NIGERIAN CRIMINALITY PATTERNS AND THEIR IMPACT ON NATIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract

Criminality in Nigeria has grown into a major threat to national security and socio economic progress, marked by an increase in terrorism, armed robbery, kidnapping, cybercrime, and political violence. These criminal acts have created an atmosphere of insecurity that hinders the nation's advancement. This paper investigates the multifaceted criminality patterns in Nigeria, closely examining its root causes and the resulting implications for national security. The analysis focuses on the socio-economic, political, and cultural drivers of crime, such as poverty, inequality, corruption, and weak governance. Additionally, it assesses the efficacy of existing security measures, including law enforcement reforms and military interventions, noting their shortcomings in managing the complexities of crime in Nigeria. The study utilizes a secondary qualitative methodology, employing content analysis and existing literature to explore changing trends and the impacts of criminality. The findings indicate that although some security initiatives show potential, they often fail due to systemic corruption within law enforcement agencies, poor intelligence, and insufficient resources. Therefore, the paper offers strategic recommendations for bolstering national security, advocating for a holistic approach that integrates institutional reforms with socio-economic development. Ultimately, the study contends that effectively addressing criminality requires a multi-dimensional strategy that targets both the underlying social issues and the weaknesses within Nigeria's security apparatus. By implementing such a strategy, Nigeria can work toward restoring safety, improving governance, and encouraging sustainable development

for its people.

Keywords: Criminality, National Security, Terrorism, Merton's Strain Theory, Routine Activity Theory, Nigeria

Introduction

The evolution of criminality is not unique to Nigeria; it mirrors a global trend where traditional criminal forms have transitioned into more sophisticated and complex criminal enterprises. Globally, nations are struggling with a rise in terrorism, organized crime, cybercrime, human trafficking, and politically motivated violence, all of which present major challenges to security, governance, and economic development (Van Dijk, 2007; Liang, 2022). In regions like sub-Saharan Africa, parts of Asia, and Latin America, crime has crossed borders, as criminal networks use technological advancements, socio-economic inequalities, and weak governance structures to expand their reach (Gana, Adamu & Zakariya'u, 2023). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the annual global cost of crime reaches trillions of dollars, with developing nations suffering the most due to their limited ability to fight such sophisticated threats (UNODC, 2021).

The evolution of criminality in Nigeria has significantly influenced the country's economic, socio-political, and trajectory, presenting complex difficulties for public safety and governance (Odoemene, 2014). Historically, crime in Nigeria was mainly characterized by less severe activities, such as isolated incidents of armed robbery and petty theft (Ojo, Ojewale, 2018). However, the nature of criminality has expanded into more organized, violent, and sophisticated forms in recent decades. This shift involves the rise of cybercrime, widespread kidnapping for ransom, terrorism (particularly through insurgent groups like Boko Haram), cultism, human trafficking, and politically motivated violence (Aadeyemi & Musa, 2015). Each of these criminal activities has had a destabilizing effect, undermining Nigeria's capacity to promote sustainable development, safeguard its citizens, and maintain order. This study aims to explore the criminality patterns in Nigeria and their effect on national security.

Methodology

This study employs a secondary qualitative research design intended to analyze the complex dynamics of criminality in Nigeria and its impact on national security. As a non-empirical study, it relies solely on existing literature—including media content, government reports, scholarly articles, and institutional publications—to develop arguments and draw insights. The methodology is based on content analysis, where qualitative data from reputable sources are systematically interpreted and reviewed to identify themes, patterns, and theoretical constructs relevant to the Nigerian security landscape. The selection of literature was based on scholarly credibility, thematic relevance, and regency, with a particular focus on materials published from 2010 to 2025. Sources include publications from Nigerian security agencies, national crime statistics, reports from international organisations (such as Amnesty International,

Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), and academic journals. This broad range of sources allows for a comprehensive examination of the contemporary and historical dimensions of criminality in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Crime

Crime is typically defined as an omission or act that violates the law and is punishable by the state. It encompasses a broad range of illegal activities, from minor offences like petty theft to more serious crimes such as corruption, terrorism, cybercrime, armed robbery, and more (Tupman, 2015). In this study, crime is understood not just as individual acts of law-breaking, but as a systemic challenge that threatens the stability of the state. In the Nigerian context, crime has evolved into a sophisticated web of activities, including political violence, kidnapping for ransom, human trafficking, cybercrime, and terrorism, each posing unique threats to the nation's security infrastructure and its people. Aggravating factors like socio-economic inequality, high unemployment rates, and widespread corruption create fertile ground for the persistence of criminality in Nigeria. Crime in this research is also interpreted as a social construct shaped by the nation's legal framework, economic conditions, and cultural dynamics. The types of crime prevalent in Nigeria reflect broader socio-political issues, including the weakness of state institutions, porous borders, and inadequate law enforcement. This study considers how criminality, whether violent or non-violent, disrupts public safety, hinders economic growth, and erodes the legitimacy of governance.

National security

National Security refers to the protection of a nation's citizens, economy, and institutions from internal and external threats (Adebakin & Raimi, 2012). Traditionally, national security was linked to military defense against foreign aggression, but the concept has since expanded to include non-military threats such as crime, terrorism, economic instability, and cyber-attacks (Chitadze, 2022). In this study, national security is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional concern that goes beyond territorial defense to include the preservation of internal order, political stability, and social cohesion.

In the Nigerian context, national security is deeply linked to the state's ability to protect its citizens from the growing threats posed by criminal elements. The study posits that the rise of criminality in Nigeria — particularly through terrorism (Boko Haram insurgency), banditry, cybercrime, and violent ethnic conflicts — presents a severe challenge to national security. This understanding of national security is not limited to preventing large-scale conflicts but also includes the protection of human security, which encompasses economic security, food security, health security, and the protection of basic human rights.

Criminality in Nigeria

(a) **Terrorism and Insurgency:** Terrorism, particularly in the northeastern region, represents one of the most significant threats to Nigeria's national security. The Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009, has resulted in the deaths of more than 35,000 people and the displacement of over 2 million, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (Canton, 2021). Boko Haram's activities, including mass abductions, bombings, and armed assaults, have been compounded by the rise of splinter groups like the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). The group's operational capacity challenges Nigeria's counter-terrorism strategies, further destabilizing the region and burdening security forces (Onuoha, 2014).

(b) **Armed Robbery and Kidnapping:** Armed robbery and kidnapping have also become widespread throughout Nigeria, contributing significantly to the general sense of insecurity. Kidnapping, which initially targeted wealthy individuals, has evolved into a lucrative industry targeting people from all walks of life, including travelers and schoolchildren. Amnesty International (2021) reported that kidnappings for ransom have surged by over 300% in recent years, primarily in the northern and southern regions. The inability of law enforcement agencies to prevent these crimes underscores systemic weaknesses, leaving citizens vulnerable to criminal activities (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019).

(c) **Cybercrime:** Cybercrime, colloquially known as "Yahoo Yahoo," has flourished in Nigeria, driven by economic hardship and the proliferation of digital technology. According to Awoyemi, Omotayo and Mpapalika (2021), Nigerian cybercriminals engage in various forms of online fraud, including identity theft, phishing, and financial fraud, affecting both domestic and international victims. The Nigerian government's efforts, including the enactment of the Cybercrime Act of 2015, have achieved limited success, as high unemployment rates continue to push young Nigerians toward these illicit activities (Uchime, Molokwu & Ewa 2024).

(d) **Political Violence and Electoral Fraud:** Political violence is another form of criminality that undermines Nigeria's democratic institutions. Electoral fraud, vote-buying, and the use of political thugs to intimidate opponents have been pervasive, especially during election cycles (Yusuf, 2019). According to Human Rights Watch (2019), electoral violence in Nigeria is deeply intertwined with criminality, weakening the legitimacy of democratic governance and perpetuating the cycle of corruption (Ewang, 2019).

Factors Contributing to Criminality in Nigeria

(a) **Socioeconomic Inequality:** Socioeconomic inequality, particularly manifested through pervasive poverty and rampant unemployment, stands out as one of the most critical drivers of criminality in Nigeria. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS,

2020) reported that over 40% of Nigerians live below the poverty line, creating an environment where desperation for survival becomes a driving force behind criminal behavior. In this context, many individuals, especially the youth, find themselves in dire circumstances with limited access to viable employment opportunities. The lack of jobs not only fosters feelings of hopelessness but also renders young people highly vulnerable to recruitment into criminal enterprises, as they may perceive such paths as their only means of survival (Madubuike & Dimnnajiego, 2023). This cycle of poverty and crime reinforces itself, as criminal activities often lead to further socioeconomic degradation, thereby perpetuating a system of inequality.

(b) **Weak Governance and Corruption:** The issue of weak governance, compounded by pervasive corruption within both government and law enforcement agencies, exacerbates criminality in Nigeria by undermining the rule of law. Public officials, often involved in diverse criminal enterprises, misappropriate funds intended for social services and security, which severely undermines the country's attempts to fight crime (Transparency International, 2022). Furthermore, corrupt officers within law enforcement hinder the justice system's effectiveness, as criminals frequently avoid prosecution via bribery or political ties (Olonisakin, Ogunleye & Adebayo, 2018). This decay of public confidence in state institutions provides fertile ground for criminal activities to grow, as citizens feel the mechanisms designed to protect them are compromised.

(c) **Ethnic and Religious Tensions:** Nigeria's vast ethnic and religious diversity, while adding to the nation's cultural fabric, has also become a double-edged sword. This diversity has sparked long-standing conflicts that worsen criminal activities in various parts of the country. Ethno-religious tensions, especially prominent in the Middle Belt region, have led to violent clashes between different groups, such as herders and farmers (Yamusa, 2022). These conflicts have caused thousands of deaths and extensive property destruction, further destabilizing communities and creating an environment where criminal enterprises can thrive (International Crisis Group, 2021). The connection between ethnic and religious identities and crime adds a layer of complexity to the security challenges confronting Nigeria.

(d) **Porous Borders and Arms Proliferation:** Nigeria's geographical landscape, marked by porous borders, significantly assists the smuggling of drugs, arms, and other contraband (Odey, Bassey, Ikhwan & Santyaningtyas, 2022). This situation has contributed to the alarming rise of violence throughout the nation. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021), more than 70% of small arms in West Africa are trafficked through Nigeria. The influx of these weapons not only drives organized crime but also empowers insurgencies, thereby threatening national security. The government's inability to effectively control and monitor its borders exacerbates the problem, allowing criminal networks to operate with relative impunity and making it increasingly difficult for law enforcement to combat the rising

tide of violence.

Impact of Criminality on National Security

Criminality in Nigeria has deep and wide-ranging effects on national security. Increasing crime levels do more than just pose direct threats to public safety; they also weaken the nation's socio-political and economic structure. The ripple effects of these crimes affect every part of governance, development, and regional stability. Below is an expanded analysis of the primary ways criminality undermines national security in Nigeria:

(a) **Economic Instability**

The effect of criminality on Nigeria's economy is both immediate and long-term, producing a continuous cycle of insecurity and economic decline. Regions suffering from high crime rates, especially in the central and northern parts of the country, face major disruptions to economic activities. Terrorist attacks, banditry, and widespread kidnappings force businesses and farmers into closure or compel them to relocate to safer zones, which reduces employment and depletes agricultural output for local communities.

Foreign investors are especially cautious about doing business in high-risk zones, resulting in a decline in foreign direct investment (FDI). The World Bank (2022) noted a significant drop in FDI in Nigeria, identifying insecurity as a main factor. Infrastructure projects, including energy and road developments, are frequently delayed or canceled due to security issues. Furthermore, the agricultural sector, which employs a large portion of the Nigerian workforce, has been devastated by violent conflicts like farmer-herder clashes. This has caused food shortages, rising prices, and lower productivity, further driving poverty and increasing crime rates.

Additionally, criminal activities significantly increase the cost of doing business. Companies must spend heavily on insurance, private security, and crisis management, diverting funds that could have been used for innovation and growth.

(b) **Loss of Lives and Displacement**

The human cost of criminality in Nigeria cannot be overstated. Since the rise of Boko Haram and other militant groups, thousands of individuals have lost their lives to terrorist attacks, banditry, and violent communal clashes. In 2021 alone, over 10,000 Nigerians were reportedly killed in violent incidents connected to criminal activities (Amnesty International, 2022). This loss of life affects the immediate families of victims and diminishes the country's human capital, hindering development. Mass displacement is another tragic result. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2021) estimated that over 2.5 million people in the northeastern region have been displaced by inter-communal violence and terrorism. Displacement leads to overcrowded refugee camps where displaced persons are vulnerable to further criminal exploitation, such as forced labor and human trafficking. The

Nigerian government's resources are stretched thin as it struggles to provide for these populations, thereby compounding the humanitarian crisis. Displacement also disrupts local economies, as commercial and agricultural activities in affected areas come to a halt.

(c) Weakening of State Institutions

The endemic nature of criminality severely weakens Nigeria's state institutions, undermining the government's capacity to protect its citizens and enforce the rule of law. Law enforcement agencies, particularly the Nigerian Police Force, suffer from inadequate manpower, chronic underfunding, and a lack of modern technology to combat sophisticated criminal networks. The National Bureau of Statistics (2020) reported that police-to-population ratios in Nigeria are among the lowest in the world, at a ratio of 1:600, well below the United Nations-recommended standard of 1:450. In many instances, law enforcement officials are allegedly complicit in criminal activities, either through direct involvement or by accepting bribes to turn a blind eye. This has led to widespread public distrust in the government's ability to provide security, leading some communities to resort to self-defense or vigilante groups, further eroding the state's monopoly on the use of force. The inability to effectively address criminality also emboldens criminal groups, creating a sense of impunity.

Furthermore, corruption within state institutions dilutes counter-crime efforts. Resources meant for security operations are often embezzled, leaving the police and military under-equipped to tackle organized crime and insurgencies. In some cases, security forces have been accused of human rights abuses, which further alienate the public and fuel recruitment for insurgent and criminal groups.

State Responses and Challenges

The Nigerian government has implemented various strategies to combat criminality, ranging from legislative measures and socio-economic initiatives to law enforcement reforms and military (kinetic and non-kinetic) actions. However, these efforts are frequently undermined by significant challenges that limit their success in restoring national security. One major response has been military interventions, specifically in the fight against bandit groups and Boko Haram insurgents in the northern regions. Since the launch of Operation Lafiya Dole in 2015, the government has seen some success, including the recapture of previously held territories and the neutralization of high-ranking insurgents (Okoko, Peter & Ekpo, 2024). However, these efforts have been hampered by widespread corruption within the military, outdated equipment, and poor intelligence gathering.

Policing and law enforcement reforms have also been introduced to address the rising tide of criminality. The Nigerian Police Force has established various specialized anti-crime units to combat terrorism, kidnapping, and armed robbery, such as the Special Tactical Squad (STS), Intelligence Response Team (IRT), Special Intervention Squad

(SIS), Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), and Police Mobile Force (PMF). However, the SARS Unit was disbanded following human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and torture, which led to widespread protests in 2020 (Human Rights Watch, 2021). While community policing strategies have been introduced to foster better cooperation between law enforcement and local populations, systemic corruption and underfunding continue to plague the Nigerian Police Force. Despite efforts to increase recruitment, the police remain poorly trained, under-resourced, and susceptible to bribery; severely hamper their ability to tackle organized crime effectively (Anzizi, 2024).

Consequently, while the Nigerian government has made significant attempts to fight criminality, these efforts are frequently undermined by systemic issues, such as weak governance structures, inadequate resources, and corruption (Page, 2021). Military interventions have seen some success but have been constrained by operational and logistical challenges. Likewise, policing reforms have been obstructed by a lack of resources and persistent corruption. While cybercrime legislation has yielded some positive results, the scale of cybercrime is still overwhelming because of insufficient public awareness and expertise (Nzeakor, Nwokeoma & Ezeh, 2020). Finally, although socio-economic programs are vital for addressing unemployment and poverty, they have not been sustainable or comprehensive enough to effectively tackle the root causes of crime. Unless these challenges are addressed, Nigeria's attempts to improve national security and combat criminality will remain incomplete.

Theoretical Framework

The study of criminality in Nigeria can be viewed through several criminological theories that explain the structural and socio-economic factors that contribute to criminal behavior. These theories offer a deeper insight into the complex dynamics driving the rise of crime in the country, especially in areas where inadequate state intervention, unemployment, and poverty are widespread. One primary theoretical perspective is Merton's Strain Theory (Merton, 1938), which suggests that societal structures place pressure on individuals to reach culturally accepted goals, like success and wealth. However, when the means to reach these goals are not equally available to all members of society, some individuals may turn to criminal or deviant behavior as an alternative. In the Nigerian context, this theory is highly applicable due to limited access to legitimate economic opportunities and wide socio-economic disparities, particularly for marginalized groups.

Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) offers another significant framework for understanding crime in Nigeria. This theory asserts that crime occurs when three elements meet: a suitable target, a motivated offender, and the absence of capable guardianship. In Nigeria, economic instability and high unemployment levels create a large pool of motivated offenders, while weak state institutions and insufficient law enforcement fail to provide adequate guardianship. The lack of robust

security and policing in many parts of the country, particularly in remote or conflict-ridden areas, creates opportunities for crime to thrive. This theory is especially useful for explaining the rise of opportunistic crimes like petty theft, armed robbery, and kidnapping for ransom, as well as the spread of banditry and terrorism in regions where the state maintains limited control.

In regions such as the North-West and North-East, where banditry and the Boko Haram insurgency have destabilized communities, the lack of government presence and adequate policing aligns with the core propositions of Routine Activity Theory. Similarly, cybercrime, which has emerged as a major issue in urban areas, can also be understood through this framework. The increase in internet access without corresponding cyber-policing, combined with a large population of underemployed youth, provides an opportunity for motivated offenders to exploit vulnerable targets within the digital space.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To tackle the increasing threat of crime in Nigeria and its wide-ranging impact on national security, a thorough and multi-dimensional strategy is vital. The nation deals with complex difficulties, such as terrorism, cybercrime, and political violence, all of which are intensified by deep-seated socio-economic inequalities and fragile governance structures. Criminality weakens national security by encouraging instability, diminishing trust in public institutions, and worsening economic stagnation. Consequently, it is vital that any attempt to restore national security addresses the fundamental issues that fuel criminal behavior and ensures a unified response to lessen its impact.

The following recommendations suggest strategic steps that the Nigerian government should evaluate to combat criminality and bolster national security:

(a) **Strengthening Law Enforcement Agencies:** Reforming the police and security agencies is vital to improving their ability to fight crime. This involves investing in improved training programs, increasing financial resources, and making deliberate efforts to eradicate corruption within law enforcement agencies. Implementing modern technology to monitor and fight new forms of crime, including cybercrime, terrorism, and organized crime, is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of law enforcement.

(b) **Addressing Socioeconomic Inequality:** Prioritizing economic development is key to tackling the root causes of crime. Initiatives centered on job creation, poverty reduction, and providing educational opportunities for the youth can help diminish the appeal of criminal activities. Additionally, government investment in rural development is required to reduce the marginalization of certain regions, which frequently become breeding grounds for crime due to a lack of infrastructure and opportunities.

(c) **Strengthening Border Control**: Enhanced border security is crucial to curbing the flow of arms, drugs, and other illegal goods into the nation. The government should

improve surveillance at key border points, increase the enforcement capabilities of customs officials, and collaborate more efficiently with neighboring nations to break up cross-border criminal networks.

(d) **Promoting Good Governance:** Fighting corruption and encouraging transparent, accountable governance are essential to rebuilding trust in public institutions. Effective governance would diminish the impunity that permits criminal networks to function without consequence. Promoting good governance will also help ensure that public funds designated for security, social programs, and development projects are utilized as intended, instead of being diverted through corrupt practices.

By executing these recommendations, Nigeria can build a more robust strategy for combating criminality. Strengthening law enforcement, addressing socio-economic inequalities, improving border control, and promoting good governance are all vital elements of restoring national security and stability. If effectively put into practice, these strategies will not only lower crime rates but also encourage greater public trust in state institutions, generate economic opportunities, and strengthen Nigeria's ability to protect its citizens.

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