

Challenges in Mitigating Youth Violence in Bo City

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Abstract

The stability of Sierra Leone after the war is seriously threatened by youth violence. Youth-initiated violence has hindered growth and scared away investors from a nation that needs private sector investment to eliminate unemployment and over-reliance on government for empowerment and opportunities. This study has strengthened the body of research supporting many risk factors for violence young adults commit. The research's conclusions showed that several structural issues threaten law enforcement and societal stability, including complete mistrust of the judiciary and police, the proliferation of weapons, and crumbling family institutions. This study offers a different standpoint on youth violence and blames the failing social institutions for abating youth-perpetrated violence. In Sierra Leone today, most social institutions have reneged on their responsibilities to perform societal functions. These failures have served as a causative factor for youth violence in post-conflict Sierra Leone and continue to make the country unstable. In this study, the researcher advances the argument on the basis of the findings that young people who engage in violent behaviors are protected mainly by their families, communities, and friends, making law enforcement difficult.

Keywords

Youth Violence, Structural Violence, Peacebuilding, Arms Proliferation, Substance Abuse, Cliques

1. Introduction

During the early years of independence in the 1960s and 1970s, young people in Africa did not pose a serious social problem. As a result, unemployment, youth violence, and “disadvantaged” youth development were all not significant targets

for governments and funding agencies (Bennell, 2000).¹ Since then, however, concerns have been rising over the welfare situation of young people in much of Sub-Saharan Africa and the prospect of creating additional livelihood opportunities for them (Bennell, 2000). This protracted and deep-rooted economic crisis that has affected nearly every country in Sub-Saharan Africa has adversely impacted the well-being of most people in Sierra Leone.

Bo City's economic situation is precarious, leaving young people vulnerable to violence. The expense of living in the city is significantly rising, especially for basic essentials like food, shelter, sanitation, education, and health. These difficulties significantly influence the health and well-being of young people, especially those from low-income households. Young people in Bo City are still having a hard time finding employment. Many are engaged in the informal economy through small-scale trading, farming for sustenance, and bike riding. This might be due to a lack of economic investment, limited loan availability, or a dearth of education and training.

Educational opportunities for young people are also very limited in the city. The development of the middle class and the occupational abilities of people who might be structurally limited to continuing their formal education receive very little attention from government and the private sector. The potential of many young people who possess valuable skills that can enhance the socio-economic well-being of the state has been constrained by the neglect in the establishment of structures to empower the middle class. When society makes its youth unemployable and economically unproductive, their vulnerability can be preyed upon by conflict entrepreneurs, especially at a time when the internet poses a new threat to societal stability. Youth internet usage has considerably expanded in recent years, which is regrettably contributing to the current violent incidents in the nation. While the usage of the internet has helped young people to communicate and learn better, it has also served as a catalyst for violence. Young people in Tombo, Lunsar, and Freetown recently staged rebellions against the government as a result of media incitements, and the reckless use of social media and the threats it poses to information and societal security.

The sudden emergence and increase in cliques and gang violence have seriously threatened the stability of a place once described as "Sweet Bo". This unfortunate rise in unlawful conduct has led most young people to commit crimes and other violent activities.² So many business and entertainment centres in the City of Bo have suffered considerable losses from these cliques, which seriously affects the socio-economic status of the city and the country at large. Even though structural violence continues to exclude most young people from the mainstream of society, numerous peacebuilding mechanisms have empowered them to become productive citizens and develop the country better. Therefore, the aim

¹Bennel P. 2000. "Improving Youth Livelihoods in SSA: A review of policies and programs with particular emphasis on the link between sexual behaviour and economic well-being" (draft). Report to IDRC.

²Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2014.

of this paper is to investigate the challenges in reducing youth violence in Bo City.

2. Research Methodology

Both primary and secondary research methods were used to create the data that served as the basis for this study's conclusions. The study was conducted in Bo City, and the data was gathered and analyzed using a thorough procedure that combined qualitative and quantitative data collection. The researcher also observed activities and interviewed police, students, and youth groups. Secondary data were created from publications, newspapers, and journals of connected work. The study offers practical methods to reduce youth violence in Bo City while outlining the challenges involved.

3. Literature Review on Youth Violence in Bo City

“Approximately 60% of the population in Sierra Leone is under the age of 35,³ making up a sizeable portion of the country's youth population. Of this group, 70% are underemployed or unemployed and 50% illiterate and unskilled” (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2021).⁴ There is a noticeable unemployment rate, especially among young males seen on the streets of Bo and other significant areas in Sierra Leone. These endemic structural acts of violence, including family deprivations, joblessness, poor decision-making processes, and living under oppressive traditional and cultural systems in some rural areas, were just a few pre-war factors that fuelled the youth's involvement in what was a terrible conflict. Many of these factors are still present today. Young people who are unemployed in large numbers could be a source of instability since they are more likely to be recruited for violent and criminal activities.

Violence between young people is one of society's most egregious forms of violence. Media outlets cover violence committed on the streets of Bo and other major cities in Sierra Leone by in- and out-of-school youngsters in their regular pieces. Adolescents and young adults are almost universally both the victims and the perpetrators of such violence. The global cost of premature death, injury, and disability is considerably increased by the involvement of young people in homicide and non-fatal attacks.

Not only do the victims of youth violence suffer great hardship, but also their families, friends, and communities. Its impacts can be felt in terms of quality of life in addition to mortality, illness, and disability. Young people's involvement in violence significantly raises the price of health and welfare services, lowers productivity, lowers property values, disrupts several essential services, and generally jeopardizes Bo City's ability to live in peace.

The excesses of youth violence have caused considerable suffering for the people of Bo. In addition, the country's stability and peacebuilding efforts are

³Census, 2015.

⁴Census Report, 2015.

critically challenged by the rapid increase in gang and clique violence, particularly among young people. According to a police interview, violent youngsters occasionally attack persons at night and in entertainment centres, contributing to economic loss and insecurity.

According to estimates from a report by the [Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2014](#), 15% of young people in Sierra Leone take drugs and misuse alcohol. The most misused substance in Sierra Leone is marijuana, which is followed by *kush*,⁵ cocaine, and now Tramadol. The age range of the majority of people with substance abuse disorders in the formal health systems is 20 to 29 years old ([World Bank Group, 2019](#)).⁶ Evidence suggests that the leading causes of drug and alcohol misuse among young people are poverty, unemployment, and trauma ([Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2014](#)). Practitioners of adolescent development, educators, and law enforcement believe that poor parental and deteriorating societal values are to be blamed for youth drug and substance abuse.⁷

The alarming increase in youth-related violence has raised severe security concerns for the government and Sierra Leoneans, who fear that any youth indignation could spark chaos and war and harm the country's progress and stability. Due to a spate of youth-related violence that has claimed lives and damaged property across the nation due to gang violence, politics, and robberies, the government has implemented community partnership policing, in which vigilante organizations monitor and protect their neighborhoods from gangs and arm thieves.⁸

These and other factors have made peacebuilding efforts very difficult. A State needs to be rebuilt, and this goes for both its socio-economic foundation and its human capital, which has been damaged physically and psychologically by war.

4. Key Findings on the Challenges in Mitigating Youth Violence in Bo City

The effort to reduce the spate of violence in the country, especially among the youth, has been frustrated by so many challenges—the following comprised some militating factors inhibiting the fight against violence in Bo City.

4.1. Absolute Distrust in the Police and the Judiciary

In Africa, people's trust in the judiciary is shaky. In several nations, including Ghana, Mali, Sierra Leone, and South Africa, public mistrust of the court is on the rise, according to recent Afrobarometer polls as reported by [Shen-Bayh, 2022](#).⁹ Even if not all African nations are seeing declines, regional heterogeneity is a harsh reminder of how the uneven rule of law growth has remained. Wherever public trust in the court and the police is low, people frequently bring up

⁵Medical cannabis.

⁶Demographic Health Survey.

⁷Ministry of Youth, 2014.

⁸Awoko Newspaper.

⁹Shen-Bayh, F. *Democracy in Africa*.

widespread beliefs that judges make biased decisions. Numerous factors, such as socio-economic disparity, the gap between rural and urban areas, and gender discrimination, have been linked to this bias.

Until it became evident that specific police personnel were running syndicates with public offenders, thieves were previously turned up to law enforcement. For instance, a thief may be arrested and handed over to the police with all the required evidence in the hope that a fair investigation will be conducted to establish a case and with the expectation that the court will deliver justice and impose the appropriate sentence to increase crime deterrence. However, it is frustrating because these same alleged criminals are routinely seen in the communities where their crimes were committed within hours of their arrest, sometimes ridiculing and threatening the neighbors who reported them to the police. Public mistrust of the judicial and law enforcement systems has increased as a result of this.

Owing to these developments and the prolonged time it takes the police to respond to calls about armed robberies, the public has even claimed that the Operational Support Department (OSD), which is in charge of weapons, is renting rifles to robbers on an hourly basis. Moreover, on rare occasions, OSD personnel themselves have also been caught taking part in robberies in Pujehun. This further erodes public confidence since there is a growing perception that some law enforcement officers are working closely with those who violate public security. Because of this heightened mistrust in the police, mob violence is now considered the most effective way to bring criminals to justice.

Access to the courts to seek justice in civil and criminal matters is still quite difficult in Sierra Leone. Bo District has a population of 756,975 and a total land area of 5219 km² (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2021). The District is divided into 16 chiefdoms with larger towns and villages. There are only two magistrate courts in the District, with few court personnel to deal with disputes that could undermine societal peace and hinder growth and development. Bo City, the study area, is home to these two courts and has a population of 223,075 (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2021). This lack of structures to expedite court proceedings has contributed to the many delays and unreasonable adjournments of cases, thereby increasing mistrust in the judiciary, exacerbating hardship for people, and escalating tension between conflicting parties.

4.2. Wilful Neglect to Establish Structures that Will Ensure a Productive Middle Class

Youth unemployment is often viewed as a security problem in post-conflict countries. The difficulty of finding work makes it challenging for many to support themselves on a basic level, which leaves many frustrated and stimulates aggressive conduct. The imported educational system had a great plan. However, it has been crippled by the government's unwillingness to set up the necessary institutions to meet the enormous demand for learning skills that will assure the

middle class's reasonable employment.

Students must advance in accordance with their chronological stage under the system. Academic students continue to senior secondary schools and universities, whereas non-academic students move on to Technical Vocational (Tech Voc) schools, technical institutes, and training colleges after taking the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). The sad fact is that more institutes and training colleges are needed to satisfy the demand for non-academic students' needs. Due to the significant financial burden connected with the establishment of such institutions and the unwillingness of stakeholders to take positive action, this neglect results from a lack of visionary leadership.

In addition, our culture has been conditioned to view middle-level occupations as academically inferior, even though these individuals are crucial to the stability of every society's economy and belong to a class that should be praised. With this unhealthy mindset, young people rush to enroll in universities, using every available tool, or risk being discriminated against, with few or no institutions to take them in. On average, more than 50% of peers who begin schooling finish being completely shut out of the system, both academically and at the average level. There must be more innovative methods to address the considerable training and career-building expectations of the bulk of the modern population in order to reduce the rate of dropouts.

During a private conversation with an Okada¹⁰ rider in Bo, it was revealed that most of them were hard-core robbers and that, if it were not for their Okada riding job, which provided them with their daily sustenance, they might have been killed. This situation assumes that theft will be significantly reduced if our young people, who are currently active and unemployed, are helped to become employable and employed. Since 77.5% of Sierra Leoneans (according to a [2014 UNDP survey](#)) live in poverty, multinational mining firms should not be importing foreigners for a job that Sierra Leoneans can do. The government's lack of interest in its people's welfare invariably worsens the masses' misery.

"The idle mind is the devil's workshop", and on the essential human context, there is desperation in hunger.

4.3. The Proliferation of Enhancer Drugs and Their Abuse

An estimated 15% of young people in Sierra Leone abuse alcohol and drugs. Marijuana is the drug that is misused the most in Sierra Leone, followed by *kush*, cocaine, alcohol, and brown-brown. The majority of people with substance abuse disorders who obtain treatment in established healthcare systems are between the ages of 20 and 29 ([Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2014](#)).¹¹ Research findings from the ministry also suggests that trauma, unemployment, and poverty are the key causes of the rising rates of drug and substance use among young people. Many people attribute the rise in drug and substance misuse among

¹⁰Commercial motorbike.

¹¹Ministry of Youth Affairs.

young people to the breakdown of the family's role in raising responsible citizens. It is hard to picture a rational person invading a house with a machete, robbing it, and then trying to rape a woman. Abusers of drugs are enticed to conduct crimes that an average person would never consider or attempt by their easy access to substances.

According to a [WHO assessment from 2016](#), Sierra Leone is currently a producer and supplier of inexpensive, unrestricted alcohol products that are available and affordable to even the least interested young people. These alcohol products are inexpensive, and young people abuse them excessively, encouraging violence and undermining efforts to reduce them. Alcohol misuse is frequently linked to crimes young people commit, including assault, vehicle accidents, murder, and injury. In addition, young people's mental health has been affected by stimulant drugs like Tramadol and *kush*, making addressing youth violence difficult.

4.4. The Emergence of Cliques and Its Approval Nod by Society

Communities have long seen individuals who have similar interests and ideals establish groups. These groups profoundly influence how their members behave. Over time, society has seen a paradigm shift from groups being formed to pursue progress to a unified force wreaking havoc in neighborhoods. This practice, which is widespread in secondary schools and higher learning institutions, has taken over Sierra Leone's educational system. The worst are cliques, typically formed by youngsters who are not in school, which terrorize neighborhoods, places of entertainment, and undermine social peace. Their associations with particular musicians and notable people make their damaging behavior evident.

When gang leaders parade themselves as music entertainers on stage shows, they are permitted to hold rallies in the city streets. During such rallies, law-abiding people have been injured for wearing a Black or Red dress, depending on which lawless group's territory they might naively enter. Peaceful people who wear colors thought to be rival colors have also been attacked, robbed, and occasionally stabbed. The Black Leo and Red Flag Movement in particular have made use of these cliques to intimidate and attack those they perceive as opponents. Due to the frequent conflicts between rival area cliques, their administration is set up so that members are given titles ranging from One Star to Five Star depending on how many people/victims they harm by stabbing, and the heads of cliques called Five Os must first murder in order to hold that rank. Often, law-abiding persons are the targets of those seeking positions. Due to the quantity of knowledge they have acquired through running cliques and perpetrating violence, members can quickly transform themselves into an arm robbery group, by attacking people with machetes and other dangerous equipment.

4.5. Politically Induced Violence

Young people's fragility is frequently used by political leaders, who then include

them in violent activities. This is a significant obstacle to reducing violence, especially among young people. They are being drugged to frighten and perpetrate violence against opposition members to defend their political parties. As they are utilized as thugs and bodyguards during political campaigns, their importance is only recognized during those times, and they frequently never achieve their goals following elections. Some young people are also used as political party militias to secure offices.

According to [Bangura \(2016\)](#), young people are aware that politicians take advantage of them by giving them money, food, beverages, and drugs while also preying on their vulnerabilities. After electoral campaigns, they bemoan the disregard and neglect of promises made to them during campaigns ([Fortune & Bloh, 2012: p. 27](#); [World Bank Group, 2013: p. 21](#)). Youths continue to hang around the headquarters of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC), the two major political parties in the nation, hoping that their problems can be addressed. They also wait for their godfathers to give them meager sums of money so they can buy food and cigarettes. Even the youth wings of these parties are instruments in the hands of their financial patrons, the godfathers.

4.6. Youth Marginalisation and Accessibility to Guns

There is not much data to support the idea that post-war environments are intrinsically more violent than pre-war societies. However, specific post-conflict difficulties do occur, such as the prevalence of numerous weapons within communities. The fragility of the security sector makes it easier for young people to access weapons, often used to rub citizens at night. Overall, young people who have seen warfare and become acclimated to it might also put the experience in a certain "wartime limbo" ([Henriques, 2002](#)). The primary motivation for many young people to join militias is marginalization. Most young people are excluded from mainstream government and decision-making due to youth marginalization. They still struggle to survive in a society that does not consider their needs or personal growth. If marginalization continues, there is a greater chance that militia recruiters will someday try to recruit the youth again. This status quo is a major challenge to curbing youth violence in post-conflict Sierra Leone.

4.7. Parents and Communities Abating Cliques and by Extension Breeding Robbers

Given that most parents lack moral principles, they allow their kids to make honest mistakes and support them in doing so. They even keep children in their care who are known to attack harmless persons, undermining the efforts of the law. Communities are aware of the neighbourhood kids who commit acts of violence. However, they consented to them and covered up their identities until recently when the Sierra Leone Police introduced cash inducements to people who will provide information leading to the arrest of public offenders.

It will interest Sierra Leoneans to know that some disgusting and shameless

parents claim innocence for the robbers they breed in their homes, attempt to rub shoulders with the law and seek their release when they are arrested for randomly breaching the law.

5. Recommendations

In an effort to rehabilitate Sierra Leone after the war, the government has put in place programs that deal with the war's fundamental causes. By empowering the civil and public sector through professional trainings to enhance service delivery, including justice, leadership, and peace, the government has also strengthened dispute resolution mechanisms at the community level in an effort to combat youth violence. The Legal Aid Board for example was established in 2012 by a Parliamentary Act to provide, administer, coordinate, and monitor the provision of legal aid in civil and criminal matters. This has improved access to justice, increased court attendance, and decreased conflict-related tensions in communities. Magistrates are being sent to areas that have never had a sitting magistrate in their history as support to expedite justice within the country. The creation of the Anti-Corruption Commission to combat corruption, the Human Rights Commission to advance and defend human rights through public education, the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police to mediate and resolve domestic violence, and the establishment of the National Youth Commission are a few of the measures taken by the government to ensure that youth violence is significantly discouraged and respect for the rule of law is increased through the effective operation of state institutions. Despite the governments and its development partners' attempts to contain youth violence, the following suggestions are highly recommended:

Building a stable and developed state demands developing the mindset of young people. This effort requires building an influential social institution that will enhance a thriving middle class and boost development. Investment in Technical Vocational Institutions can help build a sector of educated minds that have been neglected for quite a long time. This sector must also be attractive to donor investment and major government funding. In addition, Vocational technical institutions can help expose the country's tourism industry and enhance sustainable livelihood development.

Also, attention must be given to state institutions' reformation in delivering their mandates. Excerpt from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission reported that endemic greed, corruption, injustices, youth marginalisation, etc., were part of the reasons for the brutal civil war in Sierra Leone. So in addressing the underlying causes of the war, societal functions must be performed without recourse to prejudice, discrimination, and ethnicity or political affiliations. For cases to be reported to the police and judiciary, for example, the public must trust their functions. Through its reform strategies, the government must capacitate the police and the judiciary through periodic professional training. These reformations must also consider a review of the training manuals at the Police

Training School in order to have a professional police force that is law-abiding and work in the interest of the rule of law. The Complaint Discipline & Internal Investigation Department (CDIID) of the Sierra Leone Police must be equipped with the requisite skills to deal with concerns from the public concerning the unprofessional conduct of some police personnel. For example, allegations about the involvement of police in arm robbery dent public confidence and trust in the police in protecting lives and properties. Government must expand the operations of the Judiciary, so that distance cannot serve as a barrier to access justice.

Stringent measures must be implemented to regulate the accessibility, ownership, and control of guns. Post-conflict societies like Sierra Leone are prone to gun abuse, violence, and intimidation. Guns, for example, can quickly influence people's lawless behavior. Therefore, when these guns fall in the wrong hands, the tendency for abuse and violence is imminent. Rival gangs or cliques, for example, have inflicted harm on others through the access some of them have to these weapons. Therefore, better laws must be enacted and more vital institutions established to ensure stiff control to access and use of guns.

Considering the vulnerability of young people to violence, many have been induced through substance abuse, disturbing the country's peace. The proliferation of harmful drugs is a significant threat to the security and stability of a nation just emerging from war. Most politically perpetrated violence is attributed to the abuse of drugs by young people through the lawless acts of some politicians. Drugs like *kush* and alcohol are not only harmful to the well-being of youths but cheap and accessible to anyone, irrespective of age or state of mind-set. The government must improve the operations of the Pharmaceutical Board of Sierra Leone and the border security personnel to regulate the use of drugs in the country and stop the importation of harmful substances. Political parties also are urged to stop luring young people into violent behaviour with money and other rewards.

The family is an important social institution governing how people behave. The family plays a crucial role in maintaining order and stability in society. Communities' ability to produce criminals and public offenders has been dramatically impacted by the breakdown in some social and moral standards of families. Some even shield these offenders from prosecution and penalties, thereby saturating justice. Youth violence can be significantly reduced by parents taking responsibility for their children.

6. Conclusion

A significant factor that will drive sustainable development in Sierra Leone is the ability of people to maintain law and order. The enforcement of laws must be done impartially to preserve peace, enhance development, and attract investments. Over the years, lots of structural factors including mistrust in the police and judiciary, weak family institutions, arms proliferation, and neglect of the middle class among others have been identified as challenges affecting the miti-

gation of youth violence in Bo City. Government and its development partners must focus attention on reforming the police, judiciary, education, and other social institutions that provide essential services to the development of the country. The proliferation of arms for example has made it possible for ammunition to fall in the wrong hands, using it to rub peaceful citizens at night. If all of these endemic societal failures are not addressed, it is possible that the excruciating unemployment and marginalization of youths can plunge the country into another civil unrest.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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