

An Anatomy of Violent Crime and Insecurity in Kenya: The Case of Nairobi, 1985 - 1999 (Abstract)

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Crime is as old as human society. This is borne out by the fact that, at all times in history, societies have had taboos, customs and laws designed to contain crime.

Crime is an index of lawlessness and disintegration of social order (*Hou, et 04 1978:vii*). Such lawlessness has a debilitating effect on society. It disturbs its security and necessarily provokes a situation of insecurity. A United Nations report states, among other things, that crime:

“impairs the overall development of nations, undermines spiritual and material well being, compromises human dignity and creates a climate of fear and violence, which endangers personal security and erodes the quality of life (*United Nations 1992:6*)”

It is difficult to give a precise definition of crime. But crime can be roughly divided into two broad categories. The first is covert, less visible crime, which often comes under the rubric of corruption. This includes criminal activities such as embezzling public funds, filing false information, etc. Such crimes are mainly committed by the elite in society - the economically well-to-do and the politically powerful. By the very covert nature of these crimes, their perpetrators mostly go free.

The second category is overt crime, which is easily identifiable. It involves the physical or psychological injury to other people. Physical criminal violence or physical assault includes homicide, armed robbery, car-jacking, attempted murder, manslaughter, rape, etc. Psychological violence includes lies, threats, brainwashing, etc. These serve to diminish mental potentialities (*Galtung 1990:10-12*). In addition, there is also violent crime against property - car-jacking, house breaking, etc.

This kind of crime, which is rightly called violent crime, causes direct harm (*Chesnais 1992:217*). It is a big contributory factor that disturbs security in society. Violent crimes are committed mainly by members of the lower social strata, whose lives are characterised by poverty. It is this kind of crime that forms the subject matter of this paper.

There can be no pursuit of meaningful sustainable development in a situation marked by uncontrolled and uncontrollable crime, because it breeds and accompanies insecurity. (*Albert 1998*). Criminal violence is one of the most worrying problems of modern times (*Cauchy 1992:209*). Our own era, the late Twentieth Century, is arguably characterised by a violent crime rate unprecedented in human history.

It has been argued that because of material affluence and the practice of liberal democracy, violent crime has declined in Northern countries (*Pestieau 1992:202*). Available literature from the print and electronic media contests this assertion. Chesnais, for instance, states that the United States of America records a wholly exceptional level of criminal violence. To him, this violence is twice the level of that which accompanied the

disintegration of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s, and 'more murderous today than in the depths of the economic depression in the 1930s' (Chesnais 1992:221).

The last quarter of the Twentieth Century witnessed an escalation of violent crime in Africa. This crime is mainly related to the increased intensity and complexity of urbanisation. Obviously, specific features of urbanisation have particularly contributed to the growth of criminal violence.

Cairo, Lagos and Johannesburg are the cities that feature most prominently in literature on violent crime in Africa (Albert 1998). There are other cities, however, whose violent crime rate is equally or relatively high or is fast becoming so. Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, is one of those cities.

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