

FACTORS INFLUENCING PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS AMONG YOUTHS IN BENUE STATE NIGERIA

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Abstract

Proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) among youths is a global issue that has serious implications for security and stability in many regions around the world including Benue State. Proliferation of SALW implies trading and movement of small arms and others dangerous weapons or firearms from one place to another illegally. There are several factors facilitating the proliferation of SALW among youths in Benue State, including porous borders, high levels of poverty and unemployment, weak State institutions and ethnic conflict. Political instability, the presence of non-state actors and corruption are also associate factors. The study objectives were to assess how porosity of Benue borders facilitates proliferation of SALW among youths, to ascertain how poverty, unemployment, weak State institutions and ethnic conflict enhance proliferation of SALW among youths in Benue State. The study adopts social organization theory and routine activity as its theoretical framework. The study concludes that factors such as porous borders, high levels of poverty, unemployment, weak State institutions and ethnic conflict among others influenced proliferation of SALW among youths in the State. The study recommended for greater cooperation between security agencies and border communities to enhance intelligence gathering and sharing, while stiffer penalties should be imposed on individuals involved in the illegal arms trade. Also, government should implements policies and programs that target poverty reduction and job creation, such as skills acquisition training, microfinance schemes and entrepreneurship development programs.

Keywords: *Proliferation, small arms, light weapons, border porosity, youths and Benue State.*

Introduction

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths in Nigeria has become a significant concern for policymakers, academics and civil society organizations. The insecurity resulting from insurgency, banditry, militancy, kidnapping, armed robbery, ethno-religious and communal crises have become worrisome in Nigeria. All this, are perpetrated with small arms and light weapons, which are easily concealed

and used to unleash violence in the society (Uzodike, 2015). There is hardly a day passes by, without a report of one attack or the other somewhere in Nigeria. According to a report by the Small Arms Survey (2018), Nigeria has an estimated 6 million small arms and light weapons in circulation, and approximately 70% of these weapons are in the hands of non-state actors.

The situation is particularly dire in the North-Central region of Nigeria, which includes Benue State in particular, where harder-farmers conflict, inter-communal conflicts, cattle rustling, and other forms of criminal activities have led to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. All this, are perpetrated with small arms and light weapons, which are easily concealed and used to unleash violence in the society (Aning & Alidu, 2012). Globally, proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) among youths is a global issue that has serious implications for security and stability in many regions around the world.

SALW is defined as weapons that are designed for personal use or for use by a small group, and include firearms such as handguns and assault rifles, as well as other weapons such as grenades and rocket launchers. On the other hand, youth is a young person who is in the phase of life between childhood and adulthood. The exact age range that defines youth varies depending on the context and cultural norms, but typically, it includes individuals in their teenage years and early twenties. Small Arms Survey (2014) classifies small arms and light weapons as any portable lethal weapon that expels or launches, or is designed to expel or launch a shot. These include everything from revolvers and pistols, machine guns, light anti-tank weapons, shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, recoilless rifles, single-rail-launched rockets and 120mm mortars. One of the main concerns regarding the proliferation of SALW among youths is the potential for these weapons to be used in criminal activities, including gang violence, organized crime, and terrorism. The availability of these weapons can also exacerbate existing conflicts and fuel instability in regions that are already experiencing political and social tensions. According to Tsaku (2021), out of 640 million arms circulating globally, it is estimated that 100 million are found in Africa, about 30 million in sub-Saharan Africa and 8 million in West Africa, alone. The majority of these SALWs about 59% are in the hands of civilians, 38% are owned by government armed forces, 2.8 % by police and 0.2% by armed groups (Tsaku, 2021).

The extent of proliferation of small arms and light weapons causes no surprise in a situation which is both congenial and permits easy access to the sophisticated arms markets of North America, especially in the United State. The presence of private security agencies and private armies that generate huge demand for small arms are contributory factors to the spread of small arms and light weapons. In developed societies, such as Italy, Pakistan, Spain, Scotland, the Netherlands, Germany, Turkey, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Kyrgyzstan, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, Ireland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Greece and Russia, Yemen and Nepal have experience illicit arms proliferation (Sears, 2012).

In Europe, Karp and Giacaman (2016) report shows factors that contribute to proliferation of SALWs by young people to include poverty, social exclusion and the influence of criminal gangs. Similarly, Dupont and Van Dijk (2018) identifies factors influencing trafficking of SALWs in Europe, to include weak border controls, corruption and the demand for weapons in conflict regions. In Poland, a study conducted by Klimkowski (2021), attributed the factors contributing to the proliferation of SALWs to include political instability, corruption and the country's geographical location. The author argues that addressing these factors requires a comprehensive approach that involves both national and international efforts. In the same context, Cherpak (2017) submitted that country's colonial history, illicit trade networks, and the prevalence of arms in neighboring countries are factors influencing small arms and light weapons availability in France. The author argued that addressing the issue requires a multi-faceted approach that involves both law enforcement and community engagement. In United States, DeLone (2019) affirmed that SALWs in the United States, is facilitated by the country's gun culture, weak regulations and the influence of the firearms industry.

In African continent, proliferation of small arms and light weapons has posse serious threat and challenges, worsening human suffering, threaten peace, security, and sustainable development. A survey conducted by Ayittey (2013), the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Africa: a threat to human security

reported regional conflicts, weak state control and arms trafficking as the core facilitators of proliferation of SALWs in Africa. In Ghana, Baffour (2017) affirmed factors contributing to the proliferation of SALWs in Ghana to include country's porous borders, ethnic conflicts and the influence of criminal networks. The country's history of conflict, weak state institutions and the influence of armed groups were recorded as enhancing SALWs in the country (Jok, 2013).

Similarly, Fonjong (2017), small arms and light weapons proliferation in Cameroon: a critical analysis found regional conflicts, arms trafficking and the influence of criminal networks as contributory factors to small arms and light weapons proliferation in the country history. For instance, Mike (2006) reported that Somali, Sudan and parts of Northern Uganda, use small arms and light weapons as the primary tools of violence, causing deaths and injuring thousands of people among them innocent civilians. In Sub-Saharan African countries, the availability of SALW has led to several insecurity. Regrettably, Nigeria is perceived as a confluence of criminal flows of small arms and light weapons among other nations in the African continent. According to International Alert, cited in Imobighe (1990), one source of Nigeria's illicit small arms and light weapons proliferation can be traced back to the failure of the federal government to implement an arms collection programme after the civil war 1967-1970. Subsequently, numerous internecine violent-conflicts have contributed to the militarization of the Nigerian society. The local roots and causes of these conflicts are numerous and diverse. However, in nearly all of these conflicts in Nigeria, the diffusion of small arms has played a decisive role in the escalation, intensification and resolution. Factors influencing proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths in Nigeria, and Benue State by extension is complex and multifaceted. Some of the factors that have been identified in previous studies to include poverty, unemployment, weak law enforcement, lack of education and cultural factors (Bala, 2014).

In the same context, Uzodike (2015) submitted that proliferation of small arms and light weapons has also been linked to the availability of weapons from neighboring countries and the involvement of politicians in arming youths for political purposes. Similarly, Dokubo (2003) observed that in 2002, the number of SALW in Nigeria was estimated by various reports and studies at between 1 and 3 million including arms in lawful possession of members of the armed forces and the police and those in the hands of civilians. Equally, the political struggle by politician to acquire power by all means including suppressing class consciousness and promoting ethno-religious consciousness has promoted ethnic and religious hatred at the expense of oneness. Other studies carried out by Adagba (2016); Shomoye (2015); Obi (2018); and Okoli and Ezenwe (2019), observed that factors contributing to the proliferation of SALWs in Nigeria, include weak state control, poverty, border porosity, arms trafficking and the influence of armed groups among others. Studies such as those conducted by Bashir (2015), Soetan (2017), and Eseoghene (2021), either concentrated on the effects of SALWs with little emphasis on factors influencing SALWs. Even those within the contexts of causes failed to critically appreciate others areas such as porous borders, law enforcement, illiteracy and cultural factors. Bashir (2015), in his study of small arms and light weapons proliferation and its implication for West African regional security, particularly concentrated on how arms proliferation creates fear among investors and affect economic development in the region. This study will fill this gap in knowledge created.

Meanwhile, in his study, Soetan (2017) investigated proliferation of arms and security challenges in Nigeria, the study had singled out the effect on healthcare system which could be seen as the main place of attacks for many perpetrators of the arms conflict neglecting its causes. These studies did not assess factors facilitating SALWs among youths in Benue State. Thus, much is not revealed on factors influencing SALWs among youths in Nigeria especially in Benue State. At the same time, the SALWs have increased considerably hence the need to unpack these factors is necessary and urgent. This study therefore assessed factors influencing proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths in Benue State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The major objective of the study is to find out factors influencing proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths in Benue State Nigeria. The specific objectives include;

- i. To assess the extent to which porosity of borders influence proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths in Benue State Nigeria.
- ii. Ascertain how poverty and unemployment influence proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths in Benue State Nigeria
- iii. Investigate whether weak state institutions influence proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths in Benue State Nigeria
- iv. Find out how ethnic conflict facilitates proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths in Benue State Nigeria.

Literature Review

The concept of Proliferations of Small Arms and Light Weapons

According to the United Nations (2002) defined proliferation of small arms as uncontrolled spread and availability of small arms and light weapons and their ammunition. The Small Arms Survey (2015) defined proliferation as the increase in the number, types and availability of small arms and light weapons (SALW), both legal and illicit, in a specific area, region, or country. According to Keen and Lee (2004) define proliferation as the unregulated, unauthorized, and illegal spread of small arms, fuelled by conflict, criminal activity, and political instability.

In same context, the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA, 2017) defines proliferation as the increasing and uncontrolled spread and use of small arms, light weapons, and their ammunition, across national borders, continents, and conflict zones. Meanwhile, Jackeen (2003) posit that small arms and light weapons often referred to colloquially as firearms or even guns are man-portable lethal weapons for individual use that can expel or launch a shot, bullet or projectile by action of explosive. Berman and Rajae (2005) define proliferation as the increasing spread and availability of small arms and light weapons in a particular geographic area, fuelled by both licit and illicit trade. In the work of Karp, (2004) proliferation refers to the illegal and uncontrolled transfer of weapons from one country to another, often to non-state actors or criminal groups. In the same vein, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016) defines small arms proliferation as the illicit and uncontrolled spread of small arms and light weapons that contributes to violent conflicts, human rights abuses, organized crime, and terrorism. According to Thakur (2000) proliferation of small arms refers to the increasing availability of small arms, both legally and illegally, that contributes to the exacerbation of armed conflict, crime, and terrorism. The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development (2011) defines SALW proliferation as the increase in the number and availability of SALW in a given area, region or country, including through both legal and illicit transfers, and the subsequent increase in armed violence and human suffering. Similarly, Mattheisen (2008) affirmed proliferation of small arms as the unregulated and illicit spread of small arms that contributes to continued violence, undermines stability and democracy, and hinders post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

Borders Porosity and Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons among Youths

A porous border refers to a national border that is not fully secure or tightly controlled and allows for the relatively easy movement of people, goods, and/or illegal activities across it. As a transit country, Nigeria has been perceived to be one of the distribution centers for arms smuggling, traffickers has access to other neighboring states like to West Africa and to Gabon, Benin Republic and Cameroon without being detected or apprehended. This becomes possible because Nigeria also serves as an entering point for through Benin Republic Seme-border, Togo to Europe and the Middle East among others. Due to porosity of Nigeria borders allow all sorts of cross-border activities such as drug trafficking, arms proliferation and arm robbery among others. According to Hamidu and Nuhu (2015), in a country where legitimate economic opportunities are far less lucrative, criminal activities such as arms proliferation and fraudulent business transactions present enormous temptation for individuals. As a result, many people engages in cross-border crimes to earn a living, which some involves in arms trading and smuggling of contrabands goods. The UNODC (2006) identified a number of factors that could be associated with arms proliferation in Nigeria. The factors include porous border poverty, lack of educational opportunities, lack of employment and ignorance. It is

true that factors of globalization, poverty and unemployment are felt in Nigeria, but lack of education, weak state institutions and the organized criminality associated with it could enhance proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths. This is however, not without internal facilitation at the border. Many arms traffickers may not succeed without internal collaboration and cooperation.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2018) reports that many arms traded come from outside the region, and are often transported through multiple countries before reaching their final destination. For instance, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration notes that Mexican drug cartels are heavily involved in smuggling drugs across the U.S Mexico border.

Arms smuggling is another example of a trans-border crime, with weapons often trafficked across borders to fuel conflicts or support criminal activities. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC, 2019), has expressed concern about the flow of weapons across borders in conflict zones, noting that these arms often end up in the hands of non-state actors and contribute to instability. However, this porosity of borders can have a significant influence on the proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths. It can make it easier for traffickers and smugglers to transport illegal weapons across national boundaries, often evading law enforcement efforts (Small Arms Survey, 2018). This can also create a market for the illegal sale and distribution of small arms and light weapons, particularly among vulnerable groups such as youths who may be susceptible to involvement in violence or criminal activities. Consequently, in regions where porous borders are common, such as in parts of Africa and Latin America, the availability of small arms and light weapons can exacerbate existing conflicts, fuel violence, and contribute to the rise of criminal networks (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). A study conducted by Oduro and Aning (2011), small arms and light weapons proliferation in the Great Lakes Region: the role of porous borders and the need for effective control argue that inadequate border control measures have contributed to the illegal movement of weapons across national boundaries, fueling conflicts and instability in the region.

Similarly, Vogel (2013) found that weak border control measures have enabled the movement of weapons and ammunition across the border, exacerbating conflict and insecurity in the region. In the same vein, Alao, (2005 examines the role of porous borders in the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in West Africa. The author argues that a lack of effective border control measures has contributed to the rise of criminal networks and armed groups that fuel violence and instability in the region. Khannenje, (2016) affirmed that porous borders have facilitated the movement of illegal arms and ammunition, enabling the rise of armed groups and contributing to conflict and instability in Africa.

According to Innes (2011) weak border control measures have enabled the illegal movement of weapons across national boundaries, contributing to the rise of armed groups and criminal networks that fuel violence and insecurity in the country. Ukwuaba (2014) submitted that weak border control measures have enabled the illegal movement of weapons and ammunition across national boundaries, fueling conflicts and insecurity in the country. In the work of Ismail (2016), porous borders have contributed to the influx of illegal arms and ammunition, enabling the rise of armed groups and criminal networks that fuel violence and insecurity in Nigeria. A survey conducted by Shanmugam (2019), Singapore has strict border control and tough law and a well documented workforce but what keep arms traders off the coast are security personnel who are not corrupt and are not easily influenced by organized criminal gangs. These officers are committed to ensure security of their country, protect the citizens and are desirous to enforce existing legislations and conventions against arms trafficking. It is assumed that porous border connecting Benue States and other neighbouring States, unemployment, poverty and ethnic conflict may promote proliferation of arms in Benue State. However, this remains a complex challenge that requires coordinated action by governments, civil society organizations, and the international community.

Poverty, Unemployment and Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons among Youths

Poverty can increase the likelihood that individuals will turn to illicit activities, including the acquisition and use of SALW, as a means of survival. In some cases, impoverished individuals may be coerced into joining armed groups or criminal networks in exchange for financial support (Egwaikhide & Adindu, 2019).

According to Akintayo and Akinyele (2015) the inability to meet basic needs and lack of opportunities may also create a sense of hopelessness and desperation that drives some youths to engage in violent activities. However, the lack of opportunities may also create a sense of frustration and resentment that fuels violence and aggression among some youths. The combination of poverty and unemployment can create a particularly challenging environment for youths, making them vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups or criminal networks (Stohl & Peleman, 2004). The proliferation of SALW in such environments can exacerbate existing conflicts and contribute to the perpetuation of violence and instability. Other factors such as political instability, weak governance, and inadequate border control measures can also play a role in this complex problem. Stohl and Peleman (2005), in their study found that SALW exacerbate conflicts and undermine economic development, leading to high levels of youth unemployment. In the same context, Eme and Anosike (2019) maintained that SALW undermine economic development, perpetuate violence and contribute to the perpetuation of poverty. Ogban (2018) observed that the lack of opportunities and the desperation to generate income can drive individuals to engage in criminal activities, including the acquisition and use of SALW. Similarly, a survey carried out by Ogunwande and Ogunwande (2014), the influence of poverty and unemployment on proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria found combination of poverty and unemployment creates a fertile ground for the proliferation of SALW, which in turn exacerbates conflicts and undermines economic development.

Weak State Institutions and Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons among Youths

Weak state institutions in Nigeria have been identified as a major factor influencing the proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths. The absence of effective control measures, poor law enforcement and inadequate border security contribute to the ease with which illicit arms are trafficked into the country (Obaji & Okigbo, 2019). Urama (2018) observed that corruption within law enforcement agencies and the judiciary undermine efforts to address the problem of arms proliferation. Studies have shown that the lack of political will to implement gun control policies, coupled with poor coordination among government agencies responsible for the control of small arms and light weapons, creates an enabling environment for the proliferation of these weapons (Ukeje & Nwankwo, 2019).

The lack of accountability for perpetrators of gun violence and inadequate provision of social amenities also fuel the demand for guns among youths. In the same way Oluwadare and Olatunji (2018) opined that the presence of armed groups and ethnic militias, as well as the failure of disarmament and demobilization programs, exacerbate the situation. These factors have contributed to the escalation of violence, particularly in the northern and middle belt regions of the country, leading to the loss of lives and destruction of property. This institution includes Nigerian Police Force (NPF), Nigerian Armed Forces (including the Army, Navy, and Air Force), Department of State Services (DSS), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Nigerian Prisons Service, National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), Nigerian Customs Service (NCS) and Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) among others.

According to Aning and Asante (2011) when weak state institutions exists, it pave way for effectively flow of arms into the country or monitor the movement of arms. This can make it easier for arms to enter the country and end up in the hands of youth who may use them for criminal or violent purposes. Berman (2006) believed that weak state institutions may be unable to enforce existing laws and regulations on arms possession and use. As such breed an environment of impunity where individuals can acquire and use arms without fear of prosecution, thereby encouraging more people to acquire arms. Also, Chabane (2017) submitted that weak state institutions may be unable to provide alternative livelihood opportunities or social services to young people, which can contribute to their engagement in armed violence as a means of survival. This can create a vicious cycle where armed violence becomes a way of life for some youths in the absence of other viable options. Similarly, weak state institutions may be unable to effectively address the root causes of conflict, such as political exclusion, inequality, and corruption. This can create an environment of instability and insecurity, which can exacerbate the demand for arms among youths as a means of self-protection and sources of livelihood.

Ethnic Conflict and Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons among Youths

Ethnic conflict has been found to facilitate the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) among youths in many parts of the world, including Africa. In many parts of Africa, ethnic tensions and conflict are fueled by competition for resources, power, and territory (Ajayi, 2018). These conflicts often involve the use of SALWs, which can exacerbate violence and make it harder to resolve. In some cases, ethnic militias or warlords may be responsible for procuring and distributing weapons to their members (Ajayi, 2018). Ethnic divisions can also lead to a breakdown in social cohesion and create conditions that make it easier for arms to flow across porous borders.

Similarly, Small Arms Survey (2014) reported and Esezobor and Achoba (2023) attributed that corruption in state institutions tasked with regulating arms possession and trade creates loopholes for the illicit trade of SALWs. Officials may turn a blind eye to arms smuggling or even actively participate in it for personal gain. This can make it easier for youths to access weapons, either through direct purchase or theft. Seroka, J. (2018) argued that youth gangs are a significant driver of armed violence in the region, and that their access to small arms and light weapons is a major factor in their ability to perpetrate violence. Akpoghome (2016) examines how the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has contributed to youth restiveness in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The author argued that the availability of small arms has enabled young people to engage in violence and criminal activities, including militancy, kidnapping, and armed robbery.

In analysis of Odeyemi and Adesina (2017) revealed that the proliferation of small arms has fueled conflicts between different ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria, leading to loss of lives and property. The authors believed that addressing the root causes of conflicts, including poverty, unemployment and corruption is crucial to reducing small arms proliferation and promoting national development.

Theoretical framework

Social Disorganization Theory

This theory was developed by Shaw and McKay (1969). This theory posits that when social institutions are weakened, it can lead to an increase in criminal behavior and violence. In the case of Nigeria, social disorganization can contribute to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths. One way that social disorganization contributes to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths is through weak state institutions, including law enforcement agencies. Nigeria's law enforcement agencies have long been plagued by corruption and inadequate resources, which make it difficult for them to effectively enforce gun control laws and prevent the illegal importation of weapons.

This allows for a proliferation of small arms and light weapons on the black market, which are often obtained by youths who are involved in criminal activity. Similarly, social disorganization contributes to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths through the breakdown of social norms and values. In many communities, traditional social institutions, such as religious organizations and family structures, have been weakened or undermined. This has led to a breakdown in social control and an increase in violent behavior among youths.

Also, political instability, ethnic tensions and economic inequality can also contribute to social disorganization and a proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the state. For instance, a survey conducted by Oshita (2007), small arms proliferation and the challenge of conflict management in Nigeria found that social disorganization and the breakdown of social institutions are major factors contributing to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria. The authors argued that political instability, weak law enforcement institutions and ethnic tensions have all contributed to a proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths in Nigeria.

In the same context, Alao, (2012), applied social disorganization theory in his work small arms and light weapons in Nigeria: the security implications affirmed that social disorganization is a key factor driving the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria. The scholar believed that the weakness of the Nigerian State, including its inability to provide adequate social services and to effectively regulate arms trafficking, has contributed to a proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths. He also noted that economic inequality, ethnic tensions and political instability have contributed to social disorganization in Nigeria paving way for proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths in the State. This

theory has some of its limitation that proved insufficient in understanding causation of SALWs proliferation among youths in the State.

The theory overlooks the psychological factor push an individual to engage in criminal act in the society. The theory also fails to focus on underlying factors such as geographical terrain, educational background and economic status which can lead to SALWs proliferation among youths in Benue State. Therefore, there is need for another theory to support this argument so to shed more light on other areas neglected by social organization theory. Routine activity theory is introduced to complement the shortcomings of the social organization theory.

Routine Activity Theory

This theory was developed by Cohen and Felson (1979). Routine activity theory is a criminological theory that endeavors to explain how and why crimes occur. The theory tries to clarify why crime take place under some specific circumstances rather than understanding criminal characteristics as temporal displacement. According to the proponents of the theory, Cohen and Felson (1979), holds that crime occurs when there is a convergence of three elements: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. The theorists believe that opportunities for victimization are created by routine activities of others away from in spaces, places, area or locations frequented by motivated offenders.

In contrast to this view, Mustaine and Tewksbury (1998) observed that it is not necessary the coming together with a motivated offender that facilitates the chances of a person to be victimized, but the kind of establishment the person visit, as well as the activities performed by an attractive target in such a place that matters. In the context of SALWs proliferation among youths in Nigeria, routine activity theory suggests that the proliferation of these weapons may be due to the convergence of these elements. The motivated offender may be the youths who are influenced by poverty, unemployment, corruption, and ethnic conflict. The suitable targets may be the vulnerable communities where these youths reside, and the absence of capable guardians may be due to weak state institutions, corruption and inadequate law enforcement (Nwankwo & Obayelu, 2017). This however, means that the absence of capable guardians, including ineffective law enforcement and inadequate security measures, further enables such criminal activities to take place. According to Adegbite and Oyeniyi (2021), routine activity theory can explain the increase in armed robbery and other violent crimes involving SALWs in Nigeria. The authors believed that proliferation of SALWs among youths in Nigeria is due to the convergence of these elements, which create opportunities for crime. They argued that addressing the root causes of these elements can help to reduce the proliferation of SALWs among youths in Nigeria. Similarly, Okeke (2018) applies routine activity theory to the proliferation of SALWs in Nigeria and submitted that the increase in crime involving SALWs is due to the convergence of these elements. He posited that addressing the root causes of these elements, such as poverty, unemployment, and weak state institutions, can help to reduce the proliferation of SALWs among youths in Nigeria.

Routine activity theory has been criticized for relying solely on simple assumptions about the circumstances in which crime take place. According to Wilcox, Land and Hunt (2003) routine activity theory failed to adequately address the role of criminal opportunity context, the condition that motivated offenders and suitable targets congregate in the absence of capable guardian. More so, theory tends to ignore the research literatures that associate crimes with offender's tenets such as social learning, identity, self-esteem, psychological and biological traits among others. In as much as routine activity theory offers an insightful explanation in the understanding of proliferation of SALWs in the Benue State its limitations cannot be overemphasized. However, in this study, the framework of social organization theory and routine activity theory is used as the lens to understand the phenomenon proliferation of SALWs in Benue, State Nigeria.

Methodology

The study is situated in Benue State Nigeria. The study obtained it data from secondary source through journals, articles, textbooks, newspapers and media reports, archival materials, as well as position papers.

Conclusion

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons among youths in Benue State, Nigeria, poses a significant threat to peace and security in the region. This issue has far-reaching consequences, including increased violent crime, conflicts, and insecurity, which undermine social, economic, and political development. Factors that contribute to this problem are numerous, including porous borders, high levels of poverty and unemployment, weak state institutions, ethnic conflict, political instability, non-state actors, technological innovation, and corruption. Additionally, transnational criminal networks and terrorist organizations play a role in the proliferation of arms in the State, further exacerbating the security challenges in the country.

Recommendations

- i. Government strengthens border control measures, such as increasing the number of border patrols and border checkpoints, and deploying modern technology such as drones and scanners to detect and intercept illegal arms trafficking. Also, there should be greater cooperation between security agencies and border communities to enhance intelligence gathering and sharing, while stiffer penalties should be imposed on individuals involved in the illegal arms trade.
- ii. There should be an emphasis on youth empowerment through civic education and mentorship programs that promote positive values and behaviors. Also, government should implement policies and programs that target poverty reduction and job creation, such as skills acquisition training, microfinance schemes and entrepreneurship development programs.
- iii. Government should focus on institutional reform to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of law enforcement agencies, such as improving training and equipment, as well as providing adequate funding for their operations. Emphasis should be on improving the judicial system to ensure that perpetrators of crimes involving small arms and light weapons are prosecuted and punished according to the law.
- iv. There should be an emphasis on community policing and the creation of community watch groups to enhance security, while ensuring that law enforcement agencies are adequately equipped and trained to combat illegal arms trafficking. Also, there is need to promote inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation through the establishment of conflict resolution mechanisms, such as peace committees and inter-ethnic dialogue forums.

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