

Introduction: Urban Crime and Poverty Nexus

George Owusu¹

Abstract

A key issue that has attracted the attention of criminologists and others in the field of crime studies is the extent to which crime influence poverty and vis-à-vis. While this debate has extensively engaged the attention of criminologists and other social scientists in the developed world, little academic attention has been given to this debate in Africa in general and Ghana in particular. Indeed the limited academic attention to crime in Africa has led to a situation whereby models and theories on the subject are largely founded on the experiences of the developed world. This introductory section to this special issue of Ghana Journal of Geography on 'Crime and poverty nexus in urban Ghana, highlights in brief the key issues and competing theories at the heart of the relationship between crime and poverty. This and the other papers in the volume seek to make a contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the poverty-crime nexus by adding a Third World or Sub-Saharan Africa perspective to this area of criminological research.

Key words: crime; urbanization; poverty; Ghana; Sub-Saharan Africa

¹Institute of Statistical, Social & Economic Research (ISSER)/Department of Geography & Resource Development, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana. Email: GOwusu@ug.edu.gh , geowusu@yahoo.com

Introduction

Rapid shift of the population from rural areas to urban centres, a process referred to as urbanization, is occurring across much of the developing world, especially Sub-Saharan Africa (Obeng-Odoom, 2013; Oteng-Ababio & Melara, 2014; Agyei-Mensah et al., 2015). This rapid pace of urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa is occurring within the context of macroeconomic stability and growth across many countries on the continent (Grant, 2015). Commenting further on Africa's macroeconomic growth in recent decades, Grant (2015, p. 20) notes that a 'narrow elite is benefiting disproportionately and the poor and unemployed are being left behind. Current growth is neither inclusive nor democratic: unregulated, informal economic activities are very common in urban Africa, both in terms of the numbers of informally employed and in terms of the goods and services provided by the informal economy'. It is within the context of economic growth and urbanization that urban crime is noted to be on the rise in Africa largely due to weak governance systems and limited infrastructure and services, including policing (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2005).

Commenting on rapid urbanization and its relationship with security and safety of cities, UNOWA (2007, p. 16) argued that the 'chaotic expansion of urban spaces actually disables the capacity of national governments and local authorities to provide urban security and to supply basic social infrastructure – health, education, water, and sewage disposal facilities'. It adds that this leads to a situation where slums or shanty towns grow, overcome and swallow the already crumbling infrastructures of the urban nucleus, further compounding the challenges of security and crime. At the same time the unplanned nature of cities consequently overstretching not only basic infrastructure and services but also policing services of the state (Owusu et al., 2015, 2016a, 2016b).

A key question that one needs to ask is 'to what extent does crime influence poverty and vis-à-vis?' While this debate has extensively engaged the attention of criminologists and other social scientists in the developed world, little academic attention has been given to this debate in Africa in general and Ghana in particular. According to Arthur (1991, p. 502), 'the relationship between development and crime has received a great deal of theoretical and empirical attention in the developed countries since ... the early part of the 19th century and throughout the 20th century'. Indeed the limited academic attention to crime in Africa has led to a situation whereby models and theories on the subject are largely founded on the experiences of the developed world (Arthur, 1991; Oteng-Ababio et al., 2016). The papers in this special issue of *Ghana Journal of Geography* are the outcome of a broader research project titled *Exploring Crime and Poverty Nexus in Urban Ghana*.

These papers seek to make a contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the poverty-crime nexus by adding a Third World or Sub-Saharan Africa perspective to this area of

criminological research.¹ Although each of the six papers in the volume looks at different aspects of urban crime, they all include to a greater or lesser extent a discussion of crime and poverty in specific context, and the collection as a whole makes an important contribution to our understanding of crime and poverty in urban Ghana in particular and Sub-Saharan Africa in general.

The rest of this article provides an introduction to a number of the key themes that are addressed in more details in specific articles in the volume. It begins with a general overview of the theoretical relationships between crime and economic conditions, followed by brief literature review of urbanization, crime and poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is followed by a discussion of the policies and strategies to reduce urban crime, and finally, the papers which make up this special issue are introduced and summarized.

Theoretical statements on crime and economic conditions

A review of the literature on crime studies indicates clearly that ‘no discernible and consistent relationships between economic conditions and crime rates have been established as both positive and negative relationships have been reached’ (Arthur, 1991, p. 502). The lack of universal conclusion on the relationship between crime and socio-economic conditions is attributed to the varied and, cultural specificity and differences regarding the definition, classification and societal reaction to the crime problem (Arthur, 1991; Rose, 2006). Similarly, notions of what constitute well-being and poverty are also highly contested and definitions vary and differ across countries and regions.

Notwithstanding the above, there is a widely-held consensus in crime studies that crime and fear of crime are unequally distributed across cities, and that areas of higher poverty are likely to be areas of high crime incidence as well. This conclusion rests on the view that poor areas of cities characterized by high unemployment rates, family breakdowns, delinquencies and general social disruptions tend to produce alienation and consequently criminal behaviour (Sampson, 2006). While the prevailing conditions of poor areas may produce criminal behavioural tendencies, some analysts have argued that these tendencies can only manifest in the absence of law enforcement agencies such as the police (Fafchamps and Minten, 2005) or guardians as postulated in Cohen and Felson’s (1979) routine activity theory. In addition, some experts have pointed to social controls (including strong social cohesion) as having a depressing effect on crime incidence (Plumer, 2010) – a point well emphasized in this special issue (see Bagson and Owusu, 2016; Frimpong, 2016; Oteng-Ababio, 2016; Owusu et al., 2016a).

¹ ‘Exploring Crime Poverty Nexus in Urban Ghana’ project is part of a global research programme titled *Safe and Inclusive Cities (SAIC)* funded by the UK government’s Department for International Development (DFID) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. SAIC involves 15 research teams undertaking research in 44 cities in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Latin America and Caribbean.

While we do not in any way claim to have undertaken an extensive review of the literature on crime and poverty in this brief introduction, we argue that the overall assessment of the literature suggests a correlation between socioeconomic conditions and crime. However, as Pare and Felson (2014) note the interpretation of the relationship remain unclear and the relationship could be spurious as individual and group characteristics can affect both economic success and criminal behaviour, and criminal behaviour in turn can affect individual and group socio-economic conditions as well. Despite this apparent complex relationship between crime and poverty, Pare and Felson (2014, p. 435) argue that ‘most scholars assume that living in poverty increases the likelihood of criminal behaviour’.

Attempts to explain the relationship between crime and economic conditions have remained the heart of crime research and criminological inquiry. Consequently, many crime theories have explored the extent to which individual and group characteristics as well as the environment influence crime. To explain the possible association between poverty and crime, Pare and Felson (2014) provide three sets of theoretical explanations:

- discrimination and the lack of legitimate opportunities which limits poor people’s access to legitimate societal resources and widely shared goals. This situation therefore forces poor people to access these resources and goals using illegitimate means, and thereby committing crime;
- lower social controls, particularly those associated with disadvantaged neighbourhoods, with lower levels of collective efficacy, enhance risks of violence and aggressive behaviours and;
- tendency of people of low socioeconomic status to participate in crime as a results of their socialization experiences leading them to have attitudes that are conducive to crime.

The extent to which the above set of explanations properly addresses the association between crime and poverty remain an open question. Indeed, application of each of these explanations need to be placed in context as definitions of what constitute crime, poverty, poor people (or even broadly defined disadvantaged neighbourhoods), societal resources and goals, etc would vary from country to country, and region to region.² Consequently, a simplistic linear relationship between crime and poverty cannot be assumed under all contexts. As Wrigley-Asante et al. (2016) and Wrigley-Asante (2016) in this volume note even on the basis of gender, perceptions and the influence of crime and poverty can vary.

Policies to reduce urban crime and violence in Sub-Saharan Africa

Although some analysts have questioned the mantra of ‘rapid urbanization’ in Sub-Saharan Africa (see Potts, 2012), a critical analysis of the continent’s demographic trends suggest an urban future rather than persistence of its present largely rural character (Grant, 2015). However, as earlier

² The terms ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘community’ are used interchangeably in this volume.

noted, Africa's present urbanization process is severely challenged. At the heart of the challenges is the weak governance and planning of the continent's cities. According to Berrisford (2013, p. 1), planning is very critical for inclusive and sustainable urban development as it offers opportunity to 'regulate land use and land development, provide a sound basis for infrastructure planning, secure the rights of investors [and citizens], protect environmental resources and mitigate environmental risks'. However, as Watson and Agbola (2013) sadly note, Africa's cities are growing and changing rapidly, but lack appropriate planning, leading to an increasingly chaotic, inefficient and unsustainable urban development. A widely shared view in the criminology literature is that unplanned neighbourhoods and cities with their socio-economic manifestations of poverty and deprivation can facilitate crime and the fear of crime (see Sampson, 2006; Lersch, 2007; Brunton-Smith and Jackson, 2012; Landman, 2012).

In the context of limited public police services, households and neighbourhoods in urban Ghana feeling insecure have responded by target hardening their homes (use of metal burglary proofs) resulting in negative consequences, particularly weakened community bonding and social cohesion. In other instances, households and neighbourhoods have resorted to extra-judicial and instant justice measures such as lynching of crime suspects or the use of the youth as discussed in Oteng-Ababio (2016). Other measures including the employment of the services of private security guards especially in wealthy households and neighbourhoods, with cost implications for these households (Owusu et al., 2016b).

According to UN-Habitat (2007, p. iv), traditional or conventional approach of crime and violence 'as the primary responsibility of the police and the criminal justice system, is increasingly being replaced by an approach that recognizes that the complexity of the phenomenon being addressed requires a broad-based response'. Notwithstanding this fact, there is still the need to strengthen the Ghana Police Service and the judiciary system as they remain very critical in the fight against urban crime. In particular, there is the need to strengthen the police service not only in terms of logistics but also numbers. As Bagson and Owusu (2016) note Ghana's police-population ratio which stands at 1:926 in 2014 is still far higher than the UN minimum threshold of 1:500. Again, Bagson and Owusu (2016) argue that this ratio is masked by severe inequalities in the distribution of the numbers both within and across cities. For example, the police-population of Tamale, the fourth largest city in Ghana and a hotspot for violence and crime in recent years, was about 1:1580 in 2014.

Furthermore, we share the view of UN-Habitat that a comprehensive and integrated approach to crime prevention should 'include enhancement of urban safety and security through effective urban planning, design and governance; the development of community-based approaches to enhancing urban safety and security; reduction of key risk factors by focusing on groups most vulnerable to crime [especially women and children]; and strengthening of social capital through initiatives that seek to develop the ability of individuals and communities themselves to respond to problems of crime and violence' (UN-Habitat, 2007, p. iv). This integrated approach requires the active involvement of the police, city authorities, communities and other stakeholders. Such a

response to urban crime is likely to be effective rather than the individual responses of households and neighbourhoods.

For Ghana, an integrated approach to urban crime prevention and reduction needs to be anchored within the country's existing decentralized development planning and administrative framework. The country's decentralized development framework provides for both vertical and horizontal coordination of development efforts at the city and neighbourhood levels, and provides a platform for the police, city authorities, community and other stakeholders to engage to develop comprehensive and integrated strategies and policies which ensure that solutions to crimes are grounded within the city and neighbourhood context.

The Collection

The six papers in this special issue focus on variety of issues related to crime and poverty in Ghana, and highlight policy measures critical to making the urban environment safe and secure. To end this introduction, a brief summary of each of the papers is presented here.

The volume starts with Owusu et al.'s paper on the question of whether poor neighbourhoods can be correlated with crime in urban Ghana based on a household survey and a qualitative study conducted in different socio-economic neighbourhoods in four key cities (Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi-Takoradi and Tamale). This paper is very interesting as it concludes that low-class (poor) neighbourhoods were assessed to be relatively safer compared to middle-class neighbourhoods, clearly contradicting the broad findings in the criminology literature regarding poverty and crime. The paper attributes the relative safety of low-class neighbourhoods compared to middle-class neighbourhoods to strong social cohesion and presence of guardianship at all times of the day in the poor neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, the paper's conclusions also suggest a relationship between poverty and crime for specific crimes such as sexual and property offences in line with the literature. It recommended that crime prevention measures need to be place-specific and for urban planning in Ghana to recognize in practical terms that the built-up environment can facilitate as well as prevent crimes.

The second paper by Wrigley-Asante et al. examines poverty and sexual crime in five urban low-income neighbourhoods in Ghana. Based on official police data, key informant interviews and focus group discussions from the five neighborhoods, the paper analyzes the incidence and drivers of sexual crimes in these communities. The paper notes that although Ghana has legal and institutional frameworks to curb sexual crimes, these crimes persist and highly under-reported due to their sensitivity to the victims and their families as well as patriarchal attitudes. Wrigley-Asante et al. argue that prevailing conditions of poor housing (reflected in high room occupancy rates, overcrowding and congestion) and poverty in general promotes sexual crimes in poor urban communities. The paper recommends that policy measures to reduce sexual crimes should not focus exclusively on education and institutionalization of legal frameworks, but extended to poverty reduction programmes that include urban planning and slum housing upgrading measures.

Drawing on the philosophy of methodological individualism which is embedded in the rational choice theory, the third paper by Oteng-Ababio focuses on youth and criminality in Ghana by analysing different types of youth-related criminal activities in Accra, Kumasi and Tamale. The paper notes the alarming rate at which youth criminality and violence are becoming a trend in urban Ghana, and the emergence of a number of local youth groups whose activities are predicated mainly on the quest for better livelihood, but which threaten not only the security and safety of the urban environment but also the legitimacy of the state. In particular, the paper notes that the ambivalent attitude of city authorities and the state as a whole raises questions over the governmentalities of the urban space. Moreover, it argues that the yawning gap in the provision of efficient urban security in the face of increasing crime rates and complexities have fuelled the “take-over” of this niche by ‘opportunistic’ youth groups, whose modus operandi make them appear more than organized criminal groups, especially in Accra and Tamale.

The next paper by Frimpong examines the geography of fear of crime using Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolis as a case study. Using multivariate statistical technique, the study reveals a spatial variation of neighbourhood effect on fear of crime across the three low, middle and upper-class neighbourhoods in this emerging oil city in Ghana. The paper found significant variation of neighbourhood effect on fear of crime in the three neighbourhoods. For instance, while social cohesion significantly reduces fear of crime in low income neighbourhoods, no such relationship was found for high income neighbourhoods. Again, living in separate houses also increases residents’ fear of crime, and this was the case for only high income neighbourhoods. The paper therefore recommends a context specific solution in addressing fear of crime and the need to promote stronger social cohesion and community effort as well as strengthening the police as measures for reducing crime and fear of crime.

Wrigley-Asante examines once again an aspect of the gender dimensions of crime by looking at the perceptions of males and females about the safety in urban spaces. In general, males considered their communities to be safer than females as higher proportion of females than males felt unsafe walking alone particularly at night. The fear of victimization among women was particularly high in low and middle class neighbourhoods, and this is due to the absence of basic infrastructure such as proper lighting systems as well as the presence of gangsters, drug addicts and limited presence of the police. The paper argues that poor urban infrastructure and services contribute to feelings of insecurity, especially among women. It therefore recommends that particular attention should be paid to basic services and infrastructure (especially streetlights) in middle and low class neighbourhoods to improve safety and security in these neighbourhoods.

Finally, the collection ends with a paper by Bagson and Owusu which examines how security arrangements in the various neighbourhoods reflect and connect the urban fabric with residents in Tamale. The paper also makes the case for crime research in Ghana to look at medium-sized cities as the existing limited studies have concentrated on Ghana’s largest city, Accra. Based on conclusions drawn on the basis of primary and secondary data sources, the paper advocates for a more geographically sensitive and nuanced understanding of each neighbourhood concerns, and a re-consideration of security interventions to reflect not only the broad spectrum of safety demands

of the affluent but also those socially excluded and more economically disadvantaged sections of the society.

Acknowledgments

This work was carried out with the financial support from the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Ottawa, Canada. We are particularly grateful to the reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions. We particularly thank Justice Tankebe, Joseph Appiahene-Gyamfi, John Weeks, Franklin Obeng-Odoom, Richard Grant, Joseph A. Yaro and Joseph Kofi Nkuah. We would also like to thank Ruadhan Hayes for editing and proofreading of the papers. However, the views expressed in this paper and the whole volume are solely those of the authors.

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