

The consequences of crime



Summary

Crime not only harms people directly by making them feel insecure, it harms them further by limiting their opportunities to earn a living. A recent study investigates the consequences of crime in Lagos, the most populous city in Nigeria, seeking to identify the impact of crime and insecurity on the political and economic behaviour of ordinary citizens.

Key findings:

- Lagosians trust their law enforcement officers less than they trust people they do not know.
- The majority of people interviewed reported that they are planning to make an investment to start a business next year.
- People whose households had been a victim of crime in the past two years, or who reported a lack of trust in the police were less likely to be planning such an investment.

Policy conclusion: Reducing crime and insecurity is critical not just to protect Nigerian citizens but also to enable them to form their businesses and provide for their families. Solving the problem of a police force which is not trusted by the people it serves is a critical part of poverty reduction and reform of the police force itself is necessary to restore a sense of security to the streets of Lagos.

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Policy context

Nigeria maintains a national police force and a national prisons service, with each of the thirty-six states served by a command of the federal police and a command of the federal prisons service. The limitations of the police—who are typically said to be both ineffective and corrupt—along with a desire to exert greater local control, has encouraged many state governors to form their own special organizations which are effectively publicly funded vigilante groups. While these are often locally popular, they have also been criticized for operating outside the law.

Overview of project

Researchers from the University of Jos, Nigeria, and the University of Oxford, UK, chose Lagos as the site of the research because it is Nigeria's economic and financial capital and also its largest city: the last census in 2006 put the population at 10 million residents, which is widely believed to be an underestimate. All residents were eligible for inclusion provided that they were over 18 years of age and had been present for more than six months. A total of 620 residents were interviewed in seven Local Government Areas which reflect the range of populations in the state. Face-to-face household interviews were conducted in the language of the respondents' choice.

Project findings

The entrepreneurial spirit is strong in Lagos, Nigeria. A remarkable 68.5% of 18-24 year olds and 77.8% of 25-34 year olds reported that they are planning to make an investment or start a business next year. However, this spirit may be undermined by three main factors. Predictably, those who believed that the economic prospects of the country were poor were 10.5% less likely to be planning an investment. But economic conditions were no more important than factors relating to local insecurity. Respondents whose households had been a victim of crime in the past two years were 7.8% less likely to be planning an investment, while those who did not report trust in the police were 11.8% less likely.

Experience of crime and a lack of trust in the police are particularly significant because they are fairly widespread throughout Lagos. Overall, 16% of respondents reported that their household had been a victim of crime in the past two years. The most common problems were armed robbery and mobile phone theft. It is therefore unsurprising that only 27.7% reported feeling 'very safe' when meeting a stranger. Shockingly, only 17.4% of respondents said that they felt 'very safe' when meeting police officers—which means that Lagosians trust their law enforcement officers less than they trust people they do not know.

	Yes	No	Difference
Trust in police	71.2	59.4	+11.8
Victim of crime	71.6	63.8	+7.8

Table 1 – Respondents planning to invest or start a business in the next year (%)

There is clear support for violent responses to crime such as the formation of vigilante groups. In high crime areas such as Surulere, 32.6% of respondents said that violence was mostly acceptable to protect a house or property while 27.9% said that violence was mostly acceptable when strongly protesting an injury. However, while there may be local demand for the creation of alternative vigilante security forces, the importance of levels of trust in the police force suggests that this will be insufficient to restore public confidence. Nigerians do not only distrust the police because they have failed to reduce crime, but because the police are so corrupt that they have become a source of crime and instability themselves.

For more detailed information

Pattern and effects of insecurity in Lagos. Available from the author Etannibi Alemika: alemikae@yahoo.com

Criminal victimization, safety, and policing in Nigeria. Alemika, EEO and IC Chukwuma (2007). Lagos: CLEEN Foundation. Available from the author Etannibi Alemika: alemikae@yahoo.com

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