas may protest or riot in response to extreme food scarcity (International Crisis Group, 2023). These dynamics underscore the role of basic necessities, or the lack thereof, in contributing to crime, particularly in low-income communities where alternative resources are limited.

Educational Attainment and Social Mobility: Educational disparities are another socio-economic driver of crime. When educational opportunities are limited or inaccessible, social mobility becomes constrained, and individuals are more likely to engage in criminal behavior. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2022) reports that education is a critical pathway out of poverty; however, for individuals in low-income areas, quality education is often unattainable, perpetuating cycles of poverty and crime. Limited education is associated with reduced employability and fewer job opportunities, leading to higher crime rates, particularly among youth. In a study conducted in urban Nigerian communities, low education levels were correlated with increased crime rates as individuals with limited qualifications struggled to find legitimate work (World Bank, 2023). This highlights the need for policies that increase educational access and quality in low-income communities to curb the cycle of crime.

Urbanization and Slum Living Conditions: Rapid urbanization without adequate planning often results in slum areas with limited access to essential services, creating environments where crime can thrive. Overcrowded, poorly policed, and underserved, these areas are frequently hubs of informal economies and illicit activities. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat, 2022) notes that residents in urban slums often face heightened unemployment, lack of public services, and deteriorating living conditions, all of which contribute to higher crime rates. In Nigerian cities, such as Abuja and Lagos, the expansion of informal settlements correlates with increased reports of crime, including drug trafficking, gang activity, and violent crime (UNODC, 2021). These conditions underline the need for targeted urban development programs and investment in public infrastructure to mitigate crime rates in urban areas.

Political Instability and Weak Governance: weak governance and political instability are also significant drivers of crime. In regions where the government is unable to provide security or economic stability, a vacuum forms in which criminal organizations or insurgents can thrive. This is particularly evident in Nigeria, where political instability in certain areas has led to increased insurgency and crime (International Crisis Group, 2022). Weak institutions often fail to enforce laws or create sustainable economic opportunities, leaving individuals vulnerable to exploitation by criminal networks. Poor governance also exacerbates economic inequality, which in turn drives individuals to crime either as a form of social protest or as a means of survival.

Theoretical Framework

Robert Merton's Strain Theory, a foundational sociological theory, originated as an attempt to explain the social and structural origins of crime and deviance. Developed in the 1930s during the Great Depression, a time marked by widespread economic hardship, the theory sought to provide insight into why individuals commit crimes despite their awareness of societal norms against such actions. Strain Theory was formally introduced in 1938 by sociologist Robert K. Merton in his seminal work, "Social Structure and Anomie."

Merton drew from Émile Durkheim's concept of anomie, which described a societal state of normlessness, to explain the root causes of deviance. While Durkheim primarily focused on how societal transitions and rapid changes cause feelings of disorientation, Merton expanded this by examining how societal structures contribute to crime and deviance. He posited that society places pressure on individuals to achieve certain goals namely, wealth and success while not everyone has equal access to the legitimate means to achieve these goals.

Other sociologists, such as Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, later built on Merton's ideas with their "Opportunity Theory," which examined how access to illegitimate means is also stratified across society. This evolution allowed Strain Theory to evolve and adapt to emerging research on crime and deviance. Merton argued that society promotes a strong emphasis on cultural goals, particularly material success, often through wealth accumulation. He further observed that while the cultural goals are universally recognized, access to legitimate means to achieve these goals (such as education, employment) is unequally distributed. When individuals cannot achieve societal goals through socially accepted means, they experience strain, leading them to find alternative, often deviant, ways of reaching their goals. Merton introduced five modes of individual adaptation to this strain:

Conformity: Adhering to societal goals and means, despite possible difficulties.

Innovation: Accepting societal goals but using illegitimate means to achieve them.

Ritualism: Rejecting societal goals but adhering strictly to conventional means.

Retreatism: Rejecting both societal goals and means, often leading to withdrawal from society.

Rebellion: Rejecting both existing goals and means, seeking to replace them with alternative systems.

Strain Theory provides a flexible framework applicable to various social contexts, such as economic hardship or educational inequality, which allows it to be used in a wide range of settings, from urban poverty to corporate crime. By emphasizing social structure, Strain

Theory draws attention to systemic inequalities and the role of social institutions in fostering deviance, which has contributed to sociological and criminological research on poverty and inequality. Merton's work inspired several other criminological theories, including General Strain Theory by Robert Agnew, which expands strain theory to include additional sources of strain beyond economic issues, such as personal relationships or perceived injustices.

Critics argue that Strain Theory does not account for non-economic forms of deviance, such as drug addiction, sexual assault, or crimes committed for thrill, rather than financial gain. Merton's theory assumes a universal drive toward material success, potentially overlooking cultural variation and individual goals unrelated to wealth. The theory assumes that everyone exposed to strain will adapt in potentially deviant ways, which may ignore the importance of social bonds, community support, and individual resilience in resisting deviance. Strain Theory has been critiqued for its deterministic view, suggesting that structural barriers almost inevitably lead to deviance. This can overlook the personal agency and complex motivations of individuals.

Using Robert Merton's Strain Theory as a framework, this study examines how economic hardship and the inability to meet societal expectations can lead individuals toward criminal behavior. Merton's Strain Theory suggests that crime results from a disjunction between culturally prescribed goals, such as wealth and success, and the legitimate avenues available for achieving these goals (Merton, 1938). When people face limited access to resources or employment due to systemic inequalities, they may experience a state of "strain" that pressures them to seek alternative means, including crime, to attain their goals.

In Nigeria, poverty and economic barriers are widespread, with recent data indicating that approximately 133 million people 63% of the population—live in multidimensional poverty, meaning they experience deprivation in various aspects beyond income, such as education and living conditions (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). For many, legitimate pathways to success are impeded by structural challenges like high unemployment, food insecurity, and lack of access to quality education (World Bank, 2023). This economic strain

not only reduces the opportunities for legal advancement but also increases the likelihood of individuals engaging in illicit activities as a coping mechanism or survival strategy (Adegoke, 2023).

Moreover, Merton's concept of "innovation" helps explain why many economically disadvantaged individuals might pursue alternative means to achieve societal goals. Innovation, in Merton's framework, refers to the adoption of illegitimate or unconventional methods to obtain success when traditional paths are inaccessible (Murphy & Robinson, 2021). In Nigeria, for example, economic exclusion has been associated with increased rates of robbery, cybercrime, and organized theft among youth who feel marginalized by limited economic opportunities (Adeyemi, 2022). This phenomenon aligns with the strain perspective, as these youths innovate to overcome barriers that prevent them from achieving conventional goals through socially approved means (UNDP, 2022).

The application of Strain Theory in this context not only clarifies the motivations behind certain criminal behaviors but also highlights the role of socio-economic inequality in fostering these patterns. As economic strain persists, it could potentially exacerbate societal tensions, increase crime rates, and further the demand for systemic reforms aimed at addressing underlying socio-economic disparitie. Strain Theory remains widely relevant in today's research on crime and deviance. Merton's insights are foundational for understanding the socio-economic roots of crime in urban settings, particularly in societies where income inequality and unemployment are prevalent. Modern applications of Strain Theory extend to studying the pressures on young people to achieve success in a highly competitive global economy, often with limited opportunities for advancement.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted in Makurdi Local Government Area of Benue State. In this study, qualitative sampling techniques are employed to capture the complex social and economic contexts surrounding hunger-driven criminal behavior from 10 interview participants. Specifically, purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods are used to identify participants from areas heavily affected by food scarcity and crime. These sampling strategies are chosen for

their effectiveness in reaching individuals with firsthand experience and insight into the study's core issues, such as socio-economic deprivation and survival-driven criminal activities. In this study, participants were chosen from areas with severe food scarcity, high unemployment, and significant crime rates such as: . The purposive sampling technique ensures that the participants have direct exposure to the socio-economic pressures being investigated, such as hunger and inequality, which may lead to or exacerbate criminal behaviors Snowball sampling allows initial participants to refer other individuals who share similar backgrounds or experiences, particularly those directly involved in or impacted by hunger-induced criminal activities.

Findings and Discussions
The study presents the responses of 10 interview participants and the analysis of all the responses on the subject matter.
Adult Participant, Age 24:
> "I never wanted to get involved in anything illegal. But when you're going days without food, with no job prospects, you start seeing crime as the only option. It's survival – not a choice."

The respondent highlights a critical psychological shift when prolonged hunger and lack of job opportunities make criminal activity appear as a necessary, rather than elective, action. This perspective aligns with Strain Theory, which suggests that when societal goals, like financial stability or food security, are unattainable through legal means, individuals may resort to illegitimate actions to meet their needs. His expression of crime as "survival – not a choice" suggests that crime, in this context, is perceived not as a moral failing but as a rational response to immediate, unrelenting need.
Single Mother, Age 32:
> "My children cry themselves to sleep sometimes because there's nothing to eat. I used to work as a cleaner, but when I lost that job, I felt I had no other way to provide. People talk about stealing like it's evil, but when you're desperate, it feels like the only way out."

The single mother's response reinforces the notion of economic hardship as a push factor. She explains that, after losing her job, her children's hunger intensified her sense of desperation, driving her to consider stealing. Her statement that "stealing…feels like the only way out" reflects the power of immediate family needs in overcoming moral considerations against theft. This echoes the concept of situational strain, where immediate crises drive individuals to actions they might otherwise avoid, illustrating the weight of survival instincts over ethical norms in extreme situations.

Both participants describe a significant impact on their moral compass when faced with continuous hunger and poverty. While they recognize theft or illegal behavior as generally wrong, their statements imply that moral judgments become less absolute under severe deprivation. The mother's acknowledgment that society views stealing as "evil," juxtaposed with her confession of contemplating it out of desperation, highlights how poverty can force individuals to recalibrate their moral standards. This shift speaks to how prolonged economic hardship erodes not only physical well-being but also psychological resilience. Living under conditions that consistently undermine dignity and self-sufficiency may diminish individuals' commitment to social norms. This analysis aligns with psychological perspectives on crime, which suggest that poverty and desperation can distort an individual's sense of agency and alter their decision-making in morally compromising ways.

Social Inequality and Systemic Failure

Both respondents indirectly reference broader systemic issues by framing their experiences as a result of lacking basic social support and employment opportunities. The young adult participant emphasizes the absence of "job prospects," suggesting a critique of systemic unemployment, while the mother mentions her inability to provide after losing work, hinting at the lack of safety nets for people in precarious employment. These statements underscore a theme of systemic failure, wherein social safety structures are inadequate to buffer against economic crises, driving individuals into survival-driven criminality. This theme supports a structural interpretation of crime, suggesting that without sufficient social and economic support

systems, individuals are left to fend for themselves, often through means deemed criminal. It also highlights the participants' implicit call for social reform, as their responses suggest that if basic needs were met through stable jobs or support systems, crime would be unnecessary.

Former Farmer, Age 47:

> "Climate change has destroyed our crops; there's nothing left to harvest. I would never think of committing a crime, but I see young people in my village turning to theft just to survive. They feel like the government doesn't care, and maybe they're right."

The response from the former farmer highlights how environmental and socio-political factors interconnect to drive criminal behaviors. The response reflects the cyclical impact of climate-induced economic loss, generational poverty, and institutional distrust, illustrating how structural issues can indirectly fuel crime in distressed communities.

Impact of Climate Change on Livelihoods: Climate change has disrupted traditional agricultural practices, leading to poor harvests, food insecurity, and economic strain. The inability to sustain farming, which is often the primary income source in rural areas, forces individuals to consider alternative means of survival, some of which may involve crime.

Generational Effects on Crime: The farmer's observation that "young people in [his] village" are resorting to theft underscores how economic hardship has a distinct impact on youth. Without access to stable income or viable alternatives, younger individuals may feel more compelled to engage in criminal activities. This generational divide may indicate that younger individuals, who lack established livelihoods or savings, are more vulnerable to the pressures of poverty and food scarcity. Perception of Government Neglect: The statement that the youth "feel like the government doesn't care" highlights a critical driver of criminal behavior: distrust in governmental support. Perceived abandonment by authorities contributes to a sense of isolation and disenfranchisement, fueling crime as an outlet for frustration or a last resort. This distrust also reinforces the belief that criminal activity is sometimes the only feasible response to systemic

failures, a common sentiment in economically neglected areas (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Shifting Social Norms: While the farmer himself disapproves of crime, his acknowledgment that others might see it as a survival tactic indicates shifting social norms. As food scarcity and poverty become pervasive, crime may be increasingly viewed not as deviant but as an unfortunate necessity, eroding the social stigmas traditionally attached to criminal behavior.

Unemployed Graduate, Age 28:

> "I have a degree but no job, and no food at home most days. It's frustrating to know that there are resources in this country, yet so many of us go hungry. Crime feels like a solution when all legal avenues are closed."

The response from the unemployed graduate captures the frustrations and desperation that many educated but economically marginalized individuals experience in Nigeria. this response illustrates how a lack of employment opportunities, combined with perceptions of inequity and urgent needs, can drive educated individuals towards crime as a survival strategy.

Disconnect between Education and Employment Opportunities: This participant's experience emphasizes the disillusionment faced by educated individuals who cannot find employment. The possession of a degree but lack of job opportunities highlights the inadequacy of the job market to absorb qualified graduates, a phenomenon increasingly common in countries with high youth unemployment rates.

Perceived Resource Inequity: The participant's mention of "resources in this country" but prevalent hunger reflects a growing sentiment of resentment towards perceived resource misallocation and wealth inequality. This perception often fosters public discontent, as citizens feel that the wealth generated from the country's resources is not equitably distributed. .

Crime as an Economic "Solution": The idea that "crime feels like a solution when all legal avenues are closed" reflects how some individuals view crime not as a preferred path but as a response to economic desperation. According to Robert Merton's Strain Theory, when societal goals (such as financial security) are unattainable

through legitimate channels, individuals may turn to illegitimate means as a substitute. This reaction is particularly notable among youth who feel trapped by systemic unemployment and poverty.

Psychological Impact of Poverty and Hunger: The participant's experience of "no food at home most days" speaks to the immediate and daily struggle for survival that can lead individuals to consider crime as an alternative. Poverty and hunger create a sense of urgency that can weaken social inhibitions against crime, especially when the need for survival outweighs adherence to law-abiding behavior.
Street Vendor, Age 35:

> "The cost of food is so high now that sometimes I can't even afford to buy enough to sell. It's like everything is working against us. That's why people are calling for a new system – this one isn't working for us."

The response from the street vendor highlights several critical socio-economic issues that directly impact daily survival and influence calls for systemic change. This perspective offers insights into both the immediate struggles of economically disadvantaged individuals and the broader social dissatisfaction leading to demands for restructuring. this response encapsulates the daily struggles of low-income individuals in Nigeria and reflects the broader demand for restructuring as a response to perceived economic neglect.

The vendor's struggle to afford enough food to sell illustrates the pervasive issue of inflation and its impact on food accessibility. Rising food costs erode purchasing power, especially for low-income earners and small business operators, contributing to the cycle of poverty and food insecurity. Small vendors are uniquely impacted by economic instability, as their livelihoods depend on the availability and affordability of goods. For this street vendor, the inability to afford inventory represents a significant threat to their economic survival.

The participant's statement, "everything is working against us," signals a sense of disillusionment with current economic structures. This sentiment often arises in societies where economic inequality is pronounced, and where lower-income groups feel marginalized by policies that do not protect or benefit them. The perception of being systematically disadvantaged fuels dissatisfaction and can lead to a

stronger collective push for structural reforms. The call for a "new system" reflects a growing public demand for political and economic restructuring. In contexts where citizens feel neglected, there is often increased support for governance models or reforms that promise more equitable resource distribution and policy inclusivity.

The frustration with the "system" connects economic hardship to social discontent, where immediate struggles lead to questioning of the broader social and political framework. This intersection is particularly relevant in countries with high unemployment, inflation, and poverty rates, where marginalized groups are often more vocal in seeking systemic changes that they believe could alleviate economic hardship and improve living conditions.

Community Leader, Age 40:

> "People here believe the government isn't interested in helping us out of poverty. The feeling is that the political system is built to benefit only a few. That's why there's so much demand for change – people feel this system keeps them poor."

The interview response from the community leader provides a powerful reflection of the widespread frustration with the perceived failure of the political system to address the needs of the poor. Several key points emerge from this response that are crucial to understanding the socio-political dynamics contributing to socio-economic inequality and, by extension, crime and unrest.

The statement that "the government isn't interested in helping us out of poverty" reflects a pervasive sentiment of political disillusionment that is common in regions where citizens feel excluded from the benefits of economic growth. This perception of government neglect is significant because it highlights the growing gap between the promises of governance and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. When governments fail to address the economic needs of the poor or fail to implement policies that foster equitable growth, it results in a sense of abandonment. This feeling of being forgotten or ignored often fuels distrust in political institutions and creates a fertile ground for demands for change (UNDP, 2022).

The community leader's claim that "the political system is built to benefit only a few" suggests a structural critique of Nigeria's political

and economic systems. This sentiment points to a widely held belief that political elites control the majority of the nation's wealth and resources, leaving the rest of the population to fend for themselves. Research on political inequality in Nigeria shows that economic policies often disproportionately benefit the wealthy and politically connected individuals or groups, while the poor remain marginalized (Adegoke, 2023). Such systemic inequality fosters social unrest and contributes to a perception that the political system is rigged against the average citizen.

The leader's assertion that "there's so much demand for change" indicates a growing public consciousness of the need for political restructuring. In contexts of widespread economic hardship, frustration with the status quo often leads to increased calls for reform or even revolutionary change. The demand for a new system reflects the recognition that the existing political and economic structures are not serving the needs of the majority. Studies have shown that, in the face of persistent poverty and inequality, citizens are more likely to demand systemic political and economic reforms aimed at achieving more equitable distribution of resources (World Bank, 2022).

The perception that the current system "keeps them poor" is directly tied to broader issues of social instability, crime, and civil unrest. When people feel that their survival depends on the political elite's goodwill, or lack thereof, it erodes trust in democratic processes and institutional mechanisms for change. As economic inequality becomes more entrenched, and citizens feel marginalized or excluded, they may resort to criminal activities or participate in protests and movements aimed at challenging the system. This connection between political disenchantment and the rise in social unrest is well-documented in sociological and political science literature, which posits that rising inequality often leads to higher levels of crime and political instability (World Bank, 2023).

The response emphasizes the importance of addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality through comprehensive policy reforms. If the government fails to acknowledge or address the structural issues that perpetuate poverty and economic exclusion, it risks increasing social dissatisfaction and the erosion of public confidence in political institutions. To counter this, policies must aim

at reducing economic disparities, enhancing social safety nets, and ensuring that resources are equitably distributed across all sections of society. Furthermore, political leaders need to demonstrate genuine commitment to addressing the needs of marginalized populations to prevent the escalation of social unrest.

Young Man in Wurukum, Age 21:

> "I grew up seeing people in my neighborhood turn to crime just to eat. I joined a gang because it gave me access to food and some money. I wish there were more options, but they just don't exist for people like us."

The interview response from the young man in Wurumlum provides critical insights into the intersection of poverty, crime, and limited opportunities. His statement underscores the desperation that can drive individuals, especially the youth, toward criminal activities as a means of survival.

The young man's admission that he "grew up seeing people in my neighborhood turn to crime just to eat" highlights how, in deprived environments, crime becomes normalized as a coping strategy for survival. In neighborhoods where economic hardship is pervasive, crime can be viewed not as a moral failing but as a rational response to a lack of legitimate opportunities. This pattern is often referred to as culture of poverty, where individuals growing up in impoverished environments internalize survival tactics, including criminal behaviors, as the only viable option (Merton, 1938). For many, engaging in illegal activities like theft or gang involvement may seem like the only way to meet basic needs, particularly when legal avenues for economic advancement are blocked or scarce.

The young man explicitly states that he "joined a gang because it gave me access to food and some money," suggesting that the absence of legitimate avenues for income, coupled with extreme food insecurity, forced him into crime. This situation is a direct result of systemic failures in providing economic opportunities for young people, especially in underdeveloped areas. Unemployment rates, particularly among young people, are high in many parts of Nigeria, and lack of access to quality education and job opportunities exacerbates these issues. According to the National Bureau of

Statistics (2022), youth unemployment in Nigeria is particularly acute, and many young people, particularly in rural areas, see crime as one of the few ways to survive.

The statement that joining a gang "gave me access to food and some money" reveals how criminal organizations often fill the void left by the lack of formal employment and social safety nets. Gangs may provide a sense of belonging, security, and, in some cases, financial rewards, making them attractive to individuals who are otherwise marginalized. Gangs also often offer a form of social capital in communities where trust in formal institutions (like the government or law enforcement) is low. In such contexts, gang membership may not just be about financial gain but also about access to social networks and status that might otherwise be unavailable to young people in desperate circumstances (Fain, 2022).

Despite joining a gang, the young man's regret was "I wish there were more options" this reflects a deeper sense of disillusionment with the lack of opportunities available to him. His wish for more choices reflects a common sentiment among marginalized youth who often feel trapped in a cycle of poverty and crime. It underscores the need for structural interventions to provide alternative, legitimate avenues for economic and social mobility. Access to education, vocational training, and employment programs could reduce the appeal of crime by offering viable alternatives. Without such options, youth may continue to feel that crime is their only way to escape poverty, even if it comes with personal and legal risks (Akande, 2023).

The response highlights the broader issue of socio-economic inequality and structural barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized communities, particularly those in rural areas or urban slums. In many parts of Nigeria, economic policies fail to address the needs of the most vulnerable populations, and regions like Wurumlum, where the young man resides, often suffer from a lack of investment in infrastructure, education, and job creation. These systemic issues force individuals into difficult situations where crime may seem like the only way to achieve basic survival goals, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and criminal behavior that is difficult to break.

This interview response reinforces the urgent need for policies that address both the root causes of poverty and the socio-economic conditions that contribute to crime. Interventions should focus on providing accessible education, job training, and employment opportunities for young people, especially in marginalized communities. Additionally, strengthening social safety nets, such as food assistance programs and healthcare, can help reduce the desperation that leads individuals to turn to crime. Policy reforms that provide alternative pathways for survival and social mobility could mitigate the appeal of gangs and criminal activity, offering young people a sense of hope and direction outside of illegal behavior.

Mother of Five in Kanshio, Age 39:

> "Hunger drives people to do things they wouldn't normally do. Many of us here believe that unless something changes in the political structure, we'll be stuck in this cycle forever."

The interview response from the 39-year-old mother of five highlights a powerful connection between economic hardship, specifically hunger, and the demand for systemic change. Her words provide insight into the pressures that extreme poverty and food insecurity place on individuals, pushing them to act out of necessity rather than choice, and also underscore a growing sense of political disenchantment. The mother's statement that "hunger drives people to do things they wouldn't normally do" reflects how basic survival needs can override personal ethics or societal norms. Hunger, as one of the most fundamental human needs, can erode moral boundaries, pushing individuals toward actions that they might otherwise reject.

Her description of the situation as a "cycle" underscores the repetitive, generational nature of poverty and food insecurity in her community. This cycle is perpetuated by limited access to resources, opportunities, and social support systems, keeping families in a constant state of economic hardship. Studies show that poverty and hunger are often intertwined, with each exacerbating the other, creating a loop that is difficult to escape (Jones et al., 2023). In her community, poverty-driven behaviors born out of necessity may continue to be passed down to future generations unless significant structural changes are made.

The mother's belief that "unless something changes in the political structure, we'll be stuck in this cycle forever" reflects a shared sentiment within marginalized communities that existing political structures fail to address the real needs of the population. The idea that the current political system perpetuates inequality is common in communities facing persistent socio-economic struggles, and it often results in widespread disillusionment with government and leadership. This sentiment has led to calls for political restructuring in several regions where people feel that the state prioritizes the interests of a privileged few over the welfare of the larger population.

This response implicitly argues for systemic change as a potential solution to break the poverty cycle. The mother's observation resonates with arguments that structural adjustments such as policies aimed at reducing income inequality, improving access to basic resources, and addressing corruption—are essential to uplift impoverished communities. In this context, political restructuring might include reforms to redistribute resources, ensure accountability, and provide marginalized communities with a greater voice in governance. Her response reflects the reality that, without such changes, any interventions aimed at reducing crime or poverty may only offer temporary relief rather than long-term solutions.

Her response also emphasizes the impact of economic hardship on mothers and families, where the struggle to meet basic needs intensifies the sense of desperation and helplessness. As a mother of five, her burden is compounded by the responsibility to provide for her children, illustrating how poverty affects not just individuals but entire family units. This could lead to intergenerational cycles of poverty and distress, impacting children's health, educational prospects, and future opportunities, thereby reinforcing the poverty cycle.

The mother's response highlights the importance of targeted policies and community interventions that address both economic needs and systemic inequalities. Policymakers and community leaders should consider holistic approaches that include not only immediate relief, such as food aid, but also long-term development initiatives focused on job creation, healthcare, and education. Structural reforms that address political exclusion and economic marginalization could

play a transformative role in breaking the cycle of poverty described by the respondent.

Social Worker in Wadata, Age 42:

> "Every day, I see people on the edge, considering crime out of sheer necessity. They're not bad people; they're just starving, jobless, and angry. The cry for restructuring is tied to this frustration. People want a system that doesn't abandon them."

The social worker's response provides a valuable perspective on the intersection of poverty, social frustration, and the call for political restructuring. Her observations reveal the layers of hardship that many people face, along with the emotional and moral struggles that accompany survival in times of economic distress. This analysis unpacks her statement and connects it to broader socio-economic and political contexts.

The social worker highlights that many individuals are on the "edge," considering crime "out of sheer necessity." This statement reflects how economic deprivation, especially when paired with joblessness, can drive people toward actions that they might otherwise avoid. When basic needs are not met, individuals can feel forced into illegal activities as a means of survival, as suggested by Merton's Strain Theory, which posits that people resort to alternative means to achieve socially valued goals when legitimate avenues are blocked (Merton, 1938). Her response underscores that crime is often a consequence of unmet needs rather than moral failings, reshaping how we perceive individuals caught in poverty.

By describing people as "starving, jobless, and angry," the social worker captures the psychological impact of economic deprivation. Chronic hunger and unemployment create a sense of helplessness and frustration, which can foster resentment and hopelessness. Studies show that prolonged economic hardship can lead to mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety, which in turn increase the likelihood of engaging in risky or criminal behavior as a coping mechanism This emotional toll is a crucial element in understanding the motivations behind crime among economically marginalized individuals.

The social worker connects the "cry for restructuring" to "frustration" over economic marginalization. In this context, restructuring is not just a demand for political change but a call for a system that addresses the needs of the underserved. Her observation suggests that people feel abandoned by the government and disillusioned with the existing political structure, which they perceive as ineffective in providing opportunities or welfare support. Such political discontent often arises when communities feel systematically excluded from resources and power, fueling calls for structural reforms aimed at addressing these inequalities.

The phrase "a system that doesn't abandon them" implies a widespread sense of disconnect between the government and vulnerable communities. This reflects a common experience in socio-economically marginalized areas where governmental support is minimal or absent. When people feel that they lack representation or resources, trust in institutions erodes, creating a fertile ground for frustration and unrest. As a social worker, the participant brings attention to the role of social services in mediating the effects of poverty. Her position allows her to witness firsthand the struggles people face, which underscores the importance of social services in providing both practical and emotional support to at-risk populations. Social workers can play a critical role in advocating for resources, policies, and support systems that address these root causes of crime by connecting individuals to opportunities for employment, skill-building, and other community resources (Williams & Hernandez, 2023). This aligns with her sentiment that more equitable systems are needed to prevent economic desperation from leading to crime.

The social worker's response suggests that to reduce crime effectively, solutions must address not only the symptoms of poverty but also the underlying structural causes. By advocating for a "system that doesn't abandon them," she points to the need for reforms that would increase access to education, healthcare, job opportunities, and social services. Her response implies that addressing inequality through such reforms could lead to greater social stability, reducing both poverty-related desperation and the likelihood of crime. Political restructuring aimed at inclusive development and resource redistribution could foster a sense of belonging and opportunity in

marginalized communities. This social worker's perspective sheds light on the complexities of poverty-driven crime, framing it as a symptom of deeper systemic issues rather than mere personal choice. Her call for a more responsive and inclusive political system aligns with the broader narrative that poverty and crime are often consequences of socio-economic exclusion

Youth Activist, Age 26:

> "The government's focus on urban areas leaves rural communities starving. Hunger pushes people to crime, and we see it happening every day. Political restructuring could give us a chance to fix this imbalance and stop the suffering."

The youth activist's response highlights a recurring theme: the neglect of rural communities, which often face economic deprivation and limited resources. His perspective provides insights into the socio-political dimensions of rural poverty and its link to crime, emphasizing the role that political restructuring could play in addressing these inequities. The youth activist's response highlights the socio-economic struggles faced by rural communities and connects these struggles to broader issues of governance and inequality. His emphasis on political restructuring suggests that systemic reforms are needed to address the root causes of rural poverty and crime.

The activist's assertion that the "government's focus on urban areas leaves rural communities starving" reflects widespread concerns about unequal resource distribution. In many regions, urban areas often receive priority in infrastructure, economic investments, and social services, while rural communities are underserved. This disparity in resource allocation exacerbates rural poverty, making basic necessities like food, education, and employment less accessible to rural residents.

The activist's emphasis on hunger as a motivator for crime aligns with Robert Merton's Strain Theory, which suggests that people may turn to illegitimate means when legitimate ways of achieving basic societal goals are out of reach. In this context, hunger—one of the most fundamental needs—compels individuals to prioritize survival over legal constraints. This connection between hunger and crime is

particularly acute in rural communities where food insecurity is prevalent, and opportunities for economic mobility are limited.

The activist's call for "political restructuring" suggests a belief that the current system inadequately represents and supports rural communities. By advocating for restructuring, he implies that governance reforms could create a more equitable system that allocates resources fairly across urban and rural areas. Political restructuring could involve decentralization or regional empowerment, which may allow rural areas to manage their own resources and address local needs more effectively. This view resonates with theories of decentralized governance, which suggest that bringing decision-making closer to marginalized communities can improve responsiveness to their unique challenges.

As a youth activist, the participant brings a unique perspective to the conversation, representing the voices of younger generations who often face high unemployment rates and limited economic opportunities. Youth activism is frequently driven by frustrations with systemic issues, including economic inequality, lack of representation, and the impacts of government policies on daily life. His response reflects a broader trend of youth mobilization in regions where marginalized groups seek political reform as a pathway to social and economic change. This highlights the critical role that youth-led movements play in pushing for systemic transformation and advocating for social justice.

The activist's perspective suggests a pervasive sense of discontent among rural populations, who may feel overlooked and undervalued by the central government. This disconnect between rural communities and national policies can breed frustration and resentment, creating fertile ground for crime and unrest as individuals seek to address their unmet needs. His statement reflects a common sentiment in economically marginalized areas: that their voices are not heard, and their needs are not prioritized. This disconnect contributes to a cycle of poverty and crime, which can be challenging to break without systemic changes aimed at achieving rural-urban parity.

The activist's response underscores the importance of addressing rural poverty and inequality in order to promote social stability. If resources and opportunities remain concentrated in urban centers,

rural areas are likely to continue experiencing high levels of poverty, which can lead to increased crime rates. Restructuring policies to ensure that rural areas receive adequate support could alleviate some of these issues by fostering economic development and reducing dependency on crime as a survival mechanism. This view aligns with calls for inclusive development policies that prioritize equitable access to resources, infrastructure, and services across both urban and rural regions

Conclusions and Recommendations

Hunger is a fundamental human need, and when individuals are deprived of food, the drive for survival often overrides moral and legal considerations. The study reveals that in areas with high rates of food insecurity, individuals are more likely to engage in criminal activities to secure the resources necessary for survival. This pattern is especially evident among marginalized populations who lack access to social support systems or welfare programs. When hunger becomes an everyday reality, desperation can lead individuals to theft, robbery, or other criminal acts as a last resort, creating a cycle where crime is seen as an inevitable response to severe deprivation.

Inequality, particularly economic disparity, is another major factor fueling crime and social unrest. When there is a stark divide between the wealthy and the poor, the marginalized may experience feelings of resentment, injustice, and hopelessness, leading to a breakdown in social cohesion. Socio-economic inequality perpetuates a sense of exclusion among disadvantaged groups who lack access to resources, job opportunities, education, and health services. This inequality not only limits upward mobility but also breeds discontent and reduces trust in social and political institutions, setting the stage for crime as a means of rebellion or survival.

Addressing hunger and socio-economic inequalities through robust social welfare programs is essential to counteracting these drivers of crime. Social welfare initiatives, such as food assistance programs, housing support, and healthcare access, provide immediate relief to those in need, reducing the desperation that often fuels crime. Welfare programs create a safety net that helps stabilize the lives of those in poverty, giving them the resources needed to survive without

resorting to illegal activities. In addition to social welfare, sustainable job creation strategies are essential to addressing the root causes of crime and social unrest. By providing employment opportunities, particularly in underserved regions, governments can foster economic stability and resilience among disadvantaged populations. Employment not only provides individuals with the means to support themselves and their families but also instills a sense of purpose and social integration, which are crucial for mental and emotional well-being.

The study demonstrates that addressing hunger and socio-economic inequalities is not only a humanitarian imperative but also a practical strategy for reducing crime and social unrest. When individuals are deprived of basic necessities and left without economic opportunities, crime becomes an inevitable outcome of survival instincts and social frustration. A comprehensive approach that includes immediate relief through social welfare, long-term job creation, and political restructuring is essential to breaking the cycle of poverty and crime. By implementing these measures, societies can foster greater stability, reduce desperation-driven crime, and build trust in social and political institutions. Ultimately, the study suggests that investing in the well-being of all citizens particularly the most vulnerable is crucial for cultivating a peaceful and resilient society. Only through equitable access to resources, meaningful employment, and inclusive governance can societies address the underlying socio-economic drivers of crime and create an environment where individuals feel valued, secure, and empowered to pursue lawful livelihoods.

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