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The Prevalence of Criminal Victimization among the Nigerian Populace

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Abstract

This study investigated the prevalence of criminal victimization among the Nigerian populace, particularly unravelling its effects on the life of the people. This study used a combined method of qualitative and quantitative research whereby it carried out a conceptual literature review through content analysis, an empirical literature review and an in-depth interview. The study found out that there is a rising spate of criminal victimization within the nation partly because of the failure of the various crime control agencies. It concluded that these criminal incidents have far reaching effects on the life of the people namely their personal and family life, economic, social and political life. Generally, it has brought about social instability, fear and distrust. Among others, the study recommended that government must establish an effective crime control system involving different institutions in the communities, the general public must see the task of crime control as the responsibility of all, greater promotion ofinformation sharing and crime updates among groups concerned with security and the criminal justice system should devise more effective measures of handling cases so as to deter others or discourage criminality.

1.0 Introduction

Criminal victimization in Nigeria takes several forms including physical injury, financial losses, loss of property and emotional harm as a result of murder, rape, assault or fraud, homicide, stalking, domestic violence, kidnapping, torture, abuse or neglect of the vulnerable, human trafficking, rights infringement, and others (Cares, Haynes & Ruback 2015; Cassell & Erez, 2011). The weakness of the various crime control agencies has engendered a high level of vulnerability leading to the prevalence of victimization which has created the requisite conditions for social instability. There are atrocious and violent acts persistently reported on the media on almost daily basis, signaling a breakdown of law and order within the state.

The obvious consistency in criminal activities not only shows the weakness of crime control but also institutionalizes victimization with a significant threat to stability of the society and the disintegration of the state. Consequently, Niger Delta weekly (2022:1) observes that why this is of a serious concern is that "the emerging situation could cause a breakdown of law and order which could result in hooliganism, spontaneous victimization, reprisal killings and deployment of repressive measures by security forces." Hence, this prevalence of victimization in the nation has led to various forms of social disorder, socio-economic disruptions, civil unrest and political instability in the state.

Though victimization has affected people in various ways, a greater concern has been the long-term and challenging impact which is social instability. For instance, shock, anger, rage, fear, terror, frustration, confusion, guilt, self-blame, shame, feelings of humiliation, grief, sorrow, et ce tera which have been considered noticeable effects of victimization often spill into other more aggressive acts like protests, riots, mob actions and different forms of rebellion, deviance, civil disobedience (Denis & Udofia, 2024).

Lack of effective recovery process for crime victims and rehabilitation for criminals and ex-convicts has also prevented progress towards social harmony in the country. No doubt, the degree of assistance, service, accommodation, rehabilitation and education given to victims of crime can mitigate the effects of victimization and also prevent further occurrence of criminal victimization. On the other hand, trivializing, manipulating the victim's condition, neglecting, showing indifference and exploiting either for economic or political purposes on many occasions have resulted in frustration and reactions. Therefore, the wide range of social responses to victimization have over the time brought about reactions leading to social instability and unrest, contrary to expected results of effective social control characterized by confidence-building and sense of security.

In search of a way forward, this work interrogates the prevalence of criminal victimization among the Nigerian populace with a view to identify its consequences and demonstrate the possibility of combating this menace.

2.0 Conceptual Review

Understanding Crime

Crime is not an absolute phenomenon. The concept of crime lends itself to diverse definitions across times, places, cultures and contexts, hence its relativity. According to Curra (2000) the relativity in conceptualizing crime depends largely on some power structure, orientations, assumptions and school of thoughts or ideological leanings of those who make attempt at defining it. This mutability of definition also influences identifying the causes, deciphering its nature and choosing reactions to it. This implies that an act criminalized today may be decriminalized in the future or a lawful act today may become unlawful tomorrow. It could also be demonstrated on this premise that alcohol consumption, for instance, may be a crime in one culture or belief system as the law proscribes but legal in other settings. It is this sense, that crime is said to be purely a socially constructed phenomenon (Mezie-Okoye and Denis, 2023). Hence, there has not been a unanimously acceptable definition of crime because of the differently assigned meanings as expressed by various authors.

There are two noticeable aspects of the definition of crime namely the legal and the popular meanings (Isiaka & Okaphor, 2018). These two aspects are characterized and differentiated as legally proscribed behaviours and other norms or codes of moral behaviour respectively. In a strictly legal understanding, crime is understood as an act or omission that is penalized by the law. For instance, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2000) defines crime as a dishonest, violent, or immoral action that can be punished by law. Similar to this definition is the understanding that crime is expressly an act intended at violating the criminal law without defense or excuse and which is punished by the state as a misdemeanor (Tapper, 1948 in Brown, Esbensen & Geis, 2010). This understanding of crime is literally restricted within the realm of acts that have been punished or those convicted by

law, not necessarily acts that are punishable by moral or social standards. Isiaka and Okaphor (2018) have defined crime as an act or omission against public interest which is proscribed by law enacted by the legislature in the overall interest of the society and to which prescribed punishment is attached in the event of violation.

Hillyard and Tombs (2007) believe that if the consideration of an act as criminal or punishable flows explicitly from the power structure or those in positions of authority without recourse to values there exists a disparity and very evidently between the provisions of the criminal law and the interests of the members of the society. For instance, when the law fails to underlie the general opinion of what behaviours are criminal or not but rather reflects the wellbeing of the state or few others at the detriment of others. Moncado (2019) therefore observes that if crime is strictly an act of violation of proper laws made by the state, it means that the rightness or wrongness of an action cannot be objectively deciphered by this state-defined concept of crime since laws are supposed to flow naturally from social norms in the society.

This legal notion of crime narrows criminality to only those acts proscribed by the law or the state. Hence, behaviours not directly opposing some statutory or case law of the criminal justice process are excluded even though they may be socially injurious. The narrowness of such a definition makes it a far cry from what other scholars think crime ought to be. One of such limitations is that any behaviour not reported or detected, prosecuted or convicted could not be termed a crime. Hillyard and Tombs (2007) decries the relativity of the concept of crime under this legalistic definition, noting the dangers of identifying crimes within the confines of criminalized behaviour because it is at once permitting numerous socially harmful behaviours not said to be outlawed such as commercial production of toxins in the environment which is much avoidable, promoting unsafe working conditions and unsafe products display.

To fill this lacuna, Sutherland (1949) in Brown, Esbensen and Geis (2010) offers a moderate though lightly legalistic view on how crime ought to be understood. What is said to be a novel and broader definition is based on three characteristics. Accordingly, for an act to be qualified a crime, it must be prohibited by the state, it must be an act against the state and must be an act which the state may punish. This last characteristic gives room to what is punishable even though such an act is not against the state or has not been forbidden by the state yet causes some social harm not explicitly proscribed.

This is why some scholars like Hillyard and Tombs (2007) and Passas and Goodwin (2004) believe that the definition of crime must pay much attention to its sociological perspectives other than what is legally right or wrong by the standard of the criminal law process. Paradoxically, they observe that the criminal justice discipline emanated sociologically and that it is social norms that inform what is to be considered as legal or illegal within its operations. Sociological approaches tend to consider crime in a more normative way, that is, a breach of social norms and values. This is what constitutes the second aspect of the definition of crime.

Hence, Durkheim (1958) in Isiaka & Okaphor (2018) is of the opinion that crime is defined by the collective conscience of the people. In other words, whatever is agreed upon as morally right or wrong determines what constitutes crime. This sociological foundation of the public perception of crime is rooted in some extralegal norms that may be culture bound. Hence, for Mezie-Okoye and Denis (2023), it is should be considered as a social construct since every society has a peculiar view of comprises an act of criminality. However, according to the opinion of Hashmani and Jonason (2017), there are some common socially undesirable traits which in most societies are adjudged generally antisocial, namely aggression, bullying, casual/exploitative sex, deception, domestic violence, future discounting/impulsivity, psychopathy, prejudice/racism, substance use and theft. Clinard (1996) in Idowu and Imo (2014) further suggests that crime as a concept should be set aside for acts which the community strongly disapproves and finds it impracticable to accept. For Prittwitz (1999) in Kleinfeld (2013), crime is simply an interaction between a criminal and a victim.

Concept of victimization

According to Fisher and Reyns (2009), victimization is the upshot of calculated action by a person or group to exploit, subjugate or afflict another and to devastate or illicitly obtain others' possessions. The concept of victimization is derived from the Latin etymology *victim* meaning "sacrificial animal," but the concept of victim has developed to incorporate an array of targets including persons be it oneself or another, the family circle, business, the state or the environment. UN Declaration of the Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, 1985 defines "victim" as "

persons who individually or collectively, have suffered harm, which include physical or mental injury, emotional suffering or economic loss or substantial impairment of fundamental rights through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws operative within member states, including those laws proscribing criminal abuse of power (para. 1).

According to Cares, Haynes and Ruback (2015), victimisation refers to the actual harms that victims of crime experience, such as property loss and destruction, physical hurt, and psychological distress. According to Kleinfeld (2013), victimisation is the act of preying on someone's innocence or fragility.

Cassell and Erez (2011) divide victimisation into two categories: primary victimisation and subsequent victimisation. Primary victims of fraud, assault, rape, murder, and other crimes are included in the first category of victimisation. Those closest to the primary victims or those who experience the effects of victimisation indirectly because of their special relationships with direct victims—such as family members, friends, carers for victims, or other relationships to primary victims—are considered secondary victims, also referred to as ancillary victims. They believe that the harm done to the direct victim is the only reason why the secondary victims suffer harm.

The Canadian Resource Center for Victims of Crime [CRCVC] (2005) gives a more elaborate view of secondary victimization. Accordingly, it is considered as the harm that occurs in the course of institutional or individual response to the victim, rather than a direct consequence of the criminal act. It further outlines some examples of secondary victimization to include the inappropriate performance of police or other criminal justice personnel, the rigors of criminal investigation and trial, failure of the criminal justice process to keep the victim in perspective, restricted access to the body of a loved one, violating the victim's dignity or sense of privacy in cases like sexual assault, failure of doctors to admit signs of spousal abuse, insistence of spiritual leaders on forgiveness by the victims against their wishes or readiness, intrusive investigation that may involve filming, photographing and media reports.

Effects of Criminal Victimization

CRCVC (2005) avers that the effects of victimization are often long-term and very challenging to overcome. It notes that victimization affects people in various ways namely emotionally, physically, financially, psychologically and socially. The emotional impacts include shock, anger or range, fear or terror, frustration, confusion, guilt or self-blame, shame, feelings of humiliation and grief or sorrow. The physical impacts primarily consist of physical injuries sustained in the course of victimization which may include broken bones, bruises, gunshot wounds, et cetera. Physical injuries may sometimes be sustained internally too. These physical effects of victimization could also lead to loss of appetite, insomnia, lethargy, muscle tension, headaches, nausea, decreased libido, et cetera. The financial impacts of crime are namely the repairs or replacement of property and possessions, greater insurance premiums, installation of security devices, expenses for healthcare and medical services, cost of criminal justice procedure, consultation for professional counseling, time implications, funeral expenses and others. A keen observation of these impacts of victimization as outlined by the CRVC (2005) would reveal that the psychological impacts are similar to the emotional impacts while the social impacts run parallel with the different forms of secondary victimization discussed previously.

In the opinion of Fisher and Reyns (2009), victimization gives rise to various forms of harm which can consist of emotional or psychological damage, sexual or physical injury and economic loss. Criminal victimization commonly threatens security and gives rise to fear, alienation, despair, suspicion, conflict and even death (Obioha, 2004). While Karmen (2010) outlines the effects of victimization on individual victims as fright, depression, trauma, bitterness, infuriation and feelings of intimidation, Kilpatrick, Beatty & Howley (1998) in Cares, Haynes & Ruback (2015) measure the effects of victimization in terms of substantial and intangible costs. The substantial are identified as both financial and economic; comprising medical bills, lost property, insurance costs, cost of acquisition of protection devices and isolation from particular neighbourhoods, while the intangible costs consists of pain and suffering.

Wisdom and Maxfield (2001) observe that there is another effect of victimization that appears to be a continuum. It is a cycle that transforms the victim into a victimizer. This is illustrated with the behaviour of sexually molested or physically abused young people who may become typically criminal oriented where such could be traced to past experiences. Bullied students that take a belligerent initiative against offender-tutors or a battered wife that has become vengeful against the husband are some instances of making a victimizer out of a victim. Moncada (2019) is of the opinion that victimization leads to systematic rights violation because it warrants people to pull out from social and political life and embrace a somewhat low self-esteem or lower status in the society.

For Becker et al., (1986) in Ikoh (2011), the effects of victimization vary according to pattern or type of crime. While distinguishing the effects of assaults as very devastating, he admits that rape victims, who actually survive, exhibit an array of trauma-induced signs that include nightmares, loss of concentration, depression, sleep and eating disorder, mood of anger, feelings of humiliation and self-blame. They admit that apart from physical injury and psychological trauma, survivors of rape also face the danger of being infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Once crime is rife in the society, it severely strains its social fabric and could lead to moral depravity and the degeneration of the society. Some could be very heinous and violent crimes which when relentlessly reported on the media with its sensational leanings could stir suspicions, fear of crime, deep sense of insecurity and general anxiety. This in turn threatens the capacity for self-advancement and stifles economic growth (Burgess and Holmstrum, 1976 in Ikoh, 2011). For instance, people would prefer to remain indoors than go out to work for fear of being, robbed, raped or physically assaulted. Still on economic implications of victimization, Conklin (2001), posits that deterrent measures are mostly not cost effective and could financially exceed the amount of losses that were to be incurred if the crime intended to prevent actually occurred. For instance, declaration of curfews as a consequence of criminal activities often impacts negatively on the lives of the people.

Violent crimes may lead to hospitalization of the victim, shock or permanent disability. The weight of violent crime can hence be measured by number of years not lived due to early death, number of years one existed with disability, number of widows, orphans and widowers and the number of valuables or property stolen, looted or destroyed while the criminal activity took place. The society at large also loses investors for lack of guarantee for security. Causality from violent crimes could also include death, long-term disability of security personnel, loss of weapons and ammunitions, compensation to deceased families, treatment and rehabilitation of the injured which could be very costly (Millner, 1998, Maltzan, 1998, Brown & Wycoff, 1997 in Ikoh, 2011).

Commenting on the effects of victimization on the society, Karmen (2010) argues that social responses to crime occurrences also determine the extent to which such incidence may have an impact. For instance, the intensity of victimization can be measured not just by bodily harm, emotional trauma and economic privation but also by the care given to such a victim. Karmen (2010) further notes that one of the aims of investigating the concept of victimization is to facilitate an effective recovery process for crime victims. The degree of assistance, service, accommodation, rehabilitation and education given to victims of crime can mitigate the effects of victimization and also prevent further occurrence of criminal victimization. On the other hand, trivializing, manipulating the victim's condition, neglecting, showing indifference and exploitation either for economic or political purposes can result in frustration. Therefore, the wide range of social responses to victimization either results in loss of confidence, panic attacks, isolation, sleep disorders, stress-related illnesses, feelings of helplessness and a marked sense of insecurity, on the one hand, while some forms of responses or social control on the other hand may bring about confidence-building and a remarkable sense of security.

3.0 The Case of Criminal Victimization among Nigerians

Crime statistics in Nigeria over the past three decades has been summarized in bits by different agencies and researchers. A survey done by CLEEN Foundation (Audu, 2016), indicates that the sum total of crime such as child theft, armed robbery and murder numbered two hundred and fifteen thousand, seven hundred and eighty-eight (215, 788) in 1987. In 1993, these same incidences rose to two hundred and eighty-nine thousand, one hundred and fifty-six (289, 156) in number. The National Bureau of Statistics (2012) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria kept the total of crimes reported to the police in 2006 such as forgery of currency, bribery and corruption at one hundred and seventy-two thousand three hundred and twenty-six (172, 326). However, same abstract of statistics records a total figure of 108, 245 of unspecified crimes as reported to the police in 2011.

Correspondingly, the victim survey conducted by the CLEEN Foundation (2016) revealed that about three out of every four Nigerians are anxious or afraid of being a victim of crime. According to their statistics, this is about seventy five percent of the Nation's population living in fear of criminal victimization in 2012 compared to seventy-two percent in 2011. Same findings showed that in 2012 one in every three of Nigerian citizens faced actual criminal victimization. Corroborating these findings, the United States Department of State Bureau of Diplomatic Security noted in the 2015 Nigeria Crime and Safety Report that the rate of crime in the different parts of Nigeria has been frightening (Audu, 2016).

Ikoh (2011) investigated the pattern and trend of criminal Victimization in Nigeria. This work focused on the prevalence of personal victimization as well as victimization within the family unit for seven key crimes which include attempted murder, murder, robbery, kidnapping, property theft, assault and burglary. Data were collected from surveys done in 2005, 2006 and between 2007 and 2009 by the CLEEN Foundation. Putting together the results from 2007 – 2009, the study showed that household members reported more cases of assault, robbery, theft of motorcycle and murder than in the previous years. However, there was decrease in the incidence of rape reported in 2006 which dropped gradually in 2007 till 2009. While there was also a decrease in incidence of theft of vehicle, kidnapping assumed an increasing spate.

Janssen, Oberwittler and Koeber (2020), investigated the consequences of victimization on different aspects of well-being. This included the behavioral and psychological aspects of well-being in relation to violent and property victimization. The study is longitudinal research using a general population sample. It also employed data from a survey conducted in 140 neighbourhoods in 2 large German towns with 2928 respondents between the ages of 25 and 89. Random effect modeling was used to differentiate the between-person effects from the within-person effects of victimization. Findings revealed fear of crime as one of the harmful effects of victimization. It also revealed that violent victimization had more impactful consequences than property victimization and that criminal victimizations close to homes had deeper impacts than victimization elsewhere. Generally, the findings showed that violent victimization has obvious bad effects on public trust, security perceptions and neighborhood contentment but a lesser effect on emotional well-being and life fulfillment since individuals often pull through victimization within a considerable period of time, often not beyond 18 months.

The prevalence of victimization in the past led to the declaration of curfew in different parts of the state as a means of preventing the eruption of social disorder, however, the continuous imposition of curfew and some other deterrent measures of checking victimization and social disorder may have a far-reaching implication for the economy and general wellbeing of the people. Demonstrations have often been accompanied by physical injuries, permanent disability, death, destruction or looting of property and valuables stolen, incapacitation of security personnel, loss of weapons and ammunitions, compensation to deceased families, treatment and rehabilitation of the injured which are often not cost effective (Ikoh, 2011). Hence, social disorder is a phenomenon which could threaten the capacity for self-advancement, economic growth and sustainable development since people's security is under jeopardy. Few interviews, were conducted to corroborate the claims above; one of the participants of in-depth interview in his narratives explained that:

Various forms of suffering due to recurrent incidents of criminality has caused widespread public dissatisfaction towards government security forces in their effort to protect lives and property. This has occasionally triggered protests and civil unrest, disrupting social order and springing more security challenges in the state (interview conducted on 18/11/2024).

This agrees with the view of Brown & Okorie (2019), who argued that the tendency to resort to crude means of checking crime such as lynching or inflicting deadly pains is common among the natives of different communities in Nigeria based on perceived inadequacies of the different crime control agencies. Hence, findings from the study also show that chaos sets in to distort social instability and structure of the society in attempt to fight crime by random individuals and arbitrary parties.

Another respondent reported that;

Last month, particularly on the night 27th September, many hostels numbering up to ten were attacked in this village. Phones, laptops, money and other valuables were stolen from students, tenants and landlords. Police were invited, they came patrolled the already robbed hostels and left even when operation was going in the other hostels, they refused to go, for reasons we do not know. Our community elders have done little or nothing about it except to impose curfew from 10 pm which for me is making the matter worst. We are just helpless, no wonder the youths are angry and often lynch anyone they catch committing crime as in the case of one burnt to dead on top of a stolen motorcycle along Abak, Uyo road last week (interview conducted on 18/11/2024).

Having a stable social order and social stability requires the cooperation of all within the society aiming at achieving the common good. This order cannot be successfully reached within a circle of particular individuals who have common interests different from other groups.

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study shows that there is a rising level of criminal victimization in Nigeria due to failure of the different institutions of crime control. According to the few empirical examinations, the prevalence of victimization constitutes the greatest challenge to social stability. Majority of victims of crime or secondary victims either protest ineffectiveness of crime control, injustice or secondary victimization, while others take laws into their hands through arbitrary means of checking crime. The police cannot achieve social order alone neither can the traditional chiefs do that in isolation from the youths of the community. A society free from criminal victimization will not be possible when the different structures of the society attempt to function independent of one another. Achieving social stability is therefore a function of the society's structure and its process and everyone must be willing to be part of that process. Hence, this study makes the following recommendations:

i.   The country must establish an effective crime control system that involves the various institutions in the communities working stakeholders in the security sector.

ii. The general public must rise up to the task of seeing crime control as part of their responsibility by first of all avoiding criminal acts and providing useful information about crime when necessary.

iii. Creating multiple channels for information dissemination, will help the various organisations tasked with preventing crime like the police, traditional institutions and their agents, vigilantes, and even private security firms, in appropriate information sharing and crime updates among themselves.

iv. The criminal justice system must devise the best means to treat offenders so as to either serve as deterrence to others or prevent criminals from relapsing into such behaviours in the future.

v.   The masses should not talk laws into their hands to harm criminals through mob action but should report all criminal behaviours to lawful authorities.

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