

## ***The Nature, Consequences and Prevention of Armed Banditry in Nigeria: Counselling Implications***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examined the nature, consequences and prevention of armed banditry in Nigeria, and the implications of these to counselling. Banditry which is the prevalence of violent crimes involves the use of force to intimidate a person with the intention to rob, rape or kill. Banditry is a serious crime that poses a security challenge to the existence of the country, Nigeria. Nigeria's bandits are rural gangs that engage in criminal activities such as cattle rustling, looting of villages, extortion of money and kidnapping for ransoms. The prevalence of banditry in Nigeria appears to have been high and rising over the years. The paper considered the nature, consequences and prevention of armed banditry in Nigeria, and highlighted the counselling implications of these. Recommendations made include formation of formidable community police, fair sharing of dividends of democracy, deportation of these foreigners back to their various countries, and addressing the issue of illegal mining. Also, counsellors are required to be accustomed with psychological and counselling techniques, which can be used in helping banditry victims psychologically in order to enable them come out of the trauma and pain they passed through, among others.*

**Keywords:** banditry, armed, nature, consequences, counselling

### **Introduction**

The prevalence of banditry in Nigeria appears to have been high and rising over the years. Banditry means occurrence or prevalence of armed robbery or violent crime (Hornby, 2015). It involves the use of force, or threat to that effect, to intimidate a person with the intent to rob or rape or kill. Banditry is a crime against persons. It is a recurring phenomenon in Nigeria that threatens the well-being of its citizens. This act of banditry in Nigeria has assumed varying dimensions in different geopolitical zones, ranging from raping to kidnapping. Banditry in Nigeria has claimed thousands of lives and properties. Banditry, according to Brenner (2021), refers to a type of organized crime that includes kidnapping, armed robbery, murder, rape, cattle-rustling, and the exploitation of environmental resources.

Bandits are heavily armed criminal gangs that terrorize Nigeria's rural communities, mostly in the North West, killing, kidnapping, forcing people away from their homes, and taunting the authorities with their brazenness. Security breaches in Nigeria began as farmer-herder conflict in 2011 and intensified between 2017 to 2018 to include banditry, cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, sexual violence, destruction of farmland and produce and killings. Banditry is a type of organized crime committed by outlaws typically involving threat or use of violence. A person who engages in banditry is known as a bandit and primarily commits crimes such as extortion, robbery, and murder, either as an individual or in groups (Hornby, 2015). Banditry, according to researchers, is a vague concept of criminality and in modern usages can be synonymous for gangsterism, brigandage, marauding and thievery (Kyari & Chukwu, 2015). Banditry is an organized crime involving an outlaw or marauders that specialize in violent attacks in cattle rustling, armed robbery, abduction and most times killing of persons (Nigeria Watch, 2011). Their main aim is to cause mayhem to people and their community. These criminals target mostly commuters and people in rural areas in order to dispossess them of their income and possessions.

The origin of banditry in Nigeria can be traced to the farmer-herder conflict that started in 2011, and intensified between 2017 to 2018 to include cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, sexual violence and killings. Others are governance crisis, porous borders, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and crisis within the security circle. Many researchers laid emphases on the proliferation of arms, drug abuse, unregulated and illegal gold mining and the vast forests that have served as a safe haven for criminals, as other critical factors that are regarded as the root causes of banditry in Nigeria (Haruna, 2013). Effects of banditry in Nigeria at large are numerous: destruction of lives and property, insecurity, migration, lack of economic activities, development and foreign investment. Other effects include kidnapping of farmers and commuters, cattle rustling and sexual violence (Mohammedu, 2017). According to a 2019 report by the Zamfara State government, between 2011 and 2019, bandits killed at least 6,319 people, kidnapped 3,672 people and burnt more than 500 villages in Zamfara State alone. The activities of bandits have also displaced more than 200,000 people while more than 35,000 Nigerians have been forced to emigrate to the Niger Republic and Lake Chad due to the destruction of their communities by bandits. Due to the intensity of bandits' attacks on communities and citizens, Nigerians world-wide have called upon the government to classify bandits as terrorists. Several studies such as Okoli and Okpaleke (2014) have explained that bandits are an assortment of criminal gangs involved in large scale cattle rustling, sexual violence, kidnapping, armed robbery, pillage and attacks on gold miners and traders particularly in North West Nigeria. According to Rotberg (2007), crime against persons including murder, rape, and robbery has grown in scale and viciousness in Nigeria since 1999.

### **Theoretical explanations of crimes (banditry)**

Crime has been around since the beginning of civilization. Many theories have explained why people commit crimes; one of such theories is explained here as it relates to banditry.

**Situational Action Theory:** Situational Action Theory (SAT) is a newly developed general theory of moral action and crime developed in 2004 by Per-Olof Wikstrom. The theory aims to integrate individual and environmental explanatory perspectives within the framework of a situational action theory. The theory tries to explain what moves people to action such as crime by incorporating ecological, criminological, sociological and behavioural sciences. The theory aims to address and surmount some major shortcomings in prominent criminological theories. This theory builds upon insights from various conventional criminological theories and sciences more generally. Situational action theory is one of few theories in criminology that takes the person-environment interaction seriously (Wikstrom, 2019).

Crime, according to Centre for Analytic Criminology (CAC, 2019), is an action that violates the law and is a result of the interplay between an individual's exposure to criminogenic settings and the propensity for criminality. Situational action theory as explained by Wikstrom (2019) posits that crime is motivated by an individual's morality and the prevailing situation. SAT believes that people are responsible for their actions, but the causes of their actions are situational. Explaining further, Bouhana and Wikstrom (2011) said that crime is committed when it is perceived as a worthwhile and suitable alternative giving the prevailing situation, and when a person fails to apply moral restraint. The theory argues that people's propensity to commit a crime is different just as environments also vary. According to Wikstrom (2019), crime results from an interaction between a person and the environment. To develop crime's propensity, the individual has to be exposed to crime-supportive moral contexts (Bouhana & Wikstrom, 2011).

The theory's assumptions include that people are essentially rule-guided creatures, as they express their desires and respond to friction within the context of rule-guided choices; social order is based on shared rules of conduct patterns in human behaviour which are based on rule-guided routines; people are the source of their actions; people perceive, choose, and execute their actions. Other assumptions include that the causes of action are situational; an individual's particular perception of action alternatives, the process of choice, and guided by the action are triggered and guided by the relevant input from the person-environment interaction; crimes are moral actions; crimes are actions that break rules of conduct (stated in law) about what is the right or wrong thing to do in a particular circumstance (Centre for Analytic Criminology (CAC), 2019).

### **Origin of armed banditry in Nigeria**

According to Odinkalu (2018), banditry in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. In the precolonial Borgu in Kwara state, Nigeria, there was a notorious raider in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that had a gang of robbers made up of 460 men. This group had 400 men on foot and 60 horsemen. These bandits used to attack traders and robbed them of their goods. Post-independence banditry in Nigeria can be traced to before and after the civil war. Torkwembe (2020) explained that before the civil war, there were traces of insurgency in the old Western region and that after the war some combatants returned home with nothing to do, so banditry became the commonest option to them.

In the Western region, according to Odinkalu (2018), urban banditry ensued with a secondary school dropout, Ishola Oyenusi, who was nicknamed “the Doctor,” terrorizing Lagos at the end of the civil war in 1970. This type of banditry later in that 1970 spread to Kano where three men robbed a bank of £27,750. Due to increase in armed robbery, the Nigerian military introduced death by firing squad for criminals. The pace of public executions quickly escalated and by 1976, over 400 armed robbers were publicly executed by firing squad. In 1984 alone, 338 criminal were executed (Odinkalu, 2018). In 12 years between 1984 and 1996, over 1,200 criminals were also executed by firing squad (Torkwembe, 2020).

In the 1980s was Lawrence Anini, another school drop-out whose reign of terror in the then Bendel and surrounding states was well known. When two members of Anini gang were convicted in 1986, he turned his guns against the police in an intense rampage of mass killing, during which ten police officers in Bendel state died in that 1986. That made the government of General Ibrahim Babangida to intensify the heat against Anini until he was arrested in December 1986. Anini’s gang was dismantled and they were executed in March 1987 (Odinkalu, 2018).

In recent times and still ongoing, in the North West geopolitical zone of Nigeria particularly in Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina, Kaduna, and Kebbi States, the activities of bandits have been particularly worrisome. The activities of these bandits range from kidnapping to murder of victims, robbery, rape, cattle-rustling and the likes. Their modus operandi involves maiming and killing of their victims. It has been reported that these bandits who are not Nigerians have now occupied all the forests in Nigeria. This growing insecurity threat has claimed many lives of Nigerians and caused food scarcity (Torkwembe, 2020). The International Crisis Group Report (2020) states than in Zamfara alone, over 8,000 people have been murdered in the last decade, while 200,000 people are displaced internally and others fled to neighbouring states. Ezigbo (2020) laments that the situation is so horrible that the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammadu Sa’ad Abubakar lamented that bandits now move in the north from house to house with AK 47 rifles. The Sultan further explained that the North West region has become the worst place to live in Nigeria.

### **The nature of armed banditry in Nigeria**

Banditry is a serious crime that poses a security challenge to democratic governance and peaceful coexistence of the Nigerian state. Environmental decline and scarcity of water and arable land led to communities competing for those limited resources. Other factors such as unemployment and poverty have encouraged these gangs that engage in criminal activities. Bandits often terrorize communities in Nigeria especially states in the North-West. The activities of these bandits include cattle rustling, looting of villages, extortion of local communities, kidnapping for ransom, sporadic shooting, killing and rapping (Abdulrasheed, 2020). The prevalence of banditry in Nigeria appears to have been high and rising over the years.

Several studies have explained that bandits are an assortment of criminal gangs involved in large scale cattle rustling, sexual violence, kidnapping, armed robbery, pillage and attacks on gold miners and traders particularly in North West Nigeria. Bandit groups are composed largely of the Fulani and Hausa ethnic groups, and this is because these criminal gangs are products of local conflicts between farmers and herders. These criminal gangs operate in rural communities and have their bases deep in forests which provide great hideout opportunities.

### **Types of armed banditry**

There are three main known types of banditry. These include social banditry, urban banditry and rural banditry.

**1. Social banditry:** This term was first used by a historian Eric Hobsbawm in his 1959 book, *Primitive Rebels*; a study of popular forms of resistance that also incorporate behaviour characterized by law as illegal. Hobsbawm claimed that social banditry is a widespread phenomenon that occurred in many societies throughout recorded history; and forms of social banditry still exist. Hobsbawm further explained that social banditry is a universal and virtually unchanging phenomenon which embodies a rather primitive form of organized social protest of peasants against oppression. Blok (2007) refers to social bandits as robbers of a special kind who are not considered as simple criminals by public opinion. Social banditry is mainly popular in developed countries and is targeted at the rich and whatever is taken from them is given to the poor in that area. Later social scientists have also discussed the term, social banditry's applicability to more modern forms of crime like street gangs and the economy associated with trade in illegal drugs.

**2. Rural banditry:** Another type of banditry is rural. This type is the most popular type of banditry in developing countries like Nigeria. Rural banditry is carried on villagers, unarmed citizens and commuters by killing, burning of properties, abduction and sometimes raping of their victims. Abdullahi (2019) described rural banditry as a practice of stealing cattle and animals from herders or raiding of cattle from their ranches. Rural banditry refers to armed violence driven principally by the criminal intent to steal and plunder. This term referred to a group of rural outlaw involved in illicit activities such as raiding of villages, armed robbery, kidnapping, cattle rustling and the like, for accumulation of wealth. Rural bandits are therefore a group of locally organized gang terrorizing local people or travellers in order to rob them of their valuable items. Rural banditry in the North West states of Zamfara, Kaduna, Sokoto, Katsina and Kebbi has reached alarming heights in recent years. These criminal gangs usually operate within and across local communities and along rural borders with the help of their local collaborators like the natives or security agents.

**3. Urban banditry:** Urban banditry is mostly common in the Southern parts of Nigeria. Most times the bandits here carry out their attacks on facilities to get attention of the government or to press in their demands. Urban banditry is a higher form of banditry. According to Odinkalu (2018), urban banditry ensued in Southern Nigeria which comprises a mere 29% of Nigeria's nearly 924,000 km<sup>2</sup> of landmass. An early exponent of this urban banditry in the southern part was Ishola Oyenusi, a high school dropout called the Doctor who terrorized Lagos at the end of the civil war. Urban banditry was not

confined to Southern Nigeria. In April 1970, three armed men robbed a bank in Kano of £27,750 (Odinkalu, 2018). Also, in the 1980s, Lawrence Anini terrorized the then Bendel state and surrounding states. In South-East Nigeria was the Otokoto case in Owerri, Imo state in 1996, which was a case of using human beings to perform ritual to make money. In Abia State was the case of a commercial kidnapper and assassin, Osisikankwu and the emergence of the Bakassi Boys (Odinkalu, 2018).

### **Causes of armed banditry in Nigeria**

The prevalence of armed banditry in Nigeria has so many causes which include the following:

i. **Deteriorating moral values:** Deteriorating moral values of the moral institutions in Nigeria is looked upon as the first cause of armed banditry in the country. Chibuzor et al. (2020) argued that when the quest for wealth acquisition outweighs that of moral values, the resultant effect is criminality. The moral institutions in Nigeria failed to inculcate moral values which then gave birth to tribalism, ethno-religious sentiments and corruption. As a result of this, there is lack of honesty, contentment and responsiveness among the people which opened room for banditry in the country. In Nigeria, corrupt government officials and criminals are celebrated and encouraged. In a supportive view, Torkwembe (2020) perceives that celebrating people of questionable characters is an indictment on the societal and moral values.

ii. **Illegal mining activities:** Another cause of banditry in Nigeria is illegal mining activities. According to International Crisis Group (2020), illegal mining which is prominent in Kebbi, Katsina and Zamfara states of Northwest region of Nigeria has promoted violent conflict over the ownership of the minefields, and has led to destruction of lives and properties. Ogonnaya (2020) establishes that the violent conflict caused a lot of displacement among the citizens which led them to engage in banditry as an alternate means of livelihood.

iii. **Poverty:** Another cause of banditry in Nigeria is poverty, as opined by many researchers such as Chibuzor et al (2020). Many Nigerians live in abject poverty. That is why it is believed that poverty remains a breeding ground for bandits and other illegal activities that will give a better life economically. Tong (1991) asserts that peasants have to make a rational choice between surviving harsh conditions and involvement in banditry. Abdulrasheed (2020) confirms the poverty levels of Zamfara, Jigawa and Sokoto state as 74%, 87% and 87.7% respectively.

iv. **Under-governed spaces:** Ojo (2020) observes that the prevalence of under-governed spaces where the government's presence is not felt at all gives rise to banditry. Many researchers believe that such areas are characterized by bad leadership and protracted conflict which makes the citizens vulnerable to criminal elements such as bandits.

v. **Nigeria's porous borders:** The country's porous borders encourage the proliferation of small arms and light weapons which has given room for criminal activities including banditry. The porous nature of the borders welcomes the mass migration of the Fulanis from other West African countries who have now taken over the vast forests of Nigeria as armed bandits.

vi. **Herders and farmers relationship:** Another cause of banditry in Nigeria is the complex relationship between the Fulani herders and the local farmers. It was discovered from literature that due to climate change, desertification and drought, many herdsmen migrated to Nigeria's vast forests. The encroachment of farmlands and destruction of crops by these herders and their animals has led to clashes with the farmers. Uche and Iwuamadi (2018) in affirmation, agreed that these conflicts between herders and farmers have led to wanton destruction of lives and property causing insecurity in the country.

vii. **Unemployment:** Youth unemployment is a major cause of banditry in Nigeria. There is high rate of youth unemployment in Nigeria. According to Saanu (2013), Nigerians cannot meet the basic needs of life because they have no paid jobs. The politicians are not even ready to mobilize these youths to become self-reliant. Torkwembe (2020) observes that even at times when one wants to be creative, there is no government incentive to empower one. The government has no interest in the welfare of the citizenry. For most of these youths to survive, they get recruited into banditry. Mburu (1999) suggests that with the destruction of the economy, the only available job for the youth is banditry.

viii. **Demoralized security services:** Another cause of banditry in Nigeria is the weakened, overstretched, and demoralized security services who are deployed in many states in Nigeria. The porous nature of the security network in Nigeria gives impetus to whoever wants to be recruited into banditry (Torkwembe, 2020). The Nigerian security services are poorly equipped with outdated/obsolete weapons.

### **Consequences of armed banditry in Nigeria**

The continued attacks of armed bandits on Nigerians have led to the destruction of lives and property, growing number of widows and orphans and forceful displacement of people from their ancestral homes. People now live in fears. Banditry has complicated the security crisis in the country. Banditry in Nigeria has further led to food insecurity, cattle rustling, health challenges, forced migration, humanitarian crisis and kidnapping for ransoms. The activities of armed banditry in Nigeria have paralysed economic activities, slowed down development and scare away foreign investors (Nadama, 2019; Torkwembe, 2020).

Abdullahi (2019) outlines the implications of banditry in the West African sub-region to include: radicalization of the youth, increase rate of youth unemployment and their subsequent involvement in illicit trading on small arms, light weapons and drugs. According to Abdullahi (2019), banditry leads to gradual collapse of agricultural and livestock developments, bastardization of traditional institutions and ethnic hostility.

Armed bandits usually razed down communities and displace the owners. This act hampers development and progress of both the society and the individuals. Social activities of the people are also disrupted. Traders are usually attacked and the day's sales collected, which in turn discourages commercial activities in the communities leaving the victims traumatized. Farmlands have also been abandoned by the rural dwellers due to the fear of being killed, maimed or abducted for ransom by the armed bandits.

### **Prevention of armed banditry in Nigeria**

Prevention of banditry in Nigeria will demand a lot of sacrifices on the part of the government, law enforcement agencies, traditional rulers and the citizens. According to Clarke (2005), situational crime prevention means to reduce the opportunity for crime in an action setting by carefully manipulating the situational factors that engender crime, such as poorly governed spaces. Government's presence should be felt in all under-governed areas that encourage the activities of bandits. The proliferation of arms and illegal mining activities should be stopped by placing stringent measures on ground against the offenders.

There is the need to establish community policing in all states of the federation to checkmate the porousness of borders and the vast forests harbouring these bandits. Modern gadgets like the CCTV should be mounted at the border by the government for effective surveillance. The deployment of forest guards and the use of drones to monitor activities in forests should be encouraged. To strengthen further the activities of these officers, local/community vigilante groups and civilian Joint Task Force should be encouraged.

To prevent banditry in Nigeria, there is need to create more jobs for the youths to reduce the incidence of high rate of unemployment. Poverty alleviation programmes should be put in place to reduce hardship in the country. Issue of marginalization among the people should be attended to. The security apparatus should be strengthened by recruiting more able-bodied men, training and equipping them with more sophisticated and modern weapons. Government should build trust with the citizens who are vulnerable to bandit attacks by showing more interest in their security. Issues of illiteracy and unfair sharing of national resources should be tackled.

### **Counselling implications**

1. Banditry experience is terrifying and traumatic. Therefore, the counsellor should help provide psychological therapy and support services for victims and their families. This is to help the victims and their family members to manage issues like self-blame, guilt, and shame. This is to enhance victims' confidence in themselves and others.

2. The victims of banditry should be taught by the counsellor to control their fear reactions psychologically. This includes adopting cognitive behavioural techniques like mental rehearsal and guided self-talk.

3. The counsellor can help the victims of banditry by desensitizing them to the trauma of banditry through repeated exposures to memories of the traumatic event. Here, the victims are asked to repeatedly recount their banditry experience as well as confront situations in real life that remind them of the experience. Victims can also be made to listen to tape-recorded sessions telling of the banditry experience to increase exposure.

4. The counsellor can treat banditry victims through education, exposure, and cognitive techniques. Victims are encouraged to identify parts of the trauma with "inadequately processed emotions" associated with them, known as "stuck point".



5. Victims of armed banditry need immediate intervention which may be supportive in correcting distorted perceptions of what happened, and mobilizing effective coping skills and facilitating the victims' use of their wider social network and family members for continuing support.

### **Conclusion**

Banditry means prevalence of armed robbery or violent crime. Banditry involves the use of force to intimidate a person with the aim of robbing, raping or killing. Nigeria's bandits are rural gangs that engage in criminal activities such as cattle rustling, looting of villages, extortion of local communities, and kidnapping for ransom. These bandits also carry out highway ambushes, killing, and kidnapping for ransom. The bandits operate mostly in rural communities and have their bases deep in forests which provide hideouts for them. The primary driver of bandits is profit and personal enrichments. The three types of banditry include rural, urban and social.

The effect of banditry in Nigeria is extensive. Banditry has led to the destruction of lives and property, displacement of people from their ancestral homes, and growing number of widows. Banditry has increased the incidence of forced migration and food insecurity because people have abandoned their farmlands. It causes cattle rustling, and health challenges. Socio-economic developments are hindered by banditry. Banditry also threatens democratic governance; foreign investors are scared away and villages are burnt and razed by fire. Youth employment can help in preventing banditry in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were thus made:

- (i) Effective community policing mechanisms capable of addressing the hinterlands' peculiar security challenges should be put in place.
- (ii) The government should deal decisively with the bandits when caught.
- (iii) Politicians should extend dividends of democracy to areas that have no government's presence, and there should be reduction in corruption.
- (iv) Rehabilitation counsellors can help victims of banditry to overcome or manage their persona-social or psychological effects of banditry experience to live a normal life again.
- (v) Individual and group counselling should be used by counsellors to assist victims of armed banditry and their family members in the counselling process.
- (vi) Government should address the incidences of illicit artisanal mining and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the region, and engage the teeming youths meaningfully.
- (vii) These Fulani herders who are from other West African countries should be deported back to their various countries for peace to reign.
- (viii) Counselling psychologists are required to be accustomed with psychological and counselling techniques, which can be used in helping victims of armed banditry psychologically, in order to enable them come out of the trauma and pain they passed through.

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