**The Ecology of Crime**

What exactly do they tell us about crime in Nigeria? What do we know about the nature of crime and criminals? What are the trends and patterns of our crime rates and how can they help us understand the causes of crime? Generally speaking, criminologists look for stable patterns in the crime rate in order to gain insight into the nature and causes of crime. They are interested in knowing what patterns exist for different parts of a society. To know for example whether the crime rate in Northern Nigeria is higher than that for Southern Nigeria, and how this knowledge might be used to explain the etiology of crime. What then are the determinants of the trends and pattern of crime rate? Many attempts have been made to link crime rate to ecological factors. Along this line, region, season and climate, population density, amongst other factors have been identified as having direct effects on crime rates.

**Region**

There are some regional variations in crime rates in Nigeria. The differences in crime between regions have been expressed. It is believed that the crime rate in Southern Nigeria is many times higher than the rate for Northern Nigeria. Also, cities have usually reported more crime than rural areas, although it is quite likely that rural crime has been slightly under reported. In recent years, rural and suburban crime rates have been climbing faster than urban crime rates, reducing the rural-urban crime differential. For example, the rates for murder have increased immensely in such sub-urban communities as Ekpoma, Auchi and Ekiadolor in Edo State. One reason for this is the activities of secret cults in higher institutions located in these communities. Similarly, the rates for armed robbery, burglary, theft, rape, and assault have also increased correspondingly, thereby, significantly reducing the rural-urban crime differential.

**Season and Climate**

There are slight seasonal and climate variations in type of crime, with more rapes and assault in the dry season, and more thefts and larcenies in the rainy season. These variations however are moderate. During the dry season, many young persons especially teenagers, who play greater roles in crime commission are on holidays and idle, and consequently have the opportunity to commit crime. During dry season, people spend more time outdoors making themselves easy target. Also, homes are left vacant more often during this period making them easy targets for property criminals. In December and early January, more murders and robberies occur, because of the search for money by prospective holidaymakers and fun seekers who take advantage of the yuletide and end of your celebrations to attack people.

**Population Density**

Population plays a huge role in overall crime rates. Large urban areas with large population sizes have higher crime rates than small rural communities. Many factors may account for this trend. Perhaps the most important of these is the fact that rural societies are characterized by what Durkheim described as mechanical solidarity, which promotes social similitude. Here, people are supposed to be each other’s keepers. In such small-scale societies characterized by sameness, the crime rates are expected to be low. An example is the Agbede community in Edo State.

In contrast, large cities with very large populations are likely to show a high trend in crime reporting. Such large cities, like Lagos, Benin, Ibadan, Kano, Enugu, Onitsha etc attract very many persons who seek to take advantage of job opportunities, public amenities like electricity and good road network etc. Many of these persons having being displaced and alienated by the impersonal nature of social relations may take to an active line of crime as the best alternative, thereby increasing the crime rates. There are exceptions to this rule, however. Some low-population resort areas with large treatment or seasonal populations such as Abviele in Edo, Kona Dangora in Kano, Ore in Ondo etc. have reported very high crime rates.

**Use of Firearms**

There is no doubt whatsoever that the use of firearms plays a very central role in the commission of crime. The relationship between firearms and crime is not surprising, considering the recent availability and use of handguns in Nigeria. Daily, the print and electronic media report the seizure of large cache of arms from importers and smugglers in Nigeria. Similarly, many youth especially in tertiary institutions, display ostensibly, their rich stock of guns with which they cause mayhem in their academic environments. During a recent crackdown on secret cult members in higher institutions, a large amount of firearms and other sophisticated weapons were recovered from students, many of whom double as armed robbers and hired assassins.

The police also display daily, the weapons seized from criminal groups. It is believed that the amount and quality of weapons in the hands of private citizens especially youths in Nigeria, far exceed official expectations. That more of these guns are available for use by young people is an indication of the increase in crime rates in the Nigerian society. The ability of authorities to control the possession and use of firearms therefore, will impact significantly on the crime rates in the country.

**Social Class and Crime**

A lot has been said about the relationship between social class and crime. Traditionally, crime is conceived of as a lower-class phenomenon. This is because lower-class people are believed to possess the greatest incentives for committing crime. Lower-class people have been conceptualized as lacking in the means and ability to achieve legitimate goals using legitimate means, hence, their resort to crime. Along this line, persons living in poverty stricken areas are believed to engage in disproportionate amounts of violent crimes as a means of expressing their rage, frustration and anger against society. This is what Siegel (1995) describes as expressive crimes. Expressive crimes include rapes and assaults, which occur in high poverty areas in order that those engaging in violence may develop an alternative source of positive self-image by viewing themselves as tough, strong, or bad.

Official statistics available on crime in Nigeria indicate that crime rates in poor, overcrowded, inner city areas such as Ojuelegba. Ajegunle, Upper Sakponba etc. are generally higher than those in sub-urban or wealthier areas such as Victoria Island, Ikoyi, Ugbo road, and Lekki extension. Another official indicator of the relationship between crime and class can be obtained from prison surveys. A 1997 survey of recidivists at the Benin Prisons showed that prisoners were members of the lower class and were unemployed or underemployed in the period immediately before their first incarceration. For recidivists (repeat offenders), their ex-convict label or status effectively made them unemployable in job-scarce Nigeria and therefore safe bets for readmission into prisons (Okonofua, B. A. 1997).

**Age and Crime**

Many scholars have attempted to link age with criminality. According to Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983), “Age is everywhere correlated with crime. Its effect on crime does not depend on other demographic correlates of crime” (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983:552-584). Apart from factors such as sex, marital status, ethnicity, etc. age has had a tremendous impact on the Nigerian crime profile. Younger persons in Nigeria commit crime more often than older people. Official statistics indicate that young people are arrested at a disproportionate rate to their numbers in the population. Although, the reviewed police statistics does not show the ages of accused persons, it appears that those involved are youths less than 30 years of age (Ohaeri, J. 1996:113). In a study of murder cases reported to the police in Kaduna between 1983-1987 for example, Ogungbemi and Ahmed (1993) discovered that 92 percent were aged between 20 and 40 years. The relationship between age and crime is of major theoretical significance. Many criminological theories fail to explain why the crime rate drops as age increases. Siegel (1995) calls this process the “desistance phenomenon”.

The failure of major criminological theorists to account for desistance has spurred intense debates among reknown criminologists. In their view, Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) observed that the relationship between crime and age is constant. Because of this, the age variable that all people regardless of their demographic characteristics commit less crime as they age, as such, age should not be considered as a factor in explaining crime. They argued that even diehard chronic offenders would commit less crime as they age, so what would be the point of dwelling on the age factor? Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) went on to argue that differences in offending rates for groups (e.g. between men and women) that exist at any point in their life-time accounts from the above trend. For example, if an 18 year old boy was five times more likely than an 18 year old girl to commit crime, then a forty-five year old man would be five times more likely to commit crime than a forty year old woman, although the actual number of crimes committed by both males and females will constantly decline.