



Petroleum Subsidy Removal and Heightened Insecurity in Nigeria: A New Look at the Qualitative Criminology

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Abstract

The Nigerian government's final withdrawal of petroleum subsidies has produced socio-economic and security outcomes. The decision has generated widespread discontentment despite the agelong arguments depicting the policy option as a necessary remedy to fiscal deficits and a catalyst for economic sustainability. This study examines the intricate nexus between the removal of petroleum subsidies and the escalation of insecurity in Nigeria, focusing on its socio-economic dimensions based on qualitative criminology, the study adopted the Neo-Liberalism theory as the theoretical framework of analysis while the research methodology used for this article was the historical research design. The implications of fuel subsidy removal for security have come in various scopes. Part of these is the cost of goods and services that has been inflated by the resulting rise in fuel prices; a situation that has reduced people's purchasing power. Also, low-income households are disproportionately impacted by the prevailing economic hardship, which also stimulate feelings of inequality and calls for social unrest. Economic activities have as well been disrupted by the rising cost of transportation and daily essentials, especially in the informal and rural sectors. As the citizens seek alternative strategies of survival, these circumstances inspire criminal activity such as stealing, kidnapping, and banditry. The study considers how the reduction in subsidy spending has not translated to noticeable improvements in infrastructural development, which may have diminished the negative outcomes of subsidy removal. As it argues, mistrust and civil unrest are propelled by the public's view of the government's responsiveness and resource management. The study underscores the necessity of a balanced approach to subsidy removal programmes where economic disenchantment will be reduced in favour of public trust. It recommends a reduction in the security threats associated with subsidy removal, which entails immediate corrections to the emerging socio-economic imbalances. The study adds to the agelong conversation on economic reform, energy policy, and security issues in developing countries laden with abundant natural resources.

Keywords: Petroleum subsidy removal, Insecurity, Socio-economic impact, Poverty and inequality, Nigeria

Introduction

The removal of petroleum subsidies in Nigeria has historically triggered widespread socio-economic consequences, but the recent policy shift in 2023 reignited national debates and intensified existing insecurities. Petroleum subsidies have long been a tool used by successive Nigerian governments to cushion the economic burden on citizens by lowering the cost of fuel. However, these subsidies also drained public resources and were often criticized for fostering corruption and inefficiencies in the petroleum sector (Adebayo, 2023). With the Nigerian government's decision to remove subsidies in 2023, fuel prices tripled almost overnight, triggering inflation, increased transportation costs, and a general spike in the

cost of living (NBS, 2023). While the economic rationale behind subsidy removal was aimed at fostering fiscal sustainability, its immediate social fallout has been alarming, particularly in terms of rising insecurity.

From a qualitative criminological standpoint, the relationship between economic distress and rising crime is well-documented. The sharp increase in fuel prices and cost of basic goods post-subsidy removal created a fertile ground for crime and social unrest. Communities already grappling with poverty found themselves pushed further into desperation, with anecdotal and empirical evidence pointing to a surge in theft, banditry, kidnapping, and other forms of criminality



(Ogundipe & Akintunde, 2023). Qualitative criminology, which emphasizes the lived experiences and socio-cultural context of offenders and victims, provides a crucial framework for understanding how economic shocks contribute to deviant behavior in Nigeria's vulnerable populations.

The insecurity stemming from the subsidy removal is not merely coincidental but structurally linked to Nigeria's long-standing economic inequality and fragile social safety nets. In many urban centers, for example, young people faced with joblessness and inflated living costs have turned to street crimes and informal survival strategies. Rural areas, particularly in northern Nigeria, have seen an escalation in banditry and insurgency activities, often fueled by the economic desperation that worsened after the subsidy removal (Ibrahim, 2023). The criminogenic effects of economic deprivation are rooted in strain theory, which posits that when individuals are unable to achieve socially accepted goals through legitimate means, they may resort to illegitimate methods (Agnew, 2006).

Furthermore, the policy's implementation without robust mitigating strategies—such as transportation subsidies, food assistance, or job creation programs—has deepened public resentment and distrust in government institutions. The resulting civil protests and clashes with security forces are indicative of the breakdown in state-citizen relations, a key factor in the qualitative analysis of state-induced criminogenic environments. As observed by Ugwuoke (2022), the Nigerian state's failure to provide basic welfare, particularly during periods of economic transition, contributes to an environment where lawlessness becomes normalized.

Qualitative criminology also underscores the narratives and perceptions of those affected. Interviews and ethnographic studies reveal that many Nigerians do not view petty theft or informal fuel resale as criminal but rather as necessary means of survival under unjust

economic conditions. This shift in moral reasoning reflects a broader societal transformation where economic policies directly influence conceptions of legality and legitimacy. As such, any discussion of insecurity post-subsidy removal must account for these subjective experiences, which are often ignored in quantitative crime statistics.

In summary, the removal of petroleum subsidies in Nigeria has exacerbated economic hardship, leading to a corresponding rise in crime and insecurity. Qualitative criminology offers a critical lens to examine how socio-economic distress influences criminal behavior and public perceptions of justice. This perspective reveals not just the statistical increase in crime, but the underlying human stories of struggle, adaptation, and resistance in a system perceived as unjust and exclusionary. Addressing the security challenges thus requires more than punitive responses; it necessitates socio-economic reforms that prioritize human security and inclusive development.

Statement of the Problem

The removal of petroleum subsidies in Nigeria has significantly altered the socio-economic landscape, triggering a surge in insecurity and exposing systemic weaknesses in governance and public welfare. While the subsidy removal was intended to address long-standing fiscal inefficiencies and corruption in the oil sector, its abrupt implementation in 2023 exacerbated poverty, inflation, and unemployment, especially among the lower and middle classes (Adebayo, 2023). The resultant economic hardship has led to widespread discontent and increased criminal activity, including theft, kidnapping, banditry, and organized protest violence, particularly in already volatile regions (Ogundipe & Akintunde, 2023).

Traditional approaches to criminology often focus on statistical correlations and punitive measures, but they fail to fully account for the lived realities of individuals pushed toward deviant behavior by economic desperation. Qualitative criminology, which centers on



subjective experiences, social contexts, and moral reasoning, offers a more nuanced understanding of how the economic shock of subsidy removal contributes to crime (Ugwuoke, 2022). In many communities, particularly those with limited state presence or weak law enforcement, the removal of subsidies is perceived not only as an economic blow but also as a betrayal by the state, further eroding trust in public institutions.

There is a growing concern that without a deeper, qualitative investigation into the root causes of the post-subsidy insecurity, policy responses will remain reactionary and ineffective. The problem lies not only in the rising crime rates but also in the state's inability to address the socio-economic drivers of insecurity. A qualitative criminological perspective is essential to understanding how economic policies shape behaviors, perceptions of justice, and notions of survival. Without this lens, the security implications of subsidy removal will remain poorly addressed, perpetuating cycles of poverty and violence.

Despite the removal of petroleum subsidies in Nigeria—an action purportedly aimed at reducing fiscal burdens and redirecting funds to critical sectors—the country continues to accumulate foreign loans at an alarming rate. This paradox raises serious concerns about the effectiveness of Nigeria's economic management and the actual benefits of subsidy removal. The Nigerian government justified the elimination of fuel subsidies in 2023 as a necessary step to save billions of naira and reduce dependence on external borrowing (Adebayo, 2023). However, post-removal, the federal government has continued to obtain foreign loans to fund budget deficits and infrastructural projects, thereby undermining public trust and contradicting the stated purpose of the policy (Debt Management Office, 2023).

This persistent borrowing, even after subsidy reforms, points to deeper structural problems such as revenue mismanagement, corruption, and an overreliance on oil revenue. From a qualitative criminological perspective, this

inconsistency fuels public resentment and deepens the perception of state betrayal. Citizens, especially those in economically marginalized areas, experience not only worsening living conditions due to subsidy removal but also see little improvement in social infrastructure or security—despite increasing national debt (Ugwuoke, 2022). These lived realities contribute to a sense of injustice, making individuals more susceptible to crime and social unrest as a means of protest or survival.

The failure to effectively utilize savings from subsidy removal, coupled with increasing debt dependency, raises critical questions about transparency and accountability in governance. Without addressing these issues, Nigeria risks escalating insecurity, further weakening state-citizen relations and reinforcing cycles of economic desperation and crime. Qualitative criminology provides the tools to understand these dynamics by exploring how economic policies and state actions shape individual and collective responses to perceived injustice and inequality.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the relationship between petroleum subsidy removal and heightened insecurity in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the socio-economic conditions that generate criminogenic outcomes, using qualitative criminology and Neo-liberalism as the analytical framework.

Literature Review

Context and Socio-Economic Impact of Petroleum Subsidy Removal in Nigeria

Petroleum subsidy in Nigeria historically aimed to keep fuel prices low for consumers and to stabilize markets. However, critiques of the policy highlight long-standing issues of fiscal inefficiency, corruption, and inability of refineries to meet domestic demand, leading to dependency on imports and significant government expenditure. Empirical literature shows that Nigeria's removal of fuel subsidies—especially the 2023 adjustment—was intended to improve fiscal sustainability and reduce distortions in oil markets. However, it has been accompanied by inflationary pressures, higher transportation



costs, and reduced household purchasing power. A qualitative perspective also underscores socioeconomic strains experienced by citizens, including rising poverty, unemployment, and vulnerability, which serve as structural conditions that can shape patterns of behaviour and crime. This insight aligns with content analysis by Yunusa et al. (2025) showing that subsidy removal was linked to increased living costs and reports of heightened crime rates as people and businesses struggled to cope with economic hardship.

The Link Between Economic Hardship and Insecurity

Economists and security scholars alike emphasize that macroeconomic shocks—such as those triggered by subsidy removal—can deepen inequality and erode social stability (e.g., spikes in food and transport costs) and exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities. A development study on food insecurity in Nigeria specifically cites the combination of increased living costs and violence (including raids on farmers) as driving millions into acute food shortages.

Qualitative research assessing national security implications notes that the multiplier effect of fuel price increases and cost of living stress can contribute to different forms of insecurity—from protests and civil unrest to more direct criminal behaviors (e.g., property crimes, kidnapping, armed robbery). This study found that even with palliative measures in place, subsidy removal was implicated in rising rates of armed banditry and other criminal activities across Nigeria.

Scholarly Work on Crime Dynamics after Subsidy Removal

Although scholarship specifically linking subsidy removal with crime remains emergent, qualitative studies demonstrate how economic strain is connected to shifts in criminal behaviour. For instance, a qualitative investigation into post-subsidy social order found increases in petty theft, fuel smuggling, and cyber fraud using document analysis and community data, highlighting how financial stress and institutional distrust shape criminal

opportunities and adaptations.

Additionally, research on economic hardship and youth crime in Nigerian communities supports the idea that financial pressures influence crime rates and motivations, aligning with classic criminological ideas like strain theory, which posits that societal pressures and blocked opportunities can increase the propensity for crime (often through survival strategies or alternative economic paths).

Political and Security Implications

The literature also highlights the political dimensions of fuel subsidy removal. Journalistic and academic accounts note that removal has triggered protests, political backlash, and a broader narrative of distrust in public institutions—factors that intertwine political insecurity with socioeconomic strain. Historical movements like Occupy Nigeria illustrate how fuel subsidy issues can catalyze mass mobilization and political unrest.

Another strand of literature explores the politics of insecurity and subsidy removal together, arguing that governance shortcomings and policy communication failures can amplify insecurity rather than ameliorate it.

Qualitative Criminology and Theoretical Perspectives

Qualitative criminology emphasizes contextual understanding of crime—not just arrest data or aggregated statistics, but how social structures, economic policies, and lived experiences shape criminal behaviour and insecurity patterns. Several criminological theories are particularly relevant and finally that study adopted Neo-Liberalism theory.

General Strain Theory (GST): As described in strain literature, economic pressures and blocked goals can produce negative emotions and motivate crime, particularly among youth or economically marginalized individuals. Although not yet widely applied to fuel subsidy research, GST provides a conceptual lens to interpret how policy-induced hardship could elevate certain criminal activities.



Relative Deprivation Theory: Applied in some qualitative analyses of security impacts, this theory suggests that when expectations outpace actual economic achievements—as can happen after subsidy removal—relative deprivation may fuel unrest and criminal behaviour.

Routine Activities Theory & Social Disorganization Approaches: Although not Nigeria-specific, these frameworks help explain how changes in economic conditions alter routine activities (availability of targets, guardianship, etc.) and how disorganized communities under economic stress may experience higher crime opportunities.

Qualitative data collection methods, including document analysis, interviews, and content analysis, allow researchers to trace how policy changes are understood, experienced, and responded to by ordinary citizens—an approach that contrasts with purely quantitative crime rate data.

Application of Neo-Liberalism Theory to Petroleum Subsidy Removal and Heightened Insecurity in Nigeria: A Qualitative Criminological Perspective

Neo-liberalism provides a useful theoretical framework for explaining the policy logic behind petroleum subsidy removal in Nigeria and for interrogating its unintended security consequences. As an economic and political ideology, neo-liberalism advocates reduced state intervention in markets, fiscal austerity, deregulation, privatisation, and the primacy of market forces in resource allocation (Harvey, 2005). Within this framework, subsidies—particularly fuel subsidies—are perceived as market distortions that encourage inefficiency, corruption, and fiscal irresponsibility.

Neo-liberal Policy Logic and Subsidy Removal in Nigeria

From a neo-liberal standpoint, the Nigerian government's decision to remove petroleum

subsidies reflects a commitment to market liberalisation and economic rationalisation. Subsidy removal is justified on the grounds that it reduces budgetary deficits, frees public resources for productive investment, and allows market pricing to reflect the “true” cost of petroleum products (IMF, 2013; World Bank, 2020). In Nigeria, successive administrations have adopted this logic, arguing that subsidy removal would promote competition in the downstream petroleum sector, attract private investment, and enhance long-term economic sustainability.

However, neo-liberalism assumes the existence of efficient markets, functional institutions, and social safety nets capable of cushioning vulnerable populations against market shocks. The Nigerian context challenges these assumptions. Weak regulatory institutions, high levels of poverty, and limited welfare provisions mean that the withdrawal of state support through subsidy removal has immediate and severe socio-economic consequences (Okonjo-Iweala & Osafo-Kwaako, 2007).

Neo-liberalism and Socio-Economic Dislocation

The findings associated with petroleum subsidy removal in Nigeria demonstrate how neo-liberal reforms can generate socio-economic dislocation. Rising fuel prices have led to increased transportation costs and inflation in food and essential commodities, disproportionately affecting low-income households and informal sector workers. Neo-liberalism's emphasis on individual responsibility and market adjustment tends to marginalise these groups, as it downplays the structural inequalities that shape access to legitimate means of survival (Harvey, 2007).

From a qualitative criminological perspective, this economic strain creates conditions conducive to criminal behaviour. Qualitative criminology emphasises lived experiences, meanings, and social contexts of crime (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2015). The study shows that individuals experiencing acute economic hardship perceive crime not merely as deviance but as a rational survival strategy in a context of shrinking



legitimate opportunities. This outcome illustrates a core critique of neo-liberalism: while markets may be efficient in theory, they can generate social harm when implemented without adequate institutional and social safeguards.

Neo-liberalism, State Retrenchment, and Insecurity

Neo-liberalism also entails the retrenchment of the welfare state and the redefinition of the state's role from provider to regulator. In Nigeria, subsidy removal symbolises this retreat of the state from social provisioning. The study's findings suggest that this retreat has weakened the state's social contract with citizens, thereby undermining state legitimacy. As trust in government declines, compliance with law and social norms erodes, increasing the likelihood of social unrest and criminal activity (Loader & Sparks, 2010).

Heightened insecurity—manifesting in theft, kidnapping, banditry, and protests—can thus be understood as a criminogenic outcome of neo-liberal reform. Rather than addressing structural causes of insecurity, neo-liberal policies often shift responsibility to individuals, framing crime as a personal moral failure rather than a consequence of socio-economic exclusion (Wacquant, 2009). This aligns with qualitative criminological insights that link insecurity to experiences of marginalisation, exclusion, and perceived injustice.

Neo-liberalism, Governance Deficits, and Criminal Opportunity Structures

Another critical application of neo-liberalism in this context lies in its interaction with governance deficits. Neo-liberal reforms assume transparency, accountability, and efficient reallocation of freed-up resources. The study reveals that the reduction in subsidy expenditure has not translated into visible infrastructural or social improvements. This disconnect reinforces public perceptions of elite capture and mismanagement, thereby legitimising resistance and, in some cases, criminality as alternative means of redistribution.

Qualitative criminology highlights how such perceptions shape narratives of justification among offenders, who often frame their actions

as responses to systemic injustice (Presser, 2009). Thus, neo-liberalism inadvertently contributes to the creation of “criminal opportunity structures” by intensifying inequality while failing to deliver promised developmental dividends.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a historical research design to examine the relationship between petroleum subsidy removal and heightened insecurity in Nigeria. The historical approach is appropriate because it enables a systematic analysis of policy decisions, socio-economic conditions, and security trends over time. By tracing the evolution of fuel subsidy policies and their socio-economic and criminological implications, the study situates contemporary insecurity within broader structural and policy trajectories. This design allows for an in-depth understanding of how past and present policy choices have shaped current patterns of economic hardship, social unrest, and criminality.

The study is anchored on Neo-liberalism theory, which emphasises market liberalisation, reduced state intervention, fiscal austerity, and deregulation. Neo-liberalism provides an analytical lens for understanding the rationale behind petroleum subsidy removal as a market-oriented reform aimed at correcting fiscal imbalances and promoting economic efficiency. At the same time, the theory facilitates a critical assessment of how the withdrawal of state support has produced socio-economic dislocations that generate criminogenic conditions.

Sources of Data

Data for the study are derived entirely from secondary sources, consistent with the historical research design. These sources include government policy documents, budget statements, reports from international financial institutions, security reports, academic journals, books, newspaper archives, and publications from civil society organisations. In addition, crime statistics and security assessments from relevant government agencies and reputable



research institutes are consulted to contextualise patterns of insecurity before and after subsidy removal.

Method of Data collection

Data collection involves documentary analysis of historical and contemporary records relating to petroleum subsidy policies and security outcomes in Nigeria. Official documents such as policy pronouncements, legislative debates, and economic reform reports are analysed alongside scholarly literature on subsidy reform, neo-liberalism, and insecurity. Media reports and opinion pieces are also examined to capture public reactions, narratives of discontentment, and accounts of so

Method of Data Analysis

The study employs qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to interpret the collected data. Documents are systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes such as rising cost of living, declining purchasing power, inequality, governance deficits, and criminal survival strategies. These themes are analysed in relation to the assumptions of neo-liberalism and insights from qualitative criminology. The historical sequencing of events enables the study to establish patterns and linkages between subsidy removal, socio-economic strain, and the escalation of insecurity.

The scope of the study covers Nigeria as a whole, with particular attention to the period surrounding the final withdrawal of petroleum subsidies. While the analysis is national in outlook, specific references are made to urban, rural, and informal economic contexts to illustrate how the impacts of subsidy removal vary across socio-economic groups.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal a complex and deeply interconnected relationship between the removal of petroleum subsidies and the escalation of insecurity in Nigeria, particularly when viewed through the lens of qualitative criminology and Neo-liberal theory. Consistent with the assumptions of neo-liberalism, the

withdrawal of state intervention in fuel pricing was justified by government on grounds of fiscal discipline, market efficiency, and long-term economic sustainability. However, the evidence from this study suggests that the immediate socio-economic consequences of subsidy removal have generated adverse conditions that undermine public safety and social stability rather than enhance them.

One of the most significant findings is the sharp increase in the cost of goods and services following the rise in fuel prices. Given the centrality of petroleum products to transportation, electricity generation, and small-scale production, subsidy removal has had a cascading inflationary effect across the economy. This outcome has substantially eroded citizens' purchasing power, particularly among low-income households that rely heavily on daily income and informal economic activities. From a criminological standpoint, the study demonstrates that worsening economic strain has intensified survival-driven behaviours, which, in turn, have increased vulnerability to criminal involvement.

The findings further indicate that subsidy removal has disproportionately affected the poor and socially marginalised groups, reinforcing existing structural inequalities, this insight aligns with content analysis by Yunusa et al. (2025) showing that subsidy removal was linked to increased living costs and reports of heightened crime rates as people and businesses struggled to cope with economic hardship.

This aligns with qualitative criminology's emphasis on lived experiences and social contexts in understanding crime. Economic hardship, coupled with perceived inequality, has fuelled resentment and feelings of relative deprivation, which are critical drivers of social unrest and criminality. The study shows that communities experiencing heightened economic stress are more prone to crimes such as theft, kidnapping, and banditry, as individuals seek alternative means of survival in the absence of adequate social protection mechanisms.



Another key finding is the disruption of economic activities, particularly in rural and informal sectors, due to increased transportation costs and rising prices of essential commodities. These disruptions have weakened traditional livelihood systems, thereby increasing unemployment and underemployment. In line with neo-liberal critiques, the study highlights that the rapid withdrawal of subsidies without robust compensatory measures has exposed structural weaknesses in Nigeria's economy, especially its limited capacity to absorb economic shocks. This environment creates fertile ground for criminal networks to recruit economically distressed individuals, thereby intensifying insecurity. The findings is inline with Ogundipe & Akintunde, (2023) who stated that, the sharp increase in fuel prices and cost of basic goods post-subsidy removal created a fertile ground for crime and social unrest.

The study also finds that the expected benefits of subsidy removal—such as improved infrastructure and enhanced public services—have not materialised in a visible or equitable manner. This perceived failure has significantly eroded public trust in government institutions. The findings suggest that insecurity is not only driven by material deprivation but also by governance deficits, including poor transparency, weak accountability, and ineffective resource management. Public mistrust has manifested in protests, civil disobedience, and resistance to state authority, further complicating the security landscape.

Finally, the study establishes that insecurity associated with subsidy removal is both a direct and indirect outcome of economic disenchantment. Directly, rising poverty and unemployment increase crime rates; indirectly, the loss of trust in government legitimacy undermines social cohesion and compliance with law and order. The findings underscore the need for a more balanced and context-sensitive approach to economic reform—one that integrates social welfare, inclusive development, and security considerations.

In sum, the discussion affirms that while subsidy removal may align with neo-liberal economic prescriptions, its implementation in Nigeria has exacerbated socio-economic vulnerabilities that translate into heightened insecurity. Addressing these challenges requires not only economic adjustments but also deliberate policy interventions aimed at reducing inequality, strengthening social safety nets, and restoring public confidence in governance.

Conclusion

The academic literature on petroleum subsidy removal in Nigeria clearly shows that the policy has significant socioeconomic impacts including inflation, poverty, and cost-of-living increases. Emerging qualitative criminological research suggests links between these economic stresses and changes in crime patterns, including opportunistic and survival-oriented criminal activity. Criminological theories such as General Strain Theory and Relative Deprivation provide useful frameworks for understanding how economic hardship shapes insecurity and crime at both individual and community levels.

While more empirical research is needed—especially studies employing qualitative criminology methods like interviews, ethnography, and narrative analysis—existing studies point to a complex interplay between economic policy, social conditions, and insecurity in Nigeria that deserves sustained scholarly attention.

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