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Crime Trends during the Covid-19 Lock Down In Nigeria

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Abstract: The Nigerian government introduced measures such as stay at home, maintaining social distance, limitations on gatherings and business operations and school closures. However, for the COVID-19 pandemic control measures to be meaningful, understanding crime trends during the lock down in Nigeria should be sought and incorporated into any control programme to deal with the emerging crisis. Therefore, this paper examines crime trends during the lock down in Nigeria. The paper calls for the Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS) as well as State Inland Revenue Services (SIRS) to delay tax collection for the worse-hit sectors including tourism, the airline industry, and hoteliers in order to enable them recover from the steep decline in demand.

Keywords: Covid-19, Control-measures, Crime, Government, Lockdown, Pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 also known as corona-virus is currently a huge blow on human relationships and threatening global peace and security (Eze *et al.*, 2021; Ajah, *et al.*, 2020; Ajah, 2019; & Ajah, 2018). The World Health Organization (WHO 2020), has described coronavirus as a large family of viruses that are known to cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) (Lawal 2020). This is a new disease that has not been previously identified in humans until it appeared in Wuhan, China in 2019 and has now travelled across all continents of the world infecting over 900,000 people and has currently killed over 40,000 people globally including children, young men, women and the elderly (Goodell 2020; Ajah *et al.*, 2021; & Ajah *et al.*, 2020).

Across Africa, populations broadly cooperated with the stringent restrictions that governments promptly imposed during March and early April to limit the outbreak, including border closures, curfews and lockdowns. However, there are signs that patience is starting to wear thin as COVID-19 tests already low levels of trust in governments, and adds another source of tension to interactions with authorities (Ajah *et al.*, 2020; Ajah & Onyegebu, 2019; Anthony *et al.*, 2021; & Areh *et al.*, 2020). According to Ashby (2020), most countries, with the notable exception of South Africa, have tried to limit the impact of restrictions on those reliant on earning a daily income, recognising the trade-off between protecting public health and social stability. In Nigeria, markets were allowed to remain open with

reduced hours during lockdown. In Congo (DRC), the authorities opted to only shut down the wealthiest district of the capital Kinshasa rather than low-income neighbourhoods. Most governments also relaxed lockdowns from the end of April, recognising that the policy was economically untenable. Ghana was among the first countries to lift a three-week stay-at-home order in Accra and Kumasi amid signs cooperation was beginning to decline. Faced with a growing popular backlash, several majority-Muslim countries such as Niger or Burkina Faso re-opened mosques during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan (Ugwuoken *et al.*, 2019; & Nnam *et al.*, 2021).

However, restrictions to travel between the capital and other regions, or night-time curfews persist in many countries, and their enforcement has in many places exacerbated already tense relations between security forces and populations. Incidents of heavy-handed behaviour by security forces have driven criticism in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa. Meanwhile, even countries with historically more positive relations between police and populations, such as Senegal, have seen reports of abuses. Police are reportedly using checkpoints established to enforce movement restrictions as an opportunity to request bribes. Data collected at checkpoints in West African countries showed that illegal taxation had jumped by 50% (Bump 2020; & Nnamani *et al.*, 2021).

Nigeria reacted swiftly and imposed stringent restrictions, including closing airports and locking down the capital Abuja and commercial capital Lagos. Although these have now been eased, various curfews remain in place including state-wide restrictions

(Ugwuoke *et al.*, 2021). Olasunkanmi (2020), asserted that these measures have had significant economic impacts, particularly on daily wage earners, who make up a majority of the population. Government interventions have not been sufficient to mitigate the loss of income, leading to an initial spike in crime and unrest in affected states.

For example, some parts of Lagos and other cities in the country have witnessed some form of burglary attacks by hoodlums and organized criminals since the wake of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and subsequent lockdown following states and federal government directives. Some residents of Lagos particularly have seen hoodlums called 'One million boys' break into their shops while they are at home observing the lockdown, while some others have been attacked in their homes, and their personal belonging carted away also during this period. Traffic robbers, catch-in-the-air robbery gangs and robbers who attack customers coming from banks also have their own share of regrets, following the forced break-in operation, owing to the lockdown. In addition, armed robbers and miscreants broke into homes to rob innocent citizens of their valuables in the wake of the lockdown order, took a greater dimension as people suspected to be armed robbers, numbering at least 20 invaded areas such as: Alakuko, Ijaiye, Meiran, Iju-Ishaga, Fagbenro Street, Kola, all in Lagos suburb (Olasunkanmi 2020).

Also, information revealed that the rate of shop breaking at the Idumota, Balogun, Ogbete Enugu, Ariara Market in Aba, Onitsha main market among others have dropped, apparently due to the restriction of both human and vehicular movement which deprive burglars of having any means to transport stolen goods. In addition, pickpockets have been rendered useless because their prey have been forced to remain indoors, cult clashes and killings seem to have been put on hold this period. This is because everyone, with the exception of those on essential duty, have been compelled to stay at home, including criminal elements (Usman, 2020).

However, there are fears and insinuation that crime rate is likely to resurface, as criminal element could devise new means of carrying out their nefarious activities. The signal to this, is evident in some text messages and email, purportedly from reputable companies and financial institutions, where Nigerians were requested to fill some forms, in order to benefit from one form of government's gesture or the other, towards ameliorating the sufferings of Nigerians, while at home. Also, these criminally-minded individuals who are in possession of bank accounts and telephone numbers of account holders, contact these unsuspecting bank customers, requesting for some information that would enable them hack into their accounts. Usually in this case, these fraudsters would pose as bank officials who intend to pay in money purportedly from the Federal Government. Already, there are online posts, where

people are requested to provide information, in order to benefit from the Central Bank of Nigeria, CBN N50 billion loan scheme. In some parts of Igando and other suburbs, residents received letters, where a robbery gang informed them to be ready for their imminent visit. In fear, some of these residents have fled their abodes while others, are praying that the robbers' convenient day should never come.

Furthermore, Nigerian government have implemented measures to address the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The measures include maintaining social distance, limitations on gatherings and business operations, stay at home and school closures. Lockdown may have an impact on the volume and distribution of crime. Crimes such as residential burglary may decrease as a byproduct of increased guardianship over personal space and property. Crimes such as domestic violence may increase because of extended periods of contact between potential offenders and victims. In addition, for COVID-19 pandemic control measures to be meaningful understanding crime trends during the lock down in Nigeria should be sought and incorporated into any control programme to deal with the evolving crisis

Conceptualising Covid-19 Pandemic

Coronavirus, or the disease it causes 'COVID-19', originated from the Wuhan Province of China in December 2019. It began spreading rapidly in China and to other parts of the world through the movement of people in early 2020. On Wednesday 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared covid-19 a global pandemic (Farrell and Tilley 2020). The spread of COVID-19 affected economic activities in China, and in February, the Chinese economy came to a halt. China is a major exporter of commodities to African countries, and the economic contraction in China is expected to have spillover consequences for African countries through the negative impact on African businesses that rely heavily on China for the supply of primary and intermediate raw materials. The coronavirus crisis is affecting many African countries, and the number of confirmed cases has been rising rapidly with a particularly severe situation in South Africa, Egypt, Nigeria, Algeria, Morocco and Cameroon (BBC 2020c).

The severe social effect of the coronavirus crisis was felt through the imposition of movement restrictions in many African countries. Some restrictive measures that were imposed to control the spread of coronavirus include: restricting non-essential activities, closing schools and universities, encouraging people to stay home, the lockdown of entire cities, requiring essential businesses to run skeletal operations and employees should work from home. These measures inevitably affected economic activities in African countries, and policy makers had to use economic policies, both fiscal and monetary policies, to mitigate the negative effect on the economy. Many African countries deployed the national budget and Central bank's support in developing

policies to mitigate the health and economic crises. Generally, the policy response in several African countries is country-specific because African countries are not closely intertwined.

Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

On Feb 27, 2020, the first official case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was announced. The patient was an Italian citizen, who had recently arrived in Lagos from Europe and who, a few days later, tested positive for the disease. In Ogun state, a neighbouring state to Lagos, another patient was identified and was discovered to have been in contact with the first patient. Olasunkanmi (2020) affirmed that since then, the situation has developed with more cases occurring, regardless of measures initiated by the state and federal government to combat the virus and return to normalcy. As of April 22, there were 873 confirmed cases, 197 recoveries, and 28 deaths. WHO has advised on several methods to help prevent spread of the virus and to save health systems across the world from a complete collapse, eg, health washing, social distancing, and staying at home. However, Nigeria's health system before the pandemic was nearly non-existent (Olasunkanmi 2020). In most of the cities', health systems are completely dilapidated as they have not received adequate attention, and some government officials have contributed to health system collapse by encouraging medical tourism. The federal government of Nigeria enforced an initial 2-week lockdown on March 30, 2020, for three of 36 states (Lagos, Ogun, and Abuja) and, on April 13, extended it another 2 weeks (Usman 2020). Shortly after the order was announced by the President, Muhammadu Buhari, there was uproar among the citizens due to a myriad of concerns. Nigeria, in 2018, was announced by the World Poverty Clock to be the poverty capital of the world, with over 40% of its citizens living below the poverty line. Therefore, a large proportion of the population, especially in the commercial hub of Lagos, live on daily income with no savings to act as a financial buffer during the lockdown.

Buhari promised the citizens some palliative measures, which include disbursing of funds and food items to those most affected. But the reality on the ground is a far cry from the promises made; only a small proportion of the population attest to receiving any support. A large number of citizens have disobeyed the lockdown order in the hope of making sales or trying to earn money through other services, but they were apprehended by the police. The combined effort of the police and the military to enforce the lockdown may have caused more deaths than the infection itself. As well as the other negative outcomes attributed to the lockdown, Lagos has seen a huge spike in armed robberies (BBC 2020b).

One has to question whether these aforementioned negative effects override the reasons for the lockdown in the first place: to flatten the curve of

infections. According to news from other countries in Africa, the situation in Lagos is almost a perfect mirror of the situation across the whole continent, with the exception of a few countries (eg, Rwanda), where governments have been able to enact effective solutions to the pandemic and provide palliative measures.

There are some positives to consider; the private sector, churches, and non-governmental organisations have provided a lot of support to communities across Lagos and the rest of Nigeria. They have facilitated countless distributions of food items to some of the most deprived areas of Lagos. Also, there is hope that the health sector will finally receive the attention it needs from the government in response to the lessons learned from this pandemic. Despite the socioeconomic differences seen across Nigerian communities, there has been a sense of togetherness during this time. Irrespective of these positive aspects of COVID-19 and of lockdown, fears remain that the number of deaths as a result of lockdown measures will be greater than those due to infection. The Nigerian government must aim to protect its citizens and provide them with the necessary commodities or funds to help mitigate the consequences of this pandemic

Crime trends during the lock down in Nigeria

Life under lockdown is not only changing how people live, but also how crime occurs. The good news is that this fundamental change will see certain crimes decrease – some areas have already seen recorded crime drop. But there are worrying signs that offences like domestic violence and online fraud are likely to surge and that new offences.

The pandemic of COVID-19 and the imposed lockdown, has led to more people to be confined at home with many more hours to spend online each day and increasingly relying on the Internet to access services, they normally obtain offline. The dangers of cyber-crime have been there for many years, but the increase in the percentage of the population connected to the Internet and the time spent online, combined with the sense of confinement and the anxiety and fear generated from the lockdown, have provided more opportunities for cybercriminals to take advantage of the situation and make more money or create disruption. It is important to note that some more vulnerable segments of the population, such as children need to spend more time online for services such as schooling. This seismic change in how we live our lives and use the Internet has prompted a proliferation of e-crimes.

Common cybercrime techniques, such as phishing, have seen a spike. Phishing is the fraudulent practice of inducing individuals to reveal personal information, such as passwords and credit card numbers through fake websites or emails. New data gathered by Google and analyzed by Atlas VPN, a virtual private network (VPN) service provider, is shedding more light

on the scope of this. According to the report, in January, Google registered 149k active phishing websites. In February, that number nearly doubled to 293k. In March, though, that number had increased to 522k - a 350% increase since January (Halford, Dixon, Farrell, Malleson and Tilley 2020).

Countries all across the globe are reporting an increase in cybercrime during the pandemic. For instance, in Italy, the Polizia Postale, which is the law enforcement branch in charge of the cybercrimes, reported several kinds of scams and frauds that came in the form of ads, emails, fake websites, but also through phone calls and messages. Cybercriminals are capitalizing on the anxieties and fears triggered by the pandemic, using malware, such as viruses, worms, trojan horses, ransomware and spyware, to invade, damage, steal or cancel personal data on personal computers. Stolen data can then be used for different malicious purposes, including accessing bank accounts and blackmailing the victims in exchange of ransoms. A "Corona anti-virus" software has also been flagged to the Italian law enforcement authorities. The application, BlackNet Rat, promises to protect the user's device from coronavirus, but instead, it breaches the computer's security and takes control of the computer, effectively enabling the criminal to remotely control it (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-cyber-corporations/hacking-against-corporations-surges-as-workers-take-computers-home-idUSKBN21Z0Y6>).

A sharp surge of fake or inappropriate drugs and medical equipment sold at a very high price to allegedly cure the Coronavirus was recorded on an increasing number of websites well-designed by criminals. In connection to this, an increase in the trafficking of counterfeit products sponsored through emails and website, including hygiene items and facial masks, was recorded. Also, the Italian Police reported that in some cases legitimate crowd-funding campaigns to collect money in support of health institutions, under huge pressure during the past weeks, were deviated to alternative criminal pockets through fake websites.

Another common scam taking place on the web in this time of lockdown are promises of fake investment opportunities. This phenomenon has gone global and both INTERPOL and the United Nations have warned of specific online frauds such as this linked to the COVID-19. In the United Kingdom, an increase in scams and attacks targeting businesses has also been witnessed. For instance, emails pretending to relate to the government's new grant scheme have stolen money or downloaded ransomware. Financially motivated hackers have in fact been profiting from such feelings of uncertainty to target businesses and specifically retool existing malicious programs, such as ransomware -which is a type of malicious program used by hackers to take control of files in an infected system - and then demand large

payments to recover them For example, companies such as Cognizant, an information technology service provider, reported that it was hit by a "Maze" ransomware cyberattack, which is a specific attack involving hackers threatening to release information on the internet if the target company fails to pay (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-cyber-corporations/hacking-against-corporations-surges-as-workers-take-computers-home-idUSKBN21Z0Y6>)

On a similar note, with regard to attacks against other key organizations and infrastructure actively dealing with the virus response, INTERPOL's Cybercrime Threat Response Team has also warned of cybercriminals using ransomware to hold hospitals and medical services digitally hostage, preventing them from accessing vital files and systems until a ransom is paid. Several countries have registered cyber-attacks from unknown hackers at the expense of national health institutions, extremely critical infrastructures during the time of a pandemic. In Italy, on 1st April, a cyber-attack was conducted against the Spallanzani Hospital a center of excellence in the research on the coronavirus. A week earlier, also the Spanish Police has issued a warning that the entire computer system of Spain's hospitals was being targeted in a cyber-attack by a ransomware that targets enterprise and government agencies. During the same week, also the World Health Organization (WHO) has been attacked (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-cyber-corporations/hacking-against-corporations-surges-as-workers-take-computers-home-idUSKBN21Z0Y6>).

At the same time, the lockdown has also significantly increased concerns about vulnerable persons online. While children, for instance, are greatly benefiting from e-schooling, they are equally more exposed to threats coming from the internet: file-sharing abuse, inappropriate content, and the grooming of children for sexual purposes are some of the dangers their parents should be aware of in these challenging times. The elderly, who usually rely on offline shopping and have now to purchase what they need from the internet, equally find themselves more exposed to cybercrime (Ashby, 2020).

Another side-effect of the protracted lockdown has been a growing demand for pornography. The industry has seen an increase in the number of users, but also concerns are being raised about vulnerable categories being pushed into exploitation, including drug addicts and children trafficked by families in need. Although the risk of being attacked will remain, some mitigation measures may help users and employers. For the users, it is recommended to be very vigilant about phishing emails and websites, practice good cyber hygiene, use only trusted wi-fi networks and consider adopting a password manager to help to avoid using the same password for multiple websites. It is also important

to use double channels of communications with counterparts before transferring sensitive data or downloading a file from an email that may contain malware. Sending an SMS, a WhatsApp message or making a quick call to make sure that the sender is a colleague or friend can prevent a cyber-attack. Rather than immediately clicking links in emails, it is advisable to look for information from trusted websites. Regarding the collective conference calls, which are being used more frequently, it is important to be mindful of sharing screens or sending screenshots that may contain sensitive information. Employers can, among other things, make sure a secure remote access to the organization's files is set up, provide the right security capabilities and ask employees to avoid working with their personal computers. Finally, it is recommendable that they provide employees with appropriate courses to enhance their cyber-security knowledge (<https://hbr.org/2020/03/will-coronavirus-lead-to-more-cyber-attacks>)

Variations in the onset of change by crime type correspond largely with the timeline of change relating to covid-19 from 11 March onwards. The timing of the onset of decline in the 'all crime' category coincided with the WHO announcement of a 'global pandemic' on 11 March. Theft, contributes more to the 'all crime' category. From 16 March, as social distancing was more formally introduced, and non-essential travel reduced, the decline in mobility at retail and recreation areas, workplace areas and transit stations began (if slowly), and so too did the declines in assaults. The closure of bars, restaurants, and gyms from 20 March largely coincides with the onset of declines in criminal damage and public disorder.

Shoplifting had declined dramatically by the first week of lockdown. Most retail (non-grocery) shops and stores were closed at lockdown, dramatically reducing shoplifting opportunities. Supermarkets and other stores that remained open promoted social distancing, which may have discouraged shoplifting. It is possible that stores that remained open experienced an increase in shoplifting. However, if they did, then it was at most a small-fraction of total potential crime displacement, consistent with other findings (Johnson, 2014).

Non-shoplifting other thefts declined earlier than shoplifting. By one week after lockdown, other thefts had declined around half, that is, extensively but not as much as shoplifting. The overall decline fits with expectation that fewer potential victims of theft were available in retail and recreation areas, as well as on public transport and at workplaces where mobility had declined. The proportionally greater reduction in shoplifting than other theft is explained by the closure of almost all stores where shoplifting could take place, whereas a greater proportion of opportunities for other thefts remained elsewhere.

Recorded burglary dwelling declined a quarter by the first week of lockdown. By any normal measure this was a large decline. It is likely explained by increased home guardianship and surveillance (including of neighbours) as residents stayed home. However, the decline is less than that in shoplifting and arguably not as extensive as might have been expected. The mobility elasticity of burglary, being unitary, sheds light on this issue. For instance, while burglary was highly responsive to change in residential area movement, that movement only increased 25 percent. If guardianship and surveillance increased proportionally with movement then perhaps the 25 percent decline in burglary is readily explained.

The one quarter reduction in burglary of non-dwellings also fits with the explanation for burglary dwelling. While many commercial premises would be closed and locked, they would not benefit from the guardianship of increased occupancy (except natural surveillance from those overlooking such premises). Decreased movement of offenders might have played a greater role, but further research is needed to investigate that possibility further.

The lockdown measures have increased the risk of children becoming victims of domestic violence, bullying and other forms of abuse. Many countries are reporting sharp rises in domestic violence. BBC (2020c) asserted that calls to domestic violence hotlines have increased dramatically globally. There has been a string of humiliating and degrading punishments meted out to children and young people at home. Children are shedding silent tears while bearing the effects of aggressive behaviour patterns from adults with whom they are locked down at home.

The reports of domestic violence in Nigeria are following a similar trend to elsewhere in the world. Since various versions of lockdown were put in place across the country on 30 March, reported cases of gender-based violence have substantially risen. In March and April, respectively, for 23 out of 36 states in Nigeria in which data are available shows a monthly increase of 149% in reports of gender-based violence following the introduction of lockdowns at the end of March (BBC 2020c). Moreover, breaking down the data by state lines, the effect of lockdowns becomes even more apparent.. Looking at the three states (Lagos state, Ogun state, and the Federal Capital Territory) placed under full lockdown by the Federal Government, the increase in reports of domestic violence cases in April was even more profound. In these three states, the number of cases rose 60 in March to 238 in April, an increase of 297%. By contrast, in Benue, Ebonyi, and Cross River states, which were placed under less stringent lockdowns by their respective local governments, the increase in cases was only 53% between March and April. In Ebonyi state, the

number of cases decreased from March to April (International Growth Centre 2020).

CONCLUSION

Most governments around the world including Nigeria restricted the movement of people through some combination of social distancing and lockdown, as part of efforts to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. This produced a range of unintended consequences, including upsurge of crime. We therefor recommend for the Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS) as well as State Inland Revenue Services (SIRS) to waive payments on personal and corporate income tax for the second quarter of 2020, considering that the shock has affected the income and profits of households and businesses. Furthermore, FIRS and SIRS should delay tax collection for the worse-hit sectors including tourism, the airline industry, and hoteliers in order to enable them recover from the steep decline in demand.

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