

**CHRISTIANITY AND CRIME IN ONITSHA, ANAMBRA STATE - A
HISTORICAL APPRAISAL OF THE EFFORT OF THE CHURCH IN
CURTAILING THE SURGE OF CRIME**

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Abstracts

The act of crime is a universal phenomenon and it does no one any good. This study will look at this ugly thread in the present Onitsha in Anambra State, Nigeria to find out the role the church has to play to curtail the increase. The aim was to propose possible measures churches need to put in place to reduce the rising tide of crime. During the course of this study, primary and secondary sources were employed. The study observed that crime in recent time in Onitsha is necessitated by the increase in unemployment rate among the youths which increased as a result of the Covid -19 pandemic, the insecurity in Northern Nigeria which has put firearms in wrong hands, corruption and lack of democratic dividend, injustice and marginalization among others. In the midst of these scenarios, the church as an institution within the society has to take proactive measures among her members through proper sensitization, education, and different welfare programmes that will help people to gain skills and opportunities that will make them earn a meaningful living.

Keywords: Christianity, Crime, Onitsha, Anambra State, Church

Introduction

The global community is passing through hard times as a result of Covid - 19 pandemic which has paralyzed different sectors of the economy thereby causing many people to loose their employment at an alarming rate. This has caused unwarranted hardship on the global society and as a result the world economy is suffering in an unprecedented manner that made it difficult for government of many nations to carry out their responsibility effectively. Nigeria is not left out rather; the nation is seriously affected by this pandemic in a manner that shows that the government is not well prepared to handle the effects on the economy. It is important to note that prior to the emergence of Covid-19, Nigeria has her own security challenges which is threatening her as a nation. The challenges includes but not limited to the menace of Boko Haram, and Fulani herdsmen which is causing havoc mostly in the North east of the country.

However, in recent times the security challenges has spilled over to the entire nation in such a manner that indicates that there is no safe haven even the Presidential Villa known as Aso Rock as seen in the robbery attempt that took place on 9th May , 2021. Elaborating further, Agbakwuru (2021) maintains “Armed men suspected to be robbers invaded the residences of two senior aides to President Muhammadu Buhari inside the precinct of the Presidential Villa, administration officials and security sources have told Peoples Gazette, raising fears that the rising insecurity across the country was drawing closer to the elite than previously estimated. It went on to say that “Their houses were robbed and the robbers packed money and other valuable assets from both houses,”. In these ugly scenario, where lies the hope of the common man?

On this note, this study observes that Onitsha as a commercial city is not left out as seen in the recent increase in crime. Onitsha has witnessed a rigorous security threat and challenges emanating from the attacks on security formations that have led to the death of many security personnel and individuals. The situation is worsening on daily basis. In the midst of this prevailing ugly incident, the church as an institution has a responsibility of taking the bull by the horn so as to salvage the society from utterly destruction. In essence, the church is expected to take proactive and holistic measures to make sure that issues at stake are addressed for the good of the common man and the society at large.

Understanding the concept “Crime”

Crime can be defined as any offense which violates the law of state and is disapproved by the society. In essence, it is seen as acts or omissions forbidden by law which the form of punishment is described by the law. It involves but not limited to murder, robbery, burglary, rape, drunken driving, child neglect and failure to pay taxes among others. According to Thotakura (2011) the term crime is derived from the Latin word “*crimen*” meaning offence and also a wrong-doer. Crime is considered as an anti-social behaviour. For him, each society defines crime in a different perspective.

Ingredients of crime

For any act of crime to be, the following four ingredients are needed:

There must be an Individual - one of the most important ingredients for commission of a crime is an individual who has intent and is ever ready to commit a act. This act in question is contrary to the laws of the society where he

or she whats to perform the said act. So, without a person or an individual, there will be no crime for animals or non-living thing lacks the capacity to commit a crime because of their lack of freewill. But human beings are created with the ability to make a choice and this made it possible for them to be the first ingredient needed for a crime to take place.

There must be a guilty mind: This is called “mens rea” in latin which implies having a criminal intention to do something that is wrong. This intention is not seen or known until it is communicated to another person through words or actions.

There must be a guilty act: This is known as ‘Actus rea’ in latin: This implies that an act was a result of voluntary action which violates the laws of the society.

There must be an injury or hurt: This implies that the act accomplished resulted to an an injury or hurt which is physical, mental or monetary which violates a law of state.

Onitsha as a commercial city in a brief:

The city of Onitsha is one of the major economic hub of the Eastern states of Nigeria and it is located on the eastern bank of the River Niger. Its major sources of strength lies in commerce, industry and education and this is as a result of its reception of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionary endeavours in 1857. This act of welcome to the gospel of Jesus Christ transformed the city into the commercial hub of the West African States. No wonder that the city today host the two major renowned Cathedrals in the Eastern part of the country - The All Saints’ Cathedral of the Anglican Church and Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity of the Roman Catholic Church. There are many other Pentecostal churches across the city. For easy delineation, this work will limit its scope on Onistha South Local Government, Area of the City with emphasis on the data received from Fegge Divisonal Police headquarters.

Statistics Of Crimes In Onitsha South L.G.A

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|---------------------|--|
| JANUARY - JUNE 2020 | 4 CASES OF ARMED ROBERY REPORTED WHILE 10 SUSPECT ARRESTED |
| JULY 2020 | 2 CASES REPORTED WHILE ONE PERSON ARRESTED |

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|----------------|--|
| AUGUST 2020 | 4 CASES REPORTED WHILE 6 PERSONS ARRESTED |
| SEPTEMBER 2020 | 2 CASES OF ARMED ROBBERY REPORTED WHILE 5 PERSONS ARRESTED |
| OCTOBER 2020 | ONE CASE REPORTED WHILE TWO ARREST WERE MADE |
| NOVEMBER 2020 | 3 CASES REPORTED WHILE SIX PERSONS ARRESTED |
| DECEMBER 2020 | ONE CASE REPORTED WHILE 3 SUSPECT ARRESTED |

2021

| | |
|---------------|---|
| JANUARY 2021 | ONE CASE REPORTED NO ARREST WAS MADE |
| FEBRUARY 2021 | 5 CASES REPORTED WHILE 4 ARREST WERE MADE |
| APRIL 2021 | ONE CASE REPORTED WHILE ONE ARREST MADE |

(Source From Police Monthly Returns From Fegge Divisional Headquarters)

This is documented records of known crime in Onitsha with emphasis on Onitsha South Local Government area from 2020 - April 2021 with emphasis on armed robbery incidents; however, through interview and interactions there were many other unrecorded cases like bag/ phone snatching, minor stealing which is increasing on daily basis since the last "End Sars" protest in October 2020 which forced the Police out of the street, among numerous other acts of crime. In the month of May, fear has engulf the inhabitants of Onitsha as a result of frequent armed robbery attacks which has caused the people to be united in their resolve to secure their habitation and businesses and as a result mob actions and killings of robbers were introduced. Within the month of May, 2021 about ten criminals were burnt to death around, Upper Iweka, and Nkpor axis.

Possible causes of crime in Onitsha:

Crime, especially violent ones in Nigeria can be traceable to the period from 1967 to 1970 after the civil war in Nigeria when arms and ammunitions became widely available in the country. These weapons used during the Nigerian civil war got into the hands of some civilians and ex-military men – most of whom lost their job during the civil war, and they started using the arms for criminal activities such as armed robbery and fighting communal crises. The pattern and trend of crime assumed dangerous dimensions during the prolonged years of military rule when small and light weapon (SALW) begins to infiltrate into the hands of many Nigerians for self-defense. Some weapons got into the hands of unemployed youths who used them for criminal activities. The rising crime rate or the increase in criminal acts prevalent in our society today is a symptom of a much more serious, deeply rooted problem of which studies have associated it to the rising youth unemployment resulting from bad governance. The government has been too corrupt; the citizens have become desperately and hopelessly poor day by day.

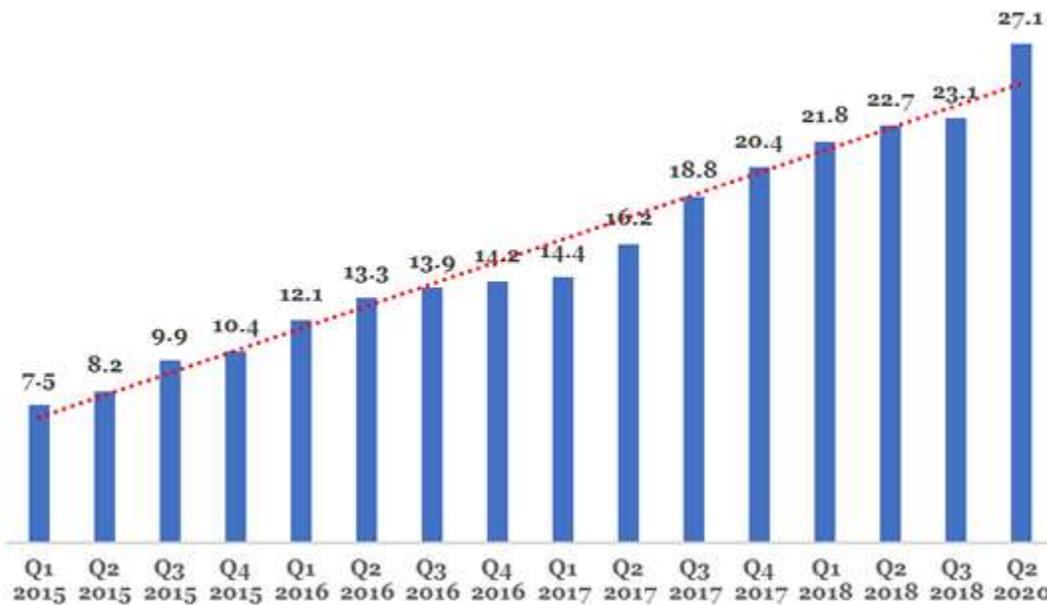
On this note, it is a widely accepted fact that no individual is born a criminal rather it is the situations and the conditions around the person that makes one act in a way that is contrary to the law of the land. In view of this there are different possible causes of crime in recent times which may include but not limited to social, economic, psychological, and political factors. However, in the course of this study, the followings were seen as the factors that necessitated increase in unrecorded crime in Onitsha.

Increase on Unemployment:

The rate in which unemployment increased in present Nigeria society is alarming. Many graduates and post graduates students are rooming around the street without having meaningful thing to do to earn a living while others lost their job as a result of the economic meltdown caused by Covid-19 pandemic.

For instance, unemployment data released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) indicates that Nigeria's unemployment situation has worsened between Q3 2018 and Q2 2020. Nigeria's unemployment rate rose from 23.1% in Q3 2018 to 27.1% in Q2 2020.

It should be noted that 2,736,076 persons or 3.4% of the local labour force were kicked out of jobs during the period but such individuals may have had workplaces to return to after the coronavirus lockdown.



Source: Proshare Research, NBS

Before the release of NBS's report, foreign and local analysts had predicted that Nigeria's unemployment rate would balloon to about 35% given the slow growth of the economy (GDP growth was 1.87% in Q1 2020 as against 2.1% in Q1 2019), the looming recession, and the adverse effect of the coronavirus which ate deep into the healthcare system and the nation's treasury. Although the unemployment rate announced by NBS for Q2 2020 was 27.1%, analysts fear that the number may not be a true reflection of the employment challenge in the country because from findings there are many unemployed youths who are doing nothing and finding it difficult to let ends meet. In this midst of such unending hardship without any hope in sight, youths are being forced to take up arms thereby increasing the rate of crime.

High Costs of food item:

There are several factors that cause high cost of food item. These factors include supply and demand, weather, disease outbreaks, war, and natural disasters. In Nigeria case, these factors played significant roles, however; the most important cause is the high Oil Prices in the international market. It is quite difficult to believe that Nigeria cannot refine her own oil to meet the demand of her citizen rather importation of refined oil placed high burden on the naira due to the high exchange rate of naira to dollar thereby causing high increase on the market. For Udegbumam (2020) Prices of food items have skyrocketed by as much as 30 per cent in many parts of Nigeria in the last one year. This increase is largely caused by border closures, COVID-19 containment measures, and insecurity; other causes, are flooding during the wet season, poor storage facilities, and rising demand. These factors have meant limited availability of food items plus rising demand, leading to rise in prices. On the insecurity factor, the frequent rising in Fulani Herdsmen versus farmers crises has caused farmers to quit their farm for fear of being murdered and as a result causing scarcity in the market.

Constant government policies of increasing fuel and electricity tariff price:

The PPPRA announced a reduction in ex-depot price to N113/litre and official pump price to N125/litre. Between June and November 2020, the price of petrol was revised four times, rising from N121.50 to “N123.50 per litre in June to N140.80 - N143.80 in July, N148-N150 in August, N158-N162 in September, and N165-N170 in November. Now the Nigerian Governor’s Forum is proposing for the sum of N385 naira for a litre of fuel. If such is turned to reality, what do you think the average citizen will do? How will he cope with the effect on food prices, transportation because any increase in petroleum product in Nigeria creates chain reaction in all the commodity in the market. This becomes a great challenge considering the volatile nature of our economy. With such becoming a reality, many able bodied men and women may find it difficult to let ends meet and by implication, loss of jobs and means of livelihood will give birth to restlessness in the society.

Harsh government policies:

It has become a custom in Nigeria that most of government policies are anti-people. For instance, the increase in national minimum wage is a welcome development but it is quite unfortunate that immediately after the increment,

fuel price, electric tariff, VAT and many other things were all increased. The recent ban of twitter in Nigeria is also another issue that will affect millions on jobs that directly and indirectly depended on twitter. The question remain, will the citizens especially the youths fold their hands while being the victim of these policies? It becomes a burden and a difficult issue. In Anambra state, the ban on Motorcycle operators on major cities of Awka and Onitsha without immediate policy to help those who might be affected is great factor. This is because immediately after the ban, unnecessary robbery and one chance incident increased drastically in Onitsha.

Constant strikes:

The rate in which various unions embark on strike action as a result of government inability to abide or perform their own part of agreement with Labour Unions has triggered many unnecessary strike actions that kept youths lazy at home. Let's look at the last strike action by ASUU that lasted for almost a year and the consider what millions of students involved will be doing at home. Even the present ASUP strike actions by the Polytechnic lecturer have left many students at home thereby creating room for various unrest and avenues for crime.

The role of the church

The fundamental purpose of any religion is to make the believer as pious, upright and proper as possible. This why Ubrurhe (2000), maintains that religion helps to curb crime because it patterns man's behavior in agreement with the societal norms and values which promotes societal stability and enhance human development. In the same vein, religion inculcates justice, truth, equity, sanctity of life into its adherents which helps to fight against crime of all sorts and promote human development. In this way, the idea of a church as a religious institution reaching out to have a positive influence in the community is as old as most of the organizations themselves.

Historically, post-Constantine churches spent great sums on the work of ransoming captives. And as a result of this concern, Scott (1987) states that St Ambrose proposed selling the precious vessels on the altars of his church in Milan to ensure that. He declared: There is one incentive which must impel us all to charity; it is pity for the misery of our neighbors and the desire to alleviate it, with all the means that lie in our power, and more besides. (p.208). While Boesak

singles out the *Belhar* Confession (1986) in this respect where it states: in a world filled with injustice and enmity God in a special way is the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged ... that the church as God's possession is called to stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged (p. 3). Boesak (2005) points out that this Confession helps us to, firstly, *stand up* (and be counted) for the poor and the destitute, and secondly, to stand where God stands. Not just in front of, in protection, but alongside, in solidarity of struggle. Not in mere sympathy but in *identification with*. The church must do that not because it is obsessed with the poor, but as the possession of God, in Whom its grounds of being, its identity is found.

In consideration of the above, Goldsmith (1997) points out that political leaders and criminal justice officials have increasingly recognized that government alone is limited in its ability to effectively address serious social and cultural problems such as crime. One manifestation of this recognition is the call to “reinvent government.” In view of this, Osborne and Gaebler (1992) are well known for their urging that government act as a “catalyst” in energizing local resources and as a partner in finding “community owned” solutions to local problems. This is why in contemporary times; the church has played a prominent role in the society, especially with regard to poverty and crime reduction. Like Jesus Christ who identified and cared for the poor, and needy, the church strives to free all humans from hunger, misery, oppression, ignorance, institutionalized injustice and hatred which are rooted in humans’ selfishness (Achunike 2004:131). The church’s option for the poor is part of its vocation in the world. In the words of Oborji (2012): The Church’s care of the poor is not a mere social service which others would as well do, but it is rooted on the very nature of the Church in continuing the redeeming work of Christ of bringing integral salvation to men and women. It is founded on the divine command of love of neighbour. (p. 169).

Through the teaching ministry of the church, Christians are to live exemplary lives, committed to good works and helping others. The Church has more to do to help minimize the increasing wave of crime in the society and the church in Onitsha through their numerous empowerment programmes are doing much to ensure that lives are impacted meaningfully.

For instance, during the Covid - 19 pandemic and nationwide lockdown, most churches in Onitsha were providing palliatives to families to ensure that people

were not frustrated to engage in crimes. In the light of the above, Nwokolo (2020) states:

The Diocese on the Niger was not left out in the provision of needed palliatives to her numerous members. The Diocesan also charged all the Clergy and Workers in charge of Diocesan congregations to provide palliatives for their members. This was well done throughout the Diocese. Added to this, the Diocese supported the efforts made by our various congregations by sharing palliatives, which included, bags of rice, tubers of yam, bags of beans, cartons of noddles and some face masks, etc, to more than five thousand families selected from our Churches throughout the Diocese. So far, the Diocese has spent over thirty million Naira on palliatives (p.47).

In addition to the above, many school leavers and unemployed youths are being engaged in many skill development programmes like catering services, computer training and engineering services, tailoring, and many other in their various vocational institutes established for the sole purpose of the equipping youths for meaningful life in the society. Most of these youths are sponsored by their local churches while others were given scholarship to ensure that the most vulnerable and neglected are touched.

For the Onitsha Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church, there is a close link between mission and charity; hence, the mission of the church must be geared towards solving of the need of the people and society at large. It will be recalled that the huge success recorded by our founding Fathers in the faith is not unconnected with the charity and love with which they evangelized our people. The Synod holds that this must be practiced even with greater favour now. Urban parishes need to help parishes in rural areas. The Synod is aware that this practice was mandated years ago. Parishes concerned are encouraged to devote more effort to it now. The mission effort must be renewed and re-energized given the present day faith situation and challenges. In general pastoral charity needs to be extended to all Catholics at large. Often it appears that we do not care enough for our own people especially when they get challenged health wise or even economically. There is urgent need to create and empower basic Christian communities for interactions among members. The poor and aged in the Archdiocese need to be taken good care of. Those challenged economically can go for loans from Oluchukwu Micro-Finance Bank to help them get back on track. Every parish is to have a body to look into the welfare of the poor, the sick

and the old. (*Pastoral issues retrieved from <https://www.onitsha-archdiocese.org/church-news/2nd-synod-messages/132-part-one-pastoral-issues>*)

Conclusion

This work has shown that the Christian church has always been involved in the transformation of society, especially as it took sides with the poor, and the oppressed so as to reduce the rate of social vices like crime. Though in recent time, it seems the church may have lost this focus, but somehow, throughout the ages, it has managed to sustain this mission responsibility. Today, more than ever, given the increasing poverty, violence, injustices and high crime rate in the world, the Christian church is called upon to embrace, engage and continue with its task of being an agent for transformation and change. It has to fulfill the gospel imperative of making the world a better place for all to live with justice, peace and harmony. And to achieve this, the church in Onitsha has engaged many youths, the old and the unemployed through her various skill acquisitions, sensitization, scholarship, and empowerment programmes thereby reducing the rate of crime. Looking at the above, one could deduce that the church has the mind, and the will to ensure that her impart is felt in the society in very progressive manner that will enhance the well-being of the humanity.

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