

COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown Enforcement: Strategies of the Nigeria Police Force and Lessons for the Future

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian government mobilisation of the police for the enforcement of COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown has redefined police officials' job prescription in a new fundamental way. Although the Nigeria Police Force routinely maintain law and order during crisis situations, yet, policing citizens' compliance in the middle of a public health emergency is a relatively novel responsibility for the law enforcement agency. Therefore, this article critically evaluates the operational strategies employed by the Nigeria Police Force for the enforcement of government-imposed movement and social restriction measures. Data were principally sourced through a case study analysis of media and government reports. The paper argued that the overall effectiveness of the operational tactics adopted by the Nigeria Police Force for the special assignment was hampered on many fronts by some institutional and procedural issues. Therefore, the law enforcement agency is urged to strategically build on the COVID-19 pandemic experience to better prepare for future public health emergencies.

Key Words: COVID-19 Pandemic, Public Health Emergency, Lockdown, Police Officials, Nigeria Police Force, Law Enforcement Agency

INTRODUCTION

The Police as the most visible agent of formal social control has an important role to play in ensuring public compliance with government directives during emergencies (Brinkkoeter, 2016; Jones, 2020; Luna et al., 2007). The 30 March 2020 federal government imposition of a total lockdown on some parts of Nigeria, and the declaration of a partial lockdown in some States in response to the growing transmission of the COVID-19 infection placed a unique demand on the Nigeria Police Force.

As part of the overall containment strategy, the government introduced some drastic measures such as imposing a total lockdown on the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja), Lagos and Ogun states, banning of interstate movements, imposing night curfew, ordering workers to stay at home (except those in essential services), canceling mass gatherings, closing national borders, airspace, schools, worship centers and other public places (Vanguard, 2020). From the day it was imposed up till 30 June 2020 when it was finally eased, police personnel were deployed nationwide to ensure people comply with the restriction measures, assist in contact tracing and transportation of emergency supplies, and secure critical infrastructures (Independent, 2020; Nigeria Police Force, 2020; Ramalan, 2020).

In terms of structure, the Nigeria Police Force is centrally administered. It runs a single command structure under the management of an Inspector General of Police. It is further structured into 36 State Commands and the Federal Capital Territory Command, with each under the control of a Commissioner of Police (Olowokere & Oluduro, 2011). At the State level, each of the Commands is also organised into Area Commands, Divisional Commands, Police Stations and Police Posts (Alemika, 2010). The current workforce of the law enforcement agency is 371, 800 (Nigeria Police Force, 2020).

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Although the Nigeria Police Force routinely maintain law and order in crises situation, yet, policing citizens' compliance with movement and social restrictions in the middle of a public health emergency is a relatively novel responsibility for the organisation. Apart from the fact that police personnel in Nigeria are already burdened fighting different forms of crime (Aborisade & Adedayo, 2021; Ojedokun et al., 2019), police occupational training curriculum at the police college might not have adequately prepared officers for the unique situation thrown-up by the outbreak of COVID-19. Thus, it becomes imperative to review the performance and operational strategies of the Nigeria Police Force during the enforcement of government-imposed restriction measures to better prepare it for a similar demand in future.

Typically, public health emergencies whether manmade or naturally occurring usually pose special challenges to police officials (Richards et al., 2006). This was evident during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) of 2002 and the H1N1 Flu of 2009 where law enforcement personnel were mobilised to work with public health officials to contain the spread of virus and maintain public order (Muckenfuss 2020). Brinkkoeter (2006) submits that a police agency's ability to preplan for various types of emergencies is very important because the outbreak of a pandemic will likely create a largescale incident that will drain law enforcement resources in a manner that police leadership are not accustomed to dealing with. Also, Carter and Rip (2013) assert that law enforcement agencies can be better prepared for responding to emergency by sharing information with public health organisations and public safety agencies.

Gradon (2020) suggests that it is imperative for law enforcement agencies to possess an established set of analytical tools, guidelines and strategies to combat various threats arising from a disaster scenario. Richards et al. (2006) contend that law enforcement officials may be called upon in times of emergency to enforce public health orders, secure contaminated areas, secure health care facilities, control crowds, investigate scenes of suspected biological terrorism, amongst others. However, Luna et al. (2007) observe that though police agencies do frequently plan for hazards, the threat of an influenza pandemic is rarely high on their list of planning priorities. Garrett (2010) mentions that law enforcement agencies' attachment of less importance to planning a pandemic response could be due to the fact that some of the most recent outbreaks were quickly controlled.

Walker et al. (2020) observe that compliance is a key component in world's response to COVID-19. Also, Alcadipani et al. (2020) note that police personnel played critical roles in the enforcement of COVID-19 restriction measures. In Ukraine, police officials were authorised to create a specialised regime of entry and exit, and to carry out sanitary inspections (Ivanivna, 2020). Over 100,000 police personnel were deployed in France to enforce government lockdown and to monitor checkpoints set up across the country, while drones were adopted by law enforcement officials in Spain for the purpose of keeping citizens at home (Ivanivna, 2020). Similarly, police in the United Kingdom combined ordinary human patrols with the use of drones to enforce compliance (Kooistra et al., 2020). However, Luscombe and McClelland (2020) note that though social distancing and some other state-imposed restrictions aimed at containing COVID-19 may be effective, punishing people for breaking rules may not. Also, Bradford, Hobson, Kyprianide, and Yesberg (2020) suggest that it is important for the police to strive to seek citizens' compliance with government directives by maintaining bonds between individuals, institutions, and wider society.

Although a number of scholarly articles have been written in Nigeria on people's knowledge of, and personal hygiene practices against COVID-19 infection (Amzat et al., 2020; Olapegba et al. 2020), none has focused on the role of the police in enforcing government response to the public health crisis. Therefore, this paper x-rayed the operational strategies adopted by the Nigeria Police Force for the enforcement of COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown.

METHODOLOGY

This article is a case study analysis of the Nigeria Police Force's strategies for the enforcement of government-imposed movement and social restriction measures during the COVID-19 emergency. Data were essentially sourced from media and government reports. Specifically, news reports focusing on policing of citizens' compliance, police tactics for the enforcement of the lockdown order, as well as criminal activities recorded during the lockdown were carefully searched, read, and content-analysed between March 30 2020 and June 30 2020. The adoption of this approach was informed by the general non-availability of police data on the subject matter.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Police Enforcement of COVID-19 Pandemic-Induced Lockdown Order in Nigeria

The operational strategies and tactics employed by the Nigeria Police Force to achieve citizens' compliance with the government-imposed movement and social restrictions essentially involved conducting beat patrol day and night, mounting road-blocks on major highways, erecting check-points in border-towns and strategic locations in major cities, closing down worship centres, restaurants, bars and nightclubs, arresting people involved in mass gatherings, detaining managers of sites hosting social gatherings, counselling culprits and/or impounding their vehicles (Independent, 2020; Ramalan, 2020; Vanguard, 2020).

Although the operational strategies employed by the Nigeria Police Force ensured that citizens complied with government order, particularly in the first few weeks they were introduced, the overall effectiveness of their enforcement tactics was hampered on many fronts by the following institutional and procedural issues:

Human Rights Abuse

A major pitfall of the police operation was the highhandedness of some personnel in the implementation of government directives. Several incidents recorded across Nigeria indicated that some police officials deployed for the special assignment conducted themselves unprofessionally, and routinely engaged in acts constituting human rights abuse (Adiele, 2020; Hanafi & Affe, 2020). The overzealousness on the part of some personnel resulted in cases of extra-judicial killings, the infliction of grievous bodily harm on people, and the destruction of goods and properties (Daily Trust, 2020; Young, 2020). Indeed, the May 2020 report of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) indicated that the Nigeria Police Force was responsible for seven out of the 18 extra-judicial killings committed by law enforcement agents during the lockdown period (Adejumo, 2020; Uzoho, 2020). For instance, in an incident that occurred on 23 April 2020 at a market in Obio/Akporo Area of Rivers State, a female police officer was fatally shot and killed by one of her colleagues in the course of enforcing movement restriction order (Akasike, 2020; Social Development Integrated Centre, 2020). Equally, media reports that emanated from different parts of the country showed that the deployed police officials routinely harassed and intimidated workers in essential services in spite of an official directive which permitted the free movement of such a category of workers (Onwuzoo, 2020; Sahara Reporters, 2020). Indeed, the harsh treatment suffered in the hands of police personnel compelled the Lagos State branch of the Nigerian Medical Association to direct its members to embark on a sit-at-home action on 20 May 2020 (Adejoro, 2020; Premium Times, 2020). The highhandedness displayed by police officials in the enforcement of government-imposed movement and social restrictions is not an isolated incident. Rather it further amplified the endemic nature of police brutality in Nigeria (Akinlabi, 2017; Igbo, 2017). The impunity of

police officials in Nigeria not only frequently results in the killing of citizens, it occasionally culminates in the homicide of law enforcement personnel (Ojedokun, 2014).

Public Extortion and Corruption

Another major shortcoming associated with law enforcement during COVID-19 emergency in Nigeria was the non-commitment of some police officials to their mandate. Despite the fact that police checkpoints and roadblocks were mounted on major intercity highways and strategic locations in major urban centres to prevent human and vehicular movements, it was widely reported in the media that some police personnel were not fully committed to enforcing the restriction order (The Sun Nigeria, 2020). The common practice of this set of police officials was to extort members of the public, while granting them freedom of passage in return (Daily Trust, 2020). Consequently, in spite of government-imposed movement restriction, people who could afford police extortion fees were not only granted rights of movement, commercial transporters were also making special arrangements with corrupt police officials to convey passengers from one State to another (Elekwa, 2020; The Sun Nigeria, 2020). In a particular incident which occurred in Lagos State, a policeman was filmed (and later arrested) collecting ₦40,000 (\$103) bribe from a motorist who violated the movement restriction order (Oyero, 2020). Police officials' aiding of citizens to violate the law they were primarily mandated to enforce does not only have serious negative implication for the public image of the Nigeria Police Force, it also called into question the overall legitimacy of the police organisation. Public extortion and gross abuse of power are among the most common forms of police professional misconduct in Nigeria (Agbiboa, 2015; Ojedokun & Adeyanju, 2018).

Police Inability to Prevent/Investigate Crimes

The efficiency of the Nigeria Police Force in the enforcement of the movement and social gathering restriction measure was significantly hampered by the organisation's exclusive reliance on traditional policing tactics which essentially involved engaging in beat patrols, conducting stop-and-search, mounting roadblocks on major highways, and erecting multiple checkpoints at border-towns. The manual policing style adopted for the lockdown enforcement manifested in security breaches in some States. There was an increase in crime rate as criminals capitalised on the opportunity presented by the newly introduced emergency measures to rob people in some residential areas, perpetrate mobile crimes, and engage in burgling and looting of stores (Blueprint Newspaper, 2020; Leadership, 2020). Although these criminal attacks were recorded in different parts of Nigeria, they were more prominent in the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja), Lagos and Ogun States (Guardian, 2020; Odunsi, 2020). Similarly, due to limited police intervention at the time, gender-based violence and other forms of interpersonal violence escalated (UN Women, 2020). Nigeria Police Force's inability to effectively control crime during the lockdown is due to chronic underfunding which makes the organization lack essential equipment necessary for effective policing (Igbinovia, 2000; Ojedokun & Aderinto, 2014). Recently, the Nigeria's Inspector General of Police disclosed that his agency needed 1,000 armoured personnel carriers (APC), 1,000 tracking devices, 774,000 operational drones, amongst others (Adepegba & Baiyewu, 2020).

Poor Surveillance/Inadequate Coverage

Owing to the Nigeria Police Force's non-utilisation of modern policing equipment, there arose the challenge of inadequate coverage of the Nigerian geographical territory. Generally, the impact of law enforcement agents monitoring the COVID-19-induced movement and mass gathering restriction measures was mostly felt in urban centres. Also, due to poor surveillance occasioned by inadequate police presence, residents of some interiors and

suburb areas were not adequately deterred from violating government-imposed restrictions as social gatherings and religious services were held by people in such locations during the lockdown (Oditto, 2020; The Sun Nigeria, 2020). Inadequate workforce is a major problem confronting the Nigeria Police Force (Osayande, 2008). With the population of close to 200 million people being policed by only 371,800 police officers, Nigeria is grossly under-policed, and has a shortfall of about 155,000 personnel (Ezeobi & Nweke, 2019; Vanguard, 2017). Jennings and Perez (2020) have equally observed that the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic exposed some key obstacles for law enforcement in terms of communication, resource management, enforcement of public health restrictions, and changes to crime and service patterns.

Non-Provision of Essential Safety and Health Kits for Personnel

Another critical issue that flawed the Nigeria Police Force's COVID-19 lockdown control operation was the non-provision of essential safety and health kits for personnel. In spite of the fact that law enforcement officers were working in the middle of a public health crisis, the Nigeria Police Force failed to adequately prepare them for the delicate task they were given to handle. Generally, officers conducting beat patrols and stop-and-search operations were not well-prepared by their agency on how to adequately protect themselves on the job. They were also not provided with basic safety kits and personal protective equipment (PPE) such as hand-gloves, face shields, protective clothing, nose masks, hand sanitisers, amongst others (Daily Trust, 2020; Punch, 2020). Although PPE shortage was a problem for most law enforcement agencies at the early stages of the pandemic (Alcadipani et al., 2020), the Nigerian situation was particularly critical because most police officers worked unprotected for the most part of the lockdown duration (Daily Trust, 2020; Ezezi, 2020). Consequently, a Deputy Commissioner of Police died of COVID-19 infection in Edo State (Shittu, 2020), while another police official died in Ogun State after being infected (Guardian, 2020). One major implication of this situation is that it has the tendency of negatively impacting the level of job commitment and dedication of police officers. Rooney and McNicholas (2020) have also mentioned that occupational stressors can negatively impact police officers' professional and personal lives.

Repositioning the Nigeria Police Force for Future Pandemic Emergencies

The enforcement of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown showed that the Nigeria Police Force is not accustomed to policing compliance and upholding law and order in a period of public health emergency. Thus, some useful lessons that can be drawn by the law enforcement agency from the COVID-19 crisis are discussed in this section.

As demonstrated by the COVID-19 emergency, law enforcement agents have critical roles to play in the implementation of government-response to public health crises. Therefore, it is pertinent for the Nigeria Police Force to adequately develop the skill and capacity of its personnel in the area of response to public health emergency. Police officials need to be rigorously trained as regards the necessary safety and precaution measures that can be adopted to protect themselves in the line of duty. This can be achieved by putting in place sound institutional framework that will facilitate consistent collaboration between the Nigeria Police Force and public health professionals. Officers should be trained and retrained on the essential vocational-related safety and health protocols bordering on communicable diseases transmission, useful measures for quick containment, and the proper use of personal protective equipment. This can be achieved through a strategic partnership between the Ministry of Police Affairs, the Federal Ministry of Health, and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). Similarly, it is important for the Nigeria Police Force to ensure a systematic incorporation of health education and public health emergency-response into the course syllabi of the Police Training College, and to make them a key component of regular organisational practices.

Another important lesson that can be drawn from the COVID-19 public health emergency is that the federal government need to adequately support the Nigeria Police Force by providing necessary financial and logistic assistance for it. Due to financial constraint and understaffing challenges, the Nigeria Police Force exclusively relied on human surveillance for monitoring and enforcing government-imposed restriction measures. Modern policing equipment and devices, such as drones, CCTV cameras, surveillance recorder, and GPS, useful for surveillance and intelligence gathering were not utilised for the operation. Consequently, the exclusive reliance on human surveillance and physical patrols resulted in poor police coverage, and the attendant victimisation of people in some neighbourhoods by opportunistic criminals.

Equally, although the Nigeria Police Force has some level of social media presence, particularly on Facebook and Twitter (Peters & Ojedokun, 2019), the potentials of these ICT resources were not optimally utilised for monitoring the lockdown because they are centrally operated. Therefore, it is necessary for the police organisation to decentralise the use of social media accounts among its command so as to leverage on the information power and feedback opportunity they present to engage the public, and disseminate vital information to them during emergency and non-emergency situations.

Also, the recorded cases of extra-judicial killings linked to police officials enforcing government lockdown order shows that the Nigeria Police Force has not made substantial progress in addressing the pervasive problem of brutality, highhandedness and excessive use of force among its personnel. Therefore, it is imperative for the police organisation to strategically inculcate and entrench amongst its personnel, the principles of civil policing and procedural justice which advocates that police treat people with dignity and respect, give citizens 'voice' during encounters, be neutral in decision making, and convey trustworthy motives. Jones (2020) has also pointed out that there might be serious ramifications for police-community relations in a situation when police officials enforce curfews and social distancing order in a militaristic manner. Indeed, the outbreak of COVID-19 represents a potential 'tipping point' for policing across the world because the adoption of a narrowly 'securitized' approach would erode public trust in policing and in government (Stott et al., 2020).

Similarly, the involvement of some police officials in public extortion for the purpose of assisting people to violate government order echoes the urgent need for the Nigeria Police Force to introduce body-worn cameras as parts of the professional kits of its personnel. The inclusion of this monitoring device is not only capable of making police personnel more accountable for their actions, but it can also go a long way in discouraging police officials from engaging in professional misconduct. Finally, the non-utilisation of basic safety kits and personal protective equipment by police personnel monitoring and enforcing lockdown measures on the streets and at checkpoints demonstrates the need for the Nigeria Police Force to always prioritise the wellbeing and welfare of its officers by always making available to them essential work-equipment vital for their safety and protection in the line of duty. This step is very important because it has serious implications for police officials' extent of job commitment.

CONCLUSION

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in China, and the subsequent rapid transmission of the deadly virus to other parts of the world has clearly shown that human population will periodically have to contend with eruption of infectious diseases. In Nigeria, the deployment of personnel of the Nigeria Police Force for the implementation of public health emergency response measures by the federal government has not only redefined police job prescriptions

in a new fundamental way, but has also demonstrated the critical roles that police officials have to play in the implementation of management-response to public health crises. The experience with COVID-19 showed that the Nigeria Police Force was ill-prepared to policing citizens' compliance and enforcing the law during public health crisis as its operational tactics were hampered by police officials' involvement in human rights abuse, public extortion and corruption, police inability to prevent/investigate crimes, poor surveillance/inadequate coverage, and non-provision of safety and health kits for personnel. Therefore, the Nigeria Police Force is urged to build on the COVID-19 experience to adequately develop its organisational capacity and better prepare its officers for a similar emergency situation in future.

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