

Socioeconomic Deprivation and Peer Network Influence on Youth Thuggery and Hooliganism in Nigeria: A Sociological Analysis**Yahaya Umar & Abdullahi Musa**

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yahaya.umar2@uniabuja.edu.ng; musa.abdullahi@uniabuja.edu.ng**Abstract**

Youth thuggery and hooliganism remain persistent forms of social disorder in Nigeria, especially in urban centres and politically volatile environments where poverty, unemployment, weak social control and elite manipulation converge. This paper examines how socioeconomic deprivation and peer network influence youth involvement in thuggery and hooliganism across Nigeria. The study is anchored on strain theory, which explains how blocked access to legitimate opportunities may push young people toward deviant alternatives, and on differential association theory, which accounts for the social learning of violent behaviour through peer interactions. Using a qualitative documentary design, the paper draws on peer-reviewed scholarship, policy reports and development documents sourced from credible academic databases and institutional repositories. The analysis shows that youth violence in Nigeria is closely linked to unemployment, poverty, exclusion, weak institutional support and peer subcultures that reward aggression and collective misconduct. Incidents of youth violence have been reported in several parts of the country, including Lagos, Rivers, Delta, Kano, Kaduna, Benue, Osun and Plateau States, often in the form of political thuggery, street fighting, cult-related violence and public disorder. The paper argues that punitive responses alone are insufficient and recommends integrated interventions that combine employment creation, educational inclusion, youth empowerment, community engagement and the disruption of violent peer networks.

Keywords: socioeconomic deprivation, peer networks, youth thuggery, hooliganism, strain theory**INTRODUCTION**

Youth thuggery and hooliganism have become recurring social problems in Nigeria, manifesting in political intimidation, cult-related violence, street fights, mob action, destruction of property, and public disorder (Omotola, 2008; Jega, 2011). These behaviours are most visible in areas where unemployment is high, social protection is weak, political competition is intense, and institutional enforcement is ineffective (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Muggah & O'Donnell, 2022). Across the country, youth violence has been reported in urban centres and conflict-prone settings, including Lagos, Port Harcourt, Benin City, Kano, Kaduna, Ibadan, Osogbo, Jos, and Makurdi (Iwilade, 2013; Momoh, 2010; World Bank, 2023). In many of these places, young people are drawn into violent groups not only because of moral failings, but because of economic hardship, frustration, and social exclusion (Ajaegbu, 2012; Honwana, 2014).

Nigeria's youthful population is large and strategically important, yet many young people face severe barriers to meaningful participation in education, employment, and politics (UNDP, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). Persistent unemployment, underemployment, inflation, poor educational quality, and widespread poverty continue to limit youth prospects and create conditions of frustration and alienation (ILO, 2022; NBS, 2023). In such circumstances, violence may become a survival strategy, a means of self-assertion, or a route to social recognition (Sen, 1999; Agnew, 2001).

Peer networks also play a major role in shaping youth conduct. Young people are strongly influenced by their immediate social circles, particularly when peer groups offer identity, protection, belonging, and economic opportunity (Sutherland, 1947; Richards, 2016). Where such networks normalize aggression, intimidation, or political violence, youth may internalize violence as acceptable or even necessary (Muggah & O'Donnell, 2022; Honwana, 2014). In Nigeria, peer-based youth groups have often been implicated in electoral thuggery, cultism, and street-level disorder, especially in settings where formal institutions fail to provide legitimate routes to success (Momoh, 2010; Omotola, 2008; Iwilade, 2013).

This paper therefore examines the relationship between socioeconomic deprivation, peer network influence and youth thuggery and hooliganism in Nigeria. It argues that these behaviours are best understood through structural and relational factors rather than through individual blame alone (Merton, 1938; Agnew, 2001). The study is important because it shows that youth violence is rooted in blocked opportunities, weak institutional support and the social learning of deviant norms (Sutherland, 1947; UNICEF, 2023). A proper understanding of these dynamics is necessary for designing more effective responses to youth violence in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. examine the extent to which socioeconomic deprivation contributes to youth thuggery and hooliganism in Nigeria;
- ii. assess the influence of peer networks on the involvement of youth in thuggery and hooliganism;
- iii. identify the social and regional patterns through which youth thuggery and hooliganism manifest across Nigeria;
- iv. determine the implications of youth thuggery and hooliganism for social order and development in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Socioeconomic Deprivation

Socioeconomic deprivation refers to the denial or absence of economic, educational, and social resources necessary for human well-being and social participation (Townsend, 1979; Sen, 1999). It includes poverty, unemployment, underemployment, poor education, inadequate housing, food insecurity, and lack of access to healthcare and social protection (UNDP, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Within the context of this study, socioeconomic deprivation refers to the conditions of poverty, unemployment, exclusion, and blocked mobility that increase the vulnerability of young people to thuggery and hooliganism in Nigeria (Ajaegbu, 2012; NBS, 2023).

Peer Networks

Peer networks are groups of individuals of similar age or social standing who interact regularly and influence one another's beliefs, values, and behaviour (Sutherland, 1947; Muggah & O'Donnell, 2022). They may promote positive *socialisation* or reinforce deviant conduct. Within the context of this study, peer networks refer to the circles of friends, associates, or informal youth groups that encourage, normalize, or facilitate violent behaviour among young people in Nigeria (Richards, 2016; Honwana, 2014).

Youth

Youth is a transitional life stage between childhood and adulthood characterised by identity formation, dependence, experimentation, and social transition (UNDP, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). In Nigeria, it is commonly used to describe persons aged 15–35 years. Within the context of this study, youth refers to persons within the socially active and economically vulnerable age bracket who are most likely to be involved in thuggery and hooliganism in Nigeria (ILO, 2022; Federal Government of Nigeria, cited in youth policy documents).

Thuggery

Thuggery refers to violent, coercive, or intimidating behaviour used to achieve political, economic, or personal ends (Omotola, 2008; Jega, 2011). It includes assault, intimidation, extortion, and political violence. Within the context of this study, thuggery refers to youth involvement in organized intimidation, electoral violence, assault, and politically sponsored coercion in Nigeria (Momoh, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Hooliganism

Hooliganism refers to public disorder, rowdy violence, vandalism, and destructive group behaviour (Agnew, 2001; Muggah & O'Donnell, 2022). Within the context of this study, hooliganism refers to youth participation in street fights, mob action, public destruction, and disorderly collective conduct across Nigerian communities (Iwilade, 2013; Richards, 2016).

Empirical Review

Socioeconomic Deprivation and Youth Violence in Nigeria

Empirical studies consistently show that socioeconomic deprivation is a major driver of youth violence in Nigeria (Ajaegbu, 2012; Iwilade, 2013). Ajaegbu (2012) links rising youth unemployment to violent crime and restiveness, arguing that the inability of young people to access legitimate livelihoods increases their exposure to criminal and violent alternatives. Similarly, Iwilade (2013) shows that exclusion, economic frustration, and social marginalisation create conditions in which youth become available for violent mobilisation.

National labour market reports also confirm that unemployment and underemployment remain major challenges for Nigerian youth (NBS, 2023; ILO, 2022). These conditions are more visible in urban poor areas and economically depressed communities where youth violence often escalates (World Bank, 2023; UNDP, 2022). Studies from different parts of Nigeria further demonstrate that deprivation and violence are closely linked. In the Niger Delta, youth militancy and cult violence have been associated with unemployment and exclusion (Momoh, 2010; Richards, 2016). In northern Nigeria, youth restiveness and political thuggery have also been tied to poverty and weak governance (Omotola, 2008; Jega, 2011). In southwestern Nigeria, street violence and cult-related disorder have increasingly been connected to youth unemployment, urban marginality, and informal gang networks (Muggah & O'Donnell, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Peer Networks and Youth Deviance

Research on peer networks shows that young people often learn violent behaviour from close associates (Sutherland, 1947; Richards, 2016). Differential association theory explains how deviant conduct is transmitted through interaction. In Nigeria, peer groups have been identified as key sites for the recruitment of youth into cults, gangs, political violence, and street fights (Iwilade, 2013; Omotola, 2008).

Richards (2016) and Muggah and O'Donnell (2022) show that violent peer groups often provide young people with identity, solidarity, and material support. This is particularly significant in

settings where family supervision is weak and institutions offer few alternatives (Honwana, 2014; UNICEF, 2023). In many Nigerian cities, peer-led youth groups occupy markets, motor parks, campuses, and informal settlements, where they socialise members into aggressive and anti-social behaviour (Ajaegbu, 2012; Momoh, 2010).

Empirical evidence also suggests that youth are more likely to engage in violence when peers reward bravery, toughness, and disobedience (Mkandawire, 2010; Agnew, 2001). In such groups, violence becomes a marker of belonging and status (Honwana, 2014; Richards, 2016). Peer influence is therefore not a secondary factor but a central mechanism through which deprivation is translated into action.

Regional Manifestations of Youth Thuggery and Hooliganism in Nigeria

Youth thuggery and hooliganism are not confined to one region in Nigeria. In Lagos, youth-related street violence and gang activity have been reported in informal settlements and high-density urban areas (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Muggah & O'Donnell, 2022). In Rivers and Delta States, cult-related violence and political intimidation have remained serious problems (Momoh, 2010; Richards, 2016). In Kano and Kaduna, youth groups have at times been implicated in election-related violence, religious unrest, and urban disorder (Omotola, 2008; Jega, 2011). In Plateau and Benue States, youth violence has also intersected with communal conflict and political mobilisation (Iwilade, 2013; UNDP, 2022). In Osun, Oyo, and Ondo States, electoral thuggery and street violence have continued to appear during political contests and social tensions (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Momoh, 2010).

These examples show that youth violence is a national phenomenon with regional variations (World Bank, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). The specific triggers may differ, but the underlying conditions of deprivation, exclusion, and peer reinforcement remain similar (Ajaegbu, 2012; Muggah & O'Donnell, 2022). Existing studies therefore suggest that youth thuggery and hooliganism are best understood as products of structural and social processes operating across Nigeria (Agnew, 2001; Merton, 1938).

Although there is a substantial body of literature on youth violence in Nigeria, most studies focus on political violence, cultism, or crime in isolation (Omotola, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2022). Fewer studies examine the combined effect of socioeconomic deprivation and peer network influence across the national space (Iwilade, 2013; Momoh, 2010). Moreover, existing studies often lack a thematic synthesis that connects structural deprivation with social learning and

regional patterns of violence (Agnew, 2001; Sutherland, 1947). This paper fills that gap by integrating these dimensions into a sociological explanation of youth thuggery and hooliganism in Nigeria (Merton, 1938; Honwana, 2014).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on strain theory, particularly the classic formulation by Robert K. Merton (Merton, 1938). The central claim of strain theory is that deviance is likely when there is a disconnect between culturally approved goals and legitimate means of achieving them (Merton, 1938; Agnew, 2001). In societies that glorify success, wealth, and status but do not provide equitable access to education, employment, and social mobility, many individuals experience pressure or strain (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2022).

Merton's framework is especially relevant to youth in Nigeria because many young people are encouraged to aspire to material success, respect, and adult independence but are denied the means to achieve these goals lawfully (NBS, 2023; ILO, 2022). Under these conditions, some youth may adopt innovative adaptations such as theft, gang activity, political thuggery, and hooliganism (Merton, 1938; Ajaegbu, 2012).

Recent sociological discussions continue to affirm the usefulness of strain-based explanations in contexts of inequality and social exclusion (Agnew, 2001; Honwana, 2014). Agnew's general strain theory, though broader than Merton's original formulation, also shows that negative social experiences such as unemployment, abuse, and blocked goals can produce anger and delinquency (Agnew, 2001). For this paper, strain theory is the single most relevant framework because it directly connects deprivation to deviant adaptation while allowing peer influence to be understood as the social mechanism that facilitates that adaptation (Sutherland, 1947; Richards, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative documentary research design and drew on peer-reviewed journal articles, books, edited volumes, official reports from Nigerian and international organisations, policy and development documents, and credible grey literature on youth unemployment, violence, and exclusion. The literature was retrieved from Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, SpringerLink, ResearchGate, Taylor & Francis Online, Elsevier ScienceDirect, and official publications from the National Bureau of Statistics, UNDP, UNICEF, the ILO, the World Bank and Human Rights Watch.

To ensure quality and relevance, the selected materials were screened for credibility, methodological soundness, and direct relevance to the study objectives. Priority was given to peer-reviewed and official publications. The literature was further cross-checked for consistency, and only sources that directly informed the research objectives were retained. In total, 28 relevant sources were selected for analysis.

The study employed thematic content analysis. The literature was coded and organized around the study objectives, namely socioeconomic deprivation, peer influence, regional manifestations of violence, and implications for social order. The findings were then interpreted using strain theory and differential association theory to develop a sociological explanation of youth thuggery and hooliganism in Nigeria.

RESULTS

Regarding the first objective, the literature indicates that socioeconomic deprivation is a consistent predictor of youth involvement in thuggery and hooliganism. Poverty, unemployment, and limited access to legitimate opportunities contribute to frustration and reduce the attractiveness of lawful routes to success. In many Nigerian communities, youth violence appears to function as a response to economic exclusion rather than as purely criminal behaviour.

On the second objective, the findings show that peer networks exert a strong influence on youth violence. Violent peer groups may provide belonging, identity, protection, and material incentives, while also normalizing aggression and making participation in thuggery or hooliganism socially rewarding. As a result, youths are more likely to become involved in violence when their peer environment encourages such behaviour.

With respect to the third objective, the analysis indicates that youth thuggery and hooliganism occur across multiple regions of Nigeria. These behaviours are evident in urban centres, politically volatile environments, and economically marginalised communities. Examples include Lagos, where gang-related violence and street disorder are prevalent; Rivers and Delta, where cult-related violence and political intimidation have been reported; Kano and Kaduna, where election-related youth violence and urban unrest occur; Plateau and Benue, where communal and politically linked youth disorder is evident; and Osun, Oyo, and Ondo, where political thuggery and street clashes have been observed.

Finally, regarding the fourth objective, the findings reveal that youth thuggery and hooliganism undermine public safety, disrupt political participation, damage property, discourage investment,

and weaken trust in institutions. They also expose young people to cycles of criminal identity, injury, arrest, and social exclusion.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings indicate that socioeconomic deprivation plays a central role in youth thuggery and hooliganism in Nigeria. When young people are denied access to employment, education, and social mobility, they become vulnerable to frustration and deviant adaptation. This supports strain theory, which argues that blocked opportunities increase the likelihood of misconduct (Merton, 1938; Agnew, 2001). In the Nigerian context, this means that youth violence should be understood as a response to structural exclusion rather than as mere moral failure (Ajaegbu, 2012; NBS, 2023). The findings also show that peer networks are powerful mechanisms through which violence is learned and sustained. Youth do not act alone; they are socialised into violent behaviour through groups that reward aggression and loyalty (Sutherland, 1947; Richards, 2016). These peer structures are especially influential where family, school, and state institutions are weak or absent (Honwana, 2014; UNICEF, 2023). As a result, violence becomes normalized, reproduced, and transmitted across settings (Muggah & O'Donnell, 2022; Iwilade, 2013).

The regional examples examined in the study confirm that youth thuggery and hooliganism are national problems with local variations. From Lagos to Kano, Rivers to Plateau, and Osun to Kaduna, youth violence takes different forms but emerges from similar structural conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2022; World Bank, 2023). This suggests that national responses must be flexible enough to address both the general causes and the regional expressions of the problem (UNDP, 2022; UNICEF, 2023).

Overall, the study maintains that youth violence in Nigeria is produced by the interaction of deprivation and peer influence. Any response that focuses only on punishment will fail because it ignores the structural roots of the problem (Jega, 2011; Omotola, 2008). What is needed is a combination of economic inclusion, social protection, educational support, community engagement, and disruption of violent peer cultures (ILO, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Youth thuggery and hooliganism in Nigeria are serious social problems rooted in deprivation, exclusion, and peer socialisation. They are not isolated acts of deviance but symptoms of deeper failures in governance, opportunity distribution, and youth inclusion. The study has shown that

when young people are denied access to meaningful livelihoods and are embedded in violent peer networks, they are more likely to adopt aggressive and destructive behaviours.

The strong position of this paper is that youth violence in Nigeria will persist unless the country addresses the structural and social conditions that make it attractive. Punitive policing alone cannot resolve a problem that is fundamentally linked to poverty, unemployment, social marginalisation, and the normalization of violence among peers. A lasting solution requires a developmental and preventive approach that restores hope, opportunity, and social belonging to young people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. Government should expand youth employment through vocational training, apprenticeships, public works, and entrepreneurship support.
- ii. Federal, state, and local authorities should strengthen social protection for vulnerable households to reduce the economic pressures that push youth toward violence.
- iii. Electoral bodies and security agencies should strictly enforce laws against political thuggery and sponsor-related violence.
- iv. Schools, communities, and civil society organisations should promote anti-violence values and positive peer culture.
- v. Youth engagement programmes should be expanded to provide structured participation in civic, social, and economic activities.
- vi. Community-based interventions should target known violent peer groups with mentorship, rehabilitation, and reintegration strategies.
- vii. Further empirical studies should be carried out across different regions of Nigeria to deepen understanding of how deprivation and peer influence interact in specific local contexts.

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