EFFECTIVENESS OF AMNESTY PROGRAMME TO CRIME REDUCTION IN BENUE STATE, NORTH-CENTRAL, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: Benue State North Central Nigeria is being faced with different dimensions of crimes which are taking sophisticated forms day-by-day and one of the measures taken to either prevent or reduce crimes by the Ortom administration in 2015 was the Amnesty Programme granted to criminals and those in possession of illegal arms. At the moment, the persistent state of insecurity in some parts of Benue and the rise in armed violent crimes due to the possession/proliferation of light and small arms by some youths and the need for peace is generating the clamour for amnesty across some stakeholders. This paper which is anchored on the control theory of crime therefore appraises pre and post amnesty programme in Benue State North Central Nigeria with the purpose of finding out the relationship between the programme and crime reduction in the State. The study adopted a descriptive survey using primary data from KII with security experts, traditional and religious leaders, government officials, women and youths as participants and complemented with secondary data from Benue State Police Command. Data was analysed with the aid of SPSS software version 21 which percentages, mean, variance and standard deviation were computed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation to test the hypothesis in order to determine the relationship between variables (Amnesty and Crime Reduction). The study found that the amnesty program was poorly executed proving that the relationship between amnesty and crime reduction in Benue State, Nigeria was negative as the programme has not significantly reduced crimes in Benue State, North Central Nigeria. It further revealed that despite the amnesty program, highly committed crimes that featured prominently in the State during the study period as theft and other stealing, grievous hurt/wound, assault/ criminal force, mischief by fire, unlawful possession, burglary/ criminal trespass and armed robbery. The findings recommended that the amnesty programme be re-visited with more sincerity anchored on sound reformative/rehabilitative initiatives, proper training of youths in skills and sound technical/ science-based education, job creation, poverty reduction measures and zero tolerance to thuggery by all political elites/politicians among others to reduce crime wave in the State.

Keywords: Appraisal, Amnesty, Crime, Crime Reduction

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Nigerian society is grappling with an unprecedented surge in crime and criminal activities, which has become a major concern for citizens, policy and law enforcement agencies. It is worthy of note that the crime problem in Nigeria has continued to raise its ugly head on Nigerian society with associated dangers affecting virtually all sectors of the nation. Various factors may have accounted for the rise in criminal activities, such as social inequality, poverty and imbalances in the socio-economic indices, bad governance, decline in family values, weak and poor law enforcement, and political agitations, among others. From violent crimes such as Boko Haram, banditry, militia herdsmen, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, cybercrimes, fraud, and corruption, Nigeria is presently facing a crime epidemic that threatens its social fabric, economic development and national security (Smah & Smah, 2023). The recently published Africa Organised Crime Index 2023 compiled by Enhancing Africa's Response to Transnational Organised Crime (Enact) project ranks Nigeria second, with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) topping the African continental charts when it comes to the scourge of organised crime (Ephraim, 2023). Similarly, Nigeria has been ranked in the 11th position among countries with the highest crime rate by the World Crime Index in Mid-Year of 2024 (www.numbeo.com), following countries such as Venezuela, Papua New Guinea, Haiti, Afghanistan, South Africa, Honduras, Trinidad and Tobago, Syria, Jamaica and Peru (Crime Index Report Mid-Year, 2024), equally of sad commentary concerning the rising crime situation in Nigeria. The Nigeria Police Crime Statistics in December 2023 reported the crime rate stood at 69.93% points on a scale from zero to 100, representing the highest concern (www.statista.com, 2023). Because of the high prevalence of crime and the perennial insecurity, Nigeria has recently been included among the countries with the least peace in the world, according to the Global Peace Index Report 2023 (www.statista.com, 2023. The situation of the crime problem in Nigeria made Odekunle (2006) and Iwarimie-jaja (2010) opine that crime has become serious and recalcitrance to control and has passed from the normal or tolerable level of pathological to become a social problem. The severe nature of crime in Nigeria manifests in various forms, including kidnapping, banditry, assassination, armed robbery, serious fraud, corruption, money laundering, drug trafficking, and cyber or hi-tech crimes, among others. Its character has become cult-like, gang-like, syndicate-like, and conspiratorial (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2010).

Similarly, Soyombo (2009) rightly observed that a major socio-economic problem in contemporary Nigerian society is crime. For many years, it has attracted considerable attention from all members of society and stakeholders, including individuals, citizens, groups, corporate organisations, and the government at various levels, as well as the international community. As Soyombo (2009) again noted, various efforts have been made to address the problem of crime; however, these efforts have not yielded the desired results, and thus the issue of crime has persisted, causing people to suffer the consequences. While it may be said that peace and security are desired by all, crime has deprived people in Nigeria, particularly in Benue State, of this cherished peace and security, as individuals can hardly sleep with both eyes closed. Virtually no day passes in Nigeria without crime being reported in the media, as affirmed by Soyombo (2009) and Dambazau (2007).

Benue State North Central, Nigeria, has experienced its fair share of criminal activities, also posing negative effects on the peace, development aspiration and actualisation of the state. According to statistics from Statista.com (2022), Benue State is ranked as the fifth most crime-prone and unsafe state in Nigeria, afflicted by common crimes such as attacks by militia herdsmen, banditry, militia-related crimes, armed robbery, kidnapping, assault, rape, and prostitution. Other states include Borno, which ranks first, followed by Kaduna in second, Niger State in third, Zamfara State in fourth, Plateau State in sixth, Katsina State in seventh, Lagos State in eighth, Anambra State in ninth, and Taraba State in tenth position. The human cost of crime is even more devastating, with countless lives lost, families torn apart, and communities ravaged by violence and fear. The social disintegration and economic and psychological trauma caused by crime in Benue and Nigeria have far-reaching consequences, resulting in the loss of human resources and properties as well as eroding trust and worsening the social image.

In view of the dangerous consequences of crime on the political and socio-economic development of Nigeria and Benue State in particular, governments at various levels have continued to evolve different ways to either tackle or reduce crime to the barest minimum. This is why, at the inception of the Ortom administration on May 29th, 2015, Governor Samuel Ortom declared amnesty for people in possession of illegal arms and criminals as a move to reduce crimes in Benue State, Nigeria. The amnesty, which was initially targeted to last three months, was later extended. The aim of the amnesty, according to Ortom, was to "rid the state of crimes by retrieving arms from those not supposed to hold them in the first instance so that peace can reign and investors would be interested in coming into the state to do business" (News Express, 2016).

The amnesty program adopted a "carrot and stick" approach; those in possession of illegal weapons will be allowed a grace period of three months to surrender them and get integrated into the society, failure of which the stick approach would be applied. According to the amnesty plan, those who were to submit such weapons either through the office of the Special Adviser on Security or church leaders were to be compensated with cash depending on the sophistication of their weaponry. More so, they would be given reformative skills in the area of education and crafts to earn a positive living (Radio Benue News, 2016).

Three months into the life of the amnesty programme in 2016, over one hundred weapons were recovered, the latest from a notorious militant world lord in Benue State, Terwase Agwaza, popularly known as "Ghana." Agwaza alone submitted over eighty assorted weapons at Government House, Makurdi. Shortly after submitting the weapons, Mr. Agwaza told journalists that his decision to lay down his arms was a result of the intervention of Governor Samuel Ortom and other religious leaders in Benue State. He pledged his commitment to the amnesty programme, assuring that he would collaborate with the government to ensure that the youths still in possession of illegal arms surrendered them for peace to prevail (News Express, 2016).

The amnesty initiative by Former Governor Ortom became indispensable due to the spate of insecurity pervading the state at the time Ortom took over as Governor. Sankara, a geo-political bloc in Benue North East Senatorial District, became more notorious for acts of kidnapping and killings, cruelty in which over 20 persons were gruesomely murdered in a period of two weeks (Nigerian Police, Benue State Command, 2015).

However, years after the amnesty programme, many crimes such as assassination, armed robbery, and kidnapping among others, have continue unabated, including the gruesome murder of a political chieftain from the People's Democratic Party, PDP, Chief Atoza Hindan, who was a Second Republic lawmaker and Senior Special Assistant to Ortom on Special Security, Mr Denen Igbana and Chief Executive Officer of Labeth Pharmacy, Mr Ternenge Labe (Wua, 2016). In July 2016, angry youths in Gboko took the path of jungle justice and killed three suspected kidnappers in Gboko (Benue State Police, Command, 2016). Also, in July 2016, some youths kidnapped a catholic priest, the Vicar-General of Oturkpo Diocese, on his way back from his village Oturkpa in Ogbadibo Local Government Area to settle a communal crisis which he was eventually killed (Radio Benue News, 2016). On the 2nd December 2016, a news editor with Radio Benue Corporation Makurdi, Mrs Iyuadoo Tor-Agbidye, was kidnapped by some well-armed gunmen in her residence in Makurdi. Also, on the 15th January, 2017 two heavily armed young men on a motorcycle sporadically killed ten members of Joint Civilian Police Task Force who were in a meeting in a community near Abaji in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area (Radio Benue News, 2017). In March, 2017 unknown gunmen shooting sporadically killed five persons at Ayati and seventeen in Zaki-Biam both in Ukum Local Government Area of the State (Radio Benue News Makurdi, 2017) Also, another sad news engulfed Benue on early hours of Sunday 20th, August, 2018 when the Principal Special Assistant to the Governor on Knowledge Economy and Investment, Dr. Tarvershima Adyorogh was murdered by unknown gun men with his wife also shot (Radio Benue News, 2018).

January first, 2019 was a black day for people of Benue State as suspected herdsmen attacked worshippers in a church in Gwer West Local Government Area killing over 100 people (Radio Benue News, 2019). Few months in to the amnesty programme, the surrendered militia kingpin "Ghana" returned to his old ways following the killing of the Special Adviser to Governor Ortom on Security Affairs, Mr Igbana in 2016 (Wua,2016) which the State Government accused Mr Terwase alias "Ghana" of and declared him wanted for over years. The Benue State Government under the leadership of Ortom for the second time granted Ghana another amnesty and, on his way, to again surrender weapons, gain freedom with his teeming militias to the Government in Makurdi the State Capital, the military allegedly intercepted, snatched and killed him (Aborishade et al, 2020). Till date, the continued rising in criminal activities and wanton killings associated with banditry and militia related crimes in Benue State is a source of concern. Amid the continuous violent crimes associated with scores of deaths , displacement of millions of persons from their ancestral communities and destruction of properties, there is a clamour for peace and amnesty agitated by some stakeholders to some youths in possession of arms which necessitated this study to examine the relationship between the amnesty programme declared in the state earlier under the Ortom administration and crime reduction, which is what constitute the problem of this study to appraise the nexus between pre and post amnesty programme to crime reduction in Benue State, North Central, Nigeria with the following objectives:

   i.   To examine the effectiveness of the amnesty programme in Benue State, North Central Nigeria to crime reduction in the State;

  ii.   To appraise the crime situation in Benue State during pre and post-amnesty programmes;

iii.   To suggest better measures to improve the effectiveness of the amnesty programme in reducing crime in Benue State, North Central, Nigeria.

Research Hypothesis

Ho_1: there is no significant relationship between the amnesty programme and crime reduction in Benue State, North Central, Nigeria.

Conceptualisation

Amnesty

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition (2000) defines "Amnesty" as a general pardon, especially for offences against a government (or for political offences). It is a period during which law is suspended to allow offenders to admit their crimes without fear of prosecution. According to Ering (2013), amnesty could also refer to a situation or initiative where individuals are encouraged to turn over illicit arms to the Authority (in this case, the government).

In Nigeria, a state of Amnesty was declared by the former civilian President, Late Umaru Yar'dua in 2009 to the various militant groups operating in the Niger Delta Region whose social vices have bridged the peace of the Region in particular and the nation in general (Ering, 2013). It is important at this point, to identify some of these major groups and their leaders operating in the area. A few notable ones were: the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF); Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People; Nigeria Niger Delta Vigilante, Niger Delta Liberation Front, Joint Revolutionary Council and the Ijaw Youth Council. The key leaders were Henry Okah, Asari Dokubo, Ateke Tom, Government Ekpemupolo (AKS Tompolo); Soboma George, Brutus Ebipodei, Solomon Ndigbara, Tubotamuno Angolia, John Togo, Ebikabowei Victor-Ben Godswill Tamuno and others. The Federal Government made this declaration with the aim of restoring normalcy to the oil-producing area (Ering, 2013).

A number of activities were planned for the many repentant militants; these included training in various skills both within and outside the country. In most cases large sums of money were paid the leaders of the various groups. A few were given contracts running into billions to protect the oil pipelines from vandalism. At the end of the Amnesty, that is when the Amnesty offer was closed, over 8000 militants surrendered their arms and ammunition and pledged full allegiance to the Federal Government (Ering, 2013). Some of the leaders of these groups were treated as kings and given juicy contracts that were worth billions of naira. Regrettably, after its declaration, remarkable changes have not been made in the region, leading to a resurgence of militant activities in the region (Ering, 2013), which calls for the examination of why the amnesty programme in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has not met the yearnings of the people.

Crime

Crime, like other concepts in social sciences, has no generally accepted definition. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (2009):

> Crime is held to be an offence which goes beyond the personal and into the public sphere, breaking prohibitory rules or laws, to which legitimate punishments or sanctions are attached, and which requires the intervention of a public authority… for crime to be known as such, it must come to the notice of, and be processed through, an administrative system or enforcement agency (Adebayo, 2013).

According to Burke (2009) crime and criminality are also closely linked to such socio-political factors and how we view the nature of society. Crime includes many different activities such as theft, fraud, robbery, corruption, assault, rape, and murder, among other illegal and generally unacceptable behaviours abhorred by any society. Affirming, Dambazau (1994) defines crime as an act or omission against public interest which is prescribed by law enacted by the legislature in the overall interests of the society, and to which prescribed punishment is attached in the event of violation and it involves four major principles which are public wrong, moral wrong, law and punishment for the criminal.

Crime is also seen as a violation of the rules agreed to be respected by all members of the society, and upon which the rest of the members of the society mete sanction upon those guilty of the violation. It is for the same reason that the legal system views crime as a public and moral wrong (Adebayo, 2013). Sociologists see crime as "any act which is considered socially injurious and which is punished by the state, regardless of the type of punishments" (Clinard, 1968 in Ozo-Eson, 2004). One striking limitation of this sociological view is that those actions that are injurious but not "punished by the state" may not be regarded as crimes, which is far from reality. Better put by the researcher within the context of this study, crime is any socially injurious act which may be punished or not by the state.

Crime rate in Nigeria in general and Benue in particular has assumed a worrisome dimension. In light of the worsening crime situation and the ineffectiveness of the crime control apparatuses, Nigeria can be deemed to have a crime problem (Adebayo, 2013). Nigeria is among the developing countries of the world and is experiencing a prevalence of rising crime waves as criminal intentions vary in nature, degrees and frequencies. Nigeria has been on the global crime map since the 1980s (Dambazau, 2007). The nature of these crimes includes most recently, banditry, terrorism, insurgency youth restiveness, kidnapping for ransom, killings and assassinations, political crimes (Shaminja, 2018,) drug trafficking, money laundering, internet or cyber scam, advanced fee fraud (419), combined with other traditional crimes such as armed robbery, murder, rape, car theft, burglary, fraud, bribery and corruption, food and drug adulteration, gambling, smuggling, human trafficking, and other illegal activities (Adebayo,2013). These crimes have no doubt posed development and social image challenges to the overall sustainable development of Nigeria.

Effectiveness and appraisal of the amnesty programme

Several studies have been carried out to appraise the effectiveness of the amnesty programme in Nigeria. Most literature reviewed on amnesty in Nigeria pointed out issues such as poor implementation, lack of effectiveness, lack of transparency, lack of sustenance and also lack of clear policy framework as some of the impediments to successful implementation of the amnesty

programme in Nigeria. For instance, Ushie (2013), in a survey study on Nigeria's Amnesty programme as a Peacebuilding Infrastructure, gives a critical account of the amnesty programme introduced by the Nigerian government in the Niger Delta, its positive impacts and limitations and stresses the need for wider reforms to address issues of underdevelopment and poverty in the region. The study is relevant to the topic at hand but only limited to the case of Niger Delta region. Similarly, Ejovi and Ebie (2013) also carried out a content review study on a critical appraisal of the Amnesty Programme and Social Political Development in the Niger Delta by examining the various challenges of the programme, including poor implementation, lack of basic facilities that negated the successes of the amnesty programme and recommended more skills training for militants and inclusion. The study is crucial to the topic under examination but equally has shortcomings focusing only on the Niger Delta case.

Furthermore, Ebiede, Langer and Tosun (2020) examined issues surrounding the implementation of the amnesty programme in the Niger Delta region, such as disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration, in a bid to analyse the outcomes of the programme. The study found that the amnesty programme contributed significantly to the reduction of small arms and light weapons and other criminal activities, such as the kidnapping of expatriates and equally improved human capacity development. It, however, showed that the programme was ineffective in the area of reintegration of ex-militants into civilian life and recommended the need for enrolment of ex-militants viable skills acquisition programmes. Also, Oluwaniyi (2011) x-rayed post amnesty programme in the Niger Delta: challenges and prospects and found that major critical challenges were alienation, marginalisation, exploitation, corruption, unemployment, poverty, youth and women's issues remained unaddressed jeopardising the possibility of future peace, security and development in the Niger Delta region. Ikenga (2023) equally looked at 13 years of the amnesty programme in Nigeria: an assessment of its impacts on the Niger Delta region using a historical and secondary method of data collection in which analysis was based. The study indicated that while amnesty programme has succeeded in reducing youth restiveness in the region, the general state of underdevelopment, environmental degradation, poor infrastructure, lack of sustainable employment still constitutes some visible features and challenges of the Niger Delta region. The study recommended involvement of communities to identify their development needs and also the need to prioritise entrepreneurship skills as well as agriculture to tackle the challenges in the region. Omokhoa (2015) using explanatory method appraised amnesty programme in Nigeria: understanding justice and equity in the Niger Delta region gave a critical analysis of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration and security interpretation and found that injustice and lack of equity were still a problem in the effectiveness of the amnesty programme. Nneli (2020) in a study "Peace without Justice: Nigeria's Amnesty Programme in the Niger Delta" revealed that the ineffectiveness of strategies such as the use of force or region-focused development programmes, and declining oil production from the region affected by violence made Nigeria's government to introduced amnesty programme in the region. The study showed that the programme led to the return of relative peace and improved and production in the in the region but encountered challenges such as lack of justice accountability for proper implementation of the programme.

Theoretical Framework

Control theory

The focus of control theories of crime is to discover and explain the controlling forces in behaviour, those forces or factors which restrain the individual from breaking the laws (Igbo, 2008). The theory advanced that youths and adults alike conform to the law in response to certain controlling forces in their lives (Igbo, 2008). It argued that people become criminals when controlling forces are weak or absent (Adler in Igbo, 2008). Sociologists of social control regard forms/mechanisms of social control such things as laws, norms, mores, customs, etiquette, ethics, etc (Igbo, 2008). The theory argues that social forces exert directly, indirectly or through internal controls. Direct control is parental control in the home context, while indirect control is when a person refrains from misconduct because of shame, pain or disappointment (Igbo, 2008). The control theory posits that formal agencies, mechanisms such as laws, the legal system, and directives from governmental bodies on social and economic matters (Igbo, 2008) are aimed at crime control and reduction. From the standpoint of social control theory, criminal behaviours and deviant manifestations are the result of failures of formal and informal systems of control. The theory is applicable to this study in that it stresses the fact that the Government has an obligation to put in mechanisms for law-making policies to reduce crime in any given society through initiative programs such as amnesty.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area

This study was carried out in Benue State, North Central Nigeria, which was created on February 3rd, 1976, by the then military administrator General Murtala Mohammed. It is located in the middle belt zone of Nigeria and shares boundaries with five neighbouring states, namely Nassarawa to the north, Taraba to the east, Cross River to the south, Enugu, Ebonyi to the south-east and Kogi to the south-west. The state also shares a common boundary with the Republic of Cameroon on the south-east. Benue state lies roughly between latitude $6^{0}1/2$ north and longitude $7\ 1/2^{0}$- 10^{0} east. Presently, the state has 23 Local Government Areas (Lyam et al., 2005). Benue State is one of the most populous states in Nigeria, with a population of over four million. According to the 2006 Population Census, the state has a total population of 4,219,244; a breakdown shows that 2, 164,058 are males and 2,055 186 are female. NBS puts the state population in 2013 at 5,287,129. The state also occupies a land mass of about 30,955 square kilometres (Lyam, 2005). In terms of ethnic composition, the state consists of several ethnic groups, namely Tiv, Idoma Igede, Etulo, Abakpa (Abakwariga), Jukun, Hausa, Akweya and Nyifon. The Tiv are the majority dominant group, accounting for over half of the entire population (Lyam, 2005). The State has, over the years, witnessed the rise in various forms of crimes, including militia herdsmen attack on farmers, militia crimes, banditry, communal clashes, armed robbery, kidnapping/abduction, violent and cult-related crimes, killings and assassination, among others.

Source of Data Collection

In collecting data for this study, primary and secondary methods of data collection were employed. To this process, the researcher utilised a qualitative data collection method via Key Informant Interview (KII) compromising security experts, traditional rulers, religious leaders, government officials, women and youth who are knowledgeable about the topic under investigation three persons from each senatorial geopolitical zones (Benue North East zone A, Benue North West, Zone B and Benue South, Zone B) for fair representation and complemented it with secondary data from Benue State Police Command from January 2013 to December 2017. Data was recorded and transcribed in the case of primary, while for the secondary, it was analysed through descriptive statistics using mean, variance, and standard deviation via SPSS software version 21 with the aid of tables and charts.

Data Presentation KII Respondents

The Key Informant interviewed on the topic of the effectiveness of the amnesty program to crime reduction in Benue State, Nigeria, responded as follows:

On the assessment of the effectiveness of the amnesty program a KII respondent, 52-year-old Kindred Head of Uyo in Ukum Local Government Area, Benue North East Zone, Chief Samuel Atsar says:

> The amnesty program initiative was a good one. During the program, our youth who were disturbing us in various criminal activities came out to embrace peace. But the situation didn't last long and they returned to their old ways of killings, stealing and kidnapping. The Government did not handle the matter well and the youth went back increasing their way of crimes. The government should go back and give them a second chance and train the youth (Source, KII, November, 2023).

Another KII from Benue North East, Lecturer at College of Education Katsina-Ala, in Katsina-Ala Local Government aged 50, Dr. Denen Azege encapsulates:

> The amnesty initiative was laudable as its pronouncement saw a slight decline in criminal activities in flashpoints such as the Sankera geo-political extraction of Benue but the killing of the Terwase Agwaza. AKA, Ghana, who was their leader, made matters worse. The government at all levels need to do more to judiciously and sincerely implement the programs and prioritise education, skills and youth empowerment programs as a measure to solve the problem of rising crime in Benue (Source, KII, November 2023).

Also, another KII, a businesswoman and mother of four, aged 45 from Logo Local government Area of Benue North East, Mrs Nguseer Kwaghve adds:

> The amnesty program idea was good but it didn't help us for long. Maybe by the time the announcement came, our youth were happy and were not as disturbed as much as they used to be in the past. But they said the Government killed their leader, and now we can't sleep with our eyes closed. Many of our people are now displaced, and killings and kidnappings are everywhere, including women and children. The Government should help us look into the matter to enable us to farm and do our business well (Source, KII, November 2023).

Similarly, 47-year-old security personnel from Benue State Command, NSCDC Makurdi, Benue North West, Officer Sam Baki opines:

> The amnesty program in Benue State was a well-intentioned initiative aimed at disarming and reintegrating former militants and criminals into society. However, the poor handling of the program has led to unintended consequences, exacerbating criminal activities in the state. Firstly, the program lacked a clear framework and guidelines, leading to inconsistencies in the disarmament and reintegration processes. This created an environment of mistrust among the beneficiaries, who felt that the program was not transparent or fair. Secondly, the program failed to provide adequate rehabilitation and reintegration support to the beneficiaries. Many of them were not provided with the necessary skills, training, education, or economic empowerment to enable them to reintegrate into society successfully. As a result, many of them returned to their former criminal activities. Thirdly, the program did not address the root causes of criminality in the state, such as poverty, unemployment, and social inequality. Instead, it focused primarily on disarmament and reintegration, without providing a comprehensive solution to the underlying issues. Lastly, the program was marred by allegations of corruption and mismanagement of funds. This further eroded trust in the program and undermined its effectiveness. In conclusion, the poor handling of the amnesty program in Benue State has worsened criminal activities in the state. To address this, the government needs to revisit the program and address the underlying issues that led to its failure. This includes providing adequate rehabilitation and reintegration support, addressing the root causes of criminality, and ensuring transparency and accountability in the management of the program. (Source, KII, November, 2023).

Likewise, a 45-year-old police officer, Godwin Nev from Benue State Command, Makurdi, Benue North-West zone, in a Key Informant Interview (KII) regarding the poor handling of the amnesty program in Benue State avers:

> As a police officer, I have seen firsthand the impact of the amnesty program on the security situation in Benue State. While the program was intended to reduce crime and violence, it has unfortunately had the opposite effect. One of the major challenges we faced was the lack of proper verification and documentation. Another issue was the inadequate provision of support and resources to the beneficiaries. Many of them were not provided with the necessary skills, training, education, or economic empowerment to enable them to reintegrate into society successfully. As a result, many of them returned to their former criminal activities. Furthermore, the program was not well-coordinated with the security agencies, including the police. We were not adequately informed or involved in the planning and implementation of the program, which made it difficult for us to provide effective support and oversight. This further eroded trust in the program and undermined its effectiveness. In my opinion, the amnesty program in Benue State was well-intentioned but poorly executed. To address the current security challenges in the state, we need to revisit the program and address the underlying issues that led to its failure. This includes providing adequate support and resources as well as training genuinely repented criminals through proper verification and monitoring and involvement of all security agencies (Source, KII, November 2023).

A 35-year-old youth activist from Guma Local Government Area, Benue North West zone, Mr Shima Utaan also gave his assessment on the amnesty programme in Benue thus:

> As a youth activist, I have been involved in various initiatives aimed at promoting peace and development in Benue State. The amnesty program was initially seen as a positive step towards addressing the security challenges in the state, but unfortunately, it has been poorly handled. One of the major issues with the program is that it did not address the root causes of the conflict. The program focused primarily on disarmament and reintegration, without providing a comprehensive solution to the underlying issues such as poverty, unemployment, and social inequality. Furthermore, the program was not inclusive, and many young people who were affected by the conflict were not involved in the planning and implementation of the program. This led to a situation where many young people felt marginalized and excluded from the process. Another issue is that the program did not provide necessary skills training, education, or economic empowerment to enable repentant militants to reintegrate into society

successfully. In my opinion, the amnesty program in Benue State was a missed opportunity. In my opinion, we need to involve young people in the planning and implementation of programs aimed at promoting peace and development to reduce crimes to the barest minimum (Source, KII, November 2023).

A 45-year-old media practitioner who hails from Okpokwu Local Government Area, Benue South zone, Mr Patrick Omora responded that:

> As an investigative journalist, I have been following the amnesty program in Benue State, and I must say that it has been a disaster. The program was meant to disarm and reintegrate militants and criminals, but it has ended up empowering them instead. One of the major issues with the program is that it was poorly planned and executed. The government did not do its due diligence in verifying the identities and backgrounds of the beneficiaries. Another issue is that the program was marred by mismanagement and insincerity, which led to the killing of militant leaders. Mr Terwase Agwaza Alias Ghana by security operatives. This scenario worsens the amnesty initiative. This has undermined the credibility of the program and eroded the trust of people in the program. In my investigation, I have also found that the program has been politicised, with government officials using it to settle political scores and campaign to win elections. This has further undermined the credibility of the program and created more problems than it has solved. In conclusion, the amnesty program in Benue State has been a failure. The government needs to go back to the drawing board and come up with a more comprehensive and sustainable solution to the security challenges in the state. This includes addressing the root causes of youth restiveness and ensuring transparency and accountability in the management of the program (Source, KII, November 2023).

A 50-year-old politician from Oturkpo Local Government Area, Benue South zone, Mr Raph Igoche says:

> The amnesty program in Benue State has faced significant challenges, and it's essential we acknowledge these shortcomings. As a politician, I believe it's crucial to learn from our mistakes and work towards creating a more effective and sustainable solution to address the security challenges in our state. We need to re-visit the program and adopt a multi-faceted approach by involving all relevant stakeholders in the Benue. I believe it's essential to involve local communities in the planning and implementation of the program (Source, KII, November 2023).

Also, a 42-year-old woman leader from Oju Local Government Area, Mrs Helen Otachi, gave her assessment on the amnesty program:

> As a mother, it's heartbreaking to see our children involved in militant activities. When the amnesty program was introduced, I thought it was a great opportunity for our children to lay down their arms and start anew. But unfortunately, the program has not been well-managed. Many of our children who participated in the program were not provided with the necessary support and resources to reintegrate into society. They were not given skills training, education, or economic empowerment, and as a result, many of them have returned to their former militant activities. As a mother, I want to see our children living in peace and prosperity. I want to see them have access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. I want to see them contributing positively to our community and building a brighter future for themselves and their families. I urge the government to revisit the amnesty program and address its shortcomings. Our children deserve a better future, and it's our collective responsibility to ensure that they receive the support and resources they need to thrive (Source, KII, November, 2023).

Data Presentation of secondary data

Data presentation was done using Crime Statistics from Nigeria Police, Benue State Command.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of crime for the number of persons arrested for various crimes in Benue 2013-2017 from Nigeria Police Force, Benue State Command table as shown below

S/N	Offence	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total	Mean	Var.	STD.
1.	Murder/Culpable homicide	110	130	45	87	51	**424**	84.60	1352.300	36.774
2.	Mischief by fire	212	216	-	216	155	**583**	159.80	8650.200	93.006
3.	Suicide	-	-	-	-	-	-	**0**	**0**	**0**
4.	Grievous Hurt/wound	161	261	-	244	240	**906**	181.20	11752.700	108.410
5.	Assault/Criminal force	208	207	-	241	205	**858**	172.20	9488.700	97.410
6.	Child Stealing	-	-	-	-	-	-	**0**	**0**	**0**
7.	Slave Dealing	-	-	-	-	-	-			
8.	Rape and indecent Assault	6	7	-	21	15	**49**	9.80	67.700	8.228

| No.	Crime									
9.	Demand with Menace	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0
10.	Kidnapping/Abduction	-	1	25	36	25	**87**	17.40	258.300	16.072
11.	Armed Robbery	146	166	105	136	81	**634**	126.80	1140.700	33.774
12.	Theft and other Stealing	231	251	-	249	286	**1017**	199.80	13141.700	114.637
13.	Burglary/Criminal Trespass	106	206	-	206	132	**650**	130.00	7258.000	85.194
14.	House Breaking	83	97	-	174	56	**410**	82.00	4022.500	63.423
15.	Store Breaking	-	-	-	-	20	**20**	4.00	80.000	8.944
16.	False Pretence/Cheating	-	-	-	-	92	**92**	18.40	1692.800	41.144
17.	Unlawful Possession	137	127	-	326	168	**758**	151.60	13621.300	116.710
18.	Breach of Public Peace	-	--	-	-	28	**28**	5.60	156.800	12.522
19.	Receiving Stolen Property	49	30	-	-	20	**99**	19.80	435.200	20.861
20.	Escape from Lawful Custody	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0
21.	Terrorism	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0
22.	Offence against traffic Act	-	137	-	158	93	**388**	77.60	5568.300	74.621
23.	Communal Clashes	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0
24.	Cattle Rustling	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0
25.	Crime General	-	-	1664	-	--	**1664**	332.80	553779.200	744.163
26.	**Total**	**1449**	**1836**	**1839**	**2094**	**1667**	**83709**			

Source: Authors computation, May, 2023

Table 1.2: Summary Table of Pearson Product Moment Correlation showing Relationship Amnesty Programme and Crime Reduction in Benue State, North Central Nigeria.

Variables	r	Sig	N	Mean	SD
Amnesty Programme			8	1.50	.53
	-1.000**	.000			
Crime Reduction			8	1.50	.53

*Key: * *= P<.01*

Histogram showing general crimes rise in Benue State North Central Nigeria within the study period below:
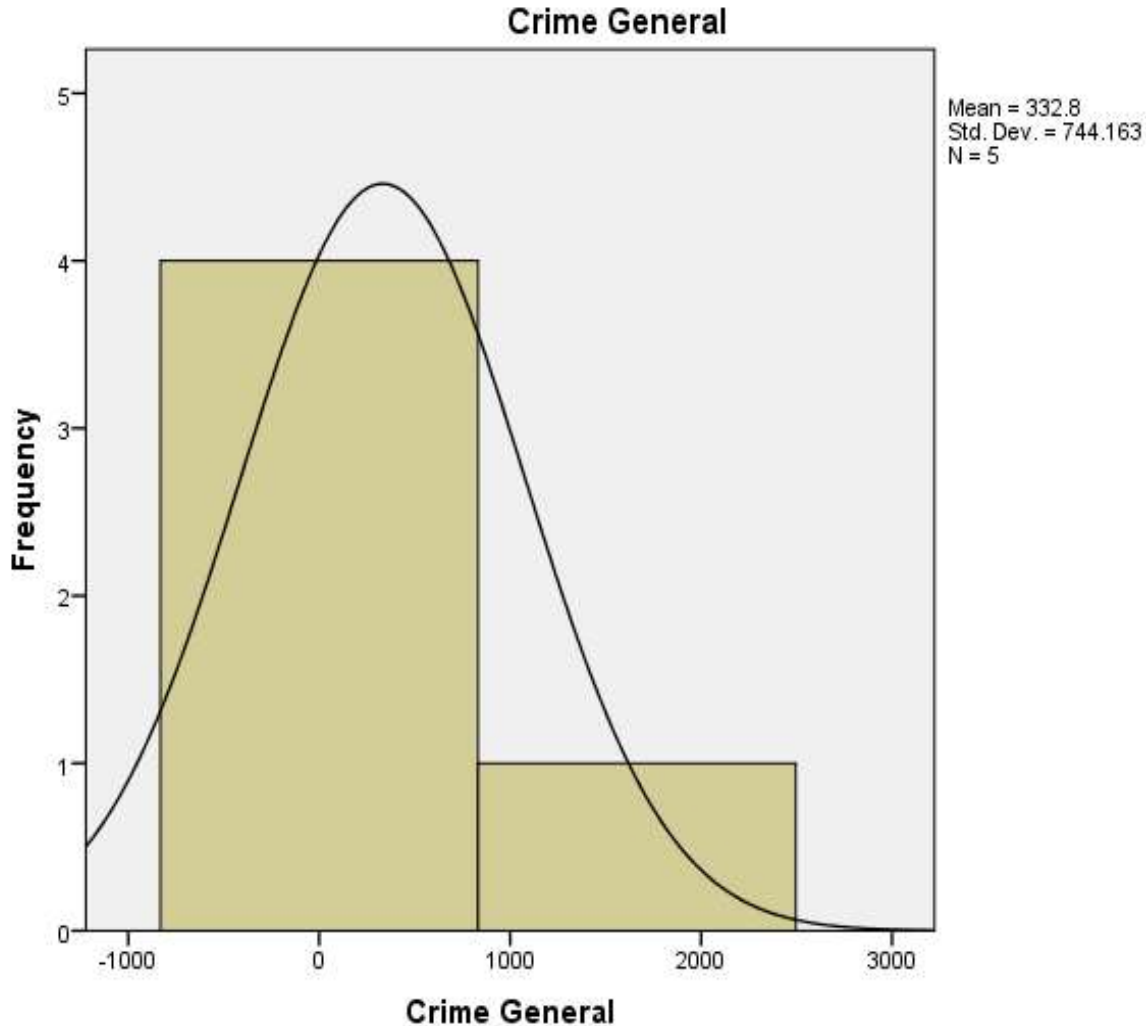
DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The study shows that crime generally in Benue State, North Central Nigeria during the study period was higher with a mean of 332.80. The highest criminal cases occurred in the form of theft and other stealing 199.80, grievous hurt/wound 181.20, assault/criminal force 172.20, mischief by fire 159.80, unlawful possession 151.60, burglary/criminal trespass 130.00 and armed robbery 126.80. Their variations around the means are 553779.200 for general crime, 13141.700 theft and other stealing 13141.700 for grievous hurt/wound, 9488.700 assault/criminal force, 8650.200 mischief by fire, 13621.300.4 unlawful possession, 7258.000 burglary/criminal trespass and 1140.700 for armed robbery respectively. This shows that even though they were highly committed within the study period, the rate of the crimes committed varied from year to year, especially during the pre

and post-amnesty periods, as shown in Table 1 in crime statistics from Benue State Command. The finding agrees with KII Mrs Nguseer Kwaghve from Logo Local Government Area, who says, "Many of our people now are displaced, killings and kidnappings, everywhere including we the women and children". Atanu (2019) states that there is a positive relationship between armed robbery, theft, rape, housebreaking, murder, grievous harm and wound (GHW) in Nigeria.

Next on the line of offences committed in order of mean were murder/culpable homicide with 84.60, housebreaking with 82.00, an offence against traffic with 77.60, receiving stolen property with 19.80, kidnapping/abduction with 17.40, breach of public peace with 5.60 with and rape and indecent assault with 9.80 with. Statistically, their variations within the period, as shown by standard deviation, are 1352.300, 4022.500, 5568.300, 435.200, 258.300, 156.800 and 67.700, which show higher variations. The findings go in line with the position of Smah and Smah (2023), who blamed violent crimes such as kidnapping/abduction, among others, in the West African region on socioeconomic factors like poverty and economic imbalances, insufficient security infrastructure and architecture, among others.

Other crimes such as suicide, child stealing, slave dealing, demand with menace, escape from lawful custody, terrorism, communal clashes and cattle rustling during the study period were rarely committed and, hence, recorded zero. Inferring from the crime statistics under review generally show crimes were highly committed, and those that featured prominently include theft and other stealing, grievous hurt/wound, assault/ criminal force, mischief by fire, unlawful possession, burglary/ criminal trespass and armed robbery. The research has also shown that the highest year of committing these crimes within the study period was in 2017, which is a post-amnesty era in Benue State, North Central Nigeria, with a reduction in 2013, which is the pre-amnesty period in the state. It could be inferred that the amnesty programme in the Benue State, North Central, has not yielded a positive result/ impact in reducing crimes in the state. This agrees with the submission of KII respondent Chief Samuel Atsar that "the amnesty program initiative was a good one. But the situation didn't last long, and they returned to their old ways of killings, stealing and kidnapping".

The result in Table 1.2 on Pearson product Moment Correlation showed a significant negative relationship between the amnesty programme and crime reduction in Benue State r (6) =1.000; P<.01. The stated null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was confirmed. This implies that the amnesty programme did not positively impact the people of Benue State in crime reduction; hence, within the amnesty period, crime has increased. This tallies with the views of KII respondent Mr Patrick Omora, that "the amnesty program in Benue State has been a failure. The government needs to go back to the drawing board and come up with a more comprehensive and sustainable solution".

Conclusion

The findings of the study concluded that the amnesty programme in Benue State has not been effectively managed, as evidenced in crime records in the state, which revealed that in spite of the amnesty, the prevalence of crimes like theft and other stealing, grievous hurt/wound, assault/ criminal force, mischief by fire, unlawful possession, burglary/ criminal trespass and armed

robbery, kidnapping/abduction etc. remained higher in Benue State. This agrees with Akpa and Igah (2023) that the amnesty programme has failed to reduce crime while similar studies by Smah and Smah (2023), Torruam and Abur (2014), Omotor (2012), Adebayo (2013) affirm that one of the greatest challenges facing the Nigeria economy is a crime which has maintained a rising trend in all forms over the years and in Benue State, North Central Nigeria as can be seen in the histogram above which required aggressive efforts of the government at all levels and criminal justice system, security agents to tackle head-on in Benue State, North Central Nigeria.

Recommendations

In view of the findings, the study recommended the following: that amnesty programme be re-visited with more sincerity anchored on sound reformative/rehabilitative centred initiatives to surrendered criminals in the Benue State, the study recommends the need for state coordinator of amnesty programme to be appointed to liaise with Federal Government and relevant stakeholders for proper implementation going forward, the need for proper training of youths in skills and sound technical/ science-based education, provision of scholarship, empowerment, entrepreneurship skills and job creation to youths, active community-based policing with hi-tech intelligence gathering, zero tolerance to thuggery by all political elites/politicians, strong synergy of community, traditional, religious and political leaders to exposing criminals in various communities of the state, strong political will to reduce rising poverty levels amongst Benue people as well as strong welfare programmes to all citizens as measures to reduce crime wave in the State.

Competing Interests

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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