

Sustainable Solutions to the Chain Reactions to Income Inequality on Crime in South Africa

Adewale A. Olutola¹, Olumuyiwa T. Faluyi²

^{1,2} Department of Law, Safety and Security Management Faculty of Humanities
Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa.

¹ Corresponding author: olutolaAA@tut.ac.za

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OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development, Ontario International Development Agency, Canada.

ISSN 1923-6654 (print) ISSN 1923-6662 (online) www.oidaijsd.com

Also available at <https://www.ssrn.com/index.cfm/en/oida-intl-journal-sustainable-dev/>

Abstract: Globally, wide disparity in income has over the years been of concern to governments, organisations, academic researchers and the public. One of the consequences of income inequality is crime. South Africa has high income inequality and one of the consequences is increased crime rate. This study explores the multifaceted relationships between income inequality and crime in the country as a foundation to address the chain reactions. The findings of the study reveal that income inequality is one of the key determinants of crime in South Africa and the chain reactions that emanate from crime may snowball into income inequality. Through the utilisation of strain theory, the study explains why income inequality is one of the factors that trigger crime. The study adopted qualitative research methods with data collected from secondary sources including books, journal articles, official government, non-governmental and international organisations' documents, newspapers and internet materials while content analysis was used to analyse the data. The recommendations for sustainable interventions hinge on effectively disrupting the cause-effect relationship between income inequality and crime. These can be accomplished through initiatives that strengthen equity and justice in the country.

Keywords: chain reaction; crime; income inequality; sustainable solutions

Introduction

South Africa has been confronted with the challenge of income inequality for decades. This challenge has taken its toll on the social and economic progress of its populace. Gaps in income frequently create circumstances where low income individuals often find illegal activities as better options to legal ones. As income inequality widens, the pressure on those at the lower echelon of income intensifies, culminating in a stronger incentive to engage in criminal behaviour (Sugiharti, Purwono, Esquivias and Rohmawati, 2023). There are other forms of inequality but income inequality is a determinant of some of them. In essence, if income inequality is low, inequality in other spheres may be low. Thus, income inequality directly or indirectly impact on crime. South Africa is not shielded from this cause-effect relationship between inequality and crime. One of the ripple effects of high inequality is the high rate of crime in the country. The level of crime in the country has spiral effects that have affected the progress of the country. To attain sustainable solutions to this multidimensional issue, a grasp of the links between income inequality and crime is imperative as this will enhance an all-inclusive approach that tackles the foundation of this correlation. Hence, this study seeks to utilise the understanding of the interconnectedness of income inequality and crime in South Africa as a basis for sustainable solutions to the chain reactions that emanate from this nexus.

The study is divided into six sections. The first explained inequality and income inequality and this is succeeded with a section on crime to explain crime and why some acts that are criminal in some spaces may not be criminal or given a soft response in other societies. The third section is the theoretical underpinning of the study- general strain theory. The fourth section focused on crime in South Africa and the different types of crime were highlighted. The fifth section explained the nexus between income inequality and crime in South Africa and the chain reactions of this fusion. The last section concluded the study and gave recommendations.

Income Inequality

The ambition and the intent of the draftsmen of section 9 subsections 1 and 2 of the Bill of Rights under the 1996 of South Africa is noted. It provides thus:

1. *Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law.*
2. *Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. To promote the achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance persons, or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination may be taken.*

However, it is now thirty years after the dawn of democracy in South Africa and the country is the most unequal country globally (UNDP, 2019; UNDP, 2024). There cannot be perfect equality among individuals and households in a country and among countries. Inequality is multifaceted such that it is present within respective countries and between countries (Vitkovics, 2023). Inequality depicts the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities among individuals, groups within a population, or countries, occurring at a specific moment or over a period of time (Yang, 2017). It represents clear indication of divisions along some parameters. These divisions manifest through divisions based on identity and discrepancies in access to basic services like education or healthcare. Others are lack of access to basic necessities of life such as water, good quality and adequate quantity of food, and a secure home. Nascent areas where differences pose a challenge are online space and different technologies (Vitkovics, 2023). Some of these shortcomings are rooted in income inequality. Thus, income inequality is a subset of inequality and the former is the root cause of some other forms of inequality. Inequality is so crucial that addressing it are integral parts of South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 (National Planning Commission, n.d) and the African Union Agenda 2063 (The African Union Commission, 2015). Ending inequality is Goal 10 of the Sustainable Development Goals (World Bank, 2019). The attention that the challenge of inequality has drawn nationally, regionally and internationally, speaks to the need to address the matter in all its spheres. Target 10.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals in response to income inequality seeks to achieve and sustain income growth (World Bank, 2019).

This study explores income inequality because of three reasons which are global attention on income inequality, South Africa's top spot in income inequality globally and income inequality being the anchor of some other forms of inequality. Income inequality is a foundation factor that establishes inequalities in health, education, work, political participation and security (Odusola, Cornia, Bhorat and Conceição, 2017; Yang, 2017). Some people are deprived of these factors because they are financially disadvantaged. The reality about income inequality in South Africa is that 73 per cent earn below R6 000 per month, 3.3 per cent earn more than R52 000 per month (Opperman, 2023). This reflects a high disparity in income.

According to Vitkovics (2023: 138), income inequality 'shows the distribution of income earned in an economy across the population, usually calculated at the household level, weighted by the number and age of household members' The gaps in this distribution represents the level of inequality of income across all population groups in a country. Income inequality can also be assessed at individual level (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2019). It can be measured through more than one means but the Gini coefficient is the most common and globally accepted. Gini coefficient is the 'measure of the deviation of the distribution of income among individuals or households in a country from a perfectly equal distribution' (UNDP, 2024: 287). The value is 0 to 1 with 0 representing a perfectly equal country and 1 representing the most unequal country which means the higher the value, the more unequal the households and individuals in the country and vice versa (Vitkovics, 2023). Income inequality is a consequence of several factors.

Subject to foundations in gender, social, economic, racial, environmental, geographical and occupational differences (Gimba, Seraj and Ozdeser, 2021), most of the root causes of inequality account for income inequality. Nolan, Richiardi and Valenzuela (2019) identify drivers of inequality as globalisation, technological change, finance, market power in labour and product markets, labour market institutions and regulations, demographic and household structures, redistribution policies and political processes and behaviours. Reasons for increase in income inequality could be structural or institutional. Structural includes globalisation and technological change. Institutional includes neo-liberal measures like privatisation, deregulation, some tax policies and welfare reduction (Polacko, 2021). Others are executive pay and union decline (Polacko, 2021). Some of these causes may apply to Sub-Saharan countries but manifest based on specific territorial circumstances. However, issues like bad leadership and corruption are contributory factors to poor service delivery in Sub-Sahara Africa (Faluyi 2023; Fagbadebo and Faluyi 2023) and they contribute to widened disparities in income due to wide unequal opportunities. Another factor that has been attributed to income inequality is colonialism. It is assumed that the post-colonial indigenous leaders inherited a politically divided and economically divided system due to colonial policies of segregation. However, the case of South Africa is peculiar. Though apartheid has ended, the income disparity owing to economic advantages the colonialists enjoyed has created income gaps and post-apartheid South Africa reflects almost the same thing because income is racially skewed in favour of the Whites (Lephakga, 2016; Bhorat, Lilenstein, Monnakgotla, Thornton and Van Der Zee, 2017;

Shahaboonin, David and Van Wyk, 2023). Hence, the lopsided economic imbalance has continued in contemporary South Africa.

The high inequality has been fuelled by high unemployment in South Africa. In 2022, President Cyril Ramaphosa stated that the private sector employs about 80 per cent of those employed in the country but the sector's operation is negatively affected by unstable electricity supply, inefficient network industries and high cost of doing business (Khoza, 2022). The unemployment rate in South Africa increased from 22 per cent in 1994 to 25 per cent in 2014 (Statistics South Africa, n.d). Unemployment was 22.3 per cent in 2007 and 22.9 per cent in 2008 (Lehohla, 2009). The unemployment rate of the population ages 15 to 64 in the first and last quarters of 2009 were 23.5 per cent and 24.3 per cent respectively and by the first quarter of 2010, it rose to 25.2 per cent (Statistics South Africa 2010). By quarter four of 2019, unemployment rate had risen to 29.1 per cent (Statistics South Africa, 2019). Unemployment in the last quarter of 2023 was 32.1 per cent (Statistics South Africa, 2024). With this high unemployment, income disparity increases because the unemployed form an integral part of the lower income echelon. Hence, a vibrant private sector will play vital role in reducing unemployment in South Africa.

Crime

One of the societal ills in the world is crime with most countries grappling with different shades of crime. Crimes are severe wrongs that attract state punishment of the perpetrator (Lamond, 2007). The dynamics in countries determine what they consider as crime. This explains why Willman, Gould, Newham, and Gomez (2019: 3) argue that 'a crime is an action that violates the law, regardless of whether or not it involves violence. White collar crimes are not violent, as an example. Furthermore, some acts of violence such as domestic and psychological violence, including stalking, are not considered crimes in many countries'. This clarifies why Felson (2009) differentiates between crime and violence. The author submits that crime encompasses rule breaking while violence is intentionally perpetrating harm using physical means. The author further explains that some violent acts are not criminal or even deviant. For instance, violence that are neither criminal nor deviant are those perpetrated in self-defense, by social control agents like parents and police and violence in war. Theft and illicit drug use are criminal acts that are not violent (Felson, 2009). Aside being an act that is against the law, another common thing about crime is that it has root causes.

Different authors have attributed different factors as drivers of crime. Weatherburn (2001) identifies proximate and distal causes of crime. Proximate causes are those which directly precede criminal behaviour. Distal causes are more remote but this does not mean they are less influential or important. What may be described as proximate or distal may be relative because a proximate cause in a situation may be distal in another circumstance. For instance, causes like weak parent child attachment and association with delinquent peers and economic stress may be proximate or distal depending on the context (Weatherburn, 2001). The places where people are located may determine the extent of threat that these factors may pose. Crime rate is higher in urban areas compared to rural areas (Khoirunurrofik, and Ismail: 2019). Urbanisation remains an issue that outperforms the government's capacity to provide services and increases crime rate (Willman et al. 2019; Hazra, 2020). Hence, poor service delivery exerts much pressure on the people that live in urban areas. To fill the infrastructural lacuna, some of them may consider crime as a tool.

There are cases peculiar to individuals and households that may be responsible for crime. These include but not limited to lack of education, unemployment, poverty and income inequality. For instance, when many people are out of school, there is high unemployment, the income gap among residents becomes wide, poverty becomes prevalent and crime tends to increase (Armin and Idris, 2019). One of the negative effects of the rise in unemployment is increase in fraud cases (Sugiharti, Esquivias, Shaari, Agustin and Rohmawati, 2022). This is evident in the recent rise in cybercrime in South Africa (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). Aside these elements highlighted, factors responsible for crime in South Africa include but not limited to inequality, poverty, beliefs about male sexual entitlement, alcohol and other substance use and abuse, activities of gangs and weak criminal justice system (Adam, 2021). For instance, the criminal justice system has been tainted with high cost of accessing justice and corruption (APRM South Africa Second Generation Review Report, 2022).

These factors highlighted as causes of crime in South Africa and beyond may apply to all countries because conditions differ across territories. Countries that have good crime control system may not experience as much crime as developing countries due to unemployment. Unemployment increases crime rate but in developed countries, it may only lead to lower crime rate because there is higher opportunity cost associated with crime (Sugiharti et al., 2022). Thus, as a result of good social security and effective criminal justice systems, unemployment poses less threat in developed countries. The type of crime that is committed and the opportunity cost of involvement in crime may be a progeny of the sophistication and development of the society.

If what people can benefit from crime is high, they may be encouraged to engage in crime but if there is increase in what it will cost them, they may be deterred (Cheong and Wu, 2015). The cost may be in form of material loss and punitive consequences of crime. According to Kang (2015), a person decides to commit a crime if the probable gains from illegal activities, after considering that the costs of punishment, outstrip the benefits from legitimate employment.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical lens of this study is general strain theory. This theory states that to address emotions generated through strain, people may resort to crime or delinquency (Angew, 2017). Strain is the stress an individual experiences and this culminates into negative emotions. According to Brezina (2017), these emotions may be in the form of anger, frustration, depression, and despair. The author avers that these negative emotions pressure an individual to consider crime or delinquency as a possible response. Thus, people who experience strain often become distressed and may recourse to crime as a coping strategy (Agnew and Brezina, 2019).

Strain may sometimes be a progeny of income inequality. Income inequality places an individual in a position where he may find it difficult to afford some basic necessities and engaging in crime may be the way to access these basics. Scholars (Chiu and Madden, 1998; Demombynes and Özler, 2002; Costantini, Meco and Paradiso, 2018; Hazra, 2020; Sugiharti, et al., 2022) have linked high income inequality to crime. However, in getting involved in crime, an individual considers the opportunity cost. In some situations, an individual may see himself relatively low in the income echelon compared to others. This breeds social jealousy and consequently crime. For instance, if poor people reside in a similar location with the rich, social jealousy becomes unavoidable and this leads to criminal acts (Khoirunurrofik, and Ismail, 2019). However, such criminal acts may not necessarily be committed within the environment of the affluent but the victims may be those of average income or the poor. The rich have the resources to protect themselves and this makes the prospective perpetrators of crime consider the consequences of having the rich as their victims but would prefer the poor (Kang, 2015). Hence, strain may snowball into involvement in crime but according to Sugiharti, et al. (2023), people commit crimes when the gap between criminal benefits and a criminal penalty outweighs benefits from legitimate employment.

Crime in South Africa

South Africa surpasses other countries in crime rate in Africa (World Population Review¹, 2024). This unenviable status is as a result of factors that contribute to crime of which income inequality is a key one. The acts of violence that accompany some of the criminal acts are so intense that the safety of law abiding citizens remains under threat. The seriousness and the targets of criminals determine how crimes are grouped and that is why crimes can be tagged as assault, burglary, corruption, crimes against public order, kidnapping, murder, stealing, narcotics, property, rape, robbery, and so on (Sugiharti, et al., 2022). Some criminal acts that are prevalent in some societies might gain traction which spurs state response. This ‘popularity’ may determine how the state will respond and how such crimes will be categorised but similar crimes with very low or no cases in other societies may be given less or no attention in the latter societies. For instance, issues like banditry and herder-farmer crises are prevalent in Nigeria and the recognition these have been given in state laws as well as the interventionist strategies of the state affirm that they are issues in the Nigerian society. However, in countries that such acts are not prevalent, they may not snowball into having any legal provisions to prevent or respond to these crimes. Grouping crime in South Africa is a derivative of the realities in the society and the acts of crime that are reported.

Crime in South Africa is categorised into various types. According to the South African Police Service (SAPS) (2016) and SAPS (2023), there are contact crime which has murder, attempted murder, assaults, robberies, sexual offences and kidnapping as sub-categories. Crime is also grouped as contact related crime which is sub divided into arson and malicious damage to property. The third is property-related crime which includes burglary at residential premises, burglary at non-residential premises, theft of motor vehicle and motorcycle, theft out of from motor vehicles and stock theft. Other categories are other serious crime, crime detected as a result of police action and environmental crimes.

Income inequality is strongly linked to high crime rate. Property-related crime and contact crime have direct links with closing income gaps. Income inequality is a strong motivation for property crime because the returns of the crime is income (Demombynes and Özler, 2002). Property crime and robbery are tied to resource acquisition because they are linked to closing the income gaps that emanate through socio-economic factors, unemployment, income and inequality (Bhorat et al., 2017). Nevertheless, other forms of crime have income dimension. Thus, crimes like murder, attempted murder, assaults, and sexual offences among others may not be directly linked to income but may be carried

¹ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/crime-rate-by-country>

out while perpetrating some property-related and contact crimes. Some contact crimes may be perpetrated due to incentives of financial gains promised by a third party. However, other forms of crime may be linked directly or indirectly to income. Authors like (Chiu and Madden, 1998; Costantini, et al., 2018; Hazra, 2020; Sugiharti, et al., 2022) submit that crime generally irrespective of how they are categorised are sometimes due to income inequality among other factors

The Nexus and the Chain Reaction

The literature consulted in this study recognise that there are different reasons why people engage in crime. The strong link between income inequality and crime has been established. An individual that has insufficient income will find it difficult to afford quality education, good health services, and other necessities. Thus, if these are absent or insufficient in the life of an individual, they may be excuses to engage in crime. Income inequality in South Africa is historically linked.

Some of the causes of inequality highlighted in this study manifest in South Africa. These causes notwithstanding apartheid is a major historical cause (Lephakga, 2016; Bhorat et al., 2017). Despite the measures put in place in post-apartheid South Africa to close the income inequality gap (Francis and Webster, 2019), income inequality has continued along racial line with the Blacks being with the highest income inequality in the country. This has created social jealousy. Social jealousy is a progeny of high income inequality. Social jealousy spices social conflict between residents and this leads to crime (Armin and Idris, 2019). Income disparity prompts people to struggle to escape from the lower income echelon and climb to the income privileged and crime is one of the tools to accomplish this status change (Khoirunurrofik, and Ismail, 2019). Crime is persistently prevalent among disadvantaged geographic and racial groups, where socio-economic opportunities remain deficient, emanating in unfulfilled expectations (Willman et al., 2019). These criminal acts have consequences which pose threats to peace, good economy and investor interests. A glimpse into income inequality and crime information over some years will give a better understanding of the link between income inequality and crime in South Africa.

The average income inequality based on Gini coefficient between 1960 and 1992 was 0.62 (Deininger and Squire, 1996). This represents the apartheid years. The Gini coefficient increased from 0.66 to 0.70 between 1993 and 2008 (Leibbrandt, Finn and Woolard, 2012) but it fell to 0.69 in 2010 (Bhorat et al. 2017). Although, it was 0.64 in 1995 but increased to 0.72 in 2005 (Bhorat, Van der Westhuizen and Jacobs, 2009). It fell to 0.66 in 2014 (Hundenborn, Leibbrandt and Woolard, 2018). The average Gini coefficient between 2010 and 2022 was 0.63 (UNDP, 2024). These figures represent very high income inequality compared to other countries (UNDP, 2019; UNDP, 2024). The country also has the highest crime rate in Africa (World Bank, 2023; World Population Review, 2024). These peak positions in income inequality and crime make it imperative to explore the nexus between the two within the South African context.

Seventeen community reported serious crimes for some years will be examined. These crimes include murder, total sexual offences, attempted murder, robbery with aggravating circumstances, and stock theft among others. **Tables 1, 2 and 3** will be the platforms to project these. These will be compared to the level of income inequality in some of the years under review.

Table 1: National Crime Figures 2006/07 to 2011/12

Year	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Reported cases	1 947 520	1 861 619	1 885 881	1 884 430	1 816 350	1 800 758

Source: SAPS (2016)

Table 2: National Crime Figures 2012/13 to 2017/18

Year	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Reported cases	1 809 001	1 803 991	1 795 947	1 770 626	1 738 980	1 662 815

Source: SAPS (2016) and SAPS (2023)

Table 3: National Crime Figures 2018/19 to 2022/23

Year	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Reported cases	1 673 990	1 629 319	1 361 797	1 480 763	1 586 508

Source: SAPS (2023)

Income inequality was 0.72 in 2005 and the cases of reported crime in 2006/07 was 1 947 520. Thus, the year that followed a year of high inequality had very high crime figure. In 2008, income inequality dropped to 0.70, while the reported crime for 2007/08 and 2008/09 were 1 861 619 and 1 885 881 respectively. Thus, as income inequality dropped, reported crimes dropped. The average Gini coefficient from 2010 to 2022 was 0.63 and it is obvious from **Tables 1, 2 and 3** that the rate of crimes in these periods has dropped. It is true that the government has performed well in giving grants and these contributed to drop in inequalities (Statistics South Africa, 2022; Van Der Byl, n.d.). The study also recognises that there are other factors responsible for crime. Generally, if income inequality has not been so high in South Africa, the level of crime will not be as high as it is. Also, if the inequality levels in the years that recorded high figures of crime have not been high, crimes would not have been that high in those years. Hence, inequality is a contributory factor to crime in South Africa. Irrespective of the level of income inequality in each year, it remains a catalyst for crime in South Africa and crime has produced some chain reactions.

According to World Bank (2023), it has economic effects as it inflicts an estimated cost of a minimum of 10 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product per annum and more public spending is devoted to combat crime. It severely affects the operations of businesses through extortion, robbery, theft, burglary and other forms of crime (World Bank, 2023). These snowball into losses of income and assets and it has related security costs. It has direct and indirect negative impact on the state, businesses, households and individuals (World Bank, 2023). It reinforces inequality because of the effects it has on businesses and households because their income determines their capacity to protect themselves through private security and absorb the impact of crime especially through insurance (World Bank, 2023). These additional expenses incurred reduce the profit of businesses which negatively affects their capacity to give good remuneration and engage the services of more employees. Hence, unemployment may set in and one of the consequences is income inequality. This inequality reinforcement makes those at the lower echelon of income engage in crime and they are more vulnerable to the negative effects of crime. Kang (2015) submits that crimes against high-income individuals may attract a higher risk of hesitation and punishment for offenders, as these affluent are more likely to invest in self-protection and reside in areas which are more policed. The author further asserts that if the increased risk of getting caught and punished overshadows the additional gains from targeting the wealthy, a potential offender sees victimisation of lower income earners as an alternative. Generally, these economic effects of crime have the propensity to dissuade investors from investing in the country or prompt them to disinvest. These negatively affect availability of jobs and further increase inequality. Crime also negatively affects the mental health of South Africans (Tsaneva and LaPlante, 2023). These effects on people's mental health may translate to low individual productivity and eventually low income which may increase inequality.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The study established that income inequality and crime are linked. There are several factors responsible for crime but the overarching nature of income inequality makes it a very strong determinant of crime in South Africa. These are evident in the high inequality and crime rates in South Africa. Crime has effects that have economically and socially affected individuals, households, businesses and the government. These effects further impoverish the people and snowball into more crimes. These assertions were made through exploration of topics like income inequality, crime, theoretical framework, crime in South Africa, the nexus and the chain reaction. Hence, sustainable solutions to income inequality and crime are expedient as parts of efforts for a better South Africa.

Service delivery should be at its peak to ensure the smooth running of businesses. If businesses have access to constant electricity for instance, they have the propensity to operate at lesser cost. If infrastructure are in good conditions, the citizens will be less discontent with the system and hardly consider crime as an alternative to fill infrastructural gap. The private sector should be encouraged through investor friendly credit systems, provision of adequate security and promulgation of friendly laws. Unemployment will reduce if the private sector thrives. More people should be encouraged to enroll for formal education and it should be at affordable cost. Good education will position South Africans for some of the challenges that come with globalisation and technological advancement as catalysts for

inequality. The criminal justice system should be made to operate corruption-free and effective. This will give the common man hope in the system and deter a lot of people from perpetrating in crime. Functional and modern recreational facilities should be made available in schools, communities and public spaces. These will engage the youths and make them less available for crime.

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