

# Burglary on the Rise: Street Life and Motivation for Residential Break-Ins in Amagba Community, Southern Nigeria

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## Abstract

The paper examines essentially, residential break-ins in Amagba community, Southern Nigeria. The high incidence and prevalence of this social malaise particularly in developing areas – suburban in Southern Nigeria has become intriguing and of grave concern to the society. The qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed to collect data from three hundred and fifty respondents. The frequency distribution table and simple percentage were employed to analyse the data collected from the field, while the qualitative data was content analysed. The study revealed that motivation for residential break-ins were multifaceted. Unemployment/economic recession, peer group influence, quest for quick money and expensive life style were some of the factors responsible for the incidence of burglary. The study suggests that burglar alarms should be installed in residential dwellings, the police should establish their presence in the community and government should create jobs for the unemployed youths in the society.

**Keywords:** Break-ins, residential premises, suburban, developing areas.

## INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, getting decent residential occupation in urban centres has become very difficult. This is due to the influx of more people into urban areas. Interestingly too, most men are not fulfilled until they are able to have houses of their own and would stop at nothing to achieve it, no matter the size and type. With the congestion and overpopulation of urban centres, it has become near impossible to acquire a parcel or piece of land for building purposes. This has led many into buying land at the outskirts of the city centres. In Southern Nigeria, communities that were hitherto referred to as rural have suddenly turned into suburban areas with people scrambling to acquire land for residential buildings. However, this ensuing development as lofty as it may appear, has unintended social consequences amongst which is the incidence of residential break-ins.

Nigeria presently is experiencing economic recession and it would appear that criminal activities of which burglary is one, is on the increase, particularly in developing areas. Without doubt, burglary is a trending global predatory crime which is not exclusive to Nigeria. Recent statistics in the United States reveal that burglary is a moderately common crime with an official occurrence rate of nearly two million incidences annually (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2014).

Unfortunately in Nigeria, there appears to be little or no comprehensive official statistics on the incidence and prevalence of the offence of burglary. The situation is further worsened as victims are not forthcoming in lodging formal reports of its occurrence due to their poor perception of the police in relation to preventing and detecting criminal activities. An average Nigerian is usually desirous of owning properties and this perhaps explains the upsurge of buildings in new areas as the urban centre is heavily populated with no land available to develop upon. Many individuals now resort to buying and developing property away from the main town. In Benin City, Edo state, southern Nigeria, areas like Amagba, Ebo community, Irhirhi community, Ogumwenyin community, Ugbor community to mention but a few have sprung up with serious building developments. With these developments has come a challenge, burglary- a new and common social phenomenon.

The prevalence of residential break-ins in suburban areas is quite alarming and needs to be addressed urgently by the appropriate organ of government in Nigeria. This social malaise affects the wellbeing of the society in general by creating insecurity and fear in the minds of the people. In fact, the effect of burglary particularly in these areas is both physical and psychological and constitutes a threat to the security of persons and property.

Scholars have been intrigued by the high or increasing incidence of burglary in developing areas commonly referred to as suburban and this makes the study more imperative (Repetto, 1974, Hakim, 1980, Brantingham and Brantingham, 1984). The need to therefore thoroughly investigate the motivational factors in burglary becomes imperative as it not only results in financial and material losses to victims, but also psychological trauma (Maguire, 1982). This study is designed to investigate the motivational factors in burglary in Amagba Community, Southern Nigeria.

## MEANING, CLASSIFICATION AND MOTIVATION FOR BURGLARY

When a building whether commercial or residential is entered into unlawfully with the mind to take or remove someone else's property or belonging, then burglary is said to have occurred. It also refers to the breaking and entering of a building illegally for the purpose of committing an offence. (Marvis, 2001). It must be noted that in burglary, unlike robbery, there is usually no victim present during the commission of the offence. The offence is as old as man and was first dealt with under the English common law which however is now codified. In southern Nigeria, Section 410 of the Criminal Code Act (2004) specifically provides that:

A person who breaks any part whether external or internal of a building, or opens by unlocking, pulling, pushing, lifting or any other thing, intended to close or cover an opening giving passage from one part of a building to another, he is said to break the building.

A person is said to enter a building as soon as any part of his body or any part of any instrument used by him is within the building.

A person who obtains entrance into a building by means of any threat or artifice used for that purpose, or by collusion with any person in the building or who enters the chimney or other aperture of the building permanently left open for any necessary purpose, but not intended to be ordinarily used as a means of entrance, is deemed to have broken and entered the building.

Section 4.11, any person who:

1. Breaks and enters the dwelling house of another with intent to commit a felony therein; or
2. Having entered the dwelling house of another with intent to commit a felony therein, or having committed a felony in the dwelling house of another, breaks out of the dwelling house;

Is guilty of a felony, and is liable to imprisonment for 14 years.

If the offense is committed in the night, the offender is liable to imprisonment for life.

### Elements of burglary

The first element of burglary as in all crimes is the physical ingredient which in Latin words is "actus reus" which simply means the guilty act. The physical element of the offence of burglary involves the breaking and entering into a building by a burglar. The breaking in can occur as either actual or constructive. It is actual when it involves physical force and it is constructive when the reverse is the case. For there to be conviction in a court in a case of burglary, the burglar must enter the building. The entry can be minimal like the sticking of the hand through a window; this must be without the consent or presence of the occupants of the building. The 'actus reus' in burglary is essentially a guilty conduct usually consisting of an act of commission prohibited by law.

The other element of burglary is the mental ingredient which in Latin words is 'mens rea'. This refers to the burglar's attitude of mind to what he was doing. In other words, whether the burglar's conduct was or was not voluntary and/or the burglar's foresight of the consequence of what he was doing. In a case of burglary, the 'mens rea' implies that the burglar must have the intent to commit an offence inside the property.

### CLASSIFICATION OF BURGLARY

Burglaries generally can be categorized into two viz:

**Commercial burglary:** This occurs when someone breaks into some type of commercial building e.g. a shopping mall, film house or a school. This kind of burglary usually takes place at night.

**Residential burglary:** This kind of burglary occurs as the name connotes in residential buildings. It involves the breaking in and removal of items of value from the dwelling place. The typical modus operandi of a residential burglar is to look for a home that appears to be unoccupied and break in to remove items like jewelry, money, small electronics etc.

#### Motivation for residential burglary

Several factors account for the incidence and prevalence of burglary in Nigeria, particularly in new community layouts commonly referred to as suburban. It would appear that a variety of factors combine in most cases to act as incentives or motivation to burglars in the commission of breakage and entrance of residential buildings.

Scholars like Mullins and Wright (2013) strongly believe that the lifestyle of a person to a large extent leads him into the commission of burglary. Most youths tend to like parties, drink, and in their words 'flex'. Some others are into drugs and expensive lifestyle. Even though there appears to be nothing wrong in the choice of lifestyle by youths in particular, the problem however is in the ability to financially sustain a flamboyant lifestyle. To organize a party requires money, to go clubbing, drinking and drugs require money and unfortunately, where money is not forthcoming from genuine source, people, particularly the youths take to burglary as it would appear to be a quick and easy source of raising money to live and maintain the flamboyant lifestyle already chosen.

Shover (1999), Cromwell, Olson, Avary (1991) in their various studies found that one of the basic

motivations for residential burglary is the ease of committing the crime without being caught. The point being raised here is best appreciated when one notes that most occupants of residential buildings, in almost all cases leave their homes in the morning to go to work and return in the evening; most homes do not have security or street guards and a walk round residential buildings in suburban streets reveals that the houses are left unguarded and this, these burglars see as easier targets. What is more, most Nigerians are religious and the Christians amongst them go to church on Sundays for service with their residential buildings left at the mercy of the burglars who take the opportunity of their absence from home and the quiet unguarded environment to break in and remove valuable items.

Almost a year and half ago, Nigeria went into economic recession with its currency crashing against the US dollar, the British pounds and the Euro and the end of the economic recession seems not to be in sight. Before the advent of economic recession in Nigeria, the country was battling with unemployment. Today, even those who are gainfully employed find it difficult to sustain themselves even for two weeks with their salaries. Ugwuoke (2011) observes that many unemployed youths in Nigeria are poverty-stricken and usually find solace in criminal activities. There are quite a number of youths who do not have jobs and have become frustrated especially, as they need to keep body and soul going. Perhaps, due to their state of joblessness and frustration coupled with the fact of trying to survive the harsh economic realities, they do from time to time go into burglary. It is not out of place to find a university graduate of Nigeria who is without job, developing negative thoughts towards his neighbours and society. Some of them see their predicament as caused by the society and so vent their anger by breaking into peoples' homes.

More worrisome is the fact that various higher institutions of learning across the country turn out graduates in large numbers but this is not matched with job vacancies. Few or no plans, projections or policies are made to absorb these graduates. If the youths who are the more vulnerable are empowered, given jobs to do or if the government provides two to three million jobs in this country, most of these crimes will be reduced. Even at times when the youths want to be creative, there is no government incentive to empower them.

Onovo (2009) has argued that criminal activities burglary inclusive in Nigeria is fundamentally a reflection of the quest for quick money and moral decadence in the society. This is further worsened by the fact that the Nigerian society worships the affluent without questioning the source of wealth.

Youths generally like recognition and applause from their contemporaries and would do anything to earn it. The influence of peer group pressure in the commission of burglary in residential buildings in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. In order not to be referred to as a weakling, a woman or fearful, some youths tag along with their mates to commit social vices which ordinarily they would never have done. Without doubt, peer groups are a strong influence and determinants in the commission of offences.

## **THEORETICAL ORIENTATION**

The paper employed the anomie perspective as a theoretical base to explain the topic issue of burglary. Anomie perspective is a brand of strain theory set forth as a theoretical framework for explaining crime rates by Merton (1938). The central thesis of the theory is that culture and social structure tends to cause the commission of crime in society especially when the emphasis in attaining economic success is not matched by a concurrent normalized emphasis in what means are legitimate for achieving the set objective. The situation is often worsened in society when there is a disconnect between economic success which in this case is referred to as culturally ascribed goals and the social legitimate means of achieving these set goals.

The study contends that anomie theory can be used to explain the subject matter of this work. Without doubt the Nigerian society not only encourages but worship economic success. Those who have economically arrived are celebrated by members of the society irrespective of the means by which such successes were attained. The poor or the economically unsuccessful persons are despised and looked down upon by the society. Worse still, is the fact that the society does not present or offer individuals equal social opportunities to achieve their set goals. Legitimate means are often not accessible by the poor and they are left with no option but to use illegitimate means like burglary to make ends meet as well as achieve economic success.

## **METHODS AND MATERIALS**

This study employed both the qualitative and quantitative techniques to gather data from the respondents in the study area. The exploratory research design was used due to its numerous relevance to the work particularly because; the topic under focus is highly understudied in Nigeria.

The in-depth interview method was utilized to collect information from the respondents while a burglary questionnaire was designed and used for the quantitative method to gather the needed data from the participants. All age brackets were sampled within Amagba community in southern Nigeria. 370 questionnaires were given out to participants while 355 were retrieved with five excluded from the analysis for failing to answer several questions in the instrument. Consequently, the data analysed below is based on the 350 questionnaires that were found to be valid.

In the course of designing the questionnaire, related literature on residential break-ins with reference to suburban communities were studied. Based on the studied literature, 20 items in form of questions were included in the research instrument which had two sections.

- ❖ Section a dealt with the socio-economic characteristics of the participants
- ❖ Section b dealt extensively with the motivation for burglary-residential break-ins with particular reference to unemployment and economic recession, quest for money and lifestyle, peer influence and easy target.

The gathered data from the questionnaire were analysed using the simple percentage and frequency distribution table while the data generated from the in-depth interview were content analysed.

**Table 1: Socio-economic features of participants**

	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	196	56.0
Female	154	44.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Age</b>		
18-30	105	30.0
31-40	167	47.7
41-50	49	14.0
Above 50	29	8.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Educational level</b>		
Secondary	150	43.0
Tertiary	168	4.8
Primary	32	9.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Religion</b>		
Christianity	329	94.0
Islam	21	6.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field survey, December 2017- January, 2018

The above table shows the socio-economic factors of the 350 participants sampled. 56.0% were male while 44.0% were female. 30.0% were in the 18-30 years age range, 47.7% were between 31-40 years while 14.0% were between 41-50 years and 8.1% were 50 years and above. On educational level, 9.1% of the respondents had primary education, 43.0% had secondary education while 4.8% had tertiary education. 94.0% of the respondents were Christians and 6.0% were Muslims.

**Table 2. Motivation for burglary**

	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
Unemployment and economic recession	10	3.0
Peer influence	30	9.0
Money and lifestyle	50	14.3
Easy target	10	3.0
All reasons stated above	250	71.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field survey, December 2017- January, 2018

The table above indicates that that 3.0% of the participants were of the opinion that unemployment and economic recession are motivating factors for burglary, 9.0% held on to peer influence, money and lifestyle had 14.3% while 3.0% were for easy target and 71.4% for all reasons stated above. This finding is further given credence to by Cromwell, Olson and Avary (1991), Shover (1991), Mullins and Wright (2013), Onovo (2009) and Ugwuoke (2011) who in their various studies concluded that all the stated reasons above are motivation in the commission of burglary and crimes in general. Their studies collaborate the opinion held by some of the participants that were interviewed.

*“Two of the boys we caught breaking into our house pleaded passionately with us saying they did it because of lack of work to do”.*

Another respondent simply put it thus:

*“When I asked my nephew why he broke into our neighbour’s house, he simply said that his friends put pressure on him to*

*join them, as nobody usually stays in the house in the mornings”.*

A police officer resident in Amagba community observed that:

*“Most of the burglars brought to my police station are young boys who by, even their physical appearance, show that they live ostentatious lives and confess to the need to get money to buy alcohol, Indian hemp and clubbing as why they engage in burglary”*

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has shown that residential break-ins are not only increasing in suburban areas, but the increase which now makes people to live in constant fear, is as a result of several factors. Residential break-ins constitute a very serious problem which needs to be tackled and therefore requires everybody to be involved as burglars seem to be numerous and resourceful.

1. Residential break-ins can be prevented when the opportunity is removed. The environment can profit from several safety measures. For instance, the installation of a burglar alarm in a residential dwelling will scare burglars from that place (Felson and Clarke, 1998).
2. There is the need for the Nigeria police force to create a divisional police station in Amagba community. The presence of the police and their ability to respond quickly when called upon can decrease the risk of break-ins in suburban areas (Rengert and Wasilchick, 1985).
3. The police should from time to time patrol the locality. The siren should be occasionally used to let the neighbourhood and potential burglars know that the area is under strict surveillance.
4. The present ban on the activities of the community development associations in Edo state, Amagba community inclusive, is indeed a welcome development. However, considering the fact that several unemployed youths were indirectly occupied by their involvement in community development associations activities and by this ban are now thrown into the labour market, government should take a step further by engaging them in other areas so as to ensure that they have means of livelihood, else they will find succor in breaking into residential premises within Amagba community which map is in their palms.
5. The media, the church and other credible agents of socialization should engage in the enlightenment of the people with a view to creating a better understanding of making residential premises secured. They should also advice people on the ills of burglary and crime in general as well as caution against ostentatious living and associating with people of questionable character.

## DECLARATION OF CONFLICT INTERESTS

- The authors declare that there is no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research authorship and/or publication of this article and further avers that this is an original work which is not under consideration for publication in any other journal.
- Copyright of the work is ceded to the journal.
- The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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