

Systematic review of the fitting together between poverty and crime: A case study of South Africa

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Abstract: Several social ills such as poverty, inequality, and high crime rates (with poverty being one of the factors contributing to crime) plague South Africa. However, some researchers recently have argued that there isn't much data to support this statement, while foreign direct investment is significantly impacted by crime, it is still unclear how poverty and crime are connected. The main aim of this article is to examine whether there is direct link between poverty and crime in South Africa, this was deemed necessary considering that South Africa has the third highest crime rates in the world and suffers from severe poverty. Therefore, it is imperative to ascertain if the severe poverty correlate with the increasing crime rate in the country. This article was underpinned by the United Nations (UN) first Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to end poverty in all its forms everywhere as well as the South African National Developmental Plan (NDP) that envisages the elimination of poverty and safer communities in the South African milieu by 2030.

To ensure that the aim of this article was achieved, the use of a systematic literature review was utilized as research methodology, which assisted the researchers in identifying patterns in documents and communication artifacts which were applicable in answering the questions of this article. To conduct the systematic review the researchers systematically collected data from various sources including journal articles, newspaper articles, books, and search engines. Even though documents are a significant source of data, the researchers cautiously and critically examined every document.

Thus, the researchers searched for pertinent studies published between the years 2019 to 2023 in the search engines Google Scholar, Web of Science, Google, SciELO and EBSCO search engine. The search terms which were used included, poverty and crime in South Africa, the nexus between poverty and crime in South Africa, contributing factors to crime in South Africa, socio-economic factors and crime in South Africa and the link between poverty and crime in South Africa. The findings of this article indicate a strong association between poverty and crime in South Africa; these findings suggests that if poverty is eliminated in the country, then a considerable fraction of all crimes can be avoided. Consequently, a more concerted effort is required from the government and civil societies to reduce poverty in South Africa.

Keywords: crime, poverty, social causes of crime, South Africa

Introduction

South Africa suffers from extreme poverty, this is according to Statista Research Department, that revealed that the country's population is roughly 60 million with about 18.2 million individuals living in extreme poverty (Statista, 2023). This extreme poverty is the result of the legacy of apartheid that confronted South Africa for 46 years, and there is little evidence that poverty will reverse itself for the poorest in the years to come. In fact, numerous strategies have been put in place for over twenty years now to alleviate poverty in South Africa, these strategies include increased social spending, targeted government transfers, affirmative action programs, social grants,

free food parcels, access to free education and healthcare. However, poverty has been increasing since 2011, after nearly two decades of steady declines (Statistics South Africa as cited in Francis & Webster, 2019).

Along with the extreme poverty, the nation also has extremely high crime rates. According to World Population Review (2023), South Africa has the highest crime rate in the world with a notable high rate of assaults, rape, homicide, and other violent crimes. Consistent with this, the latest global homicide ranking indicates that South Africa's murder rate was 6–7 times higher than the global average in 2019 (Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network, 2019; South African Police Service, 2022). This is confirmed by the South African Police Services (SAPS) statistics which indicate that as of the 1st of October 2022 to December 2022, 7,555 murders were recorded in South Africa, an increase of 696 from the previous quarter; 15,545 sexual offenses that's an increase 1,367 from the previous quarter as well as 85 640 assaults with Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH) (South African Police Service, 2022).

Furthermore, the nation experiences high levels of household crimes, with burglary at residential premises being the most frequent crime suffered by South African households. During the years 2021/22, there were 983 000 incidents of housebreaking; 155 000 of home robberies, which is the second most frequent sort of crime encountered by households (South African Police Service, 2022). Several factors have been attributed to these high crime rates, including high levels of poverty in the country (World Population Review; 2023). Cheteni, Mah and Yohane (2018) state that due to a dearth of data in several African nations, few empirical research has been conducted to examine the association between crime and poverty. The main finding of numerous research at this time is that poverty has little bearing on criminal activity however all these studies have been conducted in developed countries with extremely low levels of poverty. Therefore, research on the connection between poverty and crime is required in Africa, especially South Africa, a country which has very high crime rates and suffers from extreme poverty. As a result, this research article investigates the relationship between crime and poverty in South Africa.

Theoretical Framework

The relationship between poverty and crime can be understood using three ecological crime theories, namely the social disorganisation theory by Shaw and McKay, the strain theory by Merton as well as Becker's economic theory of crime. Becker (1968) economic theory of crime posits that individuals engage in a cost-benefit analysis, considering the potential gains and losses associated with their actions. Individuals will therefore commit crime only if the costs of doing so are less than the advantages garnered, as a result, people divide their time between market and criminal activity by weighing the expected rewards from each crime against the severity of the punishment. In relation to this article, poverty-stricken people have a substantially higher risk of committing crime than the overall population. The author asserts that poverty leads to crime by putting low-income people who have low returns from market activity in close proximity to high-income people with valuable items. This forces low-income households to commit crimes in order to improve their financial situation due to poverty.

According to the social disorganization theory by Shaw and McKay (1942) a person's physical and social environment play a major role in the behavioural decisions they make; the authors posit that location is crucial in forecasting unlawful behaviour. Physical decay, poverty, and a higher level of racial and cultural mixing are at least three issues Shaw and McKay recognized as being present in neighbourhoods with the greatest crime rates. According to these authors delinquency is not produced at the person level, but rather is a natural response by normal people to abnormal circumstances. In the event of a shortage of essential products and services, a lack of income and economic activity threatens both social and economic stability, which encourages criminal activity in a society (Garidzirai, 2021). The theory further suggests that poverty, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential mobility weakens social control and undermines the communities' desire to regulate their members (Cheteni, 2019). Lack of familial stability may make this issue worse (Sampson, 1987). When social controls are compromised, crime might become more difficult to manage.

The theory of social disorganization is closely related to Merton's (1938) strain theory which argues that societal pressures drive individuals to pursue financial success in order to gain acceptance, but lower-class people are frequently prohibited from reaching this goal through legal means. As a consequence, lower-class individuals more often experience strain, with this strain being a function of the disjunction between their goals and the legitimate means for achieving them. Merton states that there are several ways to cope with this strain, some of which involve crime. Individuals who perceive themselves as disadvantaged relative to others may resort to crimes such as theft, drug selling, and prostitution as a means of achieving monetary success and addressing feelings of unfairness. The author asserts that they may strike out at others in their frustration or engage in drug use to alleviate their frustration.

All the theories above complement each other, in that they concentrate on many facets of people, but the objective is to explain why certain people commit crime due of their social standing. The strain theory focuses on pressures to commit crimes; the social disorganisation theory considers social deterrents to crime, and the economic theory is concerned with the incentives to commit a crime and the detriment of the justice system (Cheteni, 2019). All these theories indicate that economic factors play a larger role in a society's well-being than other elements and therefore if the economy is not sound, society will break down, which will lead to an increase in crime.

Methodology

Research approach

A systematic literature review served as a method for examining the nexus between poverty and crime in South Africa. According to Lame (2019) a systematic literature review is a method of synthesizing scientific evidence to answer a specific research question in a clear and reproducible manner, while attempting to include all published information on the issue and assessing its quality. This approach ensures a systematic and thorough examination of the existing literature on the topic, allowing for a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of the available evidence. The study's sources were secondary data that came from both published and unpublished studies. Thus, the researchers searched for pertinent studies published between the years 2019 to 2023 in the search engines Google Scholar, Web of Science, Google, SciELO and EBSCO search engine. The search terms which were used included, poverty and crime in South Africa, the nexus between poverty and crime in South Africa, contributing factors to crime in South Africa, socio-economic factors and crime in South Africa and the link between poverty and crime in South Africa.

Study choice

The choice of literature was made in two steps. In the first, one hundred articles were originally collected, sixty-five articles were excluded after summaries had been reviewed due to the following reasons: (1) repeated articles, due to the use of multiple search engines (2) not focused on poverty and crime in South Africa, some would focus on poverty only however not linking it to crime (3) were not written in the South African context (4) were not written in English (5) did not present empirical research and (6) publication date prior to 2019. The remaining thirty-five articles were examined in the second stage to determine their eligibility, originality of research, published in peer-reviewed English journals, satisfactory methodological quality, and publication between 2019 and 2023 and written in the South Africa context were all the requirements. Finally, fifteen papers were selected.

Results

The findings of this article indicate that socio-economic factors such as unemployment and inequality collectively contribute to poverty which increases the prevalence of criminal activities in South Africa.

Poverty and Crime in general

Garidzirai (2019) reveals that poverty has a strong and favourable impact on crime in the Gauteng's local municipalities, this is demonstrated by the fact that a 1% rise in poverty causes a 0.69 % increase in criminal activity in this area. Steyn (2023) agrees with these findings, in a study which focused on poverty and the justification of deviant behaviour in South Africa, a sex perspective; the author collected data using a World Value Survey. The cross-sectional data from the survey was analysed by focusing on measures describing poverty and respondents' opinions toward crime, specifically its justification, were the main emphasis. Descriptive statistics, mean difference tests, correlation tests, and tests for moderated associations were all included in the analyses. The author discovered the mean scores on poverty as well as the justification for crime were identical, the findings revealed that poverty, particularly food insecurity, was more closely associated to the justification of crime than financial insecurity. On the other hand, sex had little impact on the link between poverty and crime.

A newspaper article by Editorials (2023) reveals that in South Africa, poverty has been connected to higher crime rates and societal decay. The author/s enlighten that people may turn to criminal activity as a way of survival due to a lack of economic possibilities and severe living conditions. Furthermore, high levels of poverty erode communal cohesion, create an atmosphere of mistrust and insecurity, and lead to social disintegration. Since crime tends to be more prevalent in underdeveloped places, poverty and crime feed off one another, preventing further social and economic growth (Editorials, 2023). These findings are supported by the social disorganization theory which suggests that poverty weakens social control and undermines the communities' desire to regulate their members which encourages criminal activity in a society. Moreover, Lucas (2021) conducted a study which explored the absence of social capital in entrenching recidivism amongst male and female inhabitants of Hanover Park, Western Cape. The researcher discovered that of the sampled parolees in the study approximately 60% of them come from families with a monthly

income of less than R6000, 87% of them their household income is less than R10,000 per month; this clearly demonstrates the degree of poverty encountered by the parolees in the study. This has a variety of consequences for their quality of life, the discretionary income influences access to decent health care, education, and opportunities. Furthermore, the parolee's unemployment rate is 87%, and according to them "not being able to find work is the top threat that they have to fight every day so that they can resist the temptation of going back to a life of crime" (Lucas, 2021).

Poverty and Burglary at residential premises

Two studies revealed that, poverty directly increases the incidence of burglaries in South Africa. Fumba and Magadze (2022) conducted a qualitative study which focused on the factors which influence housebreaking in the Ntabankulu Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape. The study employed semi-structured interviews with Ex-offenders and Community Leaders in the area. The results of the study revealed that socio-economic factors including poverty, inequality, substance abuse and unemployment contribute to the occurrence of housebreaking. The findings indicated that unemployment, which is exacerbated by low levels of education and lack of skills, is a major contributor to the crime of housebreaking. As a result, the research suggested that jobs need to be created through better schooling or skills development programs in order to minimize the high rate of unemployment and poverty, and hence housebreaking, in the area of study (Fumba & Magadze, 2022). These findings are in harmony, with Mbonambi (2022) findings which suggested that poverty, unemployment, drug, and alcohol abuse are factors that contribute to the commission of burglaries at residential premises in the Newlands East Policing Precinct. The author highlights that, a clear perception is that housebreakers in the study area commit burglaries to survive and to feed their drug addiction and because the area of study is characterised by both affluent and deprived neighbourhoods, this fact results in the affluent-looking homes being targeted because of the perception of high financial rewards to be gained from burglarising such houses. As a result, the author mentions that these findings highlight the need for government and private enterprise intervention to create jobs. These finding are supported by the General Strain Theory which states that when people are under strain, stressed, or frustrated, they are more likely to commit a crime, and that these crimes are usually perpetrated as a result of failed goals (Brown, Esbensen, & Geis, 2007:281). According to the General Strain Theory, many of these individuals commit burglary because their circumstance frustrates them. It was discovered that most burglars committed these burglaries because they were unemployed and unable to make ends meet to survive and feed their families as a result they had to steal and resell stolen products to get money.

Poverty, inequality, unemployment, drug abuse and crime

Cheteni (2019) investigated the relationship between crime and poverty, using quarterly data from 1995 to 2016, the author discovered that poverty, inequality, and income influence drug-related crimes both in the short and long term. The paper further argues that the youth in underprivileged communities have been the most impacted by hardships - consequently, their anger is manifested in a rise in crime. The general strain theory clarifies that when people (who have criminal tendencies) are under strain, feel stressed, or are frustrated, they are likely to commit a crime. For that reason, it argues that neglecting the poverty of young people without jobs has contributed to a rise in crime (Cheteni, 2019). Consistent with these findings Jeke, Chitenderu and Moyo (2021) affirm the notion that the nation's high crime rate is ascribed to socioeconomic problems such as the high unemployment rate, extreme poverty, and inequality. Therefore, it is imperative that policymakers introduce measures to reduce the crime rate to attract investment and create a conducive environment for development; if it is not addressed a high crime rate will therefore continue the vicious cycle of high poverty, unemployment, and inequality levels, which will in turn fuel more crime (Jeke et.al, 2021). Furthermore, a newspaper report which covered a webinar series titled, Crime in South Africa- who is to blame agrees with Jeke et.al (2021), the panellists shared that there is a definite direct link between inequality, poverty, deprivation, underdevelopment, and violent crime in South Africa. One of the panellist Adriaan Basson who is an editor-in-chief at News24 explains that the history of oppression and colonialism contributed to many of the issues and crimes which South Africa has today including unemployment, inequality, and poverty. Therefore, by addressing the social and economic ills of South Africa, mainly unemployment, poverty, and inequality there will be a direct impact on crime, specifically violent crimes (Khan, 2022).

Vulnerability and poverty

Additionally, five research studies assert that poverty makes people more vulnerable to crime. According to Hatcher et al. (2019), household poverty may be a significant factor in child sexual abuse; the authors mention that child sexual abuse is more likely to occur in societies where there is extreme poverty. Motseki and Mofokeng (2022) agree in their study which shows that a variety of circumstances, including an increase in household poverty, unemployment, marital abuse, infidelity, being abandoned by their husband, family disintegration, and ethnic conflict, contribute to the

trafficking of women in South Africa. Furthermore, Eldred de Klerk a crime researcher mentions that low service delivery, poverty as well as the gap between the rich and the poor increases crime rate (Felix, 2019). This is reflected in a newspaper report (Eyewitness news) where the researcher analysed the 2019 annual South African Police Service (SAPS) stats which not only revealed high levels of crime but also confirmed that crime still affects mainly poorer South Africans. The researcher states that “the fields with overgrown trees are making people vulnerable”, and therefore to eradicate criminal activity, the government should address social and service delivery issues in consultation with the impacted neighbourhoods (Felix, 2019).

Another article by Greater Good SA (2022) concurs by stating that some South African children are at higher risk of becoming involved in criminality and violence because of poor and insecure conditions, unstable living arrangements, as well as inconsistent parenting. This article concludes that poverty and crime rates are significantly correlated, the author explains that “in the absence of food or money, poverty often leads to a high level of stress that can result in theft, robberies, and other violent acts; one finds that in areas of high crime rates, poverty is also higher” (Greater Good SA, 2022). Another perspective is offered by Quinonez (2021) who explains that in South Africa poverty-related crime is high due to limited resources, and this phenomenon is common amongst children and teenagers. The author clarifies that the relationship exists because of more leisure time and fewer resources to successfully fill children's time after-school hours.

Conclusion And Recommendations

In conclusion the research findings support the notion that there is a link between poverty and crime in South Africa. Therefore, if the South African society is burdened by high poverty the societal condition it creates will remain favourable for criminals; thus, addressing poverty is crucial in reducing crime in South Africa. As a result, this study recommends the following:

Recommendation one: It is imperative for social crime prevention programmes to be urgently implemented in areas where poverty and high unemployment are rife with the aim of addressing the socio-economic conditions that could be linked to the causes of crime in a particular area. These programmes should integrate the efforts of law enforcement agencies, local authorities, welfare departments, and the private and business sectors. The primary focus should be on skills development, training as well as job creation for the unemployed as governmental allowances merely perpetuate the problem of loitering. A key component of lowering poverty is maintaining employment, perhaps with the help of employment subsidies.

Recommendation Two: It is highly recommended that the government and non-profit organisations increase the number of after-school activities available to kids, especially those in disadvantaged communities like townships as a deterrent from the path to criminal action. These activities should not only include educational activities but sporting activities also. These activities can give the youth something to do, help them to focus on discipline, accountability, as well as guidance and as a result discourage them from participating in illegal activities or use illegal substances.

Recommendation Three: It is recommended that the SAPS form a task team to increase drug arrests. Curbing the use of this and other drugs will result in fewer crimes being committed in communities as there will be fewer addicts who are continually looking for ways to finance their drug addiction.

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