POVERTY AND GREED IN PERSPECTIVE ON THE CRIMES

OMBOTO JOHN ONYANGO
MA Sociology (Criminology)-University of Nairobi, Part-Lecturer Egerton and Mount Kenya Universities
Email address: ombotojohn@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Property related crimes or crimes against property involve illegal acquisition or destruction of property. The common property acquisition crimes in Kenya include burglary, forgery, obtaining money/property by false pretences, larceny, shop lifting, pick pocketing, misappropriation of public funds, bribery and other forms of corruption among others. The property related offenders can be put into two classes; those who commit these crimes because of need; for instance due to poverty and those driven by insatiable greed; the desire to accumulate much more. This paper explores these two categories of offenders based on observations and crime reports in Kenya, and recommends how both poverty and greed motivated crimes can be reduced.

Keywords: Economic inequality, Poverty, Greed, Crime, Kenya

THE INFLUENCE OF POVERTY AND HUGE ECONOMIC INEQUALITY IN CRIME

According to the Global Monitoring Report 2013 Kenya is the third most unequal society in the world, this to the chairman of the commission on Revenue Allocation Mr. Micah Cheserem; is “a dangerous situation the country leadership needs to address urgently”

Inequality is marked by differences in wealth and poverty among the citizenry. Poverty is the inability to subsist; it signifies the inability of an individual or household to provide the necessities of life through its own means or through the resources transferred from others (Dentler, 1967:106). Poverty is relative because what people regard as necessary varies across time and place. However, in Kenya, it is the inability to afford the basic needs – food, shelter, clothing and at least elementary education. This causes struggle for survival that ends up in crime.

Confirming this kind of struggle between the rich and the poor, a Mr. Vaughan observed, during the East African Business Summit held in Nanyuki between September 25–27, 2003, that the fight against crime in this region cannot be won unless the gap between the rich and the poor is bridged both in public and private sectors. Muga (1977:73-109) critically observed that the poor commit property related crimes against the rich. While Oloo (1989) asserts that most property related offenders turn into recidivists.

Though not associating it to crime escalation, Bo Govansson, the then Sweden Ambassador to Kenya in his article: “Yawning Inequality in Kenya Hardly Addressed” termed the huge inequality between the rich and the poor as the “mother characteristic of the Kenyan society, seen and discussed by visitors.”

The huge economic inequality is made more pronounced by the fact that, in developing countries like Kenya, a few people are billionaires swimming in luxury while a large majority are desperately poor. This is made more evident when we consider that in our cities and towns millions live in slums where some are housed in makeshift carton boxes where they lack basic needs such as clean water, decent and adequate meals and even sewage and toilet facilities.

This extreme poverty is more associated to unemployment among other factors. For instance, majority of Kenyans in rural and urban centres,
Despite their education and training, are unemployed. These are people according to Clayton (1999) who though unemployed are available for work; make specific efforts to find the job to do but fail, or people who get involved in family activities that do not pay for lack of better options. The poor people commit crimes to survive for instance put food on the table and or buy clothes; this can take the form of theft among others. However these people also engage in expressive crimes through which they show their rage and frustrations against the society, such crimes include assault and rape etc.

Whereas poverty is not the sole cause of crime, in the day to day varied criminal acts that involve these people in the lower lower social class, poverty forms the backbone of their actions, either as a cause or correlation. Consider these three cases from News paper reports; one, titled “A baby boy dies in a fight over shs.10 debt” of two women in Butere-Mumias fighting over a 10 shillings debt the baby’s mother owed that she had taken several months to pay back. The second example of extreme poverty-related crime that was reported is “Man 37 is stabbed to death over sh10 debt.” The man Christopher Olang was stabbed twice in the stomach when he could only produce Kshs.20 out of the Kshs.30 demanded by his creditor. The incident occurred in Thika Kiambu county. A third example was titled “Man chops off wife’s ears in row over hen,” detailing how a man in Gucha chopped off his wife’s ears after she refused to slaughter their only hen for Christmas party.

Our jails are full of petty offenders who have been unable to pay fines despite the court option. The desperately poor people, are recidivists because just as other people, they must eat, and crime is their sure source; for example, if they are sentenced to prison, too good; they will have food (regardless of its quantity and quality), if they get away with the crime, at least they are assured of some meal from the proceed, but should death come in the process of committing the crime, they shall have escaped the misery of this world earlier enough (they don’t fear death).

Testimony: How poverty and desperation turned an innocent young man to a hardcore criminal.

In a holier-than-thou-attitude, I once asked a prisoner, let’s call him Machanja, who looked well educated, sensible and humble; completely not the criminal type we are used to, why he chose to live on the wrong side of the law and I was astounded by what poverty and desperation can do to make one a criminal.

“In 2001 when my parents, who were both, employed died of HIV/Aids, I was a form three secondary school student left as an elder among four other siblings. My parents were indebted thus left nothing behind since they spent much on their health and paid fees for the two of us in secondary schools.

Fortunately, my maternal uncle accepted to pay my school fees so that I later could take care of my siblings. This assistance enabled me to go through secondary school and afterwards join a polytechnic for a course in building and architectural design. As if being followed by bad spell, I couldn’t complete the three-year-diploma course because the uncle died and the aunt, now a widow with four children, could not assist further; this was after the second year in college.

Another hand of fate slapped me hard on the face; my girlfriend conceived and her parents disowned her. I tried to secure an abortion for her but, for lack of money, this was not possible. This lady who knew where I lived with my uncle moved in. To the widow, this was insensitivity and disrespect, she could not carry the burden of a man and his pregnant wife; so, she showed us the door. This was two months after Uncle died.

We moved to Mathare slums; thanks to my connections with one of my former schoolmates who got me a starter pack: a room, two sufurias (small iron pots), a plate, two dishes, two spoons, a high school student size mattress, charcoal stove and a month’s house rent. Lest you forget: all these expenses were debt to be paid back. The friend polished his generosity with a powerful lecture,

“You must be a man and face life, what you and your wife will eat from tomorrow must come from your sweat and don’t forget, she will give birth soon.”

I got my very first employment at a construction site, doing the popular hard work, “Kazi ya Mjengo” (manual construction work) which to my surprise, despite being a very hard work, I had to part with some two hundred shillings bribe to the contractor “Mwenye Kazi.” Besides, one had to take lunch at a particular Mama Uji on debt so that on the pay day, Kshs30 per lunch would be deducted.
from the daily wage of Kshs.100 with no guarantee that one would work throughout the month.

During the first engagement, I had worked for three straight weeks then started another desperate search for anything to do. It took long before I got any work and true to the saying “Adversity is the trial of principle,” my erstwhile co-operative lady of the house was not only unhappy but accused me of complacency and laziness saying, “You are also a man! Where do other people, whose wives cook meat get money, yet they are also not on permanent employment?”

One evening at about 7 pm, after what was the most frustrating walk from one construction site to another in search of work, one of my friends and I, walking reluctantly back home, passed by a well dressed drunkard, and wondered aloud why God would give some people more money to drink and deny us what to eat. As fate dictated, the drunkard heard us and in returned gave unprintable abuses. The drunkard staggered faster and slapped my friend on the face. A fight ensued; in the process, we threw the man down and something remarkable happened that changed our lives: the drunkard’s wallet fell down. We took it and hurried off.

In this wallet was ten thousand shillings, a pay slip, national identity card and a Kenya Power and Lightning Company employment card. We shared the loot ‘perpendicularly’ and dropped the wallet with the two IDs and pay slip inside. I used my share on shopping for the wife and never forgot to buy the meat, rice, and chapati (wheat) flour plus cooking fat to go with it. In the house, I gave the queen of my heart 1000/= after paying pressing debts (including the starter pack) and rent.

Then the eighth wonder of the world happened. A lady showered me with love, compliment and admiration I had never seen in my lifetime. For the first time, I had warm bathing water. How could she allow me to use cold water? She had suddenly realized that bathing with cold water in the evening could cause pneumonia. That is my wife.

From that day, my friend and I continued to do construction work when convenient but mugged people at night. We graduated to violent bank robbers with the help of those who got to the underworld before us. With the reaps, before my arrest, I took care of my wife, two children and siblings with ease”.

My question is how many people might have gotten into crime in same manner?

GREED FOR WEALTH AS A MAJOR FACTOR IN CRIME ESCALATION

Greedy property related offenders are numerous in our society. It does not require any explanation to support the fact that white collar offenders, who rip-off our country of billions, in mega corruptions, are not poor citizens. For instance, the people whose names have been mentioned in Kenya’s two major scandals: Goldenberg through which according local reports of July 2006 7, Kenyans lost Shs.158 billion, and Anglo Leasing, and those mentioned in the twin cocaine haul seized by police in December 2005 – one worth Kshs.6.4 billion and another Kshs.1.1 billion are not ordinary Kenyans struggling to survive, neither are those mentioned in the billions worth Free Primary Education, Maize and Triton oil scandals of 2008-2010, just to mention but a few. The same applies to the following categories of individuals; human resource managers and government departmental heads who in hidden ways, solicit bribes to offer employment and promotions, Authority to Incur Expenditures (AIE) holders who misappropriate funds, and the constituency Development Funds Committees headed by Members of parliament, Permanent Secretaries who the Controller and Auditor General report of October 2010 found guilty of pilferage and wastage of public finances. Notorious hardcore criminals are not poor too, thanks to the blood money, but they have not given up criminality. Therefore, we stop to ask, as Doga wondered in Imbuga (1976:10)

“What is in money that is more precious than life?”

It is indeed true that so many people are ready to die and kill for money!

However, wealth in itself does not make us the evil but our attitude towards it does. Many people consider wealth a blessing and have used it to do good to the world; they live modest lives and consider the plight of the needy in compliance to a call a apostle Paul made in the bible (Ephesians 4:28): Do something useful with your own hands, so as to have something to share with those in need. Such people work hard and acquire wealth after decades of struggle. They have wealth but are not
controlled by it; these are the lot on the right hand and are a blessing to humanity.

But on the left hand side are those of us who can do anything criminal to get wealth. From prostitution to murder, carjacking and robbery to kidnapping, theft to misappropriation of billions, they traffic in illicit drugs and substances, not out of emergent need or poverty, but for the sake of accumulation. They are driven by the desire to live beyond honest means and; so, to maintain their extravagance, they get into criminal activities.

THE REDUCTION OF CRIME FROM BOTH ASPECTS

If all people would resolve to avoid the Mahatma Gandhi’s seven social evils, among them inscribed on his tombstone; “wealth without work”, then we shall have gone to greater heights in eradicating most crimes in our society. This is because we would desist from endorsing the effortless life, easy money and quick fixes. Instead, we would all appreciate the joy and satisfaction that come with good life of success out of hard work and determination. However, as we consider doing so, we would do better to include the following measures.

A democratically elected government that listens to its people must be in place, together with other agencies, it must ensure quality life for its citizens. Already good things are taking place; the free primary education enshrined in the Kenyan constitution, if it ensures quality, is a double-edged sword aimed at eradicating illiteracy, but will end up reducing crimes since education, in itself, gives people’s future a possibility without which livelihood in crime might be the obvious alternative.

Governments must fight poverty by all means and create employment to the large number of the young energetic youth who are unemployed. However the young people must appreciate the fact that employment doesn’t have to be white collar; thus the creation of new jobs in the formal and informal sectors should be a concern for all. The leaders must realise that until the issue of unemployment among the youth is addressed the reduction of crime will be a pipe dream.

Emphasis on material wealth as a measure of success must be discouraged; it only creates madness to get more – this is already manifest in the runaway corruption in Kenya. We can start doing this by giving public recognition to the many eminent scholars, notably the professors who feature nowhere in the who is who list in terms of wealth but have won medals in various fields all over the world for their intellectualism. After all, didn’t Sallust (86 – 34BC) say that, “the renown that riches or beauty confer is fleeting and frail; mental excellence is a splendid and lasting possession.” Carson, (1992:1).

Religious leaders have a duty to preach godly; upholding hard work, honesty, and concern for the unfortunate. However, this will only be effective if the observant public see that preachers preach what they do. The now common reports that portray the religious leaders in negative light; for instance, the following reports; 15/11/2010 ‘priest arrested over shooting of a colleague’ 8, ‘preacher who defiled girl gets 50years in jail’ 9 and “Pastor is charged with fraud attempt” 10 only worsen the crime situations in Kenya because people who would have heeded their teachings will dismiss them as opportunistic wolves in sheep’s skins.

Because the poor do commit crimes against the rich to survive, the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor in Kenya must be narrowed. And, to eradicate all sorts of crime – corruption included, research on crime by scholars must be funded and encouraged. Negative attitude against crime and how to avoid it should start from homes to schools, colleges, media and our work places. Severe punishment measures impartially meted out to all offenders regardless of their social status as a means of deterrence is also quite applicable.

REFERENCES


**Footnotes:-**

1. The Standard Newspaper of 30/3/2013 pg 3
8. The Standard Newspaper 15/11/2010 pg 7