

## IMPACT OF POVERTY-INDUCED CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR AMONGST THE YOUTHS IN ENUGU STATE

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### Abstract

Crime among youths is a pervasive problem that bedevils every human society. It becomes particularly disturbing when criminal activities are allowed to continue unabated. Poverty-induced criminality is a worrisome phenomenon that requires urgent attention. Against this background, this paper investigated the impact of poverty-induced criminal behaviour among youths in Enugu State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined the influence of poverty on youths' criminal behaviour; the socio-economic factors influencing youths' engagement in criminal activities in the state; and the major effects of poverty-induced crimes among youths in Enugu State. The paper adopted the General Strain Theory (GST) and Social Control Theory (SCT) as its theoretical framework. A descriptive survey design was employed, and the study utilised a mixed-methods approach to data collection. A sample size of 625 respondents was selected for the administration of the quantitative instrument, while purposive sampling was used to select eight participants for the in-depth interviews (IDI). The findings revealed that poverty makes crime appear as a necessary means of survival for youths in Enugu State, thereby increasing their susceptibility to peer pressure and gang involvement. The study further found that a lack of educational opportunities, limited access to basic needs, and economic instability push young people into criminality. The study recommends, among others, that to reduce youths' involvement in crime, the government, community-based organisations, and non-governmental organisations should prioritise the provision of job training and employment opportunities. Initiatives such as vocational training, apprenticeships, and entrepreneurship programmes can equip youths with practical skills and sustainable income sources, thereby reducing the appeal of illegal activities as a means of survival.

**Keywords:** Crime, Criminal behaviour, Criminality, Poverty and Youths

### Introduction

Criminal acts are always frowned at among the law abiding members of any society. Almost every society always tries to stop them from taking place. Criminal acts may be induced by many factors and circumstances. According to Wikström and Treiber (2016), crime could be seen as a fault of the social system whose institutions do not work equally for all its members. Mostly, persons known to commit street crimes as reported in the crime index are poor, uneducated, often unemployed and residents of low-income neighbourhoods (Lanfear, Matsueda & Beach, 2020). Youth poverty and its links to criminal behaviour have been extensively studied due to their profound implications on public safety, socioeconomic development, and youth welfare. Youth from impoverished backgrounds often experience heightened exposure to violence, reduced opportunities, and systemic barriers, increasing their vulnerability to engaging in criminal behaviours (Opara, Lardier, Metzger, Herrera, Franklin, Garcia-Reid & Reid, 2020). Economic hardship frequently correlates with environments characterized by social instability, high unemployment, and limited access to education. These conditions create fertile ground for criminal behaviour as youths seek alternative means to cope with unmet needs (Jespersen, Hildebrand, Korbin & Spilsbury, 2021).

Research highlights that socioeconomic status is a predictor of youth criminal behaviour (Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2024). Poverty is often linked with higher levels of stress, lack of positive role models, and weaker social networks, all of which hinder healthy development and decision-making. Poverty is a complex and persistent social issue that affects millions globally. It is defined as a state of economic deprivation, where individuals lack access to basic necessities such as food, education, healthcare, and shelter (World Bank, 2022). Youths, who are often the most vulnerable group in society, face significant challenges when growing up in impoverished conditions. A lack of access to quality education and employment opportunities aggravates the problem. Studies have shown that children raised in poverty-stricken households are more likely to drop out of

school and engage in delinquent activities, as they perceive limited prospects for social mobility (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2020).

Poverty remains a persistent social issue with profound implications for youth development and behaviour. It creates environments where young people face systemic challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare, and stable housing, all of which increase the risk of criminal behaviour (Wadsworth, Ahlqvist, McDonald & Tilghman-Osborne, 2018). Youth in underprivileged areas frequently lack access to quality education and employment opportunities, leading to frustration and criminal behaviour as alternative means of survival.

The relationship between poverty and criminal behaviour has been studied by various researchers. However, there is still a gap on how this relationship plays out in a place like Enugu State, Nigeria. Many studies have looked at poverty and crime at the national or global level, but few have focused on specific places in Nigeria with their own social and cultural conditions. This paper aims to address this gap by investigating how poverty affects criminal behaviour among youths in Enugu State. To achieve this, the paper is focused on understanding;

1. The influence of poverty on criminal behaviour of youths in Enugu state.
2. The specific socio-economic factors influencing the likelihood of youths engagement in criminal activities in Enugu state.
3. The major effects of poverty-induced crimes amongst youths in Enugu state

## **Review of Relevant Literature**

### **Concept of Poverty**

Poverty, in its most fundamental sense, represents a profound deprivation of resources and opportunities that constrains human potential and dignity. It extends far beyond mere financial scarcity, encompassing limited access to education, healthcare, clean water, adequate nutrition, and safe shelter (Wijekoon, Sabri, & Paim, 2021). What makes poverty particularly dangerous is its self-perpetuating nature, the way it can trap generations in cycles of disadvantage through mechanisms both obvious and subtle (De Schutter, Frazer, Guio & Marlier, 2023). Children born into impoverished households often face malnutrition during critical developmental periods, attend underfunded schools, and lack the social connections that might otherwise provide pathways to economic mobility. This multidimensional deprivation creates a compounding effect where deficiencies in one area worsen vulnerabilities in others, creating a web of disadvantage that becomes increasingly difficult to escape as time passes (Febrian, 2024).

The measurement of poverty presents its own complex challenges, with significant implications for how we understand and address the problem. Traditional income-based thresholds, such as the World Bank's international poverty line of 2.15 US dollars per day, offer standardized metrics but often fail to capture the lived reality of deprivation (De Azevedo-Maia, 2024). Alternative approaches like the Multidimensional Poverty Index attempt to incorporate factors including health outcomes, educational attainment, and living standards to provide a more holistic picture (Vollmer & Alkire, 2022). Each measurement framework inherently contains value judgments about what constitutes a minimally acceptable standard of living. These definitions matter tremendously, as they determine who receives assistance, how resources are allocated, and how we evaluate the success of anti-poverty initiatives. (Vollmer & Alkire, 2022).

Addressing poverty requires confronting interlocking systems of economic, social, and political power that maintain inequality. While charity provides immediate relief to those in dire circumstances, sustainable solutions demand transformative change in how opportunities and resources are distributed (Royce, 2022). Economic growth alone has proven insufficient; countries with rising GDP often see minimal improvements for their poorest citizens if benefits flow primarily to those already privileged (Fioramonti, Coscieme, Costanza, Kubiszewski, Trebeck, Wallis & De Vogli, 2022). More promising approaches combine targeted interventions such as conditional cash transfers, microfinance initiatives, and early childhood education programmes with broader structural reforms addressing discrimination, corruption, and exploitation (Naisho, 2024).

Poverty also plays a significant role in shaping criminal behaviour, particularly among youths who experience prolonged deprivation. When individuals face barriers to education, employment, and basic social mobility, they may resort to illicit activities as alternative means of survival or self-expression. Structural inequalities and unmet needs foster frustration, anger, and feelings of exclusion, which can push vulnerable populations toward crime as both an outlet and a coping mechanism (Wijekoon, Sabri, & Paim, 2021; De Schutter, Frazer, Guio & Marlier, 2023). The intergenerational nature of poverty compounds this dynamic, as children raised in disadvantaged households are more likely to be exposed to environments where criminal networks provide both economic opportunities and social belonging. This reinforces the cycle of deprivation by further marginalizing individuals

caught within it, making it more difficult to access legitimate pathways out of poverty (Febrian, 2024; Naisho, 2024).

### **Criminal Behaviour**

Criminal behaviour is a complex concept that has been studied extensively in various fields, including criminology, psychology, sociology, and law. Criminal behaviour refers to actions or omissions that violate the laws of a society, resulting in harm or potential harm to individuals, communities, or the social fabric as a whole. It is shaped by a combination of factors, including cultural norms, social environments, economic conditions, and individual characteristics (Obarisiagbon, 2023).

According to Uye, Olapegba and Ogundipe (2023), the causes of criminal behaviour are diverse and interconnected, involving a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and environmental factors. Biological factors, such as genetics and neurobiology, can contribute to an individual's propensity for aggression and antisocial behaviour. Psychological factors, such as personality traits and cognitive distortions, can also play a role in shaping an individual's likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour. Environmental factors, such as poverty, social inequality, lack of education and employment opportunities, and exposure to violence, can further contribute to the development of criminal behaviour. For instance, individuals growing up in neighbourhoods with high crime rates and inadequate social services may be more likely to engage in criminal behaviour due to the normalization of deviance and the lack of opportunities for legitimate success (Uye et al., 2023).

### **Influence of Poverty on Youths Criminal Behaviour**

The relationship between poverty and criminal behaviour represents one of the most enduring and complex areas of criminological inquiry, with substantial theoretical and empirical attention dedicated to elucidating the mechanisms through which socioeconomic disadvantage influences deviant conduct. While simplistic mono causal explanations suggesting direct poverty-crime linkages have been largely abandoned in contemporary scholarship, sophisticated multidimensional frameworks have emerged to articulate how economic deprivation operates as a distal causal factor that interacts with numerous mediating and moderating variables to shape criminal propensities (Akgül et al., 2023). Economic marginalization manifests through multiple pathways, including material resource deficits, chronic stress, and spatial concentration of disadvantage, institutional breakdown, and limited social mobility that collectively constitute what scholars have termed criminogenic contexts wherein crime becomes statistically more probable, though never inevitable. Understanding this relationship requires careful consideration of how poverty's criminogenic effects operate across ecological, community, family, and individual levels of analysis, with particular attention to how these influences may vary across different types of criminal behaviour and across diverse demographic populations (Arisukwu et al., 2020). Communities characterized by persistent poverty typically experience institutional disinvestment, resulting in deteriorated physical infrastructure, inadequate public services, and diminished collective efficacy, the shared willingness of residents to intervene for community welfare. The erosion of formal and informal social control mechanisms in economically marginalized neighbourhoods compromises guardianship against criminal opportunities and weakens socialization processes that traditionally inculcate normative behavioural standards (Burgos Ochoa et al., 2023). Spatial concentration of disadvantage further exacerbates these effects through geographic isolation from mainstream economic opportunities, leaving residents disconnected from legitimate labour markets and conventional success pathways (De Azevedo-Maia, 2024).

The family system constitutes another critical domain through which poverty exerts criminogenic influence, as economic hardship disrupts family functioning through both instrumental and expressive dimensions. Financially strained households frequently experience material deprivation that compromises basic needs fulfilment, creating conditions where property crimes may represent rational adaptations to resource scarcity (Ebobo, 2023). Beyond these material effects, economic insecurity generates psychological distress among caregivers that can compromise parenting quality, increase family conflict, and diminish consistent supervision, factors consistently identified as proximate determinants of antisocial behaviour development (Jespersen et al., 2021). Economic pressure further destabilizes family systems through increased residential mobility, household crowding, and parental absence necessitated by demanding work schedules or multiple employment arrangements.

### **Socio-economic Factors that Influence Youth Engagement in Criminal Activities**

Socio-economic factors play a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of young lives, often steering them toward either productive engagement or unfortunate involvement in criminal activities. The complexity of youth engagement in crime is deeply interwoven with various socio-economic determinants that significantly influence their choices and opportunities. One of the most critical factors is poverty. Living in impoverished conditions exposes youths to an environment where illegal activities might seem like one of the few available options for

economic survival or advancement. The lack of access to basic necessities and the presence of economic disparity can push young individuals toward criminal behaviour as a means to alleviate financial strain or to attain material possessions that society seems to deny them (Murray & Atilola, 2020).

The family structure and parental influence are also crucial in determining a youth's propensity to engage in criminal activities. A broken family setup or lack of parental guidance can leave young individuals without the necessary support and supervision, making them more susceptible to negative influences (Lanfear et al., 2020). In many cases, youths from single-parent households or those with parents involved in criminal activities themselves are more likely to follow suit due to the normalization of such behaviour and the absence of a stable, guiding figure (Bosick & Fomby, 2018). Moreover, parental socio-economic status directly impacts the opportunities available to youths. Parents with higher socio-economic standing can provide better education, access to extracurricular activities, and overall support that steers children away from criminal inclinations. Conversely, youths from lower socio-economic backgrounds often lack these advantages, increasing their vulnerability to criminal engagement (De Courson & Nettle, 2021).

Education is another significant factor influencing youth involvement in crime. The quality of education received can dramatically alter a young person's life path. Access to quality education equips youths with the knowledge, skills, and critical thinking abilities necessary to navigate the challenges of life effectively. It opens doors to better job opportunities, fosters a sense of purpose, and builds self-esteem (Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2024). However, in many socio-economically disadvantaged areas, educational institutions are often underfunded, overcrowded, and lacking in resources, which can lead to disengagement and frustration among students. When youths feel that the education system has failed them or that they have failed within it, they may seek validation and a sense of belonging in gangs or criminal groups. Furthermore, the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon, where strict disciplinary policies funnel students into the criminal justice system, disproportionately affects youths from socio-economically challenged backgrounds, further aggravating the issue (Hemez, Brent & Mowen, 2020).

Unemployment and underemployment are also key drivers of youth engagement in criminal activities. When young individuals feel that they are unable to secure meaningful employment or that their efforts are not rewarded, they may turn to illegal means as an alternative source of income or status. This is particularly pertinent in societies where consumerism is highly valued, and the inability to participate in this culture can lead to feelings of alienation and frustration (Ihensekhien, 2023). The lack of job opportunities not only deprives youths of financial stability but also of a sense of purpose and belonging. In such contexts, criminal activities can become an attractive option, offering a semblance of financial security and social standing that the legitimate job market fails to provide (Edigor, 2024).

Peer influence and the socio-economic environment in which youths operate also play a significant role in their engagement in criminal activities. The company one keeps can profoundly impact one's values, beliefs, and behaviours. In neighbourhoods where crime is rampant, peer pressure can lead youths into criminal activities. The desire to fit in, gain acceptance, or achieve status within a peer group can override moral reservations about engaging in illegal behaviour (Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2024). Additionally, the socio-economic environment, characterized by high levels of crime, poor housing conditions, and lack of community resources, can normalize criminal behaviour, making it seem like a viable or even necessary part of survival (Eitle & Eitle, 2016).

Lastly, systemic issues such as racial discrimination and social exclusion further compound the problem. Marginalized communities often face barriers to accessing opportunities, facing instead systemic barriers that limit their socio-economic mobility (Kasapçopur, 2023). When youths from these communities perceive that they are being unfairly targeted, discriminated against, or excluded from mainstream society, they may rebel against these systems through criminal behaviour. This reaction can be seen as a form of resistance or a way to assert power in a world that seems determined to marginalize them.

### **The major effects of poverty-induced crimes amongst youths**

Poverty-induced crimes among youths have emerged as a growing concern in many developing nations, particularly in Nigeria where multidimensional poverty continues to shape social behaviour and opportunities. One of the most significant effects is the erosion of social values and the normalization of deviant behaviour among young people. When legitimate means of livelihood are inaccessible, many youths turn to theft, fraud, and cybercrime as alternative routes to survival. This distortion of moral values leads to a society where crime is rationalized as a survival strategy rather than condemned as a moral failing. According to De Courson and Nettle (2021), economic deprivation weakens social trust and fosters a sense of injustice, making crime appear as a reasonable reaction to structural inequality. Over time, the persistent struggle for survival in poverty-stricken

communities normalizes delinquent activities, undermining traditional moral codes and leading to intergenerational cycles of crime and poverty (Ebobo, 2022).

Another major effect is the rise in youth unemployment and underemployment due to stigmatization and criminal records. Once youths are involved in poverty-induced criminal activities, they face barriers to reintegration into formal employment systems. Employers often discriminate against ex-offenders, and the absence of rehabilitation programs compounds the problem (Omoruyi & Agbontaen, 2024). As a result, these individuals are caught in a revolving door of recidivism, where economic exclusion fuels further criminal behaviour. Studies show that regions with high youth unemployment experience correspondingly high levels of property crime and violent offences, illustrating the strong correlation between poverty, joblessness, and criminality (Ihensekhien, 2023). This socio-economic exclusion further entrenches inequality, as affected youths lack both social and economic capital to reintegrate into productive roles, thereby perpetuating structural poverty within their communities (Oyelade, 2019).

Furthermore, poverty-induced crime contributes significantly to the breakdown of family and community structures. In many poor neighbourhoods, parental incapacity to provide adequately for children leads to neglect, family instability, and exposure to criminal networks from a young age. Bosick and Fomby (2018) emphasize that family instability during childhood increases the likelihood of offending during adolescence and adulthood. When young individuals engage in criminal behaviour, the ripple effects extend beyond immediate victims to include family disintegration, emotional trauma, and a loss of communal cohesion. The rise in youth delinquency also weakens community trust and participation, making local crime prevention strategies less effective (Arisukwu et al., 2020). Consequently, poor communities become trapped in a vicious cycle of insecurity, fear, and further impoverishment.

Additionally, the involvement of impoverished youths in crime has profound psychological and health-related effects. Constant exposure to violence, police brutality, and incarceration generates chronic stress, trauma, and mental health issues. Studies have linked prolonged poverty exposure to substance abuse, emotional instability, and risky behaviour among youths (Manhica et al., 2021). Ryu and Fan (2023) note that financial worries correlate strongly with psychological distress, particularly among socially disadvantaged members of the society. Incarceration at an early age also disrupts educational pursuits, thereby limiting future economic mobility. Such psychological burdens not only hinder individual development but also affect collective community well-being, as traumatized youths often struggle to reintegrate and contribute productively to society (Roy et al., 2019). Lastly, poverty-induced crimes among youths undermine national development by escalating insecurity and discouraging investment. In contexts where poverty drives widespread criminality, businesses and investors are deterred by the risks associated with operating in unstable environments. Krammer et al. (2023) argue that high crime rates, often linked to income inequality, erode social cohesion and economic confidence. The diversion of government resources toward policing and incarceration instead of education and job creation further impedes development (Aleyomi & Nwagwu, 2023). Moreover, as more young people are trapped in cycles of crime and punishment, the nation loses valuable human capital essential for innovation and growth (Bolarinwa, 2023). Thus, addressing poverty-induced youth crime is not merely a social responsibility but a developmental imperative for achieving inclusive and sustainable progress.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopted the General Strain Theory (GST) propounded by Robert Agnew in 1992 and Social Control Theory (SCT) by Travis Hirschi in 1969 as its theoretical framework because they provide a robust and appropriate theoretical framework for the paper. The General Strain Theory (GST) posits that strain, defined as stressful events or conditions, can lead individuals to experience negative emotions like anger, frustration, and depression. These negative emotions can, in turn, increase the likelihood of criminal coping. Poverty, as a significant and persistent stressful condition, represents a major source of strain for youths. It can manifest in various forms, including lack of access to basic necessities like food, shelter, and healthcare, limited educational and employment opportunities, and exposure to unsafe environments. According to GST, these strains can lead to feelings of injustice, deprivation, and hopelessness. When youths lack legitimate means to cope with these strains or achieve desired goals (such as financial stability or social status), they may resort to illegitimate means, including criminal activities, to alleviate the negative emotions, seek revenge against perceived sources of strain, or achieve goals that are otherwise unattainable.

In addition, Social Control Theory complements General Strain Theory by offering an explanation of why not all youths facing poverty engage in crime. Social Control Theory emphasizes the importance of social bonds and

belief in societal norms in deterring deviant behaviour. According to SCT, individuals are more likely to refrain from crime when they are strongly bonded to significant social institutions such as family, school, religion, and community. In the context of Enugu State, poverty may weaken these bonds by reducing parental supervision, limiting educational opportunities, and eroding community cohesion. Youths with weak social ties may thus be

more susceptible to criminal influences, whereas those with strong social connections may resist the temptation to engage in crime despite experiencing strain. Together, GST and SCT provide a comprehensive theoretical lens: GST explains how poverty generates strain that fosters negative emotions and possible criminal coping, while SCT highlights how the strength or weakness of social bonds determines whether individuals succumb to or resist such pressures. This dual framework is therefore well-suited for analyzing the complex ways poverty influences youth criminality in Enugu State.

### Methodology

This paper adopted the descriptive survey design. The paper also involved the mixed methods of data collection. This involved the use of structured questionnaire and in depth interviews as instruments for data collection. A sample size of 625 respondents was chosen for the administration of the quantitative instrument using Yamane's sample size determination formula. The administration of the quantitative instrument (questionnaire) was done by the researcher and three research assistants trained for two days on the methodology and objectives of the study. The respondents for the quantitative data were chosen by the application of multi stage sampling procedure which is a combination of several sampling techniques.

In the first stage, Enugu State was divided into its three senatorial zones: Enugu East, Enugu West, and Enugu North. From each zone, two major towns were randomly selected using the simple random sampling technique. From Enugu East, Enugu and Nkanu towns were selected; from Enugu West, Awgu and Oji River towns were selected; and from Enugu North, Nsukka and Udenu towns were selected, making a total of six towns. In the second stage, five villages were randomly selected from each town using the balloting method, giving a total of 30 villages. In the third stage, three streets were randomly selected from each village, making a total of 90 streets. Thereafter, the systematic random sampling technique was used to select seven households from each street after a random start and every second household interval, resulting in a total of 630 households. However, only 625 respondents were selected to participate in the study through the administration of structured questionnaires, with one respondent per household. In cases where an eligible respondent (aged 18 years and above) was not available, the next available household was chosen until the target of 625 completed questionnaires was achieved. For the qualitative aspect, purposive sampling was used to select eight participants for the In-Depth Interviews (IDI) based on their knowledge and experience of the study's theme. These included two community leaders, two community members, two members of local vigilante groups, and two police officers, whose insights were expected to provide valuable and contextually relevant information to complement the quantitative data collected.

### Findings

**Table 1: Respondents' views on the primary ways poverty influences youth involvement in crime**

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Limited access to basic needs like food and shelter	184	29.8
Lack of opportunities for education and personal growth	196	31.8
Increased exposure to crime-prone environments	52	8.4
Reduced parental supervision and guidance	141	22.9
Feelings of hopelessness and despair	44	7.1
Total	617	100.0

#### Field Survey, 2025

The data in Table 1 indicate that respondents identified lack of opportunities for education and personal growth (31.8%) as the primary way poverty influences youth involvement in crime, suggesting that limited access to developmental prospects significantly increases vulnerability to criminal activities. This is closely followed by limited access to basic needs such as food and shelter (29.8%), highlighting the role of economic deprivation in pushing youths toward crime as a survival strategy. Additionally, 22.9% of respondents pointed to reduced parental supervision and guidance, implying that poverty may weaken family structures and oversight, thereby increasing the likelihood of delinquent behaviour. Smaller proportions identified increased exposure to crime-prone environments (8.4%) and feelings of hopelessness and despair (7.1%) as key factors. This finding supports the opinion of the IDI participants:

When youths lack access to quality education and certificates, it becomes very difficult for them to secure employment. Without education or skills, many youths struggle to see any legitimate future for themselves. This lack of opportunity pushes some of them to look for other ways to survive,

including crime. When there is no access to education or training, youths become idle and frustrated, and crime begins to look like an option for survival or quick success (Male, Community Member, 35 years, Udenu, 2025).

According to another IDI participant:

When families cannot provide basic necessities like food, shelter, clothing, and education, youths begin to look for ways to survive. Hunger and lack of shelter can push a young person into stealing or other crimes just to eat or meet daily needs. Poverty creates desperation, and in such situations, crime may seem like the easiest way to survive (Male, Police Officer, 38 years, Oji River, 2025).

**Table 2: Respondents' views on how poverty affects youths' decision-making regarding crime**

Responses	Frequency	Percent
It leads to rational calculations of risk vs. reward	49	7.9
It increases impulsivity and desperation	345	55.9
It fosters a sense of entitlement to material goods	100	16.2
It reduces consideration for long-term consequences	117	19.0
It has no significant impact on decision-making	6	1.0
Total	617	100.0

**Field Survey, 2025**

The data suggest that poverty significantly influences youths' decision-making processes regarding crime, primarily by increasing impulsivity and desperation, as reported by 55.9% of respondents. This indicates that economic hardship may push youths to make hasty or high-risk choices in an attempt to meet immediate needs. Additionally, 19% of respondents indicated that poverty reduces consideration for long-term consequences, implying that youths may prioritize short-term survival over future outcomes. A smaller proportion (16.2%) believed that poverty fosters a sense of entitlement to material goods, which could motivate criminal behavior as a means of acquisition. Only 7.9% felt that poverty leads to rational calculations of risk versus reward, suggesting that deliberate, calculated decision-making is less common under conditions of economic deprivation. Very few respondents (1%) believed that poverty has no significant impact on youths' decision-making. This finding is supported by IDI responses:

Poverty plays a very big role. When someone cannot meet daily necessities like food, clothing, and shelter, it can push them to commit acts of crime to survive. People sometimes leverage their poverty to commit crimes. That's why the government implements poverty alleviation programs to reduce crime (Male, Community Leader, 66 years, Nsukka, 2025).

**Table 3: Respondents' views on the aspect of poverty that most directly contributes to youth crime**

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Material deprivation (e.g., lack of food, clothing)	137	22.2
Social exclusion (e.g., feeling disconnected from society)	100	16.2
Economic instability (e.g., frequent moves, unemployment)	278	45.1
Environmental factors (e.g., living in high-crime areas)	70	11.3
Psychological strain (e.g., stress, anxiety)	32	5.2
Total	617	100.0

**Field Survey, 2025**

The data in Table 3 indicate that economic instability is perceived as the aspect of poverty that most directly contributes to youth crime, with 45.1% of respondents identifying it as the key factor. This suggests that frequent unemployment, unstable income, and financial uncertainty are major drivers that push youths toward criminal activities as a means of survival. Material deprivation, such as lack of food and clothing, was cited by 22.2% of respondents, highlighting the role of unmet basic needs in influencing criminal behaviour. Social exclusion, including feelings of disconnection from society, was reported by 16.2%, while environmental factors, such as living in high-crime areas, accounted for 11.3%. Psychological strain, including stress and anxiety, was the least reported factor at 5.2%. The findings suggest that structural economic challenges, rather than purely social or psychological factors, are seen as the primary poverty-related drivers of youth involvement in crime.

**Table 4: Respondents' views on the socio-economic factor that most strongly predicts youth involvement in crime**

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Low family income and poverty	90	14.6
Unemployment and lack of job opportunities	319	51.7
Poor educational attainment and lack of skills	92	14.9

Family breakdown and lack of parental supervision	70	11.3
Neighbourhood disorder and community disorganization	46	7.5
Total	617	100.0

**Field Survey, 2025**

The data in Table 4 indicate that unemployment and lack of job opportunities are perceived as the socio-economic factor most strongly predicting youth involvement in crime, with 51.7% of respondents identifying it as the key driver. This suggests that the absence of stable employment and income-generating opportunities creates economic pressure that may push youths toward criminal activities. Poor educational attainment and lack of skills (14.9%) and low family income and poverty (14.6%) were also noted as contributing factors, highlighting the role of limited human and financial capital. Additionally, family breakdown and lack of parental supervision (11.3%) and neighborhood disorder and community disorganization (7.5%) were reported as less influential. The findings suggest that structural economic challenges, particularly unemployment, are viewed as the primary socio-economic predictors of youth crime, although educational and family factors also play a notable role. An IDI participant stated:

The key factors are poverty, economic instability, and family breakdown. When families lack core values and resources to properly guide their children, youths become more exposed to social vices. Many youths are unable to find stable jobs, and the resulting frustration can push them toward illegal means of making money. Peer influence and community pressures further increase the likelihood that young people will engage in criminal behaviour (Male, Police Officer, 38 years, Oji River, 2025).

**Table 5: Respondents' views on the main consequence of poverty-induced crimes on youths**

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Loss of education opportunities	81	13.1
Physical injury or harm	78	12.6
Involvement with the law/prison	207	33.5
Social stigma and isolation	124	20.1
Psychological stress and depression	127	20.6
Total	617	100.0

**Field Survey, 2025**

The data in Table 5 indicate that the main consequence of poverty-induced crimes on youths is involvement with the law or imprisonment, as reported by 33.5% of respondents. This suggests that engaging in criminal activities exposes youths to legal sanctions, which can have long-term negative effects on their futures. Psychological stress and depression (20.6%) and social stigma and isolation (20.1%) were also identified as significant consequences, highlighting the emotional and social burdens associated with criminal behavior. Loss of educational opportunities (13.1%) and physical injury or harm (12.6%) were noted by smaller proportions, indicating additional risks faced by youths involved in crime. The findings suggest that legal repercussions, mental health challenges, and social marginalization are the primary consequences of poverty-related criminal involvement among youths. According to an IDI participant:

Crime disrupts schooling and limits access to scholarships, employment, and professional growth. Many youths involved in crime drop out of school, making it difficult to secure formal employment. Involvement in illegal activities also exposes them to arrest, imprisonment, and legal entanglements, which can permanently affect their personal and professional trajectories (Male, Community Member, 35 years, Udenu, 2025).

**Another IDI participant opined:**

These crimes instil negative values in youth. Youths may drop out of school, turn to crime, and end up in court or prison, limiting future opportunities. The emotional toll, including stress, fear, and feelings of despair, combined with social stigma, further undermines their ability to reintegrate into society successfully (Male, Vigilante, 32 years, Nkanu, 2025).

**Discussion of Findings**

This paper found that poverty makes crime appear as a necessary means of survival for youths in Enugu State, increasing their susceptibility to peer pressure and gang involvement. The findings show that lack of educational opportunities, limited access to basic needs, and economic instability push young people toward criminal activities. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating that economic hardship often compels youths to engage in risky survival strategies. For example, Kusi and Owusu (2022) found that young people living in conditions of

chronic poverty were more likely to join gangs as a way to secure social recognition and economic support. Similarly, Moyo and Dlamini (2023) reported that structural poverty creates an environment where illegal activities are perceived as rational alternatives for survival, particularly among marginalized youth populations.

These studies reinforce the conclusion that poverty significantly increases young people's vulnerability to gang influence and criminal behaviour.

It was found in the paper that socio-economic factors such as unemployment, lack of job opportunities, and poor educational access strongly influence youth engagement in crime. Peer influence further amplifies the likelihood of criminal involvement, as young people may conform to the criminal tendencies of friends or associates. This finding aligns with earlier research showing that limited access to education and unemployment heighten young people's vulnerability to delinquency. For instance, Adzandeh and Amuda (2020) reported that inadequate schooling restricts social mobility and drives adolescents toward survival strategies that place them at risk of criminal involvement. Likewise, Bunting and Ndfirepi (2021) observed that when young people are denied quality education, their decision-making capacities are weakened, making them more susceptible to negative street influences and gang recruitment. These studies collectively affirm that structural economic pressures, educational deficits, and peer dynamics interact to shape youths' propensity for crime.

The paper further found that poverty primarily influences property and financially motivated crimes among youths, with robbery, theft, and opportunistic offences being the most prevalent. Young adults were identified as particularly vulnerable, and involvement in gangs was reported as a common pathway for social protection and economic support. This finding is supported by research showing that economic deprivation encourages engagement in survival-driven criminal activities rather than purely violent acts. For example, Kusi and Owusu (2022) highlighted that youths in poverty often join gangs to secure both social and material resources, while Moyo and Dlamini (2023) found that marginalized youth populations view illegal activities as rational alternatives for coping with economic hardship. These studies corroborate the conclusion that poverty shapes the types of crimes youths are most likely to commit.

In this paper, it was found that involvement in poverty-related crimes has significant negative consequences for youths, including legal sanctions, social stigma, and limited future opportunities. Engagement in criminal activities reduces the potential for personal development and restricts access to education and employment, affecting long-term life trajectories. These outcomes are consistent with previous research demonstrating that youth crime destabilizes communities and imposes both social and economic burdens. For instance, Ezemenaka (2021) reported that escalating youth violence in Nigeria contributes to widespread fear and undermines human security, particularly in urban areas. Similarly, Aninworie (2023) observed that hooliganism and violent activities among youths disrupt social order and create tension within communities. Collectively, these studies reinforce the conclusion that poverty-induced criminal behaviour carries severe individual and societal consequences.

### **Conclusion**

Poverty may be considered a necessary condition for crime to occur; however, it is not a sufficient condition. This paper investigated the influence of poverty and socio-economic factors on youth criminal behaviour in Enugu State, revealing that criminality among youths is strongly linked to structural economic challenges, limited access to education, and social pressures. The findings indicate that a lack of opportunities for education and personal development, economic instability, and insufficient access to basic needs increase youths' vulnerability to engaging in various forms of criminal activity, including armed robbery, kidnapping, and related offences. Peer influence and the search for social belonging further exacerbate involvement in criminal activities, while poverty appears to normalise crime as a survival strategy. The consequences of such behaviour are wide-ranging, including legal sanctions, social stigma, reduced opportunities for personal development, limited access to higher education, and increased community insecurity. These outcomes perpetuate a vicious cycle of vulnerability, making it difficult for youths to access legitimate opportunities and reinforcing the conditions that drive criminality. The paper concludes that youth criminal behaviour in Enugu State is not merely an individual failing but a reflection of broader socio-economic and structural challenges. Addressing the root causes of the problem is therefore essential for promoting safer communities and sustainable youth development.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this paper, the following recommendations have been made:

1. To reduce youth involvement in crime, the government, community organizations, and NGOs should prioritize providing job training and employment opportunities. Initiatives such as vocational training,

- apprenticeships, and entrepreneurship initiatives can equip youths with practical skills and sustainable income sources, reducing the appeal of illegal activities as a means of survival.
2. Increasing access to education and skills development should be emphasized by schools, community centres, and educational agencies. Programmes like scholarship opportunities, after-school tutoring, provision of learning resources, and vocational training can enhance youths' competencies, engagement, and long-term prospects, addressing one of the root causes of poverty-related criminal behaviour.
  3. Offering mentorship and counselling services can help youths navigate social pressures and make positive life choices. Community-based mentorship programmes, individual counselling, peer support groups, and guidance sessions can provide emotional support, improve decision-making skills, and reduce susceptibility to gangs and negative peer influence.
  4. Implementing community-based initiatives and outreach programmes can create safe spaces and promote pro-social engagement among youths. Programmes such as youth clubs, sports leagues, civic projects, and local volunteer initiatives can strengthen community cohesion, provide constructive alternatives to crime, and foster a sense of belonging and purpose.
  5. Strengthening family support and parental involvement is essential for preventing youth engagement in criminal activities. Programmes that educate parents on effective supervision, communication, and emotional support, along with family counselling services, can reinforce positive values, improve guidance, and reduce the influence of economic and social pressures that may lead youths toward crime.

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