

# Causes and Effects of Violence in Nigerian Prisons

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## Abstract

*Violence* in one form or the other is not restricted to a section of human communities. Individuals, groups and even nations experience violence of various kinds. The nature of struggle over values, interests, power, ideology and resources of different kinds necessitates the occurrence of violence in human life (Albert, 2000). Prison communities are not far from other human communities that experience violence peculiar to their social environment. Prison violence destroys human lives (inmate and prison personnel) and property worth millions of naira in Nigeria. The incessant prison violence and jail breaks in Nigeria have created a negative image for the country. However, the lack of adequate research to reveal the causes of prison violence and jail breaks in Nigeria has made control difficult and impacted negatively in the relevance of prison in Nigeria. *Three* major research instruments were used to collect the qualitative data for this study. In-depth interview guide (IDI), Focus group discussion (FGD) and non-participatory observation were used to obtain data for the study. The study was conducted at Agodi prison yard, Ibadan Oyo state Command Secretariat, CP quarters Jericho Ibadan, Oyo Prisons, and Ogbomosho farm centre. Other secondary sources of data include text books, journals and newspapers. The researcher consulted legal practitioners and non-governmental organizations that operate within the prisons. The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive and content analysis. The study adopted relative deprivation and frustration and aggression theories. *The* study revealed that high profile inmates spear head violence in Nigeria prison. Government negligence, deteriorating facilities and overcrowding caused inmates to protest. Poor prison management style and corrupt practices by prison officials equally led to prison violence. *The* study concluded that to achieve effective management of the prison and reduce prison violence, both the government and the prison management must take their responsibilities seriously. Prison officials must be trained adequately on how to prevent and manage prison violence constructively.

## Keywords

Negligence, Poor Management, Prison Violence, Nigeria

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## 1. Introduction

Conflicts are normal features of social life in every human society. The existence of conflict cannot be terminated in life unless one wants to terminate life itself. However, a poor handling of conflict could become violent or destructive which could hinder national peace and security. Since conflict is inevitable in every human society, what should

matter now is how to reduce and manage it effectively to achieve peaceful co-existence and sustainable peace in the society.

Prison houses are not too different from other human communities that often face some life posing challenges. In most circumstances, prison crises were staged to point out some lapses on the part of government to making life bearable to prison inmates. Among these lapses may include; overcrowding, lack of medical facilities and personnel, poor

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quality and quantity of food, poor ventilation, poor sanitation and incessant death among inmates. Most prisons in Nigeria have witnessed one form of violence or another.

The negligence by government and other lapses have portrayed Nigerian prisons to be backward and underdeveloped. The contemporary Nigeria Prison Service is a colonial creation. It came into being in 1861 (Alemika, 1992). This shows that Nigerian prisons were created to serve colonial administrative interests. These colonial interests such as forced labour and taxation were usually resisted by the people. This was the period when western-type prisons were established in Nigeria. At this stage, the pre-occupation of colonial government was to protect legitimate trade, guarantee the profit of British merchants as well as guarantee the activities of the missionaries. This prompted the establishment of police force and some courts in Lagos to realize this objective of protecting colonial interest. To this end, Broad street prison was established in 1872 to accommodate about three hundred (300) inmates.

Lord Lugard favoured the introduction of draconian penal method into the colony. He advised his officials to ensure that criminals were duly punished beyond the traditional or customary practices of restitution and reconciliation among the indigenes which he considered inadequate punishment to deter the people (Milner, 1972).

Today, the Nigeria Prison service runs over two hundred and twenty seven prisons with over forty thousand inmates, among which twenty five thousand are awaiting trial inmates and fifteen thousand convicted and with about twenty two thousand staff strength (Annual Report, 2011). According to Ohia, (2014), Nigeria prison is fast becoming a smoking dungeon, despite the so called efforts of the federal government for reforms.

The relevance of prison in any society is to punish, deter and reform convicted criminals in the society. The prison institution is therefore managed in such a way that makes it promote orderliness and peace by taking care of the "bad" elements within the society.

However, the prison in Nigeria has failed to realize the purpose for its establishment. Often times we are inundated with several prison violence and jail breaks that facilitates the escape of many prison inmates. Both the prison management and the government have continued to pay lip service to the problems of prison's overcrowding, deteriorating sanitation, poor nutrition, corruption and poor management styles.

The prison in Nigeria has come to serve as a mere breeding ground for criminals who are released to commit havoc to the society through a conspiracy between prison management and criminal gangs in Nigeria. This has jeopardized the

principle of rule of law, restorative and retributive justice. The nagging question now is what is the need to put criminals in the prison if they will eventually find their way back to the society by force? Why is the government seemingly overwhelmed by prison violence and jail breaks by inmates in Nigeria? What is the role of prison's management in managing prison violence in Nigeria? Do they have the capacity to curtail the menace of prison violence and jail breaks in Nigeria Prisons?

The general objective of this study is to examine the causes and effects of prison violence in Nigeria. The specific objectives include to;

1. Explain the causes of violence in Nigeria prisons
2. Document the effects of violence on prison staff, inmates and Nigeria prison as a whole.
3. Examine the conflict management style adopted in managing prison violence in Nigeria.
4. To suggest alternative conflict management style in Nigeria prisons

The increase in the number of inmates and out breaks of violence throughout the country's prisons requires a commensurate improvement in the management of conflict needed for an improved prison service in Nigeria. A mismanagement and inability to effectively prevent and control prison violence results to a disastrous consequences for both the prison system and the host community at large.

This study therefore will bring to the fore the deplorable conditions of Nigeria prisons and challenges confronting her managers towards realizing the objectives of its establishment in Nigeria. The effective running and management of prisons in Nigeria cannot occur in isolation of prison conditions, management competence and capabilities and governments political will to provide good governance to the Nigerian society.

This study therefore will provide the needed data on prison violence and suggests how to curb it in Nigeria.

Approval was obtained from the prison authorities before access to the inmates was allowed. Confidentiality of the inmates and their opinions were kept during and after the field work.

Inmates were not coerced in any way to take part in the study and they were allowed to discontinue willingly from the study at any time. They were not exploited or caused any harm by the researcher. The outcome of the study was made available to the prison management.

The study utilized both primary and secondary sources of data collection. The instruments of data collection were in-depth interview, non participant observation and prison

records and newspapers.

The study area was Agodi prison, one of Nigeria's prisons in Oyo state. The inmates, selected prison officials and traders around the prison constituted the study population for this study. This population represents both actors and witnesses of prison violence and jail breaks in Agodi prison. In addition to this, focus group discussion session was held for selected inmates of the prison.

## 2. Review of the Literature

The prison occupies a prominent place and bears enormous burden of penal administration in the society. It is responsible for the custody of final products in the criminal justice system (Ahire, 1995) and (Okunola, 1986).

Nigerian penal system is grounded on the philosophy of hard line criminal sanctioning attitudes towards the offender. This satisfies the administrative interests of the colonial masters who created it. The prison system in Nigeria cannot be treated in isolation from the entire criminal justice system in the country. Most of the challenges of overcrowding in Nigeria prisons were caused by the police and the courts.

When arrests were made by the police, sometimes inadequate investigations or corruptions on the part of the police leads to delayed prosecution and increase in awaiting trial inmates in the prison. When charged to court, the accused were often denied bail and when bail is granted, the conditions are usually difficult for the accused to meet. Even when trials take place and the accused were found guilty, judges prefer prison option in sentencing even to minor offences. It appears from the characteristics of the prison population in Nigeria that imprisonment has been over used as a means of punishment by the courts even in minor offences (Osibanjo and Kalu, 1990).

All these decisions and actions of the police and judges help to increase the prison population leading to overcrowding of the facilities. According to Alemika (1989), draconian punishments are unscientific and barbaric in nature and has failed to deter crime. Rather efficient investigation by the police and prompt punishment of the offender helps to deter others from engaging in crime.

Overcrowding creates serious problems for the management and staff of the Nigeria prisons. The Capacity of the prison has remained unchanged for more than two decades, while prison population continues to increase. For instance Agodi prison which was built with the capacity of three hundred and seventy four inmates now accommodates about nine hundred inmates (Ogundipe, 2011), (Okunola, 1986) and (Agaba, 2009).

So with the problems of overcrowding, other facilities and services within the prison are stretched making the prison environment and conditions very poor. These poor living conditions will make it difficult to effectively reform and rehabilitate prison inmates in Nigeria. This congestion and poor feeding and sanitation of the prison lead to disastrous consequences on health of the inmates and increase in death rate (Okuola, 1986) and (Agaba, 2009).

Factors found to be related to violence include pre-existing prisoner characteristics such as (prisoner age and gender); structural or situational factors (e.g., prison architecture and design; level of security); management practices (e.g., staffing models, staff skills and training, prison culture and management style); and outside environmental influences (e.g., political pressures on prison administrators; racial tensions). Poor prison management resulting in dysfunctional forms of control emerges as a major cause of interpersonal violence, and by implication modification of these practices (especially the removal of arbitrary coercive controls) is effective in reducing violence, (Okunola, 1986) and (Obioha 1995).

The study adopted a combination of Relative deprivation and frustration aggression theories. The relative deprivation theory describes the feelings of an individual who lacks the status or conditions that he thinks he should have in reference to what other person or groups have. It deals with the actor's perception of the discrepancy between their expectations and their value capacities. The theory is based on the assumption that men have potentials for aggression that could be translated in to collective violence. Such aggression could be innate, learned or deliberately engaged to demonstrate displeasure of perceived maltreatment. So when people are deprived, they become frustrated and their frustration leads to transfer of aggression. The prison staff and properties are usually targeted during prison riots.

## 3. Methodology

In this study, the study population included staff of Nigerian prison in Agodi prisons Oyo state, the Agodi prison inmates and members of the public who live and do business around the Agodi prisons area in Ibadan Oyo state.

Data was collected through primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include In-depth interviews (IDI), Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and non-participant observational method. The secondary sources of data include prison records and Newspaper publications. A total of 32 (IDI) was conducted with (19) Agodi prison staff, (5) members of the public who live and do business around the prison and (8) inmates in Oyo state prison. Seven (FGD) were conducted with the prison inmates, while non-participant observational

method was used to observe both prison staff and inmates within the prison environment.

The study was qualitative in nature and data was analyzed using descriptive and content analysis methods. Data were analyzed in the following themes;

1. Nature of prison violence.
2. Causes of prison violence (remote and immediate).
3. The impact of prison violence.
4. Management of prison violence.

## 4. Discussion

The prison violence is always a confrontation between inmates and staff. Most times the staff may not be connected with the source of frustrations, yet they receive most of the prison inmates' aggression. Describing the Agodi prison violence in 2007, one of the staff said,

*It was a real war. I have never witnessed such*

*In the history of my years of service.*

*Male IDI/Agodi Prison, 2013*

This shows the magnitude of prison violence. It was perceived as war usually between inmates and prison staff. It is important to note that the dimension of a prison violence would take is largely dependent on the prison population and the nature of deprivations inmate were subjected to. The condition of the prison yard could also increase or reduce the level and nature of violence in prisons.

It is equally pertinent to note that the characteristics of the inmates equally affect the nature of violence in prisons. High profile inmates with strong economic and political influences play pivotal roles in prison violence in Nigeria. They command a lot of influence on their followers both within and outside the prison yard. Such inmates usually spear head a bloody and fatal prison protests. This view was corroborated by a prison staff who said,

*Usually we are used to protests in the prison*

*But the one in 2007 was very violent in nature because*

*Criminal elements with strong political connections*

*Planned and executed it*

*Male/IDI/Oyo prison, 2013.*

This point was also supported by one inmate during the FGD section, who said,

*The main reason for the 2007 protest was to draw attention*

*To our poor conditions but some inmates saw it as an*

*avenue*

*Escape, others used it to revenge on staff while others used it*

*Destroy and loot prison property.*

*FGD/ Agodi prison/2013*

This shows that the condition of the prison could influence the nature of prison violence. Where the conditions are poor any little protest triggers more violence on both staff and prison properties. In the 2007 Agodi prison violence, it was discovered that lack of medical facilities and personnel to take good care of inmates resulted into the deaths among inmates which fueled the violence in that prison. Other inmates were agitated at the level of neglect and abandonment of the sick among them by the government and prison authority.

Prison violence may not be too different from other violence among free individuals and groups. Denial of human wants may result into violent conflict especially if those wants were enjoyed before. In the case of 2007 crisis in Agodi prison, it was discovered that the inmates enjoyed lots of freedom from 2002 to 2006. The prison management stopped these freedoms and wanted to implement prison rules strictly to the letter. An inmate from the FGD section said:

*Life was made better in the prison before*

*You can get whatever you want inside the cell*

*Inmate/FGD/ Agodi prison/2013*

Another inmate in the same FGD section narrated his experiences before the 2007 crisis thus:

*At least we were free to eat and drink whatever we wanted*

*Even we used to decide when to be inside or outside the cell*

*If you settle the warden you are free to do any thing*

*Inmate/FGD/Agodi prison /2013.*

This shows that the management of the prison yard was porous and aided other corrupt tendencies. This compromised atmosphere made it difficult for discipline and control to be achieved in the prison yard.

In the opinion of a prison staff during the IDI section:

*The way this yard was ran before 2007*

*Contributed immensely to the violent crisis*

*That eventually erupted among the inmates*

*Prison staff/IDI/Agodi prison/2013.*

In his view another prison staff said:

*You see, prior to 2007, the inmates were made*

*To feel at home. They were not harassed any how*

*Prison staff/IDI/Agodi prison/2013.*

This shows that withdrawing benefits or advantages given to inmates legally or illegally may compel them to rebel against prison authority. A period between 2002- 2006 experienced a loose administration, where inmates were made king so that the prison yard may be peaceful. While 2007 period was a period of tight administration for strict reformation of the inmates. The report below gives clear illustration of this point:

*Immediately the man reported all the staff*

*That have taken trafficking as normal business*

*Were transferred away from the yards. The inmates*

*Were reclassified in line with their offences and age*

*Sanity and discipline were made to return into yard.*

*Male/IDI/Agodi prison/2013.*

The point raised above showed a sharp difference between two administration and administrators. One believed peace can only be achieved in the prison when inmates were made to feel at home, while the other believed it is only discipline that can bring peace to the yard.

Another point that was noted to have contributed immensely to prison violence is the general conditions of the prison yard. It was discovered that most Nigerian prisons lacked functional medical facilities, adequate personnel, electricity, water and proper ventilation. A prison staff supported this position by saying:

*If you want to clearly capture the causes of the crisis, you would*

*Need to imagine what the yard looked like then. You could imagine*

*A situation where resources that is meant for three people is being*

*Struggled over by ten people. you could imagine the condition of*

*Health of one hundred and twenty inmates in a room meant for only*

*Twenty five inmates. And how would you describe a situation where there*

*Is no drug to administer on a sick inmate or what do you think would happen*

*To an inmate who has never appeared in court for once since his arrest?*

*Male/IDI/Agodi prison/2013.*

This paints a picture of gross neglect and total abandonment by the government and the prison's administrators. According to the standard minimum rule for the treatment of prisoners of 1977 section 9 (i);

*Each prisoner shall occupy by night a cell or room by himself*

*If for special reasons such as temporary overcrowding, it became*

*Necessary for the central prison administration to make an exception*

*To this rule; it is not desirable to have two prisoners in a cell or a room*

The rule went ahead to state in section 20 (1&2) that:

*"Every prisoner shall be provided by the administration*

*At the usual hours with food of nutritional value adequate*

*For health and strength of wholesome quality and well*

*Prepared and served"*

The above quotations shows that the rules set up for peaceful prison administration were existing only on paper and were a far cry from the existing realities in prison yards in Nigeria.

Prison violence leaves in its wake enormous destruction of prison facilities, death of inmates and officials, and damage of properties and businesses within the immediate prison environment.

In the case of the 2007 riot in Agodi, the *North Korea Times* (2007) report below captures its effect on inmates.

*"...as inmates protested against poor medical service, eight*

*Inmates were killed and at least eighteen were wounded after prisoners tried to break out of jail"*

Other effects may be on the destruction of prison properties, rape or attempt to rape. In the case of Agodi prison Ibadan, where the female yard can easily be accessed from the male yard, there were reported incidents of rape.

When the question of rape came up, one of the IDI male interviewee said,

*"They broke into the female yard and attempted to rape some female*

*Staff. We could not actually ascertain if their mission was carried*

*Out or not, for everybody was running for his/her dear life"*

*Male/IDI/Agodi prison, Ibadan (2013).*

This may not be possible in prisons like maximum and

medium security prison Kirikiri Lagos, where there is a separate yard for both the female and male prisoners. The quotation above shows how weak the security arrangement within Agodi prison was and how vulnerable the female staffs were in times of crisis.

The violence affected businesses around the Agodi prison negatively. An online report had this to say;

*“Commercial activities at Ajibade shopping centre, a shopping complex*

*That shields the prison yard from public glance, reduced to the lowest.*

*Traders from Agodi gate iron market adjacent the prison yard and motor*

*Parks around the area closed down and formed cluster of group of onlookers”*

*www.onlinenigeria.com (accessed 16/9/2013)*

The above report shows how conflict spreads outside the prison yard and affects other economic activities within and around the prison yard.

The management and control of prison violence should go beyond what happens in the yard and strive to curtail the activities of other individuals or groups who do business around the prison. These outsiders could fuel the violence if not restricted by the security operatives during riots.

It has to be noted here that the Nigerian prison system was a colonial creation. It was created to serve the administrative desires of the Colonial masters. So the prison in Nigeria in philosophy and training orientations was established to punish inmates and maximize the use of force to control and manage them. This militaristic approach should be dropped for a more service-driven and people-oriented management style.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

As observed from this study, prison violence is mostly consequential effects of poor prison management and government neglect. Corruption in the entire criminal justice system takes its toll in the management of prison inmates. It manifests in prison congestion, poor conditions of cells and yard premises, poor health care and nutrition. Apart from these, the prison officials ought to be disciplined in their conduct and undergo regular training on conflict management. High profile inmate influence prison officials and inmates negatively.

From the findings of this study, it is imperative to

recommend the following;

1. The basic and fundamental needs of the inmates should be provided by the government.
2. Community services and other alternative dispute resolution methods should be adopted for minor offences so as to reduce overcrowding in Nigerian prisons.
3. The prison should be seen as one of the important social institutions in the society and therefore adequate funding should be provided for it to run properly.
4. The training, motivation and discipline of prison inmates should not be ignored if we are to realize the objectives and rationale for having prisons in society.
5. Militaristic management style should be replaced a more service oriented and humane management style in Nigerian prisons.
6. High profile and political inmates should be monitored so that they will not yield undue negative influence on both officials and inmates in the prison

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