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Towards Crime Prevention and Control in the Nigerian Library System: Old and New Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper incorporates criminological ideas into library science for effective crime prevention and control. Rational choice theory was adopted as a theoretical framework. Perpetrators of library crime usually plan and take precautionary measures as they carry out their operations to avoid detection. Apart from the traditional (primary, secondary and tertiary) crime prevention and control approaches, other strategies were identified, critically discussed and conclusions reached to provide new insights into the ways to combat this problem. This paper recommends hardening common library ‘targets’ by installing scientific and technologically advanced crime detection devices, application of ‘re-integrative social shame’ (disciplinary measure, correction or treatment), and making the structural design of libraries highly crime-discouraging. Although crime is inevitable, availability of these security measures tend to facilitate swift and accurate prediction, detection, prevention and control of crime.

Keywords: Crime Prevention and Control, Rational Choice, Library, Target Hardening.

Introduction

Libraries are indispensable institutions where valuable, expensive and relevant materials, in both print and electronic forms, are stored for human use (Okogwu & Nnam, 2013). This definition underscores the fact that the library as a storehouse of valuable information is prone to equally affected by the general crime problem witnessed in every segment of society. Mutilation, burglary, arson, stealing and theft are also common forms

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of crime committed in the library. Because the library is a focal point where users of diverse age groups, political and socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural affiliations, it stands to be vulnerable to all forms of crime and security risks (Jama'a, 1984 cited in Ogbonyomi, 2011).

The application of criminological thought to library studies is a practical way of discovering the missing link and elucidating the core of the problem of library crime for effective prevention and control. It is a basis for expanding the frontiers of interdisciplinary scholarship for in-depth understanding of how this complex problem can be pragmatically addressed. In response to the recent upsurge in library crime, several scholars and researchers within and outside criminology have made attempts to examine the complexities of this social phenomenon (see for e.g. Constantonou, 1995; Hogan-Bassey, 2000; Ajayi & Omotayo, 2004; Ogunyade 2005; Adewale & Oluwasanmi, 2007; Okogwu & Nnam, 2013). These authors focus primarily on the causes and effects of criminal activities in libraries while ignoring the crux of the matter, exploring and advancing robust strategies that will provide insight into the prevention and control of this offending behavior. The increasing rate of book theft, mutilation and vandalism has spurred librarians, policymakers, and professional crime analysts to be concerned with library security that can effectively promote proper management practices and deterrence (for similar studies, see Fagan, 1985; Akinfolarin, 1992; Mansfield, 2009; Ogbonyomi, 2011; Adebayo, 2013).

Library crime is not a recent development. It existed in ancient cultures and civilizations, but has largely been neglected by contemporary researchers. Only recently has serious attention been given to this problem, making it a growing area of research interest. Studies indicate that crime in libraries dates back to the 539 BC Egyptian Saga, when Persia conquered the ancient city and burgled the library of Pharaoh Rameses 11 (Constantonou, 1995; Ogunyade, 2005; Okogwu & Nnam, 2013). To close this observable gap, this issue is the central topic of this paper. In most Nigerian libraries, “criminal activities are not limited to library information materials alone but theft of personal items of users, such as handbags, purses, keys and notebooks are also common” (Ogbonyomi, 2011, p. 2). Having identified this problem, this paper examines crime prevention and control in the library system by incorporating both existing and emerging criminological frameworks for effective prevention and control.

Theoretical Framework

Rational choice theory appears suitable to help explain library crime. The emergence of this theory is traceable to the classical school of criminology. From the 1960s to the present, the classical approach to crime has widely gained currency in the sociology of crime (Nnam, 2015). Rational choice theory has also enjoyed a resurgence of popularity as a number of criminologists (and non-criminologists) have used it to explain crime in modern society (Siegel, 2008). From the central tenet of rational choice theory, stealing or destruction of library resources is a mindful and thought-out action. Library criminals (those who steal or aid and abet stealing and destroying of resources/materials kept in the library) carefully plan their criminal activities in such a manner that detection is extremely difficult.

Critical to rational choice theory “is the philosophy which holds that human beings have freewill, and that behavior is guided by hedonism or the principle of utilitarianism”

(Otu, 2010a, p. 373). Criminals voluntarily decide to commit a particular crime based on a conscientious weighing of the cost and benefits of each of the alternative choices of action (Otu, 2003; Otu, 2010b). Perpetrators of library crimes devise thought patterns before, during and after carrying out their operations to beat the security apparatus. They target and steal books that are not only widely read but are also valuable. For instance, an *out-of-volition* confession made by a professional library thief, whose areas of criminal specializations are pilfering, stealing and mutilating, speak volumes about the increasing rate of crime in the library system:

Any day I felt like taking away some library books, I would wait till the final bell rings between 9:30–10: 00 PM. Then I would station myself in a queue that usually builds up at closing time. I would study the situation, particularly the person checking. At the appropriate time, I would give the lead in harassing the ‘checker that he should hurry up, accusing him of wasting our time.’ Unfortunately, other innocent students would take a cue from me, also harassing and confusing the porter doing the checking. Most of the times the porter doing the checking will succumb to the harassment and would then do the checking in hurry. I will then succeed at such times to make away with unborrowed books (Hogan-Bassey, 2000).

The decision to steal from libraries entails calculation and evaluation of book value and the ability to locate buyers. Ogbonyomi (2011) suggested that the crime of theft and malicious damage of books in libraries could be difficult to combat if the risk of getting caught is low while the likelihood of success is high. This observation is supported by the underlying principles of rational choice theory which stresses that criminals of all kinds, including library criminals are calculative, rational, intelligent, sane and normal (Nnam, 2015). Emphasizing similarities in the nature of property crimes provides additional insight.

Crime pattern theory is a combination of rational choice and routine activity theories. It focuses on the manner in which crime, locations and offenders influence the distribution of criminal events over time and space (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993). Important to crime pattern theorists is the contact and interactions that transpire between offenders and their physical and social environments (Ikoh, 2011), including their potential targets. Targets become vulnerable if they are not hardened, that is, well protected by security agents, library authorities, and installation of state-of-the-art security devices. Crime pattern theory, therefore, suggests that ‘rational library criminals’ carry out their ‘routine’ and ‘patterned’ activities in the library where there are no robust and functional crime preventive and control measures in place. Adewale and Oluwasanmi (2007) stressed that people employ various methods in stealing books in the library owing to lack of security. Examples of these techniques include various forms of physical concealment and deceit.

Old Approach to Crime Prevention and Control in the Library System

A vast and varying opinion has emerged in relation to different approaches to crime prevention and control. Although there are variations in the strategies, there are commonalities and a general consensus among commentators on how to curtail crime. The common view or expression is that crime of all kinds cannot be easily and completely

eradicated, but rather it can (in some cases and depending on the type of crime) be prevented or controlled (see also Siegel, 2008; Nnam, 2014a; Agboti & Nnam, 2015; Siegel, 2016). The idea of crime prevention in libraries therefore, requires that stakeholders accurately predict criminogenic factors that predispose individuals to steal or destroy library materials. On the other hand, control mechanisms recognize that crime is occurring and that adequate measures must be adopted to prevent escalation. It is on this common ground that Siegel (2008 p. 78) made this metaphorical statement, “if committing crime is a rational choice, it follows that crime can be controlled or eradicated by convincing potential offenders that crime is a poor choice—that it will not bring them rewards but bring pain, hardship, and deprivation”!

Traditional crime prevention and control mechanisms, which have a universal application in crime literature, can enable us to gain insight into this problem. The works of criminologists like Reckless (1973), Palmer (1973) and Robert (2003) placed crime prevention into the primary, secondary and tertiary categories. The central concern of primary crime prevention strategies is to prevent crime. Contextually, the emphasis is on library users who have not yet stolen library resources. Here, efforts are made to identify and correct certain factors that are likely to precipitate crime. These factors are referred to as ‘library crime-encouragers’. Examples include the lackadaisical attitude of librarians towards duty, abuse and neglect in the system, and the absence of security measures. Reckless (1973) argued that primary crime prevention (whether in the library or elsewhere) is concerned with the healthy development of the self and family relationships as well as those measures that promote law-abiding behaviour. The emphasis is on forestalling any criminogenic circumstances from which crime could develop or emanate, and the elimination of such factors where they already exist. Primary prevention seeks to change environmental conditions that provide opportunities for or precipitate occurrence of criminal acts by increasing effort and risk while reducing potential rewards for the offender (Adebayo, 2013). Some scholars like Brantingham, Brantingham and Taylor (2005) have explained primary prevention within the context of situational crime prevention perspectives. Prevention requires officials to recognise criminogenic factors. They should also be aware of the opportunities offered at these sites and what constitutes the triggers for actual criminal actions (Brantingham *et al.*, 2005). No wonder advocates of ‘deviant place theory’ believe that crime thrives in a physically and socially disorganised environment (Richards, Larson & Miller, 2004).

The secondary crime prevention approach focuses on timely identification of the underlying factors that push people into stealing or destroying reading and visual materials. Although crime may occur in the library, it is obvious (from a secondary prevention standpoint) that certain criminogenic needs be seen or identified and appropriate measures undertaken to counter or prevent offending. Critical to secondary prevention is “early identification of potential offenders by seeking interventions to prevent criminal behaviour from developing or occurring” (Adebayo, 2013, p. 73). It seeks to change the attitudes and mindsets of library patrons, particularly those with criminal proclivities from stealing and destroying intellectual property. Cautions should be taken when applying these strategies in order to avoid redundancy since the difference between the two overlapping methods (primary and secondary) can be rather subtle. For clarity, the primary crime prevention strategy specifically looks into the general social conditions that may lure individuals into committing crime in the library while the secondary approach entails

timely identification and correction of existing crime-inducing opportunities. In a similar way, however, the two approaches stress the importance of treatment and elimination of opportunities that can lead certain library users to contemplate crime. Clarke (1992) used the basic assumptions of primary and secondary crime prevention techniques jointly to explain the rising crime rates when he applied a situational crime prevention approach, or what Oscar Newman termed 'defensible space', in his noted study. The idea of defensible space maintains that library crime can be prevented and displaced through the use of structural designs that reduce crime opportunities. According to Siegel (2008), defensible space is a principle which emphasizes that crime can be prevented or displaced by modifying the physical environment in order to reduce the opportunity individuals have to commit crime.

A tertiary crime prevention approach is an effort to correct or discipline (treat or punish) an individual or group of individuals who have been arrested, tried and found guilty of an offence. This type of crime prevention technique equally pertains to the library setting because it is specifically offender-focused; in essence, it is poised to avert further crimes and deter would-be library criminals. Robert (2003) and Adebayo (2013) suggested that tertiary prevention deals with interventions that are aimed at preventing illegal acts by focusing on truncating criminal careers in terms of length, seriousness and frequency. It is also concerned with interventions and/or treatment of offenders. Jacobs (1988) noted the contemporary emphasis on the manner in which people deal with crime and the treatment of offenders in order to prevent the reoccurrence of such behaviour. Punishment meted out to perpetrators of library crime may take place inside or outside the criminal justice system, depending on the type and degree of the offence committed. Tertiary techniques of crime prevention uses fines, suspensions, corporal punishment, restriction, supervisory control, withdrawal, and expulsion. In the words of Palmer (1973), both actual and potential offenders can be informally identified and treated by crises centres and other organisations that offer services in this regard. Thus, various forms of guidance, counselling and psychosocial therapy should be made available at service or intervention centres and schools. The fact remains that these treatment programmes or philosophies of punishment could be practiced in institutions of learning, as their officials strive to prevent and control crime. A classic example is the establishment of school security, counselling units and disciplinary committees to look into the illegal behaviours of students and employees

New Approach to Crime Prevention and Control in the Library System

From the standpoint of rational choice theory, perpetrators of library crime calculate the possible success of their act, assess book values, and determine the costs-benefits of their intended action. Siegel (2008) posited that offenders calculate the probable success of committing crime, select their targets on the basis of risk assessment, and only forego the offence if the potential disadvantages outweigh the benefits. It then follows that, if stealing and vandalising library resources are a rational choice, it can be prevented or reduced by convincing would-be offenders that it is not in their best interest to engage in a criminal act.

Crime prevention and control within the library system follows a multidimensional strategy. Addressing library crime is a complex endeavour. However, this paper suggests some new or emerging approaches when considering library crime. These approaches, while not new, are progressively incorporated into the analysis of library crime. Included

are deterrence (both specific and general), education, and various treatment/punishment strategies. Primary, secondary and tertiary approaches to crime prevention and control are also considered. By and large, both traditional and emerging techniques have a common focus of preventing library crimes by eliminating factors that may induce users to steal or vandalise library resources.

For effective crime prevention and control, it is of the essence to address four fundamental issues. Firstly, strategies must increase the effort needed to commit crime; secondly, they must also increase the associated risks; thirdly, they must induce guilt, and finally, they must exclude excuses (Clarke & Homel, 1997; Cornish & Clarke, 2003; Siegel, 2008). After all, if the risk of getting caught can be increased, even rational library criminals will most likely choose not to steal or destroy materials. These four factors fall under the situational crime prevention method. The situational crime prevention model explains the need to make libraries secure. Therefore, the onus is on library officials to implement practices that will reduce and prevent crime.

Applying these four crime prevention and control strategies increases the effort needed to commit crime in the library. Garofalo (1981) views the fortification of potential targets and the increased risks for detection and prosecution as essential to reducing criminal activities. Specific forms of fortification include the use of security-grade windows and doors and the close physical monitoring of library users, including the use of closed circuit television. Target hardening as a security measure safeguards library materials by identifying, preventing and controlling crime-inducing factors in libraries. Guilt inducement emphasizes the imperativeness of putting measures in place to socially shame (correct, treat or punish) someone found guilty of library crime. This technique, however, should go beyond punishing those who are directly involved in library crime (active library criminals) to include accomplices and buyers of stolen library resources. The technique of excuse removal, according to Siegel (2008), means that crime may be reduced by making it difficult for people to excuse their behaviours by saying things like, 'I didn't know that was illegal' or 'I had no choice'.

In addition, specific deterrence and general deterrence are powerful crime prevention and control techniques to be employed in the fight against library crime, especially in Nigeria where the problem seems to be on the increase. From the perspective of general deterrence, Siegel (2008) stated that crime can be controlled by increasing the real or perceived threats of criminal punishment while specific deterrence seeks to prevent repeat criminality. The concept of deterrence, whether specific or general, represents the tertiary crime prevention and control strategies as earlier conceptualised and contextualised in this paper. Worthy of note here is the fact that both specific and general deterrents are preventive and treatment/punishment-oriented. Under specific deterrence, it is obvious that a crime has been committed in the library and that the offender has been identified. Therefore, punishment should effectively dissuade criminals from contemplating further crimes against the library. Likewise, the aim of general deterrence is to prevent potential library offenders from committing similar offences.

There is also a strong connection between educational attainment and criminality (Nnam, 2014b). Studies suggest that students who perform poorly at school, lack educational motivation and feel alienated, are most likely to engage in criminal acts (Jussim, 1989 cited in Siegel, 2008). Children who fail at school commit crime more frequently than those who succeed; furthermore, these children tend to commit more

serious and violent crimes, with their criminal behaviours often persisting into adulthood (Maguin & Loeber, 1995; Siegel, 2008; Otu & Elechi, 2015). Therefore, education (formal, semi-formal, or informal) may serve a dual role in the fight against library crime. It can and should involve families and schools in crime prevention measures. Social scientists often posit that the type of home training and education that individuals receive often influences whether they engage in criminality (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2003; Igbo, 2007; Nnam, 2014b; Nnam, 2015). Parenting factors that include communication and corrective discipline often plays a critical role in determining whether one will misbehave as a child and later as an adult (Wright & Cullen, 2001; Vazsonyi & Pickering, 2003). Library crime may be effectively prevented and controlled if parents and guardians inculcate acceptable ideals pertaining to civic responsibilities in their children/wards. Such an orientation can be buttressed with the aid of teachers and other capable guardians.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper proposes applying a theoretical/conceptual framework for the prevention and control of crimes within the library. Rational choice theory was favored because of its ability to address the motivations underlying these crimes. In many cases, the theft of library materials is not spontaneous but a planned and calculated act. Primary, secondary and tertiary crime prevention and control strategies should be considered, and when and where appropriate, incorporated into library studies for a successful war on crime in libraries. In the normal course of events, the family and school occupy an important position in the prevention of library crime. Situational crime prevention and target hardening approaches also appear pertinent to the prevention and containment of library crime.

Parents, teachers, librarians and other stakeholders must be proactive in seeking to control and prevent offending behaviors. Similar strategies must be implemented to create general and specific deterrence through severe, swift and certain punishment of persons guilty of this crime. Measures should also be undertaken to increase the risks involved in committing library crime by making detection, apprehension and prosecution outweigh associated benefits. This requires the timely and deliberate application of effective target hardening strategies. Perhaps, most importantly, research into library crime must be undertaken so that scholars can become more aware of its prevalence and impact.

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