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Crime Reporting Patterns and Frequencies in Print Media in Post-COVID Nigeria: A Security Approach

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Abstract

This study systematically delves into the intricacies of crime reporting by mass media in post-COVID Nigeria, shedding light on its profound impact and intensity. Through meticulous archival methods, historical editions of The Guardian and Punch newspapers were analyzed over three years. The findings highlight a notable emphasis on crimes against individuals, such as murder and assault, compared to other categories like financial and drug-related crimes. Over 4,093 crime incidents were reported, with crimes against persons dominating in 2021 and 2022. The study underscores the need for nuanced crime reporting and advocates for substantive engagement through editorials and analyses. By fostering awareness and discourse, print media can play a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of crime dynamics and promoting societal well-being.

Keywords:

Crime; Crime rate; Security; Print media; Newspaper; Post-COVID; Nigeria.

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In every society worldwide, there are distinct sets of problems and hurdles, and Nigeria is no exception. Being a developing nation, Nigeria encounters a range of social, political, economic, and cultural challenges that significantly impact the well-being of its people. Among the myriad issues plaguing the country, crime stands out as particularly pervasive, permeating all levels of society. Crime, a phenomenon experienced universally, varies only in intensity among different nations. In Nigeria, this issue is multifaceted and has the potential to undermine the nation's unity and efforts towards sustainable development. Various factors, including the escalating and uncontrolled crime rates, pose threats to Nigeria's corporate existence, especially given its historical and contemporary political landscape.

Over time, crime rates in Nigeria have risen, characterized by increased sophistication and efficiency in criminal activities, leading to the emergence of vigilante groups in certain regions to address the issue. Understanding the dynamics of crime is fundamental to combating criminal activities effectively. While crime is commonly perceived as a moral threat and detrimental to society, it is a global phenomenon, as evidenced by the International Crime Victim Survey's findings spanning different regions and time periods.

Nigeria, like many developing countries, grapples with a rising urban crime rate, posing significant social challenges. The concentration of violent crimes in urban centers reflects broader systemic issues and threatens lives, property, social order, and national security, thereby diminishing citizens' quality of life. The print media play a crucial role as society's watchdogs, shedding light on crime and security matters, although academic attention to complement media efforts remains insufficient.

In light of these considerations, this study aims to explore the patterns of crime reporting in Nigeria through a sociological lens, complementing existing data derived from the print media. Employing a descriptive research approach, the study extracted data from two national dailies, The Guardian and Punch, archived at the Kenneth Dike's Library, University of Ibadan. Information spanning from January 2021 to March 2023 was meticulously gathered and subjected to content analysis with a view to providing insights into crime reporting trends in Nigeria. The findings, presented through tables and supported by verbatim quotes from the newspapers, offer valuable contributions to understanding and addressing crime-related issues in the country.

Crime Rate as Reported by the Print Media

Table 1 illustrates the incidence and distribution of reported crimes by the print media during the period spanning January 2021 to December 2021. Within this timeframe, Punch newspaper documented a significant focus on crimes against persons, constituting 60% of their reported cases. Drug offenses accounted for 4.3%,

financial crimes for 13.5%, other crimes for 6.9%, and property crimes for 15.3%. The cumulative count of all reported crimes by Punch during this period amounted to 879 cases.

Similarly, The Guardian newspaper covered crimes reported from January to December 2021, with a notable emphasis on crimes against persons, comprising 63.4% of their reported incidents. Drug offenses constituted 5.6%, financial crimes 12.2%, property crimes 11.0%, and other crimes 7.6%. The total count of all reported crimes by The Guardian during this period summed up to 631 cases.

TABLE 1 Crimes reported between Jan 2021 – Dec 2021

Type of Crime	Punch	Guardian	Jan-December 2021
Crime against person	467 (60.0)	335 (63.4)	802
Drug offences	60 (4.3)	57 (5.6)	117
Financial crime	129 (13.5)	89 (12.2)	218
Others	81 (6.9)	67 (7.6)	148
Property crime	142 (15.3)	83 (11.0)	225
Total	879	631	1510

Source: Punch and Guardian Newspapers, 2021

The combined reportage from Punch and The Guardian accounted for a total of 802 cases of crimes, specifically offenses against persons. Additionally, the aggregated number of reported drug offenses by both newspapers amounted to 117 cases. Financial crimes were documented in a total of 218 cases. Conversely, under the category of 'others,' encompassing offenses like traffic acts, dog acts, perjury, and coining offenses, the Punch and The Guardian reported a combined total of 148 cases during the reviewed period. Property crimes, amounting to 225 cases, were also included in the overall tally, resulting in a cumulative count of 1,510 reported crimes.

TABLE 2 Crimes reported between Jan 2022 – Dec 2022

Type of Crime	Punch	Guardian	Jan –Dec, 2022
Crime against persons	475 (54.5)	325 (64.8)	800
Drug offences	112 (7.8)	80 (7.5)	192
Financial crime	175 (16.0)	92 (9.9)	267
Other	98 (6.1)	83 (7.7)	181
Property crime	169 (15.2)	94 (10.3)	263
Total	1,029	674	1,703

Source: Punch and Guardian Newspapers, 2022

Table 2 encompasses the data for the second year under examination. As per the presented data, Punch Newspaper reported a total of 1,029 cases. Among these, crimes against persons registered the highest frequency, accounting for 800 cases,

representing 54.5% of Punch Newspaper’s reported instances. Other reported crimes included financial crime (16%), property crime (15.2%), and drug offenses (7.5%), while the remaining cases fell under the classification of ‘others’ (7.8%).

In a similar vein, the Guardian newspaper reported 325 cases of crimes against persons, making up 64.8% of their reported cases, followed by property crime (10.3%), financial crime (9.9%), ‘others’ (7.7%), and drug offenses (7.5%). The combined total of cases reported by both Punch and Guardian Newspapers during the period spanning January 2022 to December 2022 amounted to 1,703.

TABLE 3 Pattern of Crimes Reported January 2023 – March 2023

Type of Crime	Punch	Guardian	Jan-March 2023
Crime against persons	276 (54.1)	153 (41.4)	429
Drug offences	41 (8.0)	38 (10.3)	79
Financial crime	78 (15.3)	52 (14.0)	130
Other	45 (8.9)	61 (16.5)	106
Property crime	70 (13.7)	66 (17.8)	136
Total	510	370	880

Source: Punch and Guardian Newspapers, 2023

The table presented outlines the frequency and distribution of reported crimes by the print media during the period from January 2023 to March 2023. Punch newspaper documented a substantial focus on crimes against persons, constituting 54.1% of their reported cases. The reported rates of other crimes included financial crime (15.3%), property crime (13.7%), other forms of offenses (8.9%), and drug offenses (8%). During this timeframe, Punch reported a total of 510 crimes.

Contrastingly, the Guardian newspaper reported the occurrence of criminal activities from January to March 2023, with crimes against persons accounting for 41.4% of their reported cases. Property crime constituted 17.8%, ‘other’ offenses not classified herein comprised 16.5%, financial crime stood at 14%, and drug offenses at 10.3%. The total number of reported crimes by the Guardian during this period amounted to 370 cases. When combining the reported cases from both newspapers, the total number of reported crimes reached 880.

A comparison between the findings from the newspapers, as presented in Table 1, and the incidents of reported crimes at the national level, as shown in Tables 2 and 3, reveals a notable disparity in the number of crimes reported by the press and those reported by the police. Crimes against persons prominently featured in police-reported incidents. While the element of newsworthiness may have influenced these results, it raises concerns that the press might be presenting an inaccurate and distorted portrayal of the crime situation in the country.

Pattern of Crime Reported

The results indicated that the newspapers gave more coverage to violent crimes, such as murder and assaults, compared to other crime categories like financial, drug, and property crimes. Both Punch and Guardian newspapers reported on incidents involving gunmen attacks, Boko Haram issues, killings, fraud, and rape. Approximately 60% to 63% of the offenses reported in these newspapers fell under the classification of crimes against persons. The allure of crime and violence lies in their ability to attract attention and boost ratings for news programs and circulation figures for newspapers. Media owners, being profit-driven, find crime and violence stories appealing due to their sensational, dramatic, and sometimes colorful nature. This inclination is evident in the way media operators readily present gripping narratives of events such as rapes, commando-like bank robberies, murders, high-profile assassinations, or monumental frauds. In essence, crime and violence are not only captivating but also tempting to media operators (Dorfman and Thorson 1998).

TABLE 4 Crime reported within the years under review (2021 to 2023)

Pattern of Crime	2021	2022	2023	Total
Crime against persons	802 (53.1%)	800 (47.0%)	429 (48.8%)	2,031
Drug offences	117 (7.7%)	192 (11.3%)	79 (9.0%)	388
Financial crime	218 (14.4%)	267 (15.7%)	130 (14.8%)	615
Other offences	148 (9.8%)	181 (10.6%)	106 (12.0%)	435
Crime against property	225 (15.0%)	263 (15.4%)	136 (15.4%)	624
Total	1,510	1,703	880	4,093

Source: Punch and Guardian Newspapers, 2023

The above table shows the pattern and rate of crime reported by the print media from January 2021 to March 2023. These crimes were categorized under 'crime against persons', 'drug offences', 'financial crime', 'crime against property', and 'other offences'. Using the model in Okunola (2009), the crimes classified above were highlighted to understand their dimensions below:

Crime Against Persons/Violent Crimes:

Trafficking, human trafficking, grievous bodily harm, child abuse, sexual offenses, and unnatural offenses were classified by Okunola (2009). Additionally, contemporary issues in Nigeria, such as kidnapping, hostage-taking, and banditry, were prevalent, although not explicitly covered by Okunola's classification. These newer elements received extensive coverage across print, electronic, and online news platforms.

Property Crime:

Property crimes include Stealing, Robbery, Extortion, Bunkering, Forgery, Vandalisation, Burglary, and Arson.

Economic/Financial Crime:

Cases in this form of crime include Fraud/false pretense and cheating, corruption, graft, embezzlement, fake currency, impersonation, smuggling, illegal mining, and Drug offenses.

Other offense/Local Acts:

These encompass perjury cases, offenses related to demand and menace, as well as related offenses, traffic acts, offenses against township acts, liquor acts, dog acts, and other related offenses.

Table 4 outlines crimes reported over three years (2021, 2022, and 2023), examining the crime rate monthly. According to the data, Punch and Guardian Newspapers reported a total of 4,093 cases across these years. Within this total, 2,031 were crimes against persons, 388 were drug offenses, 615 were financial crimes, 624 were crimes against property, and 435 were categorized as 'other offenses'. In 2021, crimes against persons comprised the highest percentage of reports (53.1%), followed by crimes against property (15%), financial crimes (14.4%), other offenses (9.8%), and drug offenses (7.7%). In 2022, both Punch and Guardian Newspapers reported 47% of crimes against persons, followed by financial crimes (15.7%), crimes against property (15.4%), drug offenses (11.3%), and other violations (10.6%). For the January to March 2023 period, 880 crime cases were reported in Punch and Guardian Newspapers, with crimes against persons still topping the list at 48.85%. Other trends included crimes against property (15.4%), financial crimes (14.8%), other offenses (12%), and drug offenses (9%).

In Northern Nigeria, reported crime cases largely reflected escalating socio-religious issues, primarily crimes against persons. A case from the Northeastern part mirrored events in Borno State three days prior, with a property crime case referred to court in Lagos. 'Other offenses/local act' cases attracted the attention of crime desks in print media. Newspapers in Nigeria also covered foreign-based criminal cases, often involving Nigerians, particularly those related to narcotic matters. The September 21st, 2021 edition of Punch Newspaper highlighted a phone crime case without providing details. The same paper reported on federal troops seizing guns, a pickup van, and ammunition boxes from Boko Haram insurgents in Kodunga, Borno State.

Geographical Spread of the Crimes Reported

The geographic location of a crime holds significant importance, encompassing elements such as law, offender, and target, as outlined in the dimensions of a criminal event by Brantingham and Brantingham (1991). Understanding the crime location and associated geographic information can offer insights into suspect identification, aid in devising prevention or apprehension strategies, facilitate program evaluation, and contribute to a better comprehension of environmental factors linked to crime (Christie 1982; Farrington 2002).

Print media reports highlight a considerable incidence of high crimes against persons in northern Nigeria, particularly involving events such as killings, bombings, and insurgency by groups like Boko Haram and Fulani herders. Examples from places like Kano, Yobe, Kogi, Borno, Plateau, etc., include incidents resembling bloodbaths, such as the suicide bomb attacks on motor parks in Kano and Potiskum. Notable casualties include 15 people killed and 53 others injured in the Potiskum, Yobe State attack, and 12 lives lost in the incident at the Kano line motor park on Zaria Road, Kano.

In eastern Nigeria, print media commonly cover crimes such as stealing, robberies, and killings in locations like Rivers, Anambra, Imo, Enugu, etc., often of a violent nature. Within the southwestern geopolitical zone of Nigeria, crimes reported during the review period include offenses against persons like manslaughter, attempted murder, suicide, rape, and indecent assault, as well as financial crimes like fraud/false pretense, cheating, corruption, graft, embezzlement, fake currency, impersonation, smuggling, illegal mining, and drug offenses. These cases were widespread in areas like Lagos, Osun, Ondo, and other states within the region.

Management Approach Towards Crime

Crimes often trigger responses and defensive actions from victims and potential victims. These reactions may involve the installation of alarm systems, avoiding nighttime outings, or steering clear of high-risk areas. As information about crime circulates, others may adopt similar defensive strategies. In due course, community groups and governments might implement neighborhood watch programs, enhance police surveillance in problematic areas, or introduce new legislation. The strategies employed by criminals and the counterstrategies implemented in response evolve in tandem, driven by various factors. Defensive counterstrategies, discussed below, prompt individuals seeking criminal opportunities to adapt by developing new crime strategies or transitioning to different types of crime (Cohen and Young 1981).

In a broader sense, higher crime rates often prompt the implementation of more stringent protective measures, initially causing a decline in crime rates. Conversely, lower crime rates may reduce barriers to crime as individuals and communities allocate limited resources to more urgent issues. Nonetheless, individuals with a development-focused orientation would always aspire for minimal crime rates. The reduction in crime rates may make criminal activities seem easier, less risky, and more attractive as a means to acquire resources, implying that crime is likely to persist at some level in society. As fewer individuals are drawn to crime, the potential rewards tend to increase, inevitably attracting someone. These dynamics, coupled with the tendency of defensive counterstrategies to initiate a cycle by provoking counter-counterstrategies from offenders, suggest that crime will likely persist at some level in society (Davis et al. 1997; Becker 1992; Simon and Feely 1995).

Understanding how counterstrategies address the root causes of crime is crucial for making criminological research relevant to public policy. Strikingly, in areas where brutal cases of crimes against persons were reported, there was a lack of proactive measures, and the common response after such incidents was people expressing ‘lamentations.’

TABLE 5 Crime Cases and Their Treatment

Cases reported	2021	2022	2023	Total
Police investigation	512 (34.0%)	654 (38.4%)	373 (42.4%)	1,539
Judicial matter	643 (44.8%)	582 (34.2%)	298 (33.9%)	1,523
Neither police nor judicial matter	355 (21.2%)	467 (27.4%)	209 (23.7%)	1,031
Total	1,510	1,703	880	4,093

Source: Punch and Guardian Newspapers, 2021-2023

The presented table outlines crime cases reported by the print media from January 2021 to March 2023, categorizing them into three parts based on their treatment: police investigation and judicial matters, only police or judicial matters, and cases with neither police nor judicial involvement. In 2021, 34% of cases underwent police investigation, with 44.8% charged to court and attended to, and 21.2% neither treated by police nor judicial matters. In 2022, police investigation cases increased to 38.4%, judicial matters reduced to 34.2%, and cases with neither police nor judicial matters rose to 27.4%. Similarly, in 2023, police investigation cases further increased to 42.4%, judicial matters decreased to 33.9%, and cases with neither police nor judicial matters decreased to 23.7%.

During the study period, the Nigerian print media demonstrated very little or no pictorial representation of crime issues, which could have been a straightforward means of dissemination. Most analyses of media representations of crime have focused on newsprint and broadcast, with fewer studies on fiction. Crime and criminal justice have historically served as sources of popular spectacle and entertainment, illustrated by criminal biographies and pre-execution confessions prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The police and criminal justice system are predominantly depicted positively in popular fiction as effective protectors against serious harm and violence. However, there has been increasing scrutiny of police success and integrity in recent times (Reiner, 2000). Notably, in the reviewed newspaper editions, a political analytical approach was adopted, while crime stories lacked a similar analytical treatment.

Conclusion

The study has delved deeply into the crime reports featured in Nigerian newspapers Punch and The Guardian, spanning from January 2021 to March 2023. It meticulously

detailed the occurrence and breakdown of reported crimes, classifying them into distinct categories such as crimes against persons, drug offenses, financial crimes, other offenses, and property crimes. Key observations include a consistent media focus on crimes against individuals, noticeable differences between media and police-reported incidents, and a preference for covering violent crimes in print media. The narrative extends to the geographical distribution of reported crimes, particularly highlighting patterns in northern Nigeria. Additionally, it explored the approach taken toward crime management, defensive counterstrategies, the handling of crime cases by law enforcement and the judiciary, and the absence of visual representation of crime issues in the print media. The study further observed that the selected media consistently and actively reported on crime, with crime against persons emerging as the most frequently covered deviant report throughout the three-year analysis. As a result, the front pages of the newspapers prominently featured the most significant and controversial crime stories. In terms of editorial bias, the study observed that a considerable portion of the stories adhered to reporting facts without undue favoritism. These items predominantly fell into the category of straight news stories, thereby necessitating a factual and balanced presentation of reports without bias.

Similar to other forms of mass media, it was observed that the print media demonstrated a degree of indifference towards actions taken against perpetrators of crime. Although, the media is expected to go beyond mere awareness creation or indifference and serve as a conscience of authority, encouraging further investigation, educating readers, and shedding light on legal processes to stimulate change from both authorities and citizens, the selected print media maintained and restricted themselves to their traditional role of report-making.

Since a heightened emphasis on editorials is essential, as they wield significant influence in shaping public policy and setting agendas, it is crucial to stress through editorials that crime is unacceptable, and anyone caught in the web of committing criminal acts would face the consequences. Hence, the potency of print news publications should not be underestimated and needs to be leveraged, especially in this age of information, where research trends are increasingly being concentrated on the rapidly evolving cyber technologies such as the Internet, visual media, films, and television, among several others.

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