



Article

Socio-economic Disparity and Lone Wolf Terrorism in the United States of America and Europe: Implications for Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated how socioeconomic disparity fuels grievances exploited by Lonewolf terrorists. Lonewolf terrorism in the United States of America and Europe has been found to be fuelled by socio-economic factors. How this may contribute to the susceptibility of the Nigerian state was the major concern of this study, which adopted a qualitative historical research design in its investigation. Frustration-aggression theory served as a framework for analysis. The study found that socioeconomic exclusion is a key factor that fuels lone wolf terrorism in the United States and Europe. It was also found out that Nigeria's political and economic landscape creates a breeding ground for lone wolf terrorism through economic marginalisation, high unemployment, and a stark gap between aspirations and reality, which has left a majority of Nigerians, especially her youths, frustrated and filled with resentment. The study therefore recommended, among other things, that combating corruption, promoting transparency, and prioritising the well-being of citizens can assist in eliminating lone wolf terrorism in the country.

Keywords:

Lonewolf, Terrorism, Socioeconomic disparity, Grievance, Marginalization.

Introduction

Terrorism has been a persistent challenge throughout human history, and its modern manifestation rooted in the perplexing phenomenon of lone-wolf terrorism. Unlike traditional terrorist groups, lone wolves operate independently, making them particularly difficult to detect by law enforcement and intelligence agents. These individuals, often acting out of personal grievances or ideological motivations, carry out attacks without direct command or coordination from established terrorist organizations. Of course, the cornerstone of terrorism is a sense of grievance, and perceived injustice (Borum, 2003; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). This can occasionally occur as a result of having experienced injustice firsthand or having seen injustice done to others. When a grievance is powerful enough, it can inspire a desire for justice and retaliation against the people who are thought to be behind the injustice.

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According to scholars, terror attacks by lone wolves are products of one or more of the following variables: criminal history, tendency to mix personal frustrations with extremist ideologies and externalize blame and their problems on others (Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014; Nesser, 2012; Spaaij, 2012). Others are depression, grievance, personal crises (e.g., loss of job, financial problems, stress), and mental and social disorder (Nesser, 2012; Spaaij, 2012; Gill et al., 2014; Nesser, 2012). Therefore, it is not only ideology that drives lone-wolf terrorism but also a combination of multiple factors, such as ideology, anger, or depression. Trends in lone wolf terrorism from 1940 through 2000 revealed that firearms and homemade bombs were used in perpetrating attacks while trends in lone wolf terrorism from 2001 through 2013 showed that lone wolf terrorists did not only use firearms and bombs in carrying out attacks but also involved the use of biological weapons, knives, and construction equipment (Boaz, 2021). However, lone-wolf terrorists have been known to make more use of firearms than any other weapon in carrying out attacks.

In recent times in Nigeria, a new spate of terrorism that cannot be linked to any particular known organization has been witnessed. They now carry firearms to carry out acts of terrorism. Popular among the means of attack by the terrorists was the use of firearms to engage in a shoot-and-run. For instance, there are a growing number of cases of attacks targeted at uniformed police and military officers, political leaders, and even schools. Recent reports on school shootings in Nigeria revealed that factors that motivated the individuals who committed school shootings include various forms of abuse, family dysfunction, mental illness, or other psychological problems. Other sources of motivation for shooters also include depression, suicidal thoughts, a feeling of persecution and rejection, retaliation against bullying or romantic rejection, or a desire for attention or recognition (World Population Review, 2022).

For instance, a gunman killed 12 worshippers and injured 18 others in an early morning attack on St. Philip's Catholic Church, Ozubulu, in Anambra State, south-east Nigeria put the year. Lone gunmen from the area who, after shooting at their intended victims, went on to indiscriminately shoot and harm more worshippers carried out the attack, according to the Anambra State Commissioner of Police, Garba Umar. Various forms of terrorism believe in changing the status quo with force.

The majority of Nigerians suffer needlessly, while a few of the ruling class maintain their wealth primarily through dishonest and illegal means. Furthermore, these elites take very little or no action to raise the standard of living for the populace. Instead, because of their privileged position in society, they continue to uphold and defend the status quo, which gives them an unfair advantage over the populace, even with the state's apparatus of force. Consequently, they isolate, and alienate the greater populace via unfavourable economic policies, like the ones that are accountable for the depressing socioeconomic conditions throughout the nation, as demonstrated by the analysis that came before it. Besides other issues like simple access to small arms and light weapons, the appalling socioeconomic status at the local level is to blame (Ojochenemi, 2013). Going by the abysmal socioeconomic disparity in the land and its link to terrorism, this study set out to investigate socioeconomic disparity as a breeding ground for lone-wolf terrorism, with a focus on the Nigerian State.

Research questions

The following questions were posed to guide the study:

1. What are the socioeconomic factors that account for lone-wolf terrorism in the United States of America and European nations?
2. How does socioeconomic disparity contribute to the increased susceptibility of the Nigerian state to lone wolf terrorism?

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this paper is to examine how socioeconomic disparity is exploited by lone-wolf terrorists. In particular, the study:

1. Analysed key socio-economic factors that account for lone-wolf terrorism in the United States of America and European nations; and
2. Analysed how socioeconomic disparity can contribute to the increased susceptibility of the Nigerian state to lone-wolf terrorism.

Literature review

Socioeconomic Factors that Create Breeding Ground for Lone-Wolf Terrorism in the United States of America and Europe

Socioeconomic disparity functions as a fertile ground for lone-wolf terrorism by creating a set of vulnerabilities that extremist groups can exploit, and the mechanisms through which this occurs are multifaceted. With marginalized populations, for example, the growing gap between income levels and the lack of promising economic opportunities sows the seeds of frustration and resentment. As a result, people who are struggling financially may believe that they are victims of an unfair socioeconomic system, which leaves them vulnerable to radical ideologies that advocate using violence to achieve their goals (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Extremist organizations can readily take advantage of this volatile mixture of rage and despair that is produced by the feeling that the system has wronged them by providing a sense of purpose and belonging that fills the void left by social isolation (Kruglanski et al., 2014; McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008). These groups often provide a community that fosters a shared identity and purpose, potentially leading to a justification of violence against those seen as responsible for their marginalization.

Constrained social mobility and limited access to essential resources are also other factors that can further exacerbate these negative emotions. Feeling excluded and powerless, lone actors may perceive themselves as disenfranchised within a system skewed against their interests. Terrorism becomes a way to assert agency and challenge perceived systemic injustices a desperate attempt to be heard in a system they feel has ignored them (Horgan, 2019).

Furthermore, the widely held belief that hard work and perseverance will always result in success is becoming less and less accepted in societies where there is extreme inequality, which breeds pessimism. Extremist organizations can take advantage of people's desperation when they believe that there are no other options except violence, and they can persuade people that using violence is a justifiable means of bringing about change (Berkowitz, 2003).

Additionally, economic adversity further exacerbates this vulnerability to online radicalization, as individuals grappling with isolation and disenfranchisement are prime targets for extremist organizations. Leveraging the expansive reach of the internet, these groups propagate their narratives and adeptly groom susceptible recruits, with feelings of alienation amplifying receptivity to extremist propaganda, making them more likely to fall prey to online radicalization efforts (Miaotou et al., 2020). The combination of economic hardship and social exclusion creates a perfect storm, making individuals more susceptible to extremist narratives that can lead to violence.

Although it is difficult to link any single case to socioeconomic disparity alone, some lone-wolf attacks raise questions about the role of economic hardship, such as the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, which is often cited as a possible example where the perpetrator's financial struggles and social isolation may have been contributing factors (Lived Experience Research Team, 2018). According to Hafez and Mullins (2015), many Muslim communities in Europe experience isolation and discrimination, and this can contribute to

higher levels of criminality. These include, among others, poor socioeconomic status resulting from unemployment rates that are consistently higher than the national average (Alfaro-Gonzalez et al., 2015).

Other studies confirm an association between marginal discrimination and extremism. One of the studies involving over 2,500 Muslims residing in Europe and the US found that perceived discrimination towards Muslims was significantly associated with the belief that suicide bombing is justified (Victoroff, Adelman, & Matthew, 2012). Another study covering over 172 countries found a strong link between economic discrimination against minority groups and an increased risk of terrorism (Piazza, 2011).

These factors are not competing alternatives; rather, they are each part of the 'radicalization puzzle' (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). These are also not pure types. There is overlap among them, for example, between political grievances, ideology, and psychological factors. Political grievances can be a core tenet of an extremist ideology, and an individual may feel anger or frustration over these, leading them to violent action (McCauley & Maskalenko, 2008).

As was previously mentioned, a sense of grievance or perceived injustice is the foundation of terrorism (Borum, 2003; McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008). This can occasionally result from having experienced injustice firsthand or from witnessing injustice committed against others. When a grievance is strong enough, it can inspire a desire for justice and retaliation against the people who are thought to be behind the injustice. Ultimately, the sense of duty to act is what sets a potential Lone Wolf terrorist apart from all the other people who espouse violent ideology.

Socioeconomic Disparity as a Determinant to the Increased Susceptibility of the Nigerian State to Lone-Wolf Terrorism

There is a common correlation between social, economic, political, and demographic factors and terrorist attacks (Newman, 2006). Terrorism is believed to stem from multiple factors, such as poverty, unemployment, population growth, inequality, and political grievances. Understanding these components is necessary to develop effective counterterrorism strategies (Ojochenemi, 2013).

Björgo (2005) divides the reasons behind terrorism into four groups:

- **Structural Causes:** These are long-term factors like social inequality, rapid modernization, and weak governments. They create frustration and a sense of powerlessness among the population.
- **Facilitators:** These factors make terrorism easier to carry out, such as advancements in communication and weaponry.
- **Motivational Causes:** These personal grievances inspire people to become terrorists. Extremist ideologies can play a role in shaping these motivations.
- **Trigger Causes:** These are specific events that spark a terrorist attack, such as a political assassination or failed peace talks.

Ojochenemi (2013) investigates the causes of terrorism in Nigeria, emphasizing poverty, political corruption, and socioeconomic factors. Research has indicated a connection between elevated levels of inequality and acts of terrorism (Lai, 2007). Growing frustration among Nigerians, especially in the neglected northern region, is thought to be the cause of Boko Haram's rise (Rogers, 2012; Hansen & Musa, 2013; Ogunrotifa, 2013).

According to Ake, cited in Ojochenemi (2013), Nigeria's political and economic structures have traditionally favoured a small elite, which has resulted in pervasive poverty and a feeling of disenfranchisement. This has fuelled resentment towards the government and created a breeding ground for violence. For example, political corruption is another major factor contributing to terrorism in Nigeria. The misappropriation of oil revenue by the ruling class has exacerbated poverty and social inequality

(Dudley, 1968). According to several scholars (Osoba, 1996; Obadina, 1999; Obayelu, 2007; Ogbeidi, 2012), this absence of responsibility stokes anger and encourages calling for violent change.

Corruption also hinders development by diverting resources away from social services and infrastructure projects. This further marginalizes most of the population and creates a sense of hopelessness (Forest, 2012). The vast wealth disparity between the rich and the poor is a stark reminder of the unfairness of the system.

Another important component associated with terrorism is the pervasive poverty in Nigeria. According to Gordon (2006) and Oshewolo (2010), poverty is more than just a lack of material resources; it is also a result of a lack of opportunities and a feeling of helplessness. This is reflected in the UNDP's Human Poverty Index, which takes into account aspects like access to necessities, healthcare, and education.

In Nigeria, poverty is still a major problem despite recent economic growth, particularly in rural areas (Witwack, 2013). This is partially because the nation depends heavily on oil revenue, which can be mismanaged. An analogy with Indonesia demonstrates how resource wealth, if improperly managed, can be a curse.

Most Nigerians can barely make ends meet, but a small minority benefit from corruption. This economic disparity, coupled with a sense of political exclusion, creates a breeding ground for violent extremism. The emergence of militant groups like Boko Haram and unknown gunmen who engaged in shoot-and-run, banditry, etc. is a symptom of this underlying frustration. These groups seek to change the status quo through violence.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the frustration-aggression theory as framework of analysis. The frustration-aggression hypothesis suggests a connection between thwarted goals and aggressive behaviour. When individuals experience blocked opportunities and a sense of powerlessness due to socioeconomic factors, frustration can set in (Whitley & Kite, 2009). This frustration, in turn, can motivate individuals to lash out aggressively. The theory also proposes that aggression can be displaced onto targets that are more vulnerable when the source of frustration is inaccessible or retaliation is deemed too risky (Dollard et al., 1939).

In the context of lone-wolf terrorism, this displacement becomes crucial. Socioeconomic disparity can leave individuals feeling powerless against the systemic forces causing their frustration. Lone-wolf attacks might then become a way to express this pent-up aggression, targeting symbols of authority or seemingly unrelated entities. The frustration-aggression hypothesis offers insights into the increase in susceptibility of lone-wolf terrorism in Nigeria, a country grappling with significant socioeconomic disparity. Nigerians facing limited opportunities, marginalization, and feelings of relative deprivation due to uneven development can become susceptible to radicalization (Igbini, Efebeh, & Clark, 2023). This theory suggests that such frustration might be a contributing factor in the radicalization process, potentially leading to lone-wolf attacks aimed not only at the government but also at softer targets.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative historical research design. This research design was used in this study because it enabled the researcher to examine the association between lone-wolf terrorism that took place in the United States of America and European nations on the account of the identified socioeconomic disparity. Data obtained from the past events was used to examine the Nigerian state in the context of her increased susceptibility to lone wolf terrorism. The purpose of historical research according to Špiláčková (2012) is to verify and explain the history of any area of human activities, subjects or events by means of scientific processes. Importantly, historical research enables one to search and identify the relationship of past happenings and their links with the present (Berg, 2012).

Results

Key Socioeconomic Factors that Create Breeding Ground for Lone-Wolf Terrorism in the United States of America and Europe

The results of the study indicate that socioeconomic marginalization and political grievances are positively correlated with lone-wolf terrorism, especially in the US and Europe (Kruglanski et al., 2014; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Taking a closer look at specific case studies provides further insight into this connection.

2011 Norway Attacks

Scholars such as Jungar and Barber (2015) suggest that Anders Breivik's sense of economic marginalization and societal alienation may have contributed to his radicalization, even though his right-wing extremism served as the primary driving force. Feelings of economic disenfranchisement could have fueled his resentment towards what he perceived as a decline in traditional Norwegian values.

2015 Paris Attacks

Cases involving foreign fighters returning from combat zones are complicated. Sageman (2017) research indicates that extreme narratives that offer a sense of purpose and belonging may appeal to individuals who are already experiencing socioeconomic challenges in their home countries, such as poverty, lack of opportunities, and feelings of being left behind. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that ISIS recruitment also emphasizes religious justifications and a twisted sense of global conflict.

2017 Oklahoma City Bombing and 2018 Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting

Political grievances, specifically anti-government and anti-immigrant sentiment, are the primary motivators behind these attacks (Alexander, 2019; Dwyer & Gast, 2019). Socioeconomic variables may be indirectly involved. According to Horgan (2019), financial difficulties can exacerbate feelings of annoyance and helplessness, which makes people more susceptible to extremist narratives that take advantage of these complaints.

Even though these case studies demonstrate the possible impact of socioeconomic marginalization, it is crucial to take into account their limitations. First, establishing a direct causal link between socioeconomic factors and lone-wolf terrorism is challenging. Second, these factors likely intertwine with other grievances and ideologies to shape an individual's decision to engage in violence.

How Socioeconomic Disparity Contributes to the Increased Susceptibility of the Nigerian State to Lone Wolf Terrorism

This section examines the political and economic factors that make Nigeria vulnerable to lone-wolf terrorism. Based on academic literature and data from interviews, the analysis investigates how marginalization, frustration, and injustice-related feelings can foster an environment that is conducive to lone wolf terrorism.

Poor Integration and Marginalization

Feelings of exclusion and alienation can arise when individuals or groups are not integrated into governance structures (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). The marginalization of the Southeast region is evident in the lack of representation and government projects, resulting in agitations and violence.

Resentment towards the political system is fuelled by perceptions of prejudice, exclusion, and underrepresentation in the government. This phenomenon is best illustrated by the real-life experiences of Nigerians, especially those in the Southeast and Niger Delta regions. This is emphasised by the Southeast's complaints about being left out of government initiatives and marginalised. Similar to this,

the Niger Delta's oil spills have deteriorated the environment, and when combined with what seems to be government indifference, this has led to feelings of injustice and abandonment.

Corruption and Lack of Accountability

Endemic corruption erodes public trust and creates a perception that the common good is not being served (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2016). When citizens feel the government prioritizes the interests of a select few, anger and frustration can fester. The absence of channels for redressing complaints contributes to a feeling of helplessness.

Poverty and Unemployment

People in Nigeria, especially the younger generation, are depressed by the country's economic circumstances, which are characterized by high unemployment and rising living expenses despite an abundance of natural resources. The concept of relative deprivation (Hamm & Spaaj, 2019), which holds that people perceive a discrepancy between their expectations and their actual circumstances, is consistent with this financial hardship. Their sense of deprivation may make them more open to narratives that glorify the use of violence to effect change. Once more, a decline in trust in respectable business prospects is reflected in the growth of cybercrime, commonly known as "Yahoo Yahoo". In similar vein, disenchantment with the status quo is indicated by the "Japa syndrome" in which young Nigerians migrate overseas in search of better opportunities.

Conclusion

Socioeconomic exclusion is a key factor that fuels lone-wolf terrorism in the United States and Europe. However, lone-wolf terrorism likely arises from a confluence of factors, including individual psychology and the influence of extremist narratives. The Nigerian context further emphasizes this complexity. Political and economic marginalization, including poor integration, discrimination, and a lack of voice, creates a breeding ground for frustration and resentment. Furthermore, economic hardship, high unemployment, and a stark gap between aspirations and reality add to this vulnerability. Hence, Nigeria's political and economic landscape creates a breeding ground for lone-wolf terrorism. Addressing these issues requires a multi-pronged approach that tackles corruption, fosters inclusive governance, and promotes economic opportunities. Only by mitigating these root causes can Nigeria effectively neutralize the likelihood of the threat of lone-wolf terrorism.

Recommendations

The research findings regarding the relationship between socioeconomic exclusion, and lone-wolf terrorism are significant for the state of Nigeria. Thus, the following recommendations are made:

1. A sense of belonging can be promoted and feelings of alienation can be decreased through initiatives to incorporate marginalized groups into governance structures and guarantee their representation in decision-making processes.
2. Combating corruption and promoting transparency can rebuild public trust and demonstrate that the government prioritizes the well-being of all citizens.
3. To lessen the sense of relative deprivation that feeds radical narratives, policies and development programmes that aim to reduce poverty, create employment opportunities, and address regional economic disparities should be carefully considered and promptly implemented. One way to reduce feelings of abandonment is by investing in infrastructure development, especially in areas that have been neglected. This will create economic opportunities and enhance the quality of life for the local population.

4. By providing a genuine route to a better future and lowering dependency on extreme means, investing in education and skill development can empower young Nigerians and prepare them for the labour market.

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