PROBLEMS IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA: THEORETICAL AND CRIME STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR CURBING THE MENACE

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Abstract

The Crime situation in present day Nigeria has various levels of overwhelming impacts on the system and is often looked at as new norm, accepted and built into society. This paper, with the north central and particularly Benue state in view, presents a deep look at crime through sociological theories in today's Nigeria. It also provides an analytical stance on selected crime problems in the in tune with government approaches through policies and legislations. The paper posits that an adequate and appropriate understanding of different crime theories is vital for effective, proactive and reactive responses to crime problems in contemporary Nigeria. It is thus of the view that the responses so far are not adequate from the lack of theoretical understanding. It is subsequently recommended that the policy making structure of the country bothering on crime needs to go back to the strategy drawing board and advance knowledge on crime theories to enable them fashion out very adequate and appropriate policies, legislations and Judicial responses to Nigeria's crime problems. Also, Nigeria can do well if she does not only evolve sweet and catchy slogans for programs but strategically ensures the execution of such programs as enshrined in World best practices from other jurisdictions in attempt to curbing crime problems considering that the present attempts have fallen short and inadequate.

Key Words: Theories, Strategic options, Best practices, Crime

Introduction

Contemporary Nigeria presents herself as a world example of nations that are held back by crime, even of the violent type. Not a week passes in Nigeria today without a report on armed robbery, kidnapping or abductions, murder, rape, militancy, terrorism and banditry. These put together, has posed great problems in the country from economic to social and even political. The country stands at loss of investors and investments, social relations and political participation. The forgoing provides the reason enough to take theoretical explanations that expose crime in order to have a ground-up response to the crime situation in Nigeria. This is with a view to arm the polity with military (strategic) precautionary repositioning of the nation. There is, within this content, a close examination of selected crime theories and crimes, offering a near complete explanation of the notions.

Clarification of Concepts

The key concepts that make up the composite structure of the paper are given clarification for a better understanding of the thematic.

Theory

A theory is conceived here as a formal set of ideas, which is intended to explain why something happens or exists. It is a given rational system of ideas merged in an order that produces general principles based on facts which increases our understanding and explanation of phenomena. Explanations are vital because they help in finding out why things are the way they are and suggests ways to effect desired change. Many criminological as well as sociological theories exist that provide explanations of crime (Kaplan,1964; Akers,1990). However, no particular theory can exhaustively provide explanations to the crime situation. Criminology as a field of study emerged as a consequence of unjust and cruel treatment of offenders (enlightenment period 1685-1815). The field owes its origin to works of Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) and Cesare Beccaria (1738-1794) who related identity of criminals to physical and genetic features, and crime to human rational and free will, respectively (Pechan, 2014). It is pertinent to say that one of the objectives of criminological research is to provide theoretical explanatory basis for crime in order to stop or reduce its occurrence.

Crime

Crime is seen here in terms of deviance or behaviour that is non-conforming to societal norms. Crime from the legal perspective is an action or omission which constitutes an offence and is punishable by law. This is associated with synonyms as offence, unlawful act, illegal act, misdemeanor, misdeed, wrong, felony, violation, transgression, fault, injury, malfeasance, malefaction, tort, trespass (Atsegbua, 2011).

This paper avails an over view of selected contemporary theories within sociological parlance, an analysis of specific crimes within the North central region of the country, and particularly Benue State, and the responses (what is and what should be) of the political authority to these problems. Political authority here implies strategists for criminal policy within the executive, legislative and judicial enclave of government. The theories put forward here form a bench mark for explanations and a hitherto curb to the crime situation through effective and appropriate suggestions conceived as adequate ways of responding to the crime problems. Three primary and mainstream criminological theories (Biological, psychological and sociological theories) are believed here to subsume the others that are also considered-strain theory, labelling theory, utilitarian (positivism) theory, non-utilitarian theory (classism), treatment (reformism) theory, conflict theory and control theory, to help provide deeper understanding of the crime problems in Nigeria. Crime problems discussed here are banditry, terrorism; corruption, armed robbery, advanced free fraud and kidnapping or abduction. These crimes are felt to be more prevalent in Nigeria and particularly Benue state.

Strategic Options

Strategy is a military conception that suggests the science and art of conducting a military campaign in its large-scale and long-term aspects, and, or the use of such a skill in achieving a purpose (Webster, 1987).

Strategic options here refer to the aggregate choices open to a people which combine a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, with the vision of the future in the confrontation with a known foe or problem, in order to achieve expected and sustainable objectives, goals and results with minimal cost and long-term advantage. Where expedient choices work on short-term, ad-hoc, or the immediate, strategic options are holistic, long-term and planned with a conscious step by step approach. For example, the Benue state government took strategic options to establish laws prohibiting open grazing and permitting the establishment of ranches. An expedient or problem-solving choice would have asked for compromise, which conflict would resurface after a while. Problem solving approaches can be dumped when the 'crisis' is over, but strategic options continue, and are being refined over time, in the process of achievement.

Strategic options therefore refer to those broad based, long-term actions that place the users at a peculiar advantage in the war against a foe or a problem. Theories of crime provide the base and the construct through which the problems of crime and criminality can be approached consistently and sustainably. The Nigeria society is bound to always contend with the crime phenomenon and there is need therefore to adapt a firm need for strategic options for crime control.

Theoretical Precisions:

Classical and Neo-classical theories

Early criminology theorized crime from the various identification models of the criminal centered on physical body features (broad shoulders, high cheekbones, and large ears). Classical thinking is of the view that criminals make rational choices and decide conclusively to carry out crimes due to maximum pleasure and minimum pain. This is to say that criminals weigh up the costs of outcomes of their actions and therefore society needs to evolve penalties which outweigh what would probably be gained by the criminal such that the criminal is deterred from crime (Jeremy & Philip, 2011). Neo-classical thinking on the other hand is a continuation of the traditions and philosophies of the classical school of thought but has its advancements embedded in the emphasis on scientific findings to determine just punishment, which upholds law enforcement, depicting procedural law. The classical and neo-classical theories of criminology are on the one hand characterized by the rational free will ideology, that offenders understand the effects of their actions and society's response should be to enforce punitive measures that fit the crime, and also scientific study for evidence to ascertain punishment commensurate to the crime, on the other hand (Raluca, 2012; Otu, 2015; Skogan, 1990). These two schools of thoughts fall short in their attempts to explain crime in society. One short fall is on deterrence where one could ask 'does deterrence really deter' and on 'commensurate', how does one determine or measure crime and punishment quantitatively? However, punishment for wrongs is a viable instrument for crime control.

Biological theories

These theories trace crime to genetic, morphological and anthropological construction of criminals. Cesare Lombroso posited in his theory of 'born criminal', which assumes, that offenders have defects in anthropological constitution exemplified in atavistic stigmata such as unusual eye pigment, long arms and linking eyebrows, among other features, which make them

prone to crime (Adler et al., 2007). Scholars such as Richard Dugdale, Kirshner Ernest, Ernest Horton(Adler, et al, 2007) trace criminal behaviour to specific body types and hereditary traits passed from parents to children.

Psychological theories

Like biological interpretations, psychological theories of crime look for explanations of deviance within the offenders, and not the society. Rafaele Garofalo in the earliest psychological explanations of crime, traced criminal behaviours to anomalies in morality, and also the Freudian psychoanalysis propounds that offenders have a weak superego thereby lacking restraints against the urge for momentary gratification (Adler et al., 2007; Giddens, 2001). According to this theory, the human psyche is broken into the id, ego and superego. The ego seeks constantly to achieve a balance between urges and drives for gratification, this implies the id and honed personal moral codes meaning the ego. The super-ego is dependent on personal judgments about moral questions as an inter-play between the mental state of the individual, viz-a-viz the level of psychological development or mental health. Emphasis is placed on the distinctive traits of criminals including feeble mindedness and moral degeneracy. Giddens (2001) suggests that abnormal mental states are inherited and these can either predispose an individual to crime or create problems in the process of socialization, considering the balance in moral state. The moral development theory sees offenders as those with defective moral development or are those suffering from psychiatric challenges.

Sociological theories

Sociological theories of crime seek to explain crime as a product of the social conditions an individual is found in. The works of Kursat (2023) and other criminology scholars demonstrate that crime statistics vary in relation to factors like poverty, age, sex, race, neighbourhoods and today, politics. This lays a foundation for several postulations and sub-theories which may be grouped conveniently under sociological theorems. Some of these theories follow from the foregoing.

Strain theory:

This theory sees crime as resulting from efforts by offenders to inconvenient blockings to the actualization of set goals. This believes that social structures within society may presume citizens to commit crime. For example, the need to achieve (go to school, pay rents, marry, buy a car) in the presence of economic hardships with little or no clear-cut means for achievement (Merton, 1938; Richard, 1994; Zhang, 2012; Adler et al., 2007). Merton (1938) and Zhang (2012) elongate on this, that, crime is as a result of the lack of integration between what urban culture demands of individuals and what the existing means for achievement permits. For example, everyone is expected to attain certain levels of status or success per time; live in a comfortable home, marry and fend for dependents, yet the means for achieving these goals are not evenly distributed among all social classes causing strain on the less privileged. Often, those with fewer opportunities try to make it to the top at all cost (Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994; Agnew, 2001; Agnew, 2012). The individual without means for achievement then resorts to crime and other options for means in order to actualize economic goals.

Utilitarian (Positivism) Theory

The utilitarian school of thought upholds punishment as beneficial to society through incapacitation, reformation, education and deterrence. The positivism model considers the idea of deterrence, which requires the imposition of criminal sections on violators of law in order that they are prevented, alongside potential offenders, from committing crimes in the future (Yecho, 2011). By this, the offender receives punishment for his offence and for those would be offenders' thereby reducing crime in society. The non-utilitarian (classical) perspectives' justification for punishment is premised on retributive justice. Yecho (2011) says that retribution is based on the idea that offenders be punished because they deserve to be punished so that they suffer for the harms they have done others (the just desert). This emphasizes commensurability of punishment with offence committed. It is believed that offenders are rational and freely choose to violate the law. By and large, the school of thought proposes that offenders receive harm in the magnitude as their offences.

Treatment (Reformism) Theory

This theory proposes that a major trend in correction is to approach the offender much as one who is mentally ill, the neglected, or the under privileged. This mere human ideology, reflected in the transformation model, sees criminal behaviour just as the manifestation of pathology that can be handled by some form of therapeutic activity. Although the criminal may be referred to as 'sick'; the treatment ideology is not analogous to medical approach. The closest analogy is with the physical; issues lie in the need for offenders to recognize the danger and undesirability of their criminal behaviour and then to make significant efforts to rid themselves of that behaviour. The treatment model does not remove criminal behaviour as one might reprove an infected eye, rather, the patient (criminal) is made to see the rewards for positive behaviour and is encouraged and equipped to adopt it as a way of life (Anderson, and Anderson, 1984).

Conflict theory

The theory sees crime as a result of the struggle for domination by members of competing interest groups in society. This implies the imaginary cold war between the rich and the poor, the ruling class and the ruled (Damingo, 2004). The theory is of the position that private ownership of the means of production and the exploitation of the masses by a few but powerful members of the bourgeoisie class is largely the product of capitalism. This consequently leads to poverty of the masses and therefore predisposing them to crime (revolt). The exposition from the conflict perspective is that exploitation of the masses is principally the cause of crime in society. Therefore, the elimination of exploitation will be elimination of poverty, and in the same vein the elimination of crime.

Control theory

This theory conceptualizes crime as resulting from ineffective bonding between offenders and agents of socialization or authority figures such as parents, law enforcement agents, teachers, cultural, religious and political leaders. Ross (2017) expands on this by postulating that the belief systems rather than specific laws provide guide to what people do and generally serve to control behaviour. Individuals take to crime when belief systems needed to make them conform to societal laws are weak or absent. This results in reverse-socialization and low self-control or

outright failure of containment among negative groups such as street gangs, children from broken homes, failure in educational system or corrupted political and socio-cultural structure.

CRIME PROBLEMS IN NIGERIA: AN OVERVIEW OF SELECTED CRIMES

Banditry

The act of bandits' conflict can be traced back to herders-farmer conflicts that plague Nigeria, particularly Benue State of north central Nigeria. This is perceived to be as a result of environmental decline and the scarcity of water and arable land with communities competing viciously for those limited resources. In Benue state, it is believed to be vicious attempts at land grabbing. Bandits remain an assortment of non-ideological but economically driven and organized criminal groups carrying out large-scale crimes targeting road users, farmers and women (sexual violence). They extort, kidnap for ransoms, carry out robberies and commit murder. Benue has constantly been swept to the cliff or horror through killings believed to mimic ethnic cleansing. Consistent with these is the unsettling of locals from their homes by herders making them refugees in their own country (Charles, 2021). Other north central states such as Plateau, Nasarawa and Kogi have also had their fair share, variously, of herders' attacks and general banditry. There are other aspects of banditry occasioned by political rivalry among the people themselves. It began just for the purposes of winning elections by those who had a greater control of the threat machinery (bandits). It has however degenerated to what these politicians no longer can control. The general Benue public is at the receiving end of it all. The conflict theory believes that the struggle to control resources can be made simple by spreading wealth and thereby reducing hardships on the people. The conduct of the people is what creates these conflicts.

Terrorism

Terrorism began in Nigeria by the creation of various interest groups- O'dua people's congress; movement fort the emancipation of the Nigeria delta; then Boko Haram. The first two groups were said to be of a view to press home the needs and demands of their people but did that through threats and high-risk unrests. Believed to be a latent function of the prolonged failure of the state (Nigeria), terrorism has raked havoc on the nation immeasurably. Terrorism is a collection of illegal acts or threats calculated to instill fear and confusion in members of the public with the aim of compelling the government to agree to the demands of the perpetrators. It is a transnational crime, which is often associated with dissident groups, and involves series of other crimes; suicide bombing, mass murder, plane hijacking, kidnapping, and hostage taking. Historically, acts of terrorism can be traced in Nigeria to the civil war where biafra forces hijacked Nigeria planes conveying dignitaries, thereby making politically related demands.

Acts of terrorism were also employed during the Niger-Delta agitations for resource control where oil installations were bombed and experts kidnapped. Also, religious extremism in northern Nigeria has taken the form of terrorism; suicide bombings, mass murders, abductions and kidnappings (Amnesty International, 2020). In Benue state the 'sankera' axis has become a symbol of fear and no one could predict what would become of residents and travelers. This happens alongside Fulani herdsmen killings displacing many while the federal government would not declare all as terrorist groups. The food basket of the nation potentials has been taken away from Benue by terrorism both from within and outside.

Corruption

The word corruption is believed to have come to first use around 10th century. Corruption which is synonymous with decay, spoiled, rot, decomposition and other such fowl connotation terms, gained popular usage with the ancient Egyptians as they attempted to reserve their dead from total decomposition so as to have at least the remains preserved in one form or the other. The understanding one gets here is therefore that; when a person, state or system is said to be corrupt, it invariably implies that such a state or system is rotten, decomposed, and decadent or is absolutely in a bad state; and in the case of human beings, morally bankrupt.

The World Bank has defined corruption as the abuse of public office for private gains. Public office is abused for private gain when an official accepts, solicits or extorts a bribe. It is also abused when private agents actively offer bribe to circumvent public policies and processes for competitive advantage and profit. Public office can be abused for personal benefit even if no bribery occurs through patronage and nepotism, the theft of state assets and the diversion of state revenues (www.worldbank.org2008). Ackerman (1999, as cited in Falaye,2013) had posited that corruption is "a product of greed, an act which deviates from the formal rules for conduct and governing the action of someone in a position of public authority because of motives such as wealth, power or status" (pp141-142).

Stephenhurst and Serdigh (1998, as cited in Akinkugbe2013) define corruption as the abuse of power, most often for personal gain or for the benefit of a group which one owes allegiance. It can be motivated by greed, by desire to retain or increase one's power for supposed greater good (pp63-65). Huntington (2002, as cited inAkinkugbe (2013) on the other hand asserted that corruption refers to "behaviours of public officials which deviates from accepted norms in order to serve private ends" (pp67-68). Corruption is seen to as well refer to misuse of authority as a result of considerations of personal gain which need not be money. A critical look at definitions cited so far reveals the tendency of most scholars and analysts of corruption to view the malaise from the narrow confines of public offices and authority. There is therefore the preponderance of such analysis and discourse on corruption dwelling mainly on the linkage between corruption and economic underpinnings as the motivating factor. However, all attempts to analyze corruption within the context of economic gratifications that excluded the socio-political and moral perspectives can be said to have fallen short of standard. Predicted on this apparent gaffe therefore, Unaji (2010) has defined corruption simply as an attitude or behaviour that negatively affects or leads to the degeneration of the established and acceptable norms and values of a given society. Corruption seen from this point of view is about all attitudes and behaviours that negate or contravene established values and normative standards as the perpetrators seek to gratify themselves. Corruption therefore cannot be limited in scope to cover only the financial sector and public domains. Corruption is indeed prevalent in all specter of the society just as it is found in all human endeavours.

Corruption has permeated all spheres of our lives and not just about money, public authority and power, though power and authority remain the most potent instruments of corruption in Nigeria. All the foregoing discussion is a depiction of crime problems in Nigeria as a result of poor leadership and governance. It has become very clear that most of developing countries of Africa have corruption as a fundamental factor for poor governance which has led to recurrent social disequilibrium and inequality (Lumumba, 2015). Corruption is implicated here as a major cause of crime. Although Nigeria has set up some tripartite anticorruption agencies (economic and

financial crimes commission, EFCC; the Independent corrupt practices and other related offences commission, ICPCP; and the code of conduct tribunal (CT). Corruption still appears endemic in the country. (Aigboro & Eidenoje, 2016).

Countries in Africa such as Kenya and Tanzania have evolved ways like the National Tax payers Association that help to sensitize citizens on how political office holders expend public funds, and the media and citizens organizations respectively, have been efficient in the fight against corruption. In Singapore (corruption practices investigation Bureau) and Hong Kong (Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) are in operation. These bodies met out penalties against corruption and citizens are aware and ensure effective adjudications. These recommended practices have clearly identified and provided solutions for sociological factors like culture, custom and poor governance practices which fuel corruption (Aigboro & Eidenoje, 2016).

Conclusion

It has been made clear in this paper that most of what the political authority in Nigeria requires is a proper and adequate understanding of crime theories. This is believed to be the bedrock for approaches to crime control and subjugation. Crime theories go as far as exposing crime from causation to free will. Thus, outside been a 'born' criminal, an offender may take to crime based on social factors. It can succinctly be concluded that crime theories and crime cannot be separated from the attempts to curbing crime in Nigeria.

Recommendations (strategic options for crime control)

1. The crime situation in Nigeria requires astute attention towards attempts at keeping it under control. It is therefore recommended here that there ought to be a sustained drive for crime check. The propositions by early criminological theories on incarceration, and other punitive measures have been in existence but have failed to reasonably reduce crime. Our prisons as conduit pipes, always over flowing with convicts and awaiting trials. The call here is for the policy makers to think towards evolving, consistently, avenues for improved standards of living (socially, environmentally and economically); without this, the prison system will always have prisoners going in and coming out to the same conditions that led them to crime.
2. Also, taking after the postulations of the strain theory, it is recommended that the society and particularly the Nigerian community should engage in increasing achievement opportunities for her populace across social classes and also to reward citizens found to be of consistent positive behaviour. These are believed to be capable to put to check the crime situation in any society as citizens feel recognized and appreciated as they become willing to do more positive activities.
3. From the postulations of the biological theories, it is recommended that policies for crime control, which are directed towards the isolation and treatment of offenders as a way of checking crime in society be put in place. This includes, among others, preventive measures like the provision of improved standards of living and incapacitation in special homes where offenders are made to be accustomed into suppressing display of potential criminal characteristics. Also, that there should be therapeutic treatment and counseling for offenders in a bid to re-integrate them into society and curb crime in line with views of the psychological theories.

74

4. The paper also recommends for effective re-integration efforts for ex-offenders in order to reduce recidivism. This could be through avenues to put to use the reformation techniques learnt from incarceration. Ex-offenders will find gainful employment (self, government and private sector) to become useful, both to themselves and the public thereby discourage stereotyping from previous crimes.

5. In order that offenders do not have the air for free crime, those found guilty of crimes in the presence of government efforts for improved standards of living, should be handed summary sentences and punishments to uphold the spirit of deterrence while in the same vein, when receiving punishment (imprisonment) they should be equipped with technical abilities (reformations) to be able to face the economy at post prison, as they find the grounds to take new leaf of life.

6. Just like the proponents of control theory, the paper recommends proper child-bearing, integration and conscious restoration of social bonds through rehabilitation therapy as a way out to curtailing or controlling crime.

7. The instances of terrorism, banditry, and corruption should be attended under a declaration of a state of emergency. This implies a holistic approach to put to an end terrorism, corruption and other acts of criminality. This thus calls for efforts at strengthening law enforcement and judicial capabilities, expand border security, effective financing of counter terrorism, improve crisis response such as herders and farmers crisis, and counter violence and extremism, on the one hand, and consistent advocacies for support for anti-corruption agencies to truthfully recover stolen or looted funds and assets and to summarily charge and convict those found guilty to have committed such offences.

8. There is strategic need for the general public and civil society groups in conjunction with the national assembly and the media to hold the government to account for the use of public resources.

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