



FROM PROBLEM TO SOLUTION: THE ROLE OF FADEYI, MUSHIN AND OJUELEGBA AREA BOYS IN LAGOS' COVID-19 LOCKDOWN INSECURITY

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Abstract: The history of pandemic outbreaks is replete with disruptions that resonate beyond the immediate realm of health and wellness. The outbreak of COVID-19 triggered unprecedented consequences across the world. In parts of Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital, compulsorily enforced lockdown, alongside the void created by inadequate policing, caused widespread insecurity and crimes linked to so-called "one million boys". Traditionally, the menace of area boyism is rife in Lagos and extant literature has focused on the groups' acrimonious history of violence, extortion and crime. This paper examines the nexus between COVID-19 lockdown, rampant insecurity and area boys' interventions in Fadeyi, Mushin and Ojuelegba areas of Lagos. It argues that, despite their flawed reputation, area boys became instrumental in residents' search for an unconventional solution to rising crime rates in Lagos in line with the popular Yoruba saying: "Olè ló mọ ẹṣẹ olè tọ" (it is a thief that knows how to catch another thief). The study draws from a number of sources – archival materials, in-depth fieldwork, and secondary materials and adopts the qualitative and descriptive research method. Its finding indicates that COVID-19 lockdown in Lagos State did not only stimulate widespread insecurity and criminal activities, but also prompted unconventional security intervention from the most unlikely sources. It concludes that the sheer degree of energy currently being misapplied by area boys can be harnessed to further the course of national development in several crucial areas.

Keywords: area boys, awawa boys, COVID-19, Lagos, one million boys.



INTRODUCTION

Pandemic outbreaks are not a new phenomenon. Indeed, humanity across several eras has witnessed the constant occurrence of global health emergencies (Njoku, Osiki 2022: 133). Outbreaks often had as many consequences on social, commercial, security, political and everything else, as it usually had on health. The socio-economic and political disruptions that often accompanied pandemic outbreaks exert overwhelming pressure and social dislocations that resonate beyond the immediate realm of health and wellness. COVID-19 outbreak and its subsequent global spread was just as much a problem of everything else as it was a health one. Across the globe, the unprecedented measures implemented by governments to manage the spread of the virus had a devastating impact on the people (Bradford et al. 2020; Dai, Xia, Han, 2021; Ojedokun 2021). This resulted in acute shortage of food and essential needs, domestic spousal abuse, insecurity (Onuoha, Ezirim, Onuh 2021; Shodunke 2022), income and job losses and further compounded socioeconomic deprivation not only in rural areas but also among the urban poor. According to the Global Peace Index report (2021), global unrest and political insecurity rose by a significant margin following the outbreak. In Sub-Saharan Africa for instance, political and security problems linked to the outbreak were rife (Institute for Economics and Peace – IEP 2021: 20; Akanmu et al. 2021: 215). This is largely because the absence of social security of any form in many countries in the region made them unprepared to cope with the socioeconomic fallout of the pandemic. These conditions weakened poor communities and gave rise to urban crimes as a coping mechanism and survivalist strategy in the face of a biting new normal.

The Global Peace Index report further revealed the state of things in Nigeria. It ranked Nigeria among the eight least safe and peaceful countries in the world during the pandemic (Institute for Economics and Peace – IEP 2021: 43). This ranking is a manifestation of the endemic state of socioeconomic and security problems which Nigeria and indeed Lagos has grappled with for decades (Emordi, Osiki 2008: 95-109). Lagos has traditionally been Nigeria's leading cosmopolitan

centre and commercial capital. With an estimated population of 20 million inhabitants, the city holds national, regional and international significance. The discovery of Nigeria's COVID-19 index case in Ogun State on 27th February 2020 brought into sharp focus the reality of urban poverty, poor medical facilities, pervasive insecurity and overstrained infrastructure in Lagos. For instance, the void created by inadequate policing brought to the fore the perennial fundamental weaknesses of the city's security system. Consequently, these factors made Lagos extremely susceptible to criminal activities arising from the impacts of COVID-19 particularly in neighbourhoods where population density and its cosmopolitan mix created a constant army of social actors and unemployed youth engaged in social vices of multiple forms.

Therefore, many parts of Lagos witnessed widespread insecurity and crimes linked to groups such as "one million boys", "awawa boys" and others (Thomas-Odia et al. 2021; Akanmu 2023 et al.; Balogun, Abdullateef, Adeoye 2023). This paper uses Fadeyi, Mushin and Ojuelegba as a case study to examine and analyse the nexus between COVID-19 lockdown, rampant insecurity and area boys' interventions in those neighbourhoods. How did these besieged neighbourhoods deal with insecurity of the COVID-19 era? What role did area boys play in securing those neighbourhoods?

Though scholars across several fields and eras have drawn attention to the menace of area boyism in Lagos, none has adequately addressed the positivism that can be drawn from the energy they have persistently misapplied. While extant literature has traditionally focused on violence, vandalization of infrastructure, extortion and petty crimes as well as other vices often linked to area boys, I argue that area boys are what the society makes of them. This work challenges the traditional presentation of area boys as people who are only capable of undertaking criminal or violent activities, by arguing that they are capable of making positive contributions as much as they can socially destruct and distort. Consequently, an important outcome of this study is to draw attention of stakeholders to the fact that area boys can be reorientated, rehabilitated and lured back to sanity with a combination of carrot and stick approach. The security role they anchored in the study area



can be used as a springboard. It is therefore my hope that this article will steer serious interest in addressing the problems of out-of-school children, loose parenting, street children, youth unemployment and other factors largely responsible for deviant youth culture in Lagos.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts the conventional historical method and is descriptive and the analytical in nature. The study is based on data collected from participant observation, and authentic primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include oral interviews, newspaper reports, government publications and archival materials. Oral interviews are based on fieldwork conducted between March 2020 and May 2022 in three communities – Fadeyi, Mushin and Ojuelegba – in Mainland, Mushin and Surulere Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Lagos State. A total of 50 respondents were interviewed, including traditional rulers, community leaders, Community Development Associations (CDA) officials, residents, Police officers and area boys, residing or working in Fadeyi, Mushin and Ojuelegba areas. The criteria for eligibility for interview are that the participant must have lived or worked in the community for a minimum of 5 year. This is due to my prioritisation of local knowledge and awareness of the study area.

The oral interview questions were administered both as semi-structured (to allow for in-depth probing) and Key Informant Interview (KII) basis, with duration ranging between 45 minutes to 1 hour. In addition, secondary data sources such as textbooks, journal articles and relevant internet materials were also used. Data derived from both primary and secondary sources were collated, carefully analysed and interpreted to gain better insight on the extent of area boys' multi-layered engagement at the grassroots. The juxtaposition of the various data from primary and secondary sources provides means of verifying the authenticity of available data and information.

SCHOLARLY LITERATURE ON URBANIZATION, PUBLIC HEALTH AND AREA BOYISM IN LAGOS

Literature on the growth of metropolitan Lagos from a set of scattered fishing and farming settlements on the Atlantic coast, impact of health pandemics and the subsequent emergence in it, of urban touts popularly called area boys abound. Prominent literature on urbanization in Lagos includes the works of many scholars (Baker 1974; Abiodun 1974; Aderibigbe 1979; Barnes 1986; Peil 1991; Aworawo 2004; Falola, Salm 2004). Baker's work highlighted the socio-political growth of Lagos and how migrants arriving from everywhere impacted the city. The author argued that Lagos faced several challenges associated with urban explosion, including rising crime rate, infrastructural problem, housing deficit, traffic congestion and pervasive unemployment (Baker 1974: 22). Relatedly, Aderibigbe explored the history of Lagos' founders, migrants and settlers, and other historical events that influenced the emergence of cosmopolitan Lagos. In general, Aderibigbe explored multiple aspects of Lagos history, and following in the footsteps of Bakar, examined in detail some urban problems confronting Lagos (Aderibigbe 1979: 17). Peil on her part adequately explored the problems and opportunities that shaped some aspects of the lives of Lagos residents. The work discusses the pull factors that make Lagos the choice destination for many Nigerians (Peil 1991:67). Aworawo critically investigates the growth of Lagos population in the 1940s and 1950s and how the pattern of conflicts between indigenes and immigrants emerged (Aworawo 2004: 271-289).

In another work, Falola and Salm examine the development of Lagos with reference to the growth of Nigeria's population (Falola, Salm 2004). In the same vein, Abiodun explored the growth and problems faced by urban Lagos. It describes the accelerated demographic growth of Lagos since the end of World War II and the accompanying challenges of urbanisation (Abiodun 1974: 341-347). Like Bakar, the works of Aderibigbe, Peil, Aworawo, and Falola did not pay attention to the emergence of other settlements and criminal activities beyond the traditional area of Lagos Island. The first study that explored the emergence and transformation of areas such as Fadeyi,



Ojuelegba, and Mushin is the work of Barnes. Specifically, Barnes highlights the growth of Mushin as a separate settlement from the pre-colonial era. Barnes' work provides a clear understanding of the mutually reinforcing relationships between Lagos and Mushin starting from 1861 to the modern era but failed to highlight the emergence of youth touting and crimes (Barnes 1986: 124). Although Falola's work provided a general overview of crime and professional thieves in colonial Lagos (Falola, Salm 2004: 286), specific analyses of areas such as Fadeyi, Ojuelegba, and Mushin were lacking. In addition, the now entrenched culture of youth touting and criminal activities linked to area boys were also not covered. Hence, the purpose of the current study is to fill these gaps in literature.

There is a growing literature on the subject matter of public health and the impact of epidemics and pandemics outbreaks on Lagos. Prominent works include (Brown 1992; Oluwasegun 2015; Faleye 2018). Brown explains the salient issues surrounding the challenges occasioned by inadequate water supply, management of defecation, public convenience, and overall sanitation and environmental issues that confronted Lagos from 1850 to 1900. He argues that indigenes, returnees and colonial officials reacted differently to the prevailing health problems and the sanitary reforms intended to make Lagosians healthier (Brown 1992: 345). Drawing attention to the impact and management of public health emergence in colonial Lagos, Oluwasegun examines the outbreak of influenza epidemic in Lagos in 1918-1919. It argues that British reactions to the outbreak in the form of fresh sanitary and medical policies that impacted variously on the local population (Oluwasegun 2015: 412-424). Arguing from the same point of view, Faleye highlights the impact of plague on maritime trade in Lagos from 1924-1931. Faleye believes that public health interventions in Lagos impacted on local commerce and maritime trade (Faleye 2015: 287-301).

As regards the impact of COVID-19 on Lagos and its residents, Mogaji and Human Rights Watch (HRW) provide explorative analyses from transportation and economy points of view (Mogaji 2020; Ewang, Wormington, Maki 2021). While Mogaji focuses on the immediate and long-term effect of the pandemic on residents and poor transportation infrastructure



in Lagos, HRW on the other hand highlighted the plight of urban poor across Lagos whose means of livelihood suffered greatly in the wake of the unprecedented lockdown restrictions (Mogaji 2020: 2-8; Ewang, Wormington, Maki 2021: 4-13). Both studies agreed that urban poor were mostly at the receiving end of lockdown restrictions. In spite of these, none of the literature addressed the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on security and area boys, nor their role in addressing it. The current study fills this gap.

Literature on crime, gangsterism, extortion and other related vices often linked to area boys in Lagos abounds. Literature in this category was written to establish in historical terms the emergence and activities of touts, street urchins and gangs in metropolitan Lagos. In the first instance, scholars such as Fattah, Agboola, Alemika, and Osifodunrin adequately examine the nature, geography and class of perpetrators of urban crimes and violence in Lagos (Fattah 1989; Agboola 1997; Alemika 1997; Osifodunrin 2013). Fattah's work explores the factors that aid and attract criminals to individuals of certain social background, lifestyle and environment (Fattah 1989: 70–72). Closely related is the argument of Agbola who describes the state of poor urban planning in Lagos and how it aids the perpetration of violence and crime (Agboola 1997: 27). Alemika on the other hand highlights how armed robbery, murder, rape, homicide, burglary and other violent crimes resonate across Lagos (Alemika 1997: 72-95). On his part, Osifodunrin explains the kidnapping boom in Lagos. He describes the widespread involvement of indigenes and strangers in the perpetration of kidnapping and ritual killings in Ikorodu, Lagos in the late colonial period (Osifodunrin 2013: 1-16). Relatedly, other scholars (Ugwuibe, Onah, Jennifer 2022) highlighted the widespread socio-economic challenges and insecurity in Nigeria during COVID-19 pandemic and the policy gap that undermined the performance of security outfits. This condition further exacerbated insecurity, especially in poor neighbourhoods.

Other relevant works, particularly those focusing on tout-ing, youth delinquency, and urban violence among youths in Lagos include the contributions of Emordi, Fourchard, Uyieh, and Ikoumola, Aderinan, Okunola and Heap (Emordi 2005; Fourchard 2006; Ikoumola, Aderinan, Okunola, Heap 2009;

Uyieh 2018). Both Emordi and Fourchard in their historical works highlight the emergence of juvenile delinquency and urban touting in Lagos (Emordi 2005: 65-66). Specifically, Fourchard's study, which focuses on the colonial era, unpacks the main features that underpinned crime linked to youth (Fourchard 2006: 122). Ikuomola et al.'s study highlights the history, sustaining factors and negative impacts of urban touts in Lagos. It stresses the impact of Lagos transportation unions as well as the patronage of politicians on the continuous existence of area boys. Focusing on Shomolu LGA, Uyieh's study traces the fundamental activities of area boys in Shomolu since its creation in 1976 (Uyieh 2018: 324). Whereas Fourchard's study focuses on the colonial period, Ikuomola et al., Emordi and Uyieh's works left some historical work undone, especially with respect to the distinctiveness of area boys in Fadeyi, Mushin and Ojuelegba. In general, the lacuna in these works however is that they paid little attention to area boyism in Fadeyi, Mushin and Ojuelegba, for only casual allusion is made to the study area. The current work thus devotes scholarly attention to these understudied Lagos communities with thriving culture of area boysim, particularly with regard to their nuisance value during COVID-19 lockdown.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the theoretical footing of subcultural theory and structural functional theory (also known as functionalism). Subcultural theory suggests the emergence, within a broader culture of a delinquent culture (subculture) shared and popularised by a deviant minority. Such groups are shaped by deviant behaviour, shared norms and distinct values that are different from the normal societal culture and values (Cohen, 1955: 133). Delinquent behaviour such as burglary, theft, rape, extortion, violence may arise when youth are pressured to conform to the norms of a deviant subculture. Cohen describes the emergence of subculture and gangs as reaction to dissatisfaction by the weak, socially marginalised and lower-class adolescents who see it as a means of gaining recognition among their contemporaries (Cohen, 1957: 785). This, in due

course becomes a normalised way of showing frustration birthed by poverty, social marginalisation and inequality. In this connection, area boysim in Lagos represents a dangerous subculture that diverges from the norms of the broader Nigerian culture. Thus there is sufficient evidence that this subculture is linked to the crimes that area boys perpetrate in many Lagos communities. The application of this theory can help in illustrating the delinquent subculture that resonates in extortion, violence and crime, which shapes the behaviour of area boys in Lagos, Nigeria (Uyieh 2018: 328). Hence, addressing fundamental grievances that entrenched deviance culture is key to the eradication of area boyism in Lagos.

Also, functionalism is a framework that focuses on societal structure – the ordering of institutions, roles and norms ascribed to them – and the contributions they make to the continuous existence of the society. The theory likens the composition of society to the human biological system with interconnected and indispensable parts that are intended to play important roles individually and collectively. Functionalism emerged through the postulation of Émile Durkheim and was further refined by the theoretical contributions of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and others (Singer 1984: 86; Pope 1975: 366). According to its proponents, the underlying assumption of functionalism is that a social change in societal structure may result in tension within the society. Here, the functionalism is relevant to the current study as it offers an explanation for the deviant behaviour of youth and the disorder it constitutes in many parts Lagos. It can therefore be inferred that the emergence of a sub-cultural delinquent system underpinning area boyism has resulted in tension between it and the broader culture. This has thus hindered the natural flow of common values, norms and institutions that hitherto hold the society together.

While these theoretical perspectives are indeed invaluable, the current study provides a broader understanding of the disorder that area boyism constitutes to Lagos' social system and the positives that can be drawn from their enlistment into the broader culture and integrated social system. This is because, I argue, that Area Boys are a creation of necessity and a product of social configuration. Thus they are capable of making a positive contribution to national development in different spheres

if their delinquent and dysfunctional social system is reengineered through adaptation that reroute them back to what Durkheim called the “collective conscience”.

THE STUDY AREA AND THE DELIQUENT YOUTH CULTURE

Lagos by the second half of the twentieth century had emerged as one of the most urbanised cities in Africa. This rapid urbanisation created a Lagos in which ethnic and cultural diversity was well-entrenched. Thus, over several decades, the city has had to contend with the emergence of crime and delinquency, congestion, insecurity, youth unemployment and other social problems that are premised as the direct fallout of its urbanisation (Aworawo 2004: 278; Uyieh 2018: 326). While these problems are ever-present across the city, some neighbourhoods are more reputedly known to exude the most hazardous vices.

The class framing of Mainland and Island dichotomy shapes Lagos. Geographically, Fadeyi, Mushin and Ojuelegba are located in Shomolu, Mushin and Surulere LGAs in the Mainland half of the state respectively. Their development, like most Mainland metropolises, was a result of the waves of migration into new settlements created following the legal expansion of Lagos’ jurisdiction to cover Ebute Metta, Yaba and other areas in 1911, 1927 and 1950 respectively (Sada, Adefolalu 1975: 85). In the same vein, Lagos’ predominance as the centre of commerce, administration and industry also intensified the influx of migrants seeking greater employment opportunities in the city and settling in those new areas (Fourchard 2006: 124). Expectedly, these three overlapping neighbourhoods have over several decades grown to occupy pre-eminent position in the political, economic and socio-cultural character of urban Lagos.

The history of contemporary Lagos is not complete, therefore, without a mention of Ojuelegba for instance. This is illustrated by its place in the annals of the city’s cultural, social (nightlife), religious and modern transportation connectivity. In this regard, Ojuelegba has been described as one of Lagos



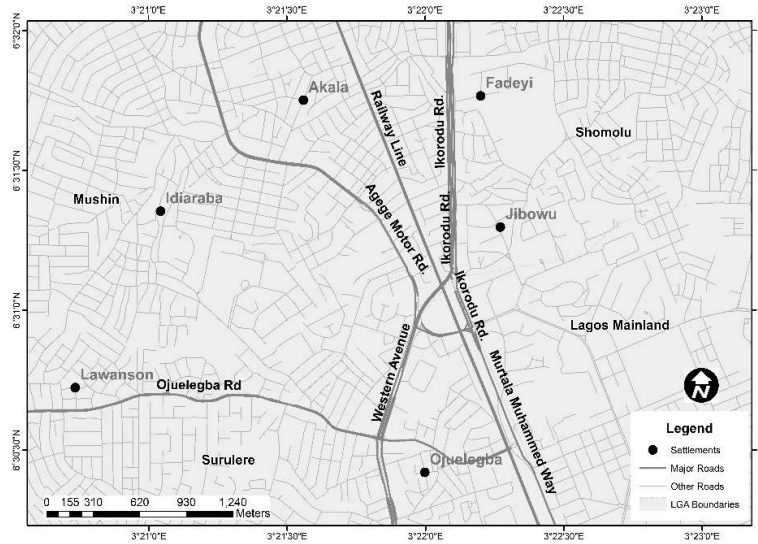


Fig. 1: Map showing the study area. Source: Samuel Udofia, Geography Department, University of Lagos.

Mainland's most popular and centralised transport hubs and notorious neighbourhoods. As Weate and Yusuf (1998: 332) noted, Ojuelegba was originally known as Ojubo-Elegbara (the place of worship of Elegbara) and a major centre of the indigenous Awori traditional worship. Due to rapid urbanisation, the once separate town and sacred site of Esu deity has become an integral part of Lagos metropolitan area and expansive community in Surulere LGA with persistent incidences of crime and violence linked to street urchins. Like Ojuelegba, Mushin has had a long history of traditional and social relevance and connection with Lagos. Although for a long period, it was a separate settlement in the pre-colonial era, a consistent pattern of mutually beneficial cultural and commercial interactions resulted in its integration into the broader Lagos territory by the early period of colonialism (Barnes 1986: 11-20). As Barnes further testifies, one immediate consequence of Mushin's incorporation into Lagos was the onset of its transformation from an essentially rural settlement dotted with a group of villages, to becoming part of the early

urbanisation of Lagos. Thus from the onset of colonial period to the current era of overwhelming urbanisation, Mushin has served as a pivotal centre of residential, industrial and commercial convergence in metropolitan Lagos.

Nevertheless, some historic realities that have plagued its identity are located in its being a disorganised, dirty and crime-infested neighbourhood. These phenomena, which have been amplified in recent years by poor planning, deepened urban poverty and growing inequality, have coalesced to create a dreaded reputation of Mushin that has been difficult to erase. On its part, Fadeyi is a notorious densely populated neighbourhood in Shomolu LGA. Like most parts of Lagos Mainland, it is located in central Lagos. Its strategic location on both sides of the ever-busy Ikorodu road, an important Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) corridor and hub of thriving local business, makes it one of the most conspicuous neighbourhoods in Shomolu. Its history of incorporation into Lagos is also located in the expansion of the city beyond the Island area (Sada, Adefolalu 1975: 80-83). Fadeyi and other parts of Shomolu are unplanned, congested, dirty and largely uncontrolled settlements.

Collectively, the areas are connected by a network of major highways, intercity roads and a vast array of street linkages. In the same vein, the Lagos-Kano railway line, making its way from Ebute Meta and Yaba, linked the three neighbourhoods on its way to Ikeja and Abeokuta. In addition, the areas are interdependent in a number of ways. For instance, the existence of markets, shopping centres, places of worship, fun centres, cultural and religious festivals all over these communities has drawn them into a deep wave of mutually reinforcing relationships with one another. In the area of language, like other suburbs in Lagos, Yoruba, English, pidgin English and other Nigerian languages are majorly spoken. These languages aid communication among the diverse group of persons from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds who mostly populate the areas. Though there is lack of comprehensive statistics on the actual population of the areas, figures from the 2006 census put the population of Shomolu, Mushin and Surulere LGAs where the study area is domiciled at 403, 569; 631, 857; and 502, 865 respectively (National Population Commission –



NPC 2006). Recent projections have however put the population at much higher figures. It is thus unarguable that the three neighbourhoods are densely populated.

From the late 1970s, Ojuelegba, Mushin and Fadeyi, like other suburbs, became popular and notorious for different reasons. It is generally believed that, apart from being faced with poor infrastructure and sanitation, widespread poverty, and housing challenge, several Lagos slums rank undeniably high in crime and unimaginable violence linked to deviant youths. This is not a new development. Indeed, archival materials and studies on crime in Lagos since the colonial period have shown an overwhelming involvement of sundry youth gangs and street urchins in the perpetration of crimes and violence clandestinely and openly (Fourchard 2006: 126; Emordi 2005: 66).

In the study area, these acts often involved delinquent youths known as area boys. Basically, the area boys phenomenon comprises male miscreants (and girls sometimes), street urchins and touts, often between the ages of 12 and 45 years, of a specified community (area) that are jobless (either as a result of failing to find job or are not willing to be employed despite being able and healthy) (O. Ouljimi, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 2 May 2022). According to Latilo, many factors often integrate in the making of area boys. He identifies breakdown of social norms, parental failure and loose guardianship, peer pressure, rural-urban migration and lack of opportunities for youths. Relatedly, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, blamed a “complex dynamic of socio-economic deprivation” for widespread youth delinquency in Lagos (Integrated Regional Information Networks – IRIN News 2005). This also resonates with the findings of Donald Faulkner, the colonial welfare officer, who in 1941 conducted a comprehensive inquiry into the activities of jaguda boys and boma boys in Lagos¹. With regard to area boys, one can argue that years of socioeconomic deprivation, neglect and negative identity have conditioned them to think of themselves as a group besieged and victims of a collective societal injustice. So, for them, area boyism emanates from the mentality of victimhood and the search for survival from systematic disempowerment that places them at a great disadvantage.



Like most deviant individuals and groups, area boys in Fadeyi, Mushin and Ojuelegba do not conform to the generally acceptable behavioural norms (Police officer 1, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 22 September 2020). Without any recognizable means of livelihood, they are often wild and weaponise violence. These fundamental deviant features and violence ingrained in them palpable resentment towards the society and security agencies. In addition, their assemblage often follows recruitment of impressionable, loyal and vulnerable boys within an area by kingpins, and mending them into a formidable delinquent unit. Their overriding interest often rests in extortion, harassment, pickpocketing, petty theft, exploitation and vandalism directed at residents, businesses, hawkers, cart pushers, commuters, government properties or truck drivers and car owners whose vehicle breakdown on the highway, etc. (O. Ahmed, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 22 September 2020).

Beyond outright extortion, area boys are masters of what the UN office on drugs called “coercive and persuasive requests”, or subtle cajoling, particularly, when dealing with persons of higher status and means. This is aimed at extracting monetary gifts from strangers just as they monetise any assistance rendered. Thus most area boys I interviewed during field trips generally demanded incentives as compensation for information given². Their years of exposure to the difficult life on the street entrench in them, the culture of touting, weaponisation of violence as a means of negotiation as well as a high likelihood of getting involved in crimes and drugs (O. Latilo, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 20 January 2022). In addition, they also adjudicate on matters brought before them, help recover debt and resolve marital issues (when invited), etc (S. Oke, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 12 May 2021).

In terms of organisation, area boys, internally, follow a rigidly structured ordering of men and resources that portray strength and sophistication and are devoid of external interference. Leadership thus generally follows the top-bottom approach and resonates in service, loyalty and reward. In addition, they are territorial in nature and have deep knowledge of their crammed domain, adjourning neighbourhoods and economic status of residents. Apart from this, like formal security agencies, they have well-coordinated spying networks that alert



members of impending rival attacks, raids by security agents or even the presence on the highway of a broken-down vehicle whose owner is to be extorted or robbed as the case may be (G. Emmanuel, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 28 November 2021). Hence, area boys often surface within five minutes of a vehicle breakdown on Ikorodu Road, Western Avenue or Agege Motor road to demand protection fees.

Like their counterparts across Lagos, most area boys in the study area live on the street – under bridges, abandoned or uncompleted buildings, shanties, abandoned vehicles and just anywhere good enough to offer shelter from rain and sun (Y. Olagunju, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 17 December 2021). In the study area, their most prominent abodes include under Ojuelegba and Dorman bridges on Ikorodu Road, shanties along the rail line and abandoned vehicles and buildings across the three neighbourhoods. For instance, the rail lines that run through these neighbourhoods serve as informal abodes that harbour different clusters of area boys who erect shanties in what they regard as “no man’s land” (O. Latilo, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 20 January 2022). Expectedly, several nefarious activities ranging from pickpocketing, rape and outright armed robbery, particularly during late hours, take place in these areas. Although security agencies raid identified black spots whenever violence linked to street boys blow over, the majority of these areas are, however, ungoverned spaces, or at best, jointly governed by the government and area boys. This triangular model of grey governance in practice here is such that it allows the political class to leverage on area boys’ local influence and network to attain or retain political power and then yield certain areas to them in a shared governance structure with the people at the receiving end³. Additionally, this longstanding mutually reinforcing synergy has often led to the ascendancy of highly connected touts into formal influential positions where they are either employed as aids to politicians or appointed into government agencies⁴. Many, with elementary education often secure jobs into state paramilitary outfits such as the Lagos State Waste Management Agency (LAWMA), the Lagos State Traffic Management Authority (LASTMA), or the Lagos Neighbourhood Watch (LNW), but



a stack majority of the boys are permanently engaged to powerful politicians as political thugs who are used to perpetrate electoral violence during elections (Heap 2009: 57).

Consequently, residents and the society in general are usually at the receiving end of area boys activities. Apart from extortion and other exploitative acts targeted at them, regular squabble, power tussle, as well as intra and inter group clashes, during which cutlasses, knives, broken bottles and other dangerous weapons are freely used, have often left residents at the centre of danger, leading to loss of lives and properties in many cases (Fattah 1989: 70–72; Uyieh 2018). There are also cases of movement restriction to which residents are subjected whenever the government imposes curfew due to gang violence. For example, during field interviews, Joel Okechukwu cited several cases of curfews imposed on Fadeyi and its environs in 2000, 2008 and 2014 and how they impacted negatively on residents' economic wise (J. Okechukwu, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 12 October 2021) Notwithstanding these levels of discomfort, fieldwork shows that the feeling of many residents towards area boys is purely that of sympathy and empathy.

It must be mentioned that area boys is a broad categorisation that can encompass other variants of dangerous urban gangs in Lagos. In most cases, agbero and cultists have also been categorised under the umbrella of “area boyism”. Though different, there is a thin line between these groups in terms of membership, idiosyncrasy and philosophy. This explains why they often have overlapping membership as belonging to one often qualifies and predisposes an individual to others. This has thus created a situation where an area boy also becomes an agbero (a member of a transport union) and may also belong to a cult group at the same time. A number of factors are responsible for this complex pattern of street gang membership in these areas. First, belonging to only one of these groups, places a fundamental limitation not only on accruable daily income, but influence and respect a tout can attract. Second, belonging to a cult group for instance confers protection and fear factor, on a tout more than an ordinary tag of area boy would do. Therefore, across these neighbourhoods, there are sophisticated gang leaders with influence transcending different spectrums⁵.

It must be noted that in all their violence and delinquency notwithstanding, area boys convey some sense of security in an unsecured and volatile neighbourhood or slum. This is because their knowledge of crime psychology, geographical setting and information on prospective thieves give them an edge in local security matters (R. O. Branson, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 20 May 2022). This attribute would later prove invaluable to residents of Ojuelegba, Mushin and Fadeyi during COVID-19 lockdown insecurity.

ACTORS IN LAGOS COVID-19 LOCKDOWN INSECURITY

Lagos has habitually been faced with the challenge of rampant gang-based crimes and violence that have often overwhelmed its badly-equipped and somewhat inefficient security system (Fourchard 2006; Heap 2009: 60). Beside area boys whose activities are commonplace across many parts of the city, countless ultra-violent and notorious gangs have also sprung up and become entrenched in slums where unplanned development and population pressure created social actors and conditions favourable to violence and crime. In this regard, amongst several others, “one million boys” and “awawa boys” share a reputation for being perhaps the most wild, disorderly and dangerous gangs whose activities constitute security underbellies to many Lagos communities. Before COVID-19, they were mainly domiciled in Agege and Alimosho LGAs and their nefarious activities were mostly felt in Abule Egba, Agege, Dopemu, Ifako Ijaiye, Ikotun, Oko Oba, Ogba and Pen Cinema areas. They also operated across several LGAs in neighbouring Ogun State with Songo Ota, Owode, being the most affected.

Over the years, these wild variant sets of street boys have gained a reputation for carrying out mass attacks with dangerous weapons such as knives, cutlasses, small axes, razor blades, broken bottles and locally made guns. According to Oyebade, the gangs are noted for being behind heinous crimes including traffic robbery, gang rape of defenceless women (including pregnant woman), mass invasion of homes, and murder (Oyebade 2016). Other sources have also established the extent of violent and destructive criminal activities they are linked



with. One recent example is the account provided by then superintendent Olayinka Egbeyemi, the commander of Lagos state task force, who established that the gangs often “killed, raped and robbed innocent citizens of their valuable property” across different parts of Lagos state. Similarly, in the confessional statement made to newsmen after his arrest, Tobi Akinbayo, also known as Scorpion, the notorious leader of awawa boys in Dupemu, affirmed that: “he and his boys raped, burgled and killed innocent citizens [...] during [...] their operations around Dopemu area” (Akinbayo in Oyebade 2016). For Fayemi, awawa boys:

operate mostly at night and [...] target dark roads where they split themselves strategically and wait for unsuspecting passers-by [...]. They also burgle shops and rape [...] those who rape get rewarded specially and they keep “body count” of the number of girls they have raped for “bragging rights” (Fayemi 2016).

The foregoing demonstrates the gangs’ reputation for robbery, killing and maiming. This, however, is hardly surprising. Indeed, a combination of multiple factors had aggravated social grievances and the damages deviant gangs were capable of unleashing. Thus, breakdown in social values, psychological disorientation, and abuse of psychotropic substances such as marijuana, cocaine as well as readily available drugs like codeine, rohypnol and tramadol, entrenched the gangs’ capacity for crime and violence.

Over the years, the two gangs became bitter rivals with different modus operandi. While awawa boys operated mostly at bus stops, used teenage girls as spies and bait to lure men who were then attacked and robbed. In contrast to awawa methodology, one million boys adopts a more bold and audacious approach. Its prominent strategies include dispatching letters to the head of targeted streets informing them of their impending visit and attack, which usually happens as planned (C. Omorodon, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 6 July 2021). There is no doubt that the lack of adequate security, particularly in the state’s slums, has literally made the activities of these criminal gangs go on largely unchallenged.

President Buhari on March 30 2020, declared a sweeping lockdown measures for Lagos, Ogun and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). The lockdown, which was for an initial 14 days period, was subsequently intermittently extended, over several weeks following a soaring number of confirmed cases. It was meant to serve as a quarantine measure, to enable the government and health workers identify, trace and isolate those who had had contact with confirmed cases (J. Alechenu et al. 2020). This development became both a bane and a blessing. On the one hand, the lockdown, slowly but definitely helped to ease the spread of the virus. On the other hand, it triggered an unprecedented implosion in crime rate across many parts of Nigeria especially in Lagos (Akanmu et al. 2021). In many parts of the city, especially in poor and vulnerable neighbourhoods, an already heightened insecurity was further compounded by the invasion and mass looting carried out by notorious gangs like one million boys and others. It is believed that the gangs extended their criminal activities to Mainland Lagos in response to the aggravated shortages occasioned by the imposition and subsequent extension of lockdown over Lagos.

Unsurprisingly, the attack and mass looting perpetrated by the gangs, which began during the first lockdown in March 2020, was initially targeted at the peripheries, in particular, border communities close to Ogun state. This was then gradually extended inward to central Lagos. To be sure, there are some remarkable features about the robbery cases linked to one million boys and other gangs during the period. First, was the fact that they were not limited to night time alone. In fact, majority of the attacks took place in broad daylight and in the full glare of helpless residents (Eniola Badmus TV 2020; Lambo 2020). Second, the gangs operated in mob-like shocking numbers that simply defied logic. For instance, on April 20 2020, more than 100 members of one million boys invaded Mushin, Ilupeju and parts of Ojuelegba in broad daylight, terrorising and looting (Lambo 2020; Nnadozie 2020). Additionally, beyond breaking into homes to loot food items and properties and rape at will, the gangs, on many occasions, forced fathers to have sex with their daughters at gunpoint (CDA member, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 28 October 2020). Hence, the havoc they often left behind instigated fear among residents and thus popularised

the saying: “The fear of one million boys is the beginning of wisdom” (This Day 2016). Expectedly, these occurrences further added to an already nightmarish experience entrenched by the pandemic and its array of restrictions (Ehigiator 2020).

In general, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing security challenges in Lagos and Nigerians in general. In this sense, the lockdown measures underscored the general spike in crime rate as a result of COVID-19’s impact on people’s livelihoods, inadequate welfare system and government inadequate responses (Isangha, Choi, Chiu 2021). In addition, these conditions were worsened by the antics of the police officers deployed for enforcement of lockdown measures. As argued by Abiodun and Izobo on *AfricLaw*, and by Aborisade and Ariyo, beside the application of extreme force, police officers enforcing lockdown measures carried out systemic extortion of money and other valuables from the people in exchange for passage at roadblocks (Abiodun, Izobo 2020; Aborisade 2021; Aborisade, Ariyo 2022).

Meanwhile, the dire socio-economic and security challenges occasioned by COVID-19 as well as the adverse impact caused by lockdown measures, were not limited to Nigeria. Ozili opined that the adverse impact of the pandemic eroded socio-economic gains in many African countries just as lockdown measures affected economic wellbeing (Ozili 2020). As a result, Abraham, Abdulkareem, and Oyebamiji highlighted the spike in social conflict, human capital reduction, hunger and insecurity in many African countries due to COVID-19 (Abraham, Abdulkareem, Oyebamiji, 2024). According to Eurofound, COVID-19 threatened to undo economic progress of several decades in the European Union, leading to job losses, socio-economic crisis and security issues (Bobrovnikova et al. 2023). Also, Tran et al. argued that COVID-19 significantly impacted the socio-economic wellbeing and quality of life of Vietnamese (Tran et al. 2020). Consequently, the overall impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown measures implemented to curb its spread was the exacerbation of socio-economic challenges, gender-based violence and insecurity in many parts of the developed and developing world (Mishra, Rampal, 2020; Akanmu et al. 2021; Thanh, The Duy, Bao Duong, 2022).

THE ROLE OF AREA BOYS IN SECURITY PROVISION DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

According to a senior police officer, citizens are often left with no choice than to cater for themselves by organising self-defence against threats when traditional state security becomes weak (Police officer 3, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 14 October 2021). This has been identified as an effective strategy for protecting vulnerable homes and communities, especially, from gangs. With regard to how the neighbourhoods solved the rampant insecurity problem, it must be said that if the robbery cases of the lockdown era were out of the ordinary, reactions to them were even more unusual. Despite the fact that the first step taken by many CDAs as a way of arresting the deteriorating security situation was to approach police authority in their respective divisions to do something about it, many still considered it almost impossible to rely solely on overwhelmed law enforcement agencies (Anyaoagu 2020). In this light, for residents of the affected areas, it was simply an extraordinary situation that required an extraordinary response. Consequently, in spite of the near general disdain and perception as criminals many residents held about them, area boys, across many vulnerable neighbourhoods, were mobilised and incentivised to render security services. Though not unheard of, but the use of area boys for security provision was something that has never transcended private arrangements, where individuals contract them to ward-off trespassers from their land or keep uninvited guests away from party venues; having them provide security for streets or communities was seen in some quarters as “strange and totally unusual” (R. O. Branson, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 20 May 2022). Yet, this did not discountenance the fact that area boys had always had some sort of protective value in their neighbourhoods, but residents had never had to completely put their fate in their hands. It is therefore logical to argue that the COVID era security situation birthed a new order, and a new approach to community-based security provision in Lagos rendered through self-help and non-state actors.

Yet, this new collaboration was not without some initial opposition on the part of many residents. According to Jimoh Adebayo, many residents of Adegbenro Street in Mushin, for

instance, questioned the wisdom in engaging known touts, many of whom have penchants for criminal activities, to undertake informal crime fighting duties. He further added, “Some felt it would be a licence for the boys to go into full time robbery” (J. Adebayo, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 12 August 2021).

But, as it appeared, the communities did not have many options, and time was also running out. As argued by chief Agbaakin, many neighbourhoods in Fadeyi were caught between endlessly waiting on the police and taking drastic steps, however informal, to ward-off the persistent threats from the criminals (B. Agbaakin, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 18 February 2022). However, by April 2020, when the attacks became most unbearable and incessant, it became almost impossible, even by the most cynical residents, to oppose the idea. It must be stressed however that one of the most significant factors that led to an eventual formalisation of residents-area boys’ partnership against crime during lockdown, was the willingness to serve or render service shown by most of the boys. In this respect, many groups of area boys, on their own, had begun to defend their streets and communities even before they were formally engaged to do so. In Ojuelegba for instance, area boys across Ayilara, Omololu, Apena, Clegg, Fashoro and other major streets took turns guarding their streets day and night (I. Igboeze, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 12 May 2022). In addition, apart from opposition coming from some residents, whether or not a street would formally engage its area boys for security duties was largely a function of the availability of essentials – money, food items, alcohol and herbal drinks and other things. This was also dependent on the cooperation of residents, especially, traders and well-to-do members of the communities, whose stores or homes were usually the target of mass looting during attacks.

Many factors contributed to the uncommon alliance between resident and area boys. First, at this time, as always, the state’s conventional security system made up of the police, the Civil Defense Corps (NSCDC), the Lagos neighbourhood watch, amongst others, was blighted by familiar long-running challenges of inefficiency, ill-equipment, corruption and poor management (Adisa, 1994: 151-156). In any case, even at its best, the security apparatus usually offered little protection to



poor neighbourhoods where incidentally, crime and violence have often been of endemic proportion. Secondly, whatever efficient response they would have offered was undermined by COVID-19 peculiarities. This is because while testing positive to COVID-19 confined a good number of security personnel to isolation centres, others were divided between enforcing the lockdown restrictions and regular crime fighting duties (Police officer 2, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 28 December 2020). This development which reinforces the view presented Nielson, Zhang, and Ingram, on the impact of COVID-19 on the activities of police officers in many countries, stretched the 33,000 men of the Lagos State police command to its limit (Nielson, Zhang, Ingram 2022). Consequently, it exposed an already under-policed Lagos to crime explosion (Akoni 2021). Besides, for area boys, there were two major contrasting motivations. First, COVID-19 outbreak had created adverse conditions across board, resulting in widespread hunger and lack, particularly among the urban poor. Area boys, who by their very nature, are known to be absolutely reliant on daily earnings, were particularly impacted. Second, being traditionally territorial in nature, area boys are known to protect their area or neighbourhoods with utmost jealousy, mainly when the threat emanates from rival and rivals. As it turned out, though, area boys were incentivised, but it is obvious that they were further compelled by a sense of duty to protect their area or communities from invaders.

To achieve their stated objectives, especially, to keep area boys happy and focused, CDA representatives often went round their communities to raise funds via donation and levies (CDA member, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 17 May 2022). Besides, many residents also regularly made voluntary donations to the course. This was particularly the case in the Olosa area of Mushin, where traders, mindful of the dangers that mass looting portends, voluntarily donated money, alcohol and food to area boys (E. Chukwuka, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 27 March 2022).

As a manifestation of their inherent sense of security, across many streets, area boys organised themselves into three main groups for efficiency. For example, there was a spying team that gathered information about the location and movement of one

million boys. This helped to ensure proper planning and organisation. This team engaged in regular neighbourhood patrols and relied significantly on communication tools like WhatsApp and regular information from residents to stay up-to-date and relay messages about the movement of hoodlums quickly (A. Babatunde, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 18 December 2020). Also, there was another group whose members mounted roadblocks across major streets in their CDAs. This was apparently done to stop and interrogate unfamiliar faces seen within the communities. This was exactly helpful as those deemed suspicious are arrested and handed over to the police for further interrogation. In addition, the third group was in charge of logistics. This group ensured that food, water, alcohol and herbal drinks, cigarettes, marijuana, and other things were readily available. It is noteworthy that each of the groups were organised on day and night shifts with command and control at various levels. This organisational structure was meant to ensure an integrated and coordinated security strategy that takes into account the threat capability, movement and location of criminals, as well as the best way to confront them. This complex and multi-layered security strategy was replicated across many streets with unshakable devotion.

Meanwhile, another significant aspect of security provision is in the nature of materials deployed by area boys to aid their task. In a megacity like Lagos that is replete with widespread gang violence, there can hardly be any effective defensive mechanism without some form of weapons, especially, when the belligerent groups such as one million boys are known to operate with dangerous arms. Interestingly, whether it is rival clash or motor park fight; area boys themselves are also known to employ the use of weapons such as knives, dagger, bottles, sticks, cutlasses and sundry other weapons that are capable of inflicting life-threatening injuries. With this in mind, the COVID era security organisation provided by area boys witnessed extensive deployment of those weapons, though, largely as instruments of deterrence. In addition, the need to ensure proper illumination, effective night time surveillance and operation, made vigilantes to rely on bonfires regularly set up across streets. However, the act of setting up bonfires, especially, on tarred roads, soon attracted the condemnation of the state government, who noted

that heat generated by bonfires destroy asphalt and roads (Lagos Eye News 2020). In turn, many CDAs responded by lighting up their streets, making many areas that would ordinarily be plunged by darkness to be lit and accessible. With this development, the reliance on bonfires declined drastically across many communities.

From all indications, these self-help arrangements had significant immediate and desired impact. As a result, not a single episode of one million boys-style invasion or robbery was recorded in the three areas after 20 April 2020. Clearly, what made this development so significant, for instance, are the unimaginable consequences that would have greeted those communities if these arrangements were not put in place. The clear danger was that Ojuelegba, Mushin and Fadeyi would have been plunged by the sort of frequent attacks and mass-looting endured by residents of Aboru, Ahmaddiya, Alakuko, Agbado, Agege, Ejigbo, Fagba, Idimu, Ijaiye, Igando, Meiran, Ifako, Ikorodu, Oko-Oba, Oshodi, Ojota, Iyana-Ipaja and many parts of neighbouring Ogun State where the gangs did not only loot and rape but launched ceaseless attacks that resulted in loss of lives (Olabulo et al. 2020). Another significant occurrence that defined the period, across most of the communities, is the existence of fervently improved relations and engagement between residents, particularly, their CDAs and the area boys. Thus, the two groups, despite having a past shaped by hostilities, and a future shrouded in uncertainties, experienced a period of rare and frequent dialogue borne out of necessity.

It is also necessary to highlight police reaction to insecurity and the self-help effort by residents. As expected, the initial reaction of the police was to play down the attacks, then, subtle acknowledgement and a promise of more surveillance and patrol of the areas (Lambo, 2020). In any case, the initial denial by the police tended to lend credence to the popular view that police in Lagos hardly prioritise security in poor neighbourhoods. This has apparently been the case, since crime in these areas hardly attracts the same level of attention as those neighbourhoods inhabited by the rich and elites. In any case, this view further gained traction among residents in the affected areas.

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that the delinquent sub-culture that inherently shape the deviant behaviour

of area boys notwithstanding, the security role they so effectively anchored in the study area during COVID-19, however, seem to deconstruct the preposition presented in the subcultural theory. One important finding from the current study, thus, is that there is unlikely a single universal explanation and outcome for activities undertaken by deviant groups. This means that area boys, like any other deviant group, are capable of undertaking positive activities for public good if met with the right motivation (O. Latilo, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 20 January 2022). It can further be inferred that despite their deviant nature, area boys also possess valuable human capital that can be harnessed for the benefit of the society. This resonates with the human biological system thesis of the structural functional theory which holds that all members of the society are interconnected and have vital roles to play in its proper functioning (Singer 1984; Pope 1975). Consequently, like many deviant groups, addressing the dissatisfaction and grievances behind the deviant sub-culture of area boyism is crucial to ending the violence, crime and disruption that they exude in Lagos (Maclure, Sotelo 2004).

STRATEGIES FOR CURBING AREA BOYISM IN LAGOS

Overriding opinion points to the fact that area boys and the menacing danger they posed to Lagos residents are products of failed homes and leadership for which the society must take responsibility and make amend. This means that:

Any policy that would solve the area boys problem in Lagos must first address the problem of poor upbringing, rural-urban migration, growing number of out of school children and unemployment (E. Ayoola, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 12 May 2022).

Indeed, amongst other factors, unemployment, particularly among the youth has become one of the social realities that have characterised life in the Nigerian society, especially in the urban areas. According to KPGM International, unemployment rate in Nigeria stood at 37,7% in 2022 and was projected to rise to 40,6% by the end of 2023 (KPGM International 2023: 47-48).



Lagos, owing to its population, is assumed to hold the highest number of people unable to find jobs. Related to this is the problem of loose guardianship occasioned by what Faulkner termed: “the lack of a permanent and stable home” (National Archives Ibadan – NAI 1943) which exposes children to dangerous street influences early in life. This manifestation often brings about frustration, hopelessness and resentment, which have given rise to incidences of armed robbery, extortion, and violence linked to unemployed youths and urban gangs across many parts of the city.

In addition to the unemployment and social problems painted above, one other reason why efforts to effectively address the area boy menace has so frequently come up short is the fact that the group is often linked with political actors. Thus a member of a CDA in Fadeyi, for example, contends that: “the greatest obstacle to the eradication of the contemporary area boys phenomenon is the government and powerful interest groups whose political standing is intertwined with and sustained by the existing social order” (CDA secretary in Mushin, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 4 May 2021). This is perhaps why in spite of successive governments’ promises to properly rehabilitate deviant youths scattered across the state, by “equipping them with the requisite knowledge and skills needed [...] to support a brighter future”⁶ not much, if anything, has changed. The recruitment and use of area boys as political thugs has continued to be the order of the day. A respected elder in Fadeyi noted that:

[T]he major factor behind the continuous emergence of urchins of various forms and nomenclature in our communities, is due largely to a strong, discernible government patronage [...] politicians have simply made touting profitable and attractive (Community leader 1, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 30 March 2021).

In the same vein, another elder in Ojuelegba reinforces this position by stating that:

[W]ithout these boys who they use as foot soldiers, many politicians would simply not have business in politics; without politicians who use the instrument and resources of the state to protect and reward them, there would not be area boys (Community leader 2, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 12 May 2022).

Another prominent community leader in Fadeyi also stressed the culpability of the political class when he opined that:

many people have no faintest idea about what our communities go through in the hands of politically empowered youth gangs (Traditional leader in Fadeyi, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 27, May 2021).

Similarly, according to the African democratic congress candidate in the 2023 governorship election, Funso Doherty, area boys “are part of the power structures that brought the ruling party into power” (Lambo 2022). This perhaps explains the fact that “when arrested by the police, some influential politicians get them released” (Punch Editorial Board 2023).

Another factor is the concerns as to whether area boys themselves are willing to be reformed and rehabilitated. According to Jimoh Ojo, an area boy who is well-known around the Moshalashi axis:

many boys I know will prioritise earning “protection fees” on the streets and working as hired thugs over any form of skill acquisition and rehabilitation (J. Ojo, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 13 April 2021).

Another resident of Mushin, chief Umoh Innocent, put it thus:

those boys are only interested in free money and free lifestyle and do not have the patience and discipline that learning a skill and doing legitimate work demands. (U. Innocent, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 2 December 2021).

This view clearly resonates with the submission of scholars such as Ikuomola, Okunola, and Heap on the role of “free lifestyle” as key attraction for many touts in Lagos (Ikuomola, Okunola, Heap 2009: 56). It is therefore hardly a surprise that most interventions, dating back to decades, by the government, faith-based organisations and civil societies, aimed at rehabilitating and equipping area boys with occupational skills have proven ineffective. For instance, from late 1980s to early 1990s, the People’s Bank extended micro-credits to many Area Boys and Girls (ABG) across Lagos (IRIN News 2005), despite training and mentoring programmes they were exposed to, many of the beneficiaries soon returned to the streets by the late 1990s.

In that instance, Ekpo, for example, notes how a 1993 “rehabilitation camp” programme for ABG, by the People’s Bank of Nigeria, made little or no impact (Ekpo et al. 1995: 311-316). Also, the widely publicised rehabilitation programmes organised by the salvation army, as well as the rehabilitation and skills training centre set up at Ita Oko, on the Lagos lagoon during Bola Tinubu tenure, both failed to make meaningful impact (Ehigiator, Yinusa 2002; IRIN News 2005). Other rehabilitation initiatives, including those undertaken by the Fashola, Ambode and Sanwo-Olu administrations, have generally had a disappointing impact.

However, notwithstanding their well-documented history of crime and extortion, many youths who make up area boys have been identified as possessing energy and potentials for legitimate engagement capable of contributing to national development. This perhaps explains their involvement in highly effective vigilante activities during COVID-19 lockdown. Indeed, one of the most significant paradoxes thrown up during the lockdown period in many parts of Lagos was the transformation of area boys, from perpetrators to fighters of crimes. This development has thus provided an alternative interpretation of the complexities of the area boys phenomenon, particularly given that they are an often rather demonised figure in Lagos (V. Lu, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 27 June 2022). Their provision of an important form of order for residents following the COVID-19 security challenges, thus illustrates the capability that deviant youths possess, and justifies the view that they are not beyond redemption.

The position of the media regarding the nuisance that area boys constitute, the generally depressing performance of previous rehabilitation programmes, as well as the discomfiting tolerance often shown by the state government towards them, is very critical. According to the newspaper *Punch*, whatever measures government have deployed in the past are not only:

[...] ineffective and defeatist, but also amounts to pandering to the authority of criminals [...] this is a classic example of surrendering state authority to non-state actors. It is an admission of government failure and inability to enforce its writ. (*Punch* Editorial Board 2019).

Residents, media and analysts appear to focus on the strict application of state coercive powers and prosecution of suspects in line with extant laws, as effective and long-term remedies for youth crisis in Lagos. However, this perspective seem to downplay two significant realities: first, that the growing youth problem in Lagos, especially among urban poor, reflects the agelong social and economic problems in Nigeria that recent policies such as the fuel subsidy removal has further exacerbated; and, second, it is now obvious that no form of security and judicial measures can succeed as long as the political class continues to be the prime beneficiaries of area boy-sim. As a way of historical justification, both measures have hardly provided Lagos any form of reprieve from threats posed by urchins as illustrated, for example, by the defiance regeneration of Jaguda boys in the face of repeated “rounding up” by the police, prosecution and their repatriation to their home areas between 1930s and 1950s nor did the highhandedness of soldiers during the military regime curb the menace (National Archives Ibadan – NAI 1941).

Thus, if past efforts to combat deviant youth culture in Lagos have persistently achieved underwhelming results, then the task of developing lasting and effective solutions in the contemporary period, are even more daunting. What can be deduced from fieldwork is that there is little agreement – and even less confidence – among residents that government at all levels and indeed, individual politicians in the state will ever prioritise any arrangement that will drastically reform the area boy culture. For them, the political prize for such change far outweighs whatever public good it would bring. However, it can be done, and it is imperative given that rehabilitating area boys, and the entire spectrum of deviant youth culture is crucial to reducing violence, extortion and dangers they posed to the socioeconomic rights and security of Lagosians. As exemplified by the highly significant security role they played in the study area during the lockdown period, it is obvious that many youths that make up the area boys phenomenon possess incredible potentials in several areas. Yet, whether the government and stakeholders proceed to use the latest example as a springboard to reform and rehabilitate area boys, whether area boys themselves will embrace such a plan, and how the

larger society will react is unclear. But the worst-case scenario for all concerned is that the existing order of youngsters and urchins who make a living by mugging pedestrians, going on pickpocketing spree, demanding protection money and perpetrating general gang violence, is allowed to continue.

CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS

Urban gangs, wherever they exist, constitute a source of violence, anarchy, extortion and destruction. The area boys in Lagos is no exception. From being a rather negligible social and urban problem in the 1980s, affecting mainly people in slums and impoverished neighbourhoods, crimes and violence linked to area boys had become one of the most compelling security issues affecting Lagos by the dawn of the millennium. However, there emerged even more frightening criminal gangs such as one million boys, whose criminal activities became most manifest during the lockdown. This article has thus examined the area boys menace in Lagos, with particular focus on the security role they played in Ojuelegba, Mushin and Fadeyi areas during lockdown. From this article, certain deductions can be made in relation to the menace of area boyism. It has shown that, though area boys are traditionally reputed for petty urban crimes and engage in free-for-all violence, they are however so socially conditioned by a plethora of factors, including parental and governmental failure. Second, the generality of urchins who constitute the area boys menace are capable of channelling their energy into positive use if lured back to sanity. As shown in the case examined, area boys can be mended into a social force that is capable of providing solutions to biting societal problems. Thus, it can also be argued that the potential inherent in deviant youths that is currently being misapplied can be redirected to positive use with the right policies. One observation, however, is that no rehabilitation programme or policy can be successful as long as the political class remains the major beneficiary of area boys' nuisance. This observation is important for two reasons: first, complicity on the part of the political class has over the years rewarded and sustained the culture of area boysim; also, the



political relevance of area boys has often undermined policies and programmes geared towards eliminating the scourge.

Nonetheless, the current trajectory is not sustainable by any normal definition. It is a mistake to ignore, misunderstand, underestimate or sustain the dangerous trend of area boyism. The Lagos State Government (LASG) must address both the causative factors and brutal consequences of area boysim instead of letting it fester and exacerbate. However, in contrast to what some overly simplistic analyses imply, the application of security and judicial measures are a vital but not sufficient solution to the scourge of area boyism. A better way of ensuring enduring strategy would be through a combination of effective hard and soft measures. First, statistics have shown that Lagos state has at least 2 million out-of-school children (Badmus 2022). This is a huge number from which future area boys, one million boys, cultists can be recruited. Thus, stakeholders must intensify efforts at shoring up school enrolment, in addition to making the learning environment conducive. Second, Nigeria, and Lagos State, especially, must criminalise loose parenting which allow youngsters to move out of home, end up in parks, market stalls and uncompleted buildings, and cohabit with urchins, ultimately ending up as area boys. The state government must put in place effective support systems for homeless youths to prevent them from veering off and going rogue. Third, given that every area boy is a potential mechanic, barber or small business owner, the primary focus of stakeholders should be on equipping them with professional skills for life-long economic sustenance to curtail the growing number of urchins and the uncomfortable nuisance they cause. Another imperative step would be to disincentivise area boyism. The prevailing idea among area boys is that touting is a means to gain political connection and reward.

Lagosians and the society in general must also play a role in the process of eradicating area boyism. The general view that area boys are criminals who can never change no matter what anyone does must now begin to give room for a new kind of thinking hinged on the idea that “nobody is beyond redemption”. This view is buttressed by the submission of Lati-ilo. Drawing inspiration from the story of biblical David, who

rose from a damaging notoriety and sense of entitlement illustrated by his attempt to stubbornly extort “protection fees” (a practice widely replicated by modern day Lagos area boys) from Nabal, to become one of the greatest kings in Israel (1 Sam 25, 10), Latilo recommends:

[...] everyone deserves a second chance at life [...] the society must abhor the urge to shame, condemn or stigmatise any genuinely repentant and rehabilitated area boy (O. Latilo, interviewed by B. J. Njoku, 20 January 2022).

NOTES

¹ Boma boys and jaguda boys were some of the notorious urban youth gangs that terrorised Lagos beginning from the 1920s (Faulkner, 1941).

² Most area boys interviewed demanded to be incentivised.

³ These notorious neighbourhoods also serve as major hubs for illicit drugs. They are impregnable even to security agents, thus rare raids often result in casualties on both sides.

⁴ Several examples of this can be found in the study area.

⁵ For security reasons, names of notorious gang leaders are not mentioned.

⁶ Quoted from the keynote address by Obafemi Hazmat, Lagos state deputy governor, at the 2023 International youth day, Alausa, Ikeja, Lagos (Lagos State Government – LASG 2003).

INTERVIEWS (CONDUCTED BY B. J. NJOKU)

Ola Ahmed (age 36, member of area boys), under Ojuelegba bridge (Ojuelegba, Lagos), 22 September 2020.

Police officer 1 (age 47, anonymous), Barracks bus stop (Ojuelegba, Lagos), 22 September 2020.

Community Development Association (CDA) member (age 65, anonymous), Akanbi Crescent (Ojuelegba, Lagos), 28 October 2020.

Ajani Babatunde (age 39, area boy), 248 Ikorodu Road, (Fadeyi, Lagos), 18 December 2020.

Police officer 2 (age 52, anonymous), Anthony bus stop (Anthony, Lagos), 28 December 2020.

Community leader 1 (age 64, anonymous), Fadeyi (Lagos), 30 March 2021.

Jimoh Ojo, (age 30+, area boy), Mushin (Lagos) 13 April 2021.

CDA secretary in Mushin (age 50+, anonymous), Mushin (Lagos), 4 May 2021

Segun Oke (age 54, member CDA), Ojuelegba (Lagos), 12 May 2021.

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Chris Omorodon, (age, 48, keke operator), Agege Motor Road (Mushin, Lagos), 6 July 2021.

- Jimoh Adebayo (age 56, community leader), Mushin (Lagos), 12 August 2021.
 Joel Okechukwu (age 66, spare parts seller), Fadeyi (Lagos), 12 October 2021.
 Police officer 3 (age 40+, anonymous), Lagos Island (Lagos), 14 October 2021.
 Gbolahan Emmanuel (age 42, resident of Mushin), Agbemi Street (Mushin, Lagos), 28 November 2021.
 Umoh Innocent, (age 56, resident of Mushin), Olosa (Mushin, Lagos), 2 December 2021.
 Yusuf Olagunju, (age 62, resident), Mathew Street (Ojuelegba, Lagos), 17 December 2021.
 Olatunji Latilo, (age 52, security expert, consultant, Ph.D candidate), University of Lagos, 20 January 2022.
 Bayo Agbaakin (age 73, CDA member), Omobola Street (Fadeyi, Lagos), 18 February 2022.
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