

The Social Production of Deviance and Criminality Through Homes, Places, and Spatial Contexts in African Societies: Toward a Relational Geography of Crime

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Abstract:

This paper theorized space, place and spatiality as not simply the sites where deviance and crime occur, but also as which actually construct deviant behavior and crime within African urban society, thus moving the focus of analysis away from individual pathology towards a relational geography of crime. The analysis examines cases of South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya and argues that crime is not just simply an expression of individual maladjustment, but a direct result of spatial interaction and practices which are often realized in sites of historic marginality. In particular, it posits that combining spatial criminological concepts such as defensible space, routine activity and crime pattern theory with Lefebvre's notion of the social production of space highlights how colonial and post-colonial urban design, the construction of informal settlements, and post-colonial state deficit actually construct criminogenic space.

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1. Introduction

High levels of violent crime are a characteristic feature of all African cities, representing one of the most significant challenges to the process of urbanisation on the continent. Despite unprecedented economic growth experienced by many African countries over the last twenty years, urban areas continue to record higher rates of violent crime. These patterns display a spatial clustering that reflects underlying structural inequalities (Odebode et al., 2023; Umar et al., 2021). At the current time, the African continent is witnessing the fastest rate of urbanisation ever seen in human history, and by 2050 almost 60% of the continent's population will be urban dwellers (Pelling et al., 2024).

The demographic shift that is taking place is predominantly in the form of informal settlements, peri-urban developments and unplanned urban peripheries. The lack of formal infrastructure, governance and appropriate housing in these areas is noted (Finn & Cobbinah, 2023). Crime has become increasingly clustered in these spatial environments and needs to be empirically and theoretically understood at a systematic level. The links between the physical environment and criminality need to be understood.

In African cities there is evidence of spatial patterns in the distribution of crime, the understanding of which cannot be based on traditional theories of individual criminality. Crime does not occur equally in the African city as shown by Jegede et al. (2021) and most recently Olajide & Lawanson (2022). Instead it tends to be geographically concentrated within specific micro-locations that are marked by particular environmental characteristics. In Nigerian cities such as Lagos and Kaduna where crime is concentrated, features such as poorly lit streets, low pedestrian volumes and lacking sanitation can be seen to have a positive relationship with the creation of criminal opportunities (Odebode et al., 2023; Umar

et al., 2021). Similarly in the South African cities, where apartheid spatial planning has a continuing legacy, there is an overwhelming inequality in violent crime between black townships and formal white suburbs (Bandaiko et al., 2022; Forde, 2022; Ismail & Olonisakin, 2021). The spatial variations point to crime not being the product of space per se, but the result of the interplay of human agents and the built environment.

The concept of place has, over recent years, gained significance in the field of criminology, and it is being considered as an important determinant of the development of criminal behaviour. However, the predominant models of the place are derived from the western city, the environment that is markedly different from that found in the African city (Jones & Newburn, 2021). Models such as defensible space (Lee, 2022), routine activity theory (Weisburd et al., 2023), broken windows theory (Weisburd et al., 2024), and others originated in the US and Europe, and "formal" cities which have relatively well-developed infrastructure and state presence. The explanations of space as the production of deviance are thus unsuited to an analysis of African cities where spaces are characterized by informal settlements, weak governance and rapid spatial transformations (Olamide, 2025; Bandaiko et al., 2022). This has resulted in a lack of theory and interventions to deal with urban crime in Africa.

The fundamental question this article seeks to investigate is how deviant behaviour and criminality are produced in relation to the centrality of home, place and space in African society. In this study, attention is drawn to the social and physical composition of space and its impact upon the possibility, rationality and likelihood of criminality, not due to individual's immorality or culture (Rosenfeld & Lopez, 2020; Zhanjun et al., 2022; Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2023). This means moving away from viewing social space as the theatre in which social action unfolds to rather understanding how space is actively produced and constituted by social relationships including relationships of crime (Zhu et al., 2024). The relationship between the organization of urban space and crime has particular urgency and complexity in the African city, where the majority of the urban population reside in informal settlements and have limited access to state services and thus are susceptible to crime.

This paper has three aims. It seeks to theorise the geographical production of deviance within the African urban space and develop conceptual frameworks that can embrace the specific features of informal urbanism, colonial spatial legacies and governance deficits. Secondly, it intends to provide an overview of how the physical features of house, neighbourhood and urban infrastructure influence the opportunities for crime and the practice of social control, focusing on the way that residents use and navigate physical constraints (Finn & Cobbinah, 2023; Olamide, 2025; Bandauko et al., 2022). Third, it seeks to develop methods tailored to an analysis of the relationship between crime and space that can be used to generate urban policy and develop criminology theory in African cities.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Spatial Criminology: From Western Origins to African Applications

Since defensible space theory was introduced by Newman in 1970's, spatial criminology has become progressively advanced. The theory proposed that architecture can foster territoriality and reduce opportunity for crime (Lee, 2022). However, while Newman's works highlighted the function of natural surveillance, access control, and territory reinforcement, later researchers find a great number of shortcomings on these applications in situations of poverty and informal settlement (Minnery, 1988; Chalfin et al., 2022).

Crime pattern theory was further improved with the emergence of the routine activity theory introduced by Cohen and Felson. It proposes that crime takes place when three conditions occur in space and time- motivated offenders, suitable targets and lack of capable guardianship (Weisburd et al., 2023). In an African city context, rapid urbanization has led to a condition of lack of capable guardianship (Odebode et al., 2023; Umar et al., 2021), making this theory particularly relevant for explaining crime phenomena in African cities.

The theory was finally developed by Weisburd et al. (2023) who examines how offender movements and patterns in space cross paths with the urban backcloth to result in concentrations of crime. Despite this development, the adoption of these

theories which originated from a Western context is in great need of being tailored to Africa contexts that is often characterize by the lack of state presence, formality, and the nature of social organizations in general (Olamide, 2025; Bandauko et al., 2022).

2.2 The Social Production of Space: Lefebvre and African Urbanism

The theoretical foundation for analysis of African urban criminality lies in Henri Lefebvre's conception of the social production of space (Zhu et al., 2024). Lefebvre identified three elements to space: spatial practice (perceived space); representations of space (conceived space); and representational spaces (lived space). Lefebvre claimed that spaces are never neutral, but are socially produced through relationships: "The space of what there is of reality [conceived space, or representation of space] is always socially and historically determined" (Lefebvre 1991, 41).

In the context of African cities, marginal spaces have been spatially produced by colonial and post-colonial planning through forcible displacement, segregationist practices and under-investment in African residential spaces (Finn and Cobbinah, 2023). The material consequences of these spatial productions-limited infrastructure, economic opportunities and the segregation of residential spaces-now structure opportunities for crime. The theoretical framework provided by Lefebvre helps explain how these prior spatial injustices continue to structure the everyday lives of those inhabiting these spaces and provide them with opportunities to commit crimes.

2.3 An Integrated Framework: Relational Geography of Deviance

This article suggests an integrative model based on strain, relative deprivation and environmental criminology that aims to explain the spatial production of deviance in the context of African countries.

Strain theory (Merton, 1938) holds that discrepancies between approved societal goals and the means available to reach them may lead to strain which, in turn, causes maladaptive responses including criminal acts (Agnew, 2020; Raturi and Rastogi, 2022). This can be seen as amplified in areas that are spatially marginal

as well as urban, because of restricted access to legitimate employment (Odebode et al., 2023; Umar et al., 2021).

Relative deprivation extends this idea further by highlighting the nature of the space, whose marginalisation in visible terms, increases perceived inequalities and criminal motive (Weisburd et al., 2022). Together, these socio-psychological explanations of deviance with environmental criminology produce a relational geography of deviance, by highlighting the space not only as the medium but as an active element of criminal activity.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Historical Geographies of Crime and Control in Africa

Crime and the African City: spatial dynamics cannot be examined in abstraction from colonial histories. Colonial spatial planning created rigidly racialized, segregated areas of privilege and disadvantage, the legacies of which we can see today in crime patterns (Finn & Cobbinah, 2023). In South Africa, racialized spatial segregation was given an institutional and legal framework by apartheid and the Group Areas Act. This divided the country into areas of white residence and areas of black, migrant labour accommodation (townships) which were characterized by insufficient housing, few economic opportunities and state violence (Bandaiko et al., 2022; Forde, 2022). It was from these spatial structures that continued high levels of crime would later emerge, as demonstrated by Higginson et al's (2015) work in divided Cape Town. The newly independent post-colonial states had inherited these spatial inequalities (and often amplified them), developing urban structures in which crime is located in the already segregated regions of the city. In tracing this throughout the continent, they illustrated how colonial logics of policing are replicated today, leading to the criminalization of poverty and the spatial marginalization.

3.2 Informal Settlements as Crime-Producing Environments

Academic concern has lately intensified with a greater recognition of informal settlements as unique, criminal-opportunity producing environments. Odebode et al. (2023) illustrated that violent crime in Kaduna (Nigeria) occurs more

in specific micro-places with conditions of poor street lighting, lack of connectivity and insufficient sanitation which constrains natural surveillance and capable guardianship and creates territory gaps within which offending gangs flourish (Jegede et al., 2021). Olajide & Lawanson (2022) further explored this relationship in Lagos by arguing that infrastructure deficit and governance deficit combined with each other resulted in the creation of criminogenic environments. On the other hand, informal settlements also give birth to an advanced form of informal social control that somewhat blurs straightforward crime-environment relationships (Finn & Cobbinah, 2023). They form the hub of various vigilantism activities, community police groups and customary powers which somewhat cover the deficiency of the state apparatus (Olamide, 2025; Bandauko et al., 2022).

3.3 Gated Communities, Fortification, and the Architecture of Fear

An increasingly spatialized form the response to urban crime has taken; gated communities, fortified buildings and defensive urban design are to be noted. Lemanski (2004) describes how middle-class South Africans are receding behind walls and security. In fact she argues that it is a kind of 'fortress urbanism', which fragments the public and the displacing of rather than the prevention of crime. In addition, Ismail & Olonisakin (2021) provide evidence that this defensive reconfiguration of the urban replicates apartheid's spatial logic in new ways. Fear of crime is therefore conflated with anxieties about race and class. Patterns of fortress urbanism have also been traced across other cities in Africa; private security systems lead to archipelagos of security in an ocean of danger. These systems reconfigure the urban and the social and criminal geographies (Jones & Newburn, 2021). Privatised security, the writer argues, entrenches spatial inequality: it redirects money from public safety to private security.

3.4 Governance, Service Delivery, and Spatial Justice

The correlation between the presence of the state and crime has been the subject of recent debate among scholars. Jegede et al (2021) state that the weakness of governance and services are creating a space for criminal enterprises to co-exist and even dominate with normal economic activity, as for example the lack of a police presence and street lights in a favela means that criminality can thrive in the shadows of social activity (Odebode et al., 2023). However this does not always

correlate to lower crime levels as too great a state presence is seen to promote levels of violence and alienation from the community (Olajide & Lawanson, 2022). Thus, what is needed are governance structures that tackle structural spatial inequalities while at the same time fostering informal social control within communities (Olamide, 2025; Bandauko et al., 2022).

4. Conceptualizing the Home-Crime Nexus

4.1 The Home as Site of Vulnerability

Within African urban contexts, the household represents a fundamental arena of criminal victimization. In particular, female and child victims are disproportionately vulnerable to crimes of domestic violence and intimate partner violence occurring within the household (Bazaanah & Ngcobo, 2024). Criminalized harm is privatized within housing forms which lack effective mechanisms of protection, and which are poorly built and inadequately lit, located in segregated and isolated locations within informal settlements (Odebode et al., 2023). Lemanski (2004) highlights how, in townships in South Africa, migrant labor patterns of the past had generated housing forms that disrupted the family home and led to vulnerable, female-headed households which were susceptible to both property and domestic crime. Insecurity in housing- the threat of eviction, land insecurity and displacement- also leads to the creation of social vulnerability, and contributes to criminal predation and exploitation (Finn & Cobbinah, 2023). The home is, therefore, not a safe haven, but a site of conflict wherein multiple forms of violence interact.

4.2 The Home as Site of Criminal Enterprise

However, the home has a second role to play within criminality, acting not as a location where criminal activity occurs, but as the base from which it operates, especially in areas with high unemployment and low opportunities for legal economic activity (Odebode et al. 2023). In his study of Nigeria, Jegede et al. (2021) describe how the complex network of informal dwellings offers a cover for stolen goods, the processing of drugs, and the staging of criminal networks. Indeed, the dual domestic and commercial functions of the home are common in informal settlements. Informal houses function as shops, workshops, public venues, and

homes and the lines between the licit and illicit become blurred (Olamide 2025; Bandauko et al. 2022).

While Olajide and Lawanson (2022) suggest that this hybridization of economies reflects a coping mechanism for a segment of the population locked out of legitimate employment, it also, they note, provides a space in which crime can be hidden in plain sight. Architectural and spatial design further aids the hiding of criminality, with numerous entrances and rear spaces, and little or no external surveillance of activities (Odebode et al. 2023; Umar et al. 2021).

4.3 Domestic Architecture and Surveillance

Architectural design and form shape possibilities for surveillance and social control within domestic spaces. The original conceptualisation by Newman (1972) of increasing territoriality and natural surveillance through architecture, however, relies on formal settings where the boundaries and construction standards for buildings are standard (Lee, 2022). For African informal settlements, construction methods are organic and emergent, leading to an irregular street network, inconsistent building heights and a lack of clear territorial boundaries. All of these features impede natural surveillance (Finn & Cobbinah, 2023). Residents are therefore presumed to develop compensatory strategies for surveillance, such as the establishment of extensive kinship networks, cooperative childcare practices and neighbourhood watch schemes. These compensatory mechanisms help overcome shortcomings in architectural designs (Olamide, 2025; Bandauko et al., 2022). In South Africa townships, the reorganisation of space from apartheid era hostels to single family homes brought about initial reductions in some forms of crime due to family based social control. However, these reductions did not last due to overcrowding and deteriorating facilities (Ismail & Olonisakin, 2021). Architecture's role in crime and domestic life is therefore mediated through social practices within its spaces (Zhu et al., 2024).

4.4 Tenure Arrangements and Community Dynamics

Property tenure systems affect the type and extent of crime opportunities and the ways the community may respond to deviant behavior. Communal property tenure systems are widely used across many of Africa's informal settlements and

have the potential of establishing a collective responsibility for the reduction of crime but can result in vague lines of accountability which favor the criminals (Jegede et al., 2021). Individual property tenure systems could foster territorial behavior, making homeowners more likely to invest in the home protection. Yet, it also tends to undermine community cooperation and weaken the community vigilance (Bandaiko et al., 2022; Forde, 2022). The question of property tenure systems and their link to crime can be complicated further by insecurity. Under whatever property tenure system, tenure insecurity will compromise effective crime prevention efforts through community action, as continuous insecurity threatens eviction and makes the community hesitate to invest in its long-term future (Jones & Newburn, 2021). The connection between the home and the commission of crimes is better examined through a synthesis of spatial and tenure regimes and the resulting social relations.

5. Neighborhood Contexts and Criminal Ecologies

5.1 Street Networks and Crime Patterns

The configuration of the street network directly influences where crime occurs by affecting offender movement paths, potential victim's access and routes of escape (Weisburd et al., 2023). Crime is found to occur where an offender's space of activities intersects with available targets. Street networks determine how and where this intersection takes place. In African informal settlements organic street networks are shaped by their irregular connectivity, lack of direct thoroughfare, and fuzzy public/private domain resulting in a unique form of criminal geographies and "distinctively different from those found in grid like Western cities" (Finn & Cobbinah, 2023).

It has been shown by Odebode et al., (2023) that the location of violent crime is clustered around particular street segments in Kaduna, Nigeria due to the lack of lighting and heavy foot traffic within these locations, combined with proximity to commerce indicating how the micro environment combines with street network geometry. Olajide and Lawanson (2022) show for Lagos how street width, road condition and drains all contribute to potential crime opportunity and access for law enforcement, with narrow and poorly maintained street networks

being a place of rapid crime escapes but slow access for official intervention, however this can be counterbalanced by denser, more organic street networks which limit mobility of both offenders and criminals and enable neighborhood watch through high foot traffic, thus making the network configuration in and of itself not the determining factor (Olamide, 2025; Bandauko et al., 2022).

5.2 Land Use Mix and Criminal Opportunities

This combination of residential, commercial and recreation uses can offer a unique blend of criminal opportunity, primarily due to the bringing together of varied populations, opportunities to commit crimes and the development of territorial confusion. Originally, Jacobs (1961) described mixed land uses as a positive aspect of cities, providing 'eyes on the street' that create surveillance. But others have observed that particular land-use mixes - like the coexistence of drinking outlets and housing - are particularly conducive to violence and disorder (Weisburd et al., 2022; Rosenfeld & Lopez, 2020).

The informal mixing of land uses in African cities contributes to a distinctive criminogenic blend. The establishment of informal bars, unlicensed shops, and small business stalls in Nigerian neighbourhoods leads to an association of crime with legitimate enterprise (Jegede et al., 2021). When mixed uses in informal African settlements develop in an unregulated manner, they can lead to conflicting proximities, for instance, industry next to a school or the selling of alcohol near a religious site (Odebode et al., 2023). The temporal use of land also matters. For instance, daytime economic activity in a South African township centre may provide a sense of security; this may be replaced by activity associated with street-level criminal enterprises when legitimate activities close down in the evening (Ismail & Olonisakin, 2021).

5.3 Collective Efficacy and Informal Social Control

Collective efficacy, or the "ability of a community to exercise informal social control" (Zahnw et al. 2022), acts as an important intermediary variable between spatial organization and criminality. Since formal state control is sparse, or in some instances hostile, within African informal settlements, the community has had to establish mechanisms for managing the settlement and resolving

conflicts (Olamide 2025; Bandauko et al. 2022). Finn and Cobbinah (2023) reveal how, in the absence of formal control mechanisms, "people rely on each other to develop complex systems of surveillance, dispute resolution, and youth control, which may or may not substitute for the activities of state actors".

As Lemanski (2004) notes, the apartheid removed traditional African social structures and decimated community-based systems for collective efficacy. As a result, current rates of criminality can be seen in part as a continuation of this historical process of disrupted social organization. Furthermore, informal social control can also be coercive; in areas with a lack of, or delegitimized state control, vigilantism, mob justice, and criminal government occur (Jones & Newburn 2021). Indeed, as Olajide and Lawanson (2022) found in Lagos, vigilante groups, in addition to preventing some forms of criminality, engaged in extortion and gross human rights violations, complicating any simplistic judgement on the effects of informal controls. The relation between context and criminality, then, is thus also shaped by the kind of collective efficacy which is present within a specific spatial form-whether it is co-operative or coercive, inclusively or exclusivist.

5.4 Infrastructure Deficits and Environmental Risk

The lack of basic services, such as streetlights, sewers and refuse collection create the conditions under which crime occurs, and indicates state failure, which may encourage criminals. Odebode et al. (2023) demonstrate a clear association between infrastructure quality and crime hot spots in cities in Nigeria: poor street lighting, for example, not only provides an opportunity for violent attacks but also enables the easy concealment of evidence; open drainage ditches create the perfect place to dispose of it.

Infrastructure under-provision in South African townships has roots in conscious neglect during the Apartheid regime, Higginson et al. (2015). The deficits continue through current governance failures and crime may represent one element of persistent spatial injustice: the psychological pressure and precarious material conditions of pollution, flooding, and fire risk provide motivation for criminality (Jegade et al. 2021). Infrastructural crime occurs on various levels; physically through the opportunities it presents; socially through the communities' diminished

capacity for self-governance, and symbolically as an indicator of state withdrawal, which is likely to break down informal social control.

6. City-Wide Spatial Structures and Crime

6.1 Segregation, Inequality, and the Distribution of Violence

The spatial organisation of African cities on a macro level is a key determinant of where criminal violence is distributed within them. As Odebode et al. (2023) show, spatial inequality, identified by conditions such as infrastructure, service delivery and quality of housing, is a strong predictor of crime hotspots in cities. Violent offending clusters in spatially excluded former slums characterised by accumulated disadvantage. This pattern may be viewed as an analogue to what Massey and Denton (1993) describe as American apartheid. However, in the African context spatial segregation often predates market processes and arises from colonial city design and implementation. In South Africa, for example, spatial planning during apartheid led to sustained levels of inequality within and across urban spaces which could not be undermined by de-segregation. The townships continue to display far higher levels of violent offending than white former suburbs (Lemanski 2004).

How does this segregation lead to increased levels of violence? First, concentrations of poor people cannot easily access legitimate economic opportunities and as such there is pressure to turn to criminal activity for the sake of economic stability. Second, isolation from centres of economic activity limits opportunity, and spatial separation creates spatial stigmas with negative psychological consequences which reduce levels of collective efficacy and community organisation (Zahnow et al. 2022). Furthermore, it can lead to the formation of separate criminal sub-cultures in marginalized spaces, such that violence in that space comes to be accepted and status can be gained through it, specifically for men by asserting a violent masculinity and criminal capacity (Higginson et al. 2015). Criminal violence in areas so defined tends to become self-perpetuating by concentrating the opportunities for it and creating a disconnect from mainstream institutions that may offer incentives for desistance.

6.2 Peri-Urbanization and Transitional Zones

As African cities rapidly expand into their peripheral hinterlands they generate distinct forms of criminal ecologies. These are marked by institutional ambiguity, tenure insecurity and a blending of rural and urban social forms. Finn and Cobbinah (2023) point out that peri-urban areas exist outside of the effective jurisdiction of both urban and rural authorities. This leaves the zones devoid of the regulatory mechanisms required to curb informal construction, illegal settlement and the informal economy; it leaves them as spaces for contest over the ownership of land and resources. Indigenous landholders, migrant settlers and the state all contend for control over land and resources within areas characterized by legal pluralism and contested jurisdiction (Olamide, 2025; Bandaiko et al. 2022).

Olanide and Lawanson's (2022) study of Lagos is illustrative in showing how peri-urban expansion in the megacity generates criminal opportunities through the subversion of traditional social controls and the absence of adequate modern ones. Infrastructure deficiency, (i.e. Poor roads, lack of lighting, ineffective policing), common in peri-urban settings, adds criminal opportunities while also complicating the state's ability to police the areas (Odebode et al. 2023). This, in addition to the frequent use of peri-urban spaces as staging points for the transshipment of illegal goods between producer hinterlands and consumer cities through the spatial fragmentation afforded by peri-urban morphology makes the regions attractive for criminal enterprise (Jegede et al. 2021). Crime within peri-urban settings reflects the structurally ambiguous position of these spaces which are neither rural nor urban, not governed by either traditional or modern authority, and only tenuously incorporated into either the local or global economy.

6.3 Transportation Infrastructure and Crime Mobility

The linkages between districts within cities (i.e. The transportation networks) have a large role in how crime is distributed across space. They provide access routes for offender mobility and help create and define how a particular crime site is accessible or not accessible to both offenders and police responders. Weisburd et al. (2023) found that transportation arteries help shape crime sites into 'crime templates' guiding offender searches. Main roads and transport terminals form crime attractors or crime generators by bring together target and offenders. In

African cities, informal transport-like minibus taxis and motor cycle taxis- are both crime venues and routes used for offender mobility (Olamide, 2025; Bandauko et al., 2022). Bus and motorcycle taxi terminals in big African cities are major venues for robberies and harassment, as dense public transit locations allow for crime opportunity through conditions of low guardianship and anonymity (Jones & Newburn, 2021).

The highways and main roads permit the efficient movement of stolen items, weapons, and illegal substances from one district to another, and permit offenders to flee from their neighborhoods into communities where they are not as readily recognized as offenders (Odebode et al., 2023). Introduction of new transport infrastructure like BRT lines and road expansions can lead to the displacement of crime without absolute reduction as increased accessibility allows for legitimate business and criminal activity simultaneously (Ismail & Olonisakin, 2021). Thus, transport infrastructure is a double-edged sword allowing for police accessibility and economic development while creating criminal opportunity and expanding offender movement into new areas within the metropolitan region.

7. Comparative Case Studies

7.1 South Africa: The Legacy of Apartheid Spatial Planning

It is in the context of post-apartheid South Africa that one can fully understand how enduring patterns of criminal violence the legacy of spatial planning policies of the past are. Apartheid spatial planning through the enforcement of the Group Areas Act and other policies led to an urban spatial form of peripheral townships, where the Black population was confined, housed in substandard conditions, economically disadvantaged and strategically underinvested in terms of infrastructure and services (Bandauko et al., 2022; Forde, 2022). As indicated by Higginson et al. (2015) such planning outcomes have proved exceptionally tenacious; spatial inequalities remain strong along racial and class divisions in Cape Town, closely correlated with violence crime rates.

Multiple pathways link Apartheid planning to crime of today. There include breakdown of social capital (traditional means of social control), the concentration

of unemployment and poverty on peripheral areas and the creation of an urban environment which is both highly conducive to criminal activity while at the same time difficult for police to control (Ismail & Olonisakin, 2021). The spatial stigma associated with townships further engenders psychological and social consequences on the residents. It can negatively impact on their sense of efficacy and collective capacity to address criminal concerns, normalization of violence in these areas and the perpetuation of an atmosphere of vulnerability (Zahnow et al., 2022). Even reactions to crime and fear of it are equally spatialised with increasing proliferation of gated communities, private security and defensive architecture contributing to the re-spatialisation of apartheid divisions in new forms (Bandauko et al., 2022; Forde, 2022). This defensive urbanism, however, may lead to increased crime by diverting resources from public safety to private protection thereby diminishing collective capacity to combat crime. In summary, spatial injustice during apartheid led to cyclical patterns of violence that may be resistant to purely technical solutions because they are rooted in the most fundamental structure of the urban space.

7.2 Nigeria: Crime and Urban Informality in Lagos and Kaduna

The urban areas of Nigeria demonstrate the criminal effects of rapid urbanization under circumstances of limited governance and pervasive informality. As the largest city in Africa, Lagos has been expanding at such a rapid pace that the state has been unable to plan and deliver services and instead has created sprawling informal neighborhoods where criminal groups and legitimate business operate in parallel (Olajide & Lawanson, 2022). Division of power among federal, state, and local governments leads to regulatory gaps, into which criminal governance can emerge as an alternative to formal systems. Informal groups such as area boys operate on tribute for the provision of security and dispute settlement (Olamide, 2025; Bandauko et al., 2022).

Odebode et al. (2023) provide evidence from Kaduna that illustrates these features. They demonstrate that violent crime is spatially concentrated on micro-places. In these areas environmental features such as low lighting, a deficit in street connectivity and insufficient sanitation facilitate offending while hindering guardianship. They also argue that the quality of infrastructure is a stronger predictor of offending patterns than individual demographic characteristics, lending

credence to the theory that place itself produces opportunities for crime. Jegede et al. (2021) extends these analyses and demonstrates the relationship between crime and community responses to it and the way that form-particularly housing and neighborhood design, and by implication the structure of settlement patterns-affect the nature of crime. Dense, irregularly planned neighborhoods simultaneously help criminals conceal their activities while enabling informal monitoring. Nigeria demonstrates how rapid urbanization combined with governmental weakness and specific spatial formations can create criminal environments where residents can still develop strong informal means of providing security in the absence of state governance.

7.3 Kenya: Informal Settlements and the Production of Disorder

Kenyan urbanism (especially in Nairobi) has a specific logic, illuminating links between informality, governance and crime. Nairobi's infamous informal settlement of Kibera is a good example of how spatially generated marginality produces concentrated disadvantage which produces criminal opportunities and constraints (Finn & Cobbinah 2023). While townships in South Africa are state-planned, albeit underinvested, Kibera grew out of irregular occupation. This produces complicated forms of land tenure and an unclear authority regime. According to Finn & Cobbinah (2023) this informality produces not only criminal opportunity but community capacity. Residents 'deal with unclear property rights and inadequate state services with an elaborate framework of mutual obligation and informal regulation'.

The form that Kibera takes (tight housing, lack of open space, poor infrastructure) also creates environments where some crimes are easy to perpetrate and others are difficult to. Violence tends to be territorialized and located in specific parts of the shantytown managed by specific criminal gangs or youth militias. While the state response to informal settlements has been characterized as vacillating between neglect and violent eviction, slum upgrading projects and crackdowns have often produced unintended consequences including Displacement. Police-Community partnership schemes in informal settlements in Kenya have met with minimal success. These programs appear to have failed because local committees were co-opted by local politicians and compromised by criminal networks,

demonstrating the challenge of developing collective efficacy in contexts of chronic inequality and weak institutions (Olamide, 2025, Bandauko et al. 2022). The case of Kibera illustrates the interaction of informal settlement form with politics that leads to specific forms of criminal ecologies.

8. Discussion: Towards an African Spatial Criminology

8.1 Contextualizing Western Theories

The discussions above thus illustrate both the applicability and the constraints of using spatial criminological theories of Western origin within the African urban context. Theories of defensible space which require strengthening territorial boundaries and controlling access, presume forms of housing and property relations which do not hold true in the cumulative, communal and blurred terms of tenure, which are characteristic of African informal settlements (Lee, 2022).

Chalfin et al. (2022), recognise this shortcoming, and note that to apply principles of defensible space in contexts of poverty, significant revision is required given the lack of state, community action, the self-building nature of housing construction and limited resources for environmental design. Likewise, assumption of capable guardianship under routine activity theory presupposes the existence of both state and community structures, which are lacking in the African urban periphery (Weisburd et al., 2023). As demonstrated by Odebo et al. (2023) in Nigerian cities, absence of capable guardianship is not just accidental, but a fundamental attribute of governance deficits that cannot be solved by merely reconfiguring individuals' behaviours.

Conversely, theory of crime patterns by Weisburd et al. (2023) is more flexible since it does not rely on pre-assuming structures but rather focuses on movement of offender and backcloth of the environment which can conform to informal settlements' uneven street patterns and land use. Nonetheless, even this theory has to be complemented by awareness of governance voids and plural legal systems, which organize opportunities for crime in African cities (Olamide, 2025; Bandauko et al., 2022). The problem, therefore, is not that Western theories should

be abandoned wholesale, but rather, that they need to be adapted empirically to the African urban context.

8.2 The Active Role of Space in Producing Deviance

The case studies from South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya thus all contribute to the understanding of space as a direct constitutive force of criminal activity rather than just a backdrop or setting. This paper has, building upon Lefebvre (1991), shown how spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces are all integral in generating the social conditions in which deviance becomes rational and feasible. In African cities planning, both during colonialism and under post-colonial administrations, has generated marginalized spaces through physical segregation, removals and under-provisioning, contributing to a built environment in which poverty is concentrated and legal avenues for exploitation limited, and criminal activity is possible (Finn & Cobbinah 2023; Bandaiko et al., 2022; Forde, 2022).

These spatial productions do not exist in a vacuum; they are constantly reproduced through contemporary governance, investment processes and social relationships that sustain and reinforce the marginal spaces through territorial stigmatization and social exclusion (Wacquant & Vandeboeck 2024). As shown by Higginson et al. (2015) in South African cities there is an active reproduction of spatial inequality through the mechanisms of state action and private investment which focuses resources and investment onto privileged zones and away from the marginalized spaces. The creation of criminality is thus through a dialectic of space and social action where neither term can be simplified to the other.

8.3 Policy Implications

The theoretical model formulated here is highly relevant for crime prevention policy in African cities. It points towards the need to decolonize CPTED strategies, in so far as Western design logic has been applied to the contexts of informality, weak governance and rapid urban change (Chalfin et al., 2022). Imported western design logic is inappropriate, and for effective intervention, a participatory process is necessary to allow residents to participate in analysis and development of solutions that appropriately reflect the context (Olamide, 2025).

Informal settlement upgrading stands out as a site of crime prevention potential. Natural surveillance and collective efficacy can be built through the provision of lighting, street connectivity and improved public space, without displacement of the community (Odebode et al., 2023). However, according to Olajide and Lawanson (2022), mere infrastructure investment will not be effective unless it is coupled with improved governance mechanisms and economic opportunities that ensure the sustainability and vibrancy of the public environment. Spatial justice should also be addressed by crime prevention efforts. Policies designed to tackle crime, without first addressing spatial inequality, will result in intensified segregation and exclusion that breeds criminality (Lemanski, 2004). Spatial criminology should also deal with struggles against forces of urbanization.

9. Conclusion

9.1 Summary of Key Arguments

In three closely related claims this article argues about the spatial production of crime and criminality in the African context: First, crime and criminality do not derive from individual pathology per se but is a product of the dialectical interrelation between structures and practices, with places-houses, neighborhoods, and whole city-acting as sites of the production of crime opportunity (Zhu et al., 2024; Odebode et al., 2023). Second, spatial criminological theory developed from the Western context can only work when grounded in an African urban context that is marked by its informality, lack of strong governance and colonial legacy (Newman, 1972; Chalfin et al., 2022; Olamide, 2025; Bandauko et al., 2022). Third, in fighting against crime it is imperative to combat spatial injustice embedded in urban space by engaging in inclusive participatory upgrade of informal settlement, investing in infrastructure and technology that enhance collective efficacy and social cohesiveness rather than strengthening segregations through fortification (Bandauko et al., 2022; Forde, 2022; Ismail & Olonisakin, 2021).

Comparative study among South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya points to similarities as well as specificities in spatial production of criminality in the various contexts of Africa, hence the relevance of studying the relation between space and

criminality in the continent. The above finding helps in the construction of theoretically sound frameworks relevant to the continent while at the same time responsive to the nuances of the local context.

9.2 Contributions to Knowledge

This paper offers a few novel contributions in criminology and urban studies. Theoretically, it develops a relational geography of crime by extending environmental criminology with the critical spatial theory to conceive of space not just as context but as constitutive (Zhu et al., 2024; Weisburd et al., 2023). Empirically, it combines evidence from across multiple national settings and finds that a relationship exists between spatial marginality and crime violence, and that there are the intervening variables. These are lack of guardianship, infrastructure deprivation, governance absence and stigmatized territory (Finn & Cobbinah, 2023; Olajide & Lawanson, 2022).

Methodologically, it illustrates that through comparative case study, a theoretically grounded, contextually appropriate framework can be developed while overcoming the problematic issues of universalism and exceptionalism. Practically, it suggests to policy makers an intervention strategy for addressing the spatial dimensions of crime without replicating the exclusion which breeds crime.

9.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The limits of this analysis point to the potential for further research. Because we drew on existing studies and secondary literature, our ability to conduct an systematic cross-national comparison is limited. Data collection instruments need to be developed to allow for more robust comparative research in the future. Furthermore, this analysis exclusively discusses urban crime. The unique spatial dimensions of rural and peri-urban criminality have yet to be systematically theorized and examined (Olamide, 2025; Bandauko et al., 2022), and should be studied in their own right. There is a need to further theorize the gendered dynamics of spatial production. The home-crime nexus differs across gender: it is in the home that female residents are in places of greater vulnerability (Bazaanah & Ngcobo, 2024).

Lastly, this study does not sufficiently address the longitudinal dynamics of spatial production and criminality; these dynamics should be explored further through the study of the impact of neighborhood change processes such as gentrification, investment in infrastructure, and the implementation of policy. Since African cities are continuing to grow and transform at an un-precedented rate, this research becomes increasingly vital for scholarly, policy, and community understanding of the spatial production of deviance, and for creating just and safe cities in the future.

10. References

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