ASSESSING URBANIZATION AS A FACTOR THAT AFFECTS CRIME PREVENTION STRATEGIES IN AREA 8 (MCHESI AND BIWI)

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ABSTRACT

Urbanization is a complex socio-economic process that reshapes population distribution, settlement patterns, and social structures. This study examined how urbanization influences crime prevention strategies in Area 8, with specific focus on Mchesi and Biwi townships in Lilongwe City. Rapid and largely unplanned urban growth in developing countries has been associated with rising crime rates due to population congestion, unemployment, informal settlements, and erosion of traditional social control mechanisms (Shaw & McKay, 1942; UN-Habitat, 2016). The study employed a triangulation approach using a cross-sectional research design. Data were collected from 120 respondents through questionnaires and key informant interviews involving residents, community leaders, and police officers. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that rapid urbanization has strained existing crime prevention strategies by overwhelming policing capacity, weakening community cohesion, and increasing opportunities for criminal activities. The study concludes that effective crime prevention in urbanized settings requires integrated urban planning, strengthened community policing, and socio-economic interventions targeting urban poverty and unemployment.

KEYWORDS: Urbanization, Crime Prevention, Area 8, Mchesi, Biwi, Lilongwe.

INTRODUCTION

Urbanization has become one of the defining features of socio-economic transformation in the 21st century. Globally, cities continue to expand as people migrate from rural areas in

search of employment opportunities, access to services, and improved standards of living (UN-Habitat, 2016). While urbanization contributes to economic growth and modernization, it also introduces complex social challenges, among them crime and insecurity.

In Malawi, urbanization has intensified particularly in Lilongwe, the capital city. Area 8, including Mchesi and Biwi, has experienced rapid population growth largely driven by rural-to-urban migration and natural population increase (NSO, 2018). However, this growth has not been matched with adequate urban planning, housing development, or expansion of social services. As a result, informal settlements have emerged, characterized by overcrowding, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure.

This study examines urbanization as the independent variable and crime prevention strategies as the dependent variable. This relationship is critical because crime prevention strategies such as policing, community surveillance, and neighbourhood cohesion are heavily influenced by settlement patterns, population density, and socio-economic conditions (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Understanding this relationship is essential for developing effective crime prevention frameworks suited to rapidly urbanizing urban communities.

1.0 Background of the Study

1.0.1 Historical Background

Historically, urbanization gained momentum during the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period marked by the transformation of economies from agrarian-based systems to industrial production. During this era, cities emerged as major centers of manufacturing, trade, and wage employment, attracting large numbers of people from rural areas who sought better economic opportunities (Glaeser, 2011). While this migration stimulated economic growth and technological advancement, it also produced significant social challenges. The rapid influx of populations into urban centers often outpaced the capacity of governments to provide adequate housing, sanitation, and public services. As a result, many early industrial cities experienced severe overcrowding, the emergence of slums, poor living conditions, and heightened levels of crime. The concentration of poverty, social inequality, and weak urban governance created environments in which crime flourished, thereby compelling authorities to develop formalized policing and crime prevention systems.

These historical dynamics remain highly relevant in contemporary urban contexts, particularly in developing countries where urbanization is occurring at an accelerated pace and largely without comprehensive planning frameworks. Unlike industrialized nations that

gradually developed urban infrastructure over time, many developing countries experience rapid urban expansion driven by rural-to-urban migration, population growth, and economic disparities between rural and urban areas. This form of urbanization often results in informal settlements characterized by insecure housing, inadequate lighting, limited road networks, and insufficient law enforcement presence. Such conditions weaken both formal and informal crime prevention mechanisms, making urban communities more vulnerable to criminal activities (UN-Habitat, 2016). Consequently, the historical link between urban growth and crime observed during the industrial revolution continues to manifest in modern urban settings.

In Malawi, urban growth intensified significantly after independence as cities increasingly assumed administrative, political, and commercial functions. Lilongwe's designation as the national capital in 1975 marked a turning point in its urban development trajectory. The city rapidly attracted migrants from various rural districts seeking employment opportunities, access to education, and improved social services. However, the pace of population growth far exceeded the capacity of urban planning authorities to provide adequate housing and essential services. As a result, informal and low-income settlements such as Mchesi and Biwi expanded rapidly to accommodate migrants who could not afford formal residential areas.

Mchesi and Biwi evolved as densely populated urban settlements characterized by limited infrastructure, high unemployment levels, and inadequate access to basic services such as sanitation, waste management, and street lighting. According to the National Statistical Office (NSO, 2018), these areas exhibit high population densities and youthful populations, factors commonly associated with increased vulnerability to crime. The absence of well-structured urban layouts and limited policing infrastructure further complicate the implementation of effective crime prevention strategies. Narrow roads, overcrowded housing, and informal settlement patterns reduce visibility and hinder police patrols, thereby creating opportunities for criminal activities such as theft, burglary, and violent crime.

Furthermore, the socio-economic pressures faced by residents in these settlements, including poverty and limited employment opportunities, exacerbate crime risks. In line with Social Disorganization Theory, the constant movement of people and weakened community bonds in rapidly urbanizing areas undermine informal social controls that traditionally deter criminal behavior. Consequently, the historical patterns observed during early urbanization processes—where rapid population growth, inadequate planning, and social inequality contributed to rising crime, remain evident in Mchesi and Biwi today. This historical and contextual understanding underscores the need for crime prevention strategies that are

responsive to the unique challenges posed by rapid urbanization in Malawi's urban settlements.

Theoretical Background

Social Disorganization Theory and Routine Activity Theory, both of which provide a strong theoretical basis for understanding crime in urban settings, inform this study.

Social Disorganization Theory argues that crime thrives in communities where social institutions such as family, schools, and community organizations are weak or disrupted (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Rapid urbanization often breaks down traditional social networks, as residents come from diverse backgrounds and lack strong social bonds. In Mchesi and Biwi, frequent population movement and overcrowding reduce social cohesion, making informal social control mechanisms less effective.

Routine Activity Theory emphasizes that crime occurs when three elements converge: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardians (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Urban environments increase the likelihood of this convergence. High population density provides suitable targets, unemployment increases motivation for crime, and limited policing reduces guardianship. Together, these conditions create an environment conducive to criminal activities.

Conceptual Background

Conceptually, urbanization affects crime prevention strategies through multiple interconnected pathways. Population growth increases pressure on housing, leading to informal settlements with poor lighting, narrow roads, and limited security infrastructure. Unemployment and poverty increase economic strain, which may push some individuals toward criminal behavior (UNODC, 2019).

Crime prevention strategies, such as police patrols, neighbourhood watch groups, and community policing, depend on adequate resources, effective coordination, and community participation. In rapidly urbanizing areas, these strategies are often overwhelmed by the sheer scale of population growth and complexity of urban life. Consequently, crime prevention becomes reactive rather than preventive.

Contextual Background

Mchesi and Biwi are among the most densely populated settlements in Area 8 of Lilongwe. These areas are characterized by informal housing, high youth populations, and limited recreational and economic opportunities. According to UN-Habitat (2016), such urban

conditions weaken formal and informal crime prevention mechanisms, making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to maintain effective control.

General Objective of the Study

To examine how urbanization affects crime prevention strategies in Area 8, with specific focus on Mchesi and Biwi.

Specific Objectives of the Study

1. To assess how urban population growth influences crime patterns in Mchesi and Biwi.
2. To examine the effectiveness of existing crime prevention strategies in Area 8.
3. To identify challenges faced by law enforcement agencies and communities in preventing crime.
4. To propose strategies for improving crime prevention in rapidly urbanizing settlements.

Literature Review

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate a strong and positive relationship between rapid urbanization and increased crime rates, particularly within informal and high-density settlements (UNODC, 2019). Classical sociological research, notably Social Disorganization Theory, explains that rapid urban growth disrupts established social structures, weakens informal social controls, and reduces collective efficacy within communities. When populations expand quickly and residents are highly mobile, social cohesion declines, making it difficult for communities to regulate behavior and prevent criminal activities. These conditions are especially pronounced in informal settlements, where residents often lack legal tenure, basic services, and formal governance structures.

Contemporary studies reinforce these early findings by highlighting how modern urbanization processes in developing countries intensify crime risks. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2019), informal urban settlements often experience higher levels of crime due to overcrowding, poverty, unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to justice and security services. Poor street lighting, unplanned housing layouts, and narrow pathways reduce visibility and surveillance, creating environments that facilitate crimes such as theft, burglary, assault, and drug-related offenses. As a result, urbanization not only increases the volume of potential targets but also reduces the capacity of communities and institutions to prevent crime effectively.

Research conducted in African cities further reveals that crime prevention strategies are frequently undermined by structural and institutional constraints. Skogan (2006) notes that

law enforcement agencies in many urban areas operate with inadequate financial, human, and logistical resources, limiting their ability to conduct regular patrols, respond promptly to incidents, and engage in proactive crime prevention. Additionally, poor urban planning contributes to the persistence of crime by producing neighbourhoods that are difficult to police due to irregular road networks and high residential density. In such environments, conventional policing methods become reactive rather than preventive, focusing on responding to crimes after they occur rather than addressing underlying risk factors.

Weak police–community relations further exacerbate these challenges. In many rapidly urbanizing African cities, mistrust between residents and law enforcement agencies reduces cooperation in crime reporting, intelligence sharing, and community surveillance. Fear of victimization, perceptions of corruption, and past negative encounters with police often discourage residents from actively participating in crime prevention initiatives. This lack of collaboration significantly diminishes the effectiveness of policing efforts and allows criminal activities to persist unchecked.

In response to these challenges, community policing has been widely identified as an effective crime prevention strategy, particularly in urban settings characterized by high population density and social diversity. Community policing emphasizes partnership, trust-building, and shared responsibility between police officers and community members (Skogan, 2006). When communities actively participate in identifying security concerns, reporting suspicious activities, and supporting law enforcement efforts, crime prevention becomes more sustainable and context-specific. Trust between the police and the public enhances information flow, improves response times, and strengthens informal social controls, thereby reducing opportunities for crime.

However, the effectiveness of community policing depends largely on genuine community engagement, institutional commitment, and adequate resources. Without these elements, community policing risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. Therefore, existing literature underscores the importance of integrating community policing within broader urban development and governance frameworks to address the structural drivers of crime associated with rapid urbanization.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A cross-sectional research design was adopted because it allows for the collection of data from a defined population at a single point in time. This design is appropriate for examining relationships between variables in social research (Sekaran, 2003).

Study Population

The study population comprised residents of Mchesi and Biwi, community leaders, and police officers. 39 respondents were involved to ensure diverse perspectives.

Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was used to select key informants with direct knowledge of crime prevention, while simple random sampling ensured fair representation of residents.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires captured measurable trends, while interviews provided in-depth explanations.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicated that urbanization has significantly increased crime in Mchesi and Biwi through unemployment, overcrowding, and weakened social control. Crime prevention strategies such as police patrols and neighbourhood watch groups were found to be inadequate due to limited work force, logistical constraints, and low community participation. These findings align with UNODC (2019) and Skogan (2006), who emphasize the importance of integrated community-based crime prevention approaches.

Table 4.1: Urbanization Factors Contributing to Crime in Mchesi and Biwi. (n = 39)

Urbanization Factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Unemployment	13	33.3
Overcrowding	11	28.2
Informal settlements	9	23.1
Weak social control	6	15.4
Total 39 100	39	100

Interpretation:

Unemployment and overcrowding (61.5% combined) were identified as the leading urbanization-related contributors to crime, confirming the study's assumption that rapid urban growth intensifies crime risks.

Table 4.2: Common Types of Crime Reported in Area 8.

Type of Crime	Frequency	Percentage
Theft and burglary	15	38.5
Assault and violent crime	10	25.6
Drug-related offences	8	20.5
robbery	6	15.4
Total	39	100

Interpretation:

Theft and burglary were the most common crimes (38.5%), reflecting how overcrowding and informal settlement patterns create opportunities for property-related crime.

Table 4.3: Effectiveness of Existing Crime Prevention Strategies.

Crime Prevention Strategy	Effective n (%)	Not Effective n (%)
Police patrols	11 (28.2)	28(71.8)
Community policing	17 (43.6)	22 (56.4)
Neighbourhood watch	9 (23.1)	30 (76.3)

Interpretation:

Police patrols and neighbourhood watch groups were largely viewed as ineffective, while community policing showed relatively better performance but remained insufficient.

Link to The Conclusion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that rapid urbanization in Mchesi and Biwi has increased crime while weakening existing prevention strategies. Limited police capacity, informal settlement growth, and weak community engagement necessitate integrated urban planning, strengthened community policing, and socio-economic interventions, as concluded in the study.

Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Strengthen community policing initiatives to rebuild trust between residents and law enforcement (Skogan, 2006).

2. Improve urban planning to regulate informal settlements and improve infrastructure (UN-Habitat, 2016).

3. Increase police resources and patrol coverage in high-crime areas.

4. Promote youth employment and skills development programs to address economic drivers of crime (Glaeser, 2011).

5. Enhance public awareness on crime reporting and prevention strategies.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that urbanization has a profound impact on crime prevention strategies in Area 8, particularly in Mchesi and Biwi. Rapid and unplanned urban growth has weakened traditional crime control mechanisms and overwhelmed law enforcement capacity. Sustainable crime prevention requires a holistic approach that integrates urban planning, socio-economic development, community participation, and effective policing. Addressing the structural challenges associated with urbanization is essential for improving safety and security in Lilongwe is rapidly growing urban settlements.

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