

**PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE EXTENT OF THE INFLUENCE OF POVERTY ON
CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR AMONG YOUTHS IN BENIN CITY, NIGERIA**

BY

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SSC2105907

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

UNIVERSITY OF BENIN

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**BEING A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this study was carried out by DEHINBO IYABO MARIAM with the mat no SSC2105907, in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, faculty of social sciences, University of Benin, Benin city, Edo state.

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DEDICATION

This research work is dedicated to God for his mercy, provision, protection, guidance, and his unending favour over me throughout this degree and to express my profound gratitude to Him that made it possible for me to gain the necessary knowledge and understanding and made me to go through the university in good health and faith.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates public perceptions of how poverty influences youth criminal behavior in Benin City, Nigeria. Despite the city's cultural and economic significance, escalating youth crime has emerged as a major social concern, often attributed to widespread poverty, unemployment, and social disorganization. Grounded in criminological frameworks such as Strain Theory, Social Disorganization Theory, and Attribution Theory, the research explores how residents interpret the relationship between economic hardship and youth involvement in crime and how these perceptions shape support for social or punitive policy responses.

A cross-sectional descriptive survey design was adopted. Using stratified random sampling, 100 adult respondents were selected across the three local government areas of Benin City—Oredo, Egor, and Ikpoba-Okha. Data were collected through structured questionnaires validated by experts and tested for reliability using the test-retest and Cronbach's Alpha methods. Descriptive and inferential statistics, including frequency distributions, mean scores, and Chi-square tests, were employed to analyze quantitative data, while open-ended responses were thematically interpreted.

Findings reveal an overwhelming consensus that poverty is a major determinant of youth criminality. Eighty-five percent of respondents identified poverty as the leading cause of crime among youths, with 60 percent rating its influence as "very high." Unemployment, peer influence, and poor family background were also cited as significant contributing factors. The study found that 88 percent of respondents agreed that poverty breeds desperation, compelling young people to adopt illicit means of survival. Similarly, 84 percent believed that poverty-reduction initiatives would substantially decrease crime rates. A large majority (82 percent) expressed preference for preventive, welfare-oriented strategies—such as job creation, vocational training, and youth empowerment—over punitive measures like policing and incarceration.

Demographic data highlighted that most respondents were young (ages 18–35), low-income earners with moderate education levels, reflecting the socioeconomic group most affected by unemployment and vulnerability to crime. These characteristics underscore the structural and psychological pressures shaping youth deviance in Benin City. The findings align with global criminological theories emphasizing the interplay between economic deprivation and social breakdown as key drivers of criminal behavior.

The study concludes that public perception in Benin City strongly links poverty to youth criminality and favors socio-economic intervention over coercive control. It recommends that policymakers, law-enforcement agencies, and community organizations prioritize integrated poverty-alleviation programs, job-creation initiatives, and educational opportunities as core components of crime-prevention strategy. Academically, the study contributes to literature on the socioeconomic determinants of crime and provides empirical evidence for testing and refining criminological theories in Nigerian contexts.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The criminality of Youth in Benin City, Nigeria, has emerged as a pressing social problem that undermines community wellbeing and economic development. Despite the city's rich cultural heritage and status as a commercial hub, many of its young people face dire socioeconomic circumstances. National statistics indicate that over 70% of Nigerians live below the poverty line, with youth bearing the brunt of deprivation and joblessness (Ekeji, 2013). Recent surveyed youths in Benin City reported specifically about, 79.4% are experiencing poverty and hunger, conditions that are widely believed to fuel illicit activities as a means of survival (Longe & Omigie, 2024). Public narratives frequently highlight economic hardship as a root cause of youth offending, yet empirical investigations into residents' perceptions of this linkage remain limited.

The theory of Criminology, offers insight into how poverty might translate into criminal behavior. Strain theory for instance posits that when legitimate avenues to socioeconomic success are blocked, individuals may resort to deviance to achieve culturally valued goals (Merton, 1938). Complementing this, relative deprivation theory argues that perceptions of inequality and unfair resource distribution generate resentment and heighten the propensity for criminal acts (Gurr, 1970). These frameworks suggest that both material hardship and the subjective experience of disadvantage can drive youths toward lawbreaking. However, the extent to which the public in Benin City recognizes and attributes young offenders' conduct to such socioeconomic strains has not been systematically examined.

Studies empirically carried out from broader Nigerian contexts reinforce the causal role of poverty in crime. A Toda–Yamamoto Granger causality analysis found unidirectional causality running from poverty to crime, indicating that deteriorating economic conditions actively precipitate criminality rather than merely co-occurring with it (Ihensekhien, 2023). Locally, Longe and Omigie (2024) documented that long-standing social support networks have eroded, leaving impoverished youths with few alternatives to criminal subsistence. Contrarily, a survey by Iwemi Bookstore (2024) reported no statistically significant link between poverty rates and youth vulnerability to urban crime in Benin City, suggesting that residents may hold more nuanced or multifactorial views about what drives young people into unlawful behavior.

Although there are mixed findings, prevailing public opinion in Benin City tends to emphasize poverty, unemployment, and educational deficits as primary catalysts of youth crime (Longe & Omigie, 2024; Iwemi Bookstore, 2024). Understanding this perception is critical for policymakers and social service providers aiming to design targeted interventions. By illuminating how residents interpret the poverty–crime nexus among their youth, stakeholders can better align poverty-alleviation programs, educational initiatives, and community policing strategies with local expectations and beliefs. This study thus seeks to explore public perceptions regarding the extent to which poverty influences criminal behavior among youths in Benin City, filling a gap in community-based research and informing more effective, locally resonant crime prevention efforts.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite its longstanding reputation as a center of commerce and culture, Benin City faces an alarming escalation in youth criminality, with many observers attributing this trend to pervasive poverty. National estimates indicate that over 70% of Nigerians subsist below the internationally

recognized poverty line (Ekeji, 2013), and locally, nearly 80% of youths report recurrent hunger and material deprivation (Longe & Omigie, 2024). Although criminological theories such as strain theory (Merton, 1938) and relative deprivation theory (Gurr, 1970) suggest that economic hardship breeds frustration and resentment, empirical studies yield mixed results. For instance, Toda–Yamamoto Granger causality analysis confirms poverty’s unidirectional causal impact on crime in Nigeria (Ihensekhien, 2023), yet community surveys in Benin City sometimes find no statistically significant link between poverty rates and youth vulnerability to crime (Iwemi Bookstore, 2024). This inconsistency in findings underscores a critical need to understand how the public itself perceives the poverty–crime nexus among local youths.

Public perception plays a pivotal role in shaping policy priorities and resource allocation. When residents view poverty as the primary driver of youth offending, there may be stronger support for social-welfare interventions, employment programs, and educational initiatives. Conversely, if other factors—such as peer influence, family breakdown, or substance abuse—are deemed more consequential, stakeholders might favor law-and-order or rehabilitative approaches (Agbai & Adesanya, 2023). In Benin City, anecdotal accounts and local media narratives frequently emphasize economic deprivation as the root cause of juvenile delinquency (Longe & Omigie, 2024), but systematic, community-wide assessments of these beliefs remain scarce. Without such insights, interventions risk misalignment with community expectations and may fail to address the true catalysts of criminal behavior.

Moreover, existing research in Benin City predominantly adopts quantitative or secondary-data approaches, leaving qualitative dimensions of public sentiment underexplored. While statistical analyses chart correlations and causations, they do not capture residents’ nuanced understandings, moral judgments, or experiential knowledge regarding why youths turn to crime. This gap is

significant, because interventions designed without local buy-in often encounter resistance or limited efficacy. A rigorous examination of public perceptions would illuminate whether poverty is viewed as an inescapable social condition warranting collective redress, or as an individual failing that justifies punitive responses. Such clarity is essential for policymakers, law enforcement, and community organizations striving to co-design sustainable crime-prevention strategies.

In summary, the problem lies in the absence of comprehensive data on how Benin City's residents interpret the influence of poverty on youth criminality, despite contradictory empirical evidence and theoretical assertions. This knowledge vacuum hinders the development of community-endorsed policies and programs capable of reducing juvenile offending and improving socio-economic well-being. Addressing this gap through targeted research into public perceptions will provide the evidence base needed to craft interventions that are both contextually relevant and socially legitimate. The purpose of this study is to examine how residents of Benin City perceive the influence of poverty on criminal behaviour among youths. It aims to understand whether the public views poverty as a major driver of youth crime and how these perceptions shape support for different crime-prevention strategies. By capturing community insights, the study seeks to inform policies and interventions that are socially grounded and locally relevant.

1.3 Research Questions

To guide the investigation into public perception of the influence of poverty on youth criminal behaviour in Benin City, the following research questions are proposed:

1. To what extent do residents of Benin City perceive poverty as a major factor contributing to youth involvement in crime?
2. What are the social, cultural, and economic factors residents consider as explaining why youths engage in criminal behavior?
3. How do public perceptions correlate with support for social welfare versus punitive crime prevention strategies

1.4 Objectives of the Study

Specifically, the study:

1. Assess the Extent resident of Benin city perceive poverty as a major factor contributing to youth involvement in crimes
2. Identify the social, cultural, and economic factors residents cite when explaining why impoverished youths engage in criminal behavior.
3. Examine how these perceptions correlate with support for social-welfare versus punitive crime-prevention strategies.

Understanding these dimensions is crucial because public endorsement shapes both policy priorities and resource allocation. If poverty is widely viewed as a root cause, stakeholders may favor investment in education, vocational training, and direct cash-transfer programs (Longe & Omigie, 2024). Conversely, if residents emphasize moral failure or peer influence, authorities might lean toward stricter policing and rehabilitation models. This study's findings will therefore empower decision-makers to align crime-reduction efforts with the normative beliefs and lived

experiences of Benin City's populace, enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of interventions.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research will provide insight into how poverty is socially constructed and understood in relation to youth crime. The findings will be valuable for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and community organizations seeking to align crime prevention strategies with public sentiment. It will also contribute to academic discourse on the intersection of poverty, perception, and criminal behavior. For policymakers Evidence-based Policy Formulation: Policymakers can use this data to design policies that address socio-economic inequalities (such as unemployment, lack of access to education, and inadequate housing) which often contribute to criminal behavior.

Resource Allocation: If the findings show that poverty is widely seen as a key driver of youth crime, it would justify increased investment in poverty alleviation programme youth empowerment schemes, and skills acquisition initiatives in Benin City.

Preventive Legislation: Understanding public views can help lawmakers craft laws that focus more on prevention (through welfare and social support) rather than just punitive measures.

Law Enforcement Agencies Improved Policing Strategies: By knowing that poverty strongly influences youth crime, law enforcement agencies can shift from purely reactive approaches to proactive community policing, targeting hotspots with social outreach in addition to security operations.

Building Public Trust: Since the study captures public perception, law enforcement can use the findings to realign their operations with community expectations, thereby fostering trust and cooperation in crime prevention.

Training and Sensitization: Police officers and security agents can be trained to recognize the socio-economic pressures that drive young people into crime, making them more effective in rehabilitation-oriented approaches rather than relying solely on arrests and punishment.

Community Organizations Designing Intervention Programmes: NGOs, religious groups, and local associations can use the findings to develop targeted programmes such as mentorship, vocational training, and poverty alleviation initiatives for at-risk youths.

Advocacy and Awareness: Community organizations can leverage the study to advocate for social reforms and mobilize stakeholders (government, private sector, and civil society) to jointly tackle poverty as a root cause of crime.

Strengthening Social Support Systems: Understanding public perception enables communities to create stronger support networks that can help young people resist the pull of crime, such as youth centres, after-school programmes, and counselling services

Academic community

Contribution to knowledge; It will add to the growing body of literature on the socioeconomic determinants of crime

Theoretical development; it will help in findings and refining of existing criminology theories such as strain theory, social disorganisation theory and so on. Also, it can allow scholars to access whether public perception align with or contradict theoretical explanation of crimes

It will serve as empirical data for further Research making it a database of public perception that other researchers can build upon, It can also serve as a case study for public policy, criminology or Development studies courses.

It can be used as teaching materials by teachers and students in criminology, sociology, public administration offering real world. It can provide dissemination topics.

1.6 Brief Scope and Delimitations of the Study

1.6.1 Scope of the Study:

This study focuses on exploring public perceptions of the influence of poverty on criminal behaviour among youths in Benin City, Nigeria. It investigates how residents interpret the relationship between economic hardship and youth crime, the factors they associate with this link (e.g., unemployment, hunger, lack of education), and how these perceptions vary across demographic groups. The study also examines how public opinion shapes support for different crime-prevention strategies, such as social welfare programs or punitive measures.

1.6.2 Delimitations of the Study:

- The study was geographically limited to Benin City and does not include other urban or rural areas in Nigeria.
- It was concentrates specifically on youth criminal behaviour, excluding adult crime or other forms of deviance.
- Data collection was based on public opinion through surveys and interviews, rather than official crime statistics or law enforcement records.

- The study only attempt to establish causality between poverty and crime but rather focuses on perceived relationships.
- Only selected socio-economic factors was be considered, and other influences like cultural norms or psychological traits are outside the scope.

This focused approach allows for a deeper understanding of local beliefs and attitudes, which are essential for designing community-informed intervention.

1.7 Definitions of Terms

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout the study on public perception of the extent of the influence of poverty on criminal behaviour among youths in Benin City, the following key terms are defined:

- **Public Perception:** The collective understanding, beliefs, and attitudes held by members of the public regarding a particular issue. In this study, it refers to how residents of Benin City interpret and evaluate the relationship between poverty and youth criminality (Halsey & White, 2008).
- **Poverty:** A multidimensional condition characterized by deprivation of basic needs such as food, shelter, education, healthcare, and employment. It includes both absolute poverty (lack of resources for survival) and relative poverty (economic disadvantage compared to others in society) (WHO, 2001; Gurr, 1970).
- **Youth:** Individuals typically aged between 15 and 35 years, as defined by Nigeria's national youth policy. This group is considered vulnerable due to limited access to resources, education, and employment opportunities (Ekeji, 2013).

- **Criminal Behaviour:** Actions that violate legal norms and are punishable by law. In the context of this study, it includes theft, robbery, cultism, drug abuse, and cybercrime committed by youths (Taylor, 2006; Anasi, 2010).
- **Influence:** The capacity of one factor (poverty) to affect or shape another (criminal behaviour). This study explores perceived influence rather than proven causality.
- **Benin City:** The capital of Edo State in southern Nigeria, known for its historical significance and contemporary socio-economic challenges, including high youth unemployment and poverty rates (Longe & Omigie, 2024).
- **Socioeconomic Factors:** Conditions related to income, education, employment, and living standards that affect individuals' opportunities and behaviours. These are often cited as underlying causes of youth crime (Ajibade & Adenike, 2009).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the public perception of poverty's influence on youth criminality is essential for developing effective social policies. The relationship between poverty and youth criminal behaviour has been extensively documented, with research underscoring how economic deprivation fosters conditions conducive to delinquency. Studies in Nigeria reveal that limited household resources, inadequate access to education, and high unemployment rates correlate strongly with increased youth involvement in crime (Effiom, Archibong, & Ojua, 2014). By framing poverty as both a structural constraint and a precipitant of deviant responses, scholars argue that financial hardship compels some youths to view illicit activities as viable coping strategies.

Public perception of this nexus plays a pivotal role in shaping crime prevention policies and community interventions. In many Nigerian communities, residents overwhelmingly attribute juvenile delinquency to material need, believing that poverty—rather than inherent moral failings or peer influence—is the foremost driver of youth crime (Onota & Ighomrore, 2025). This widespread belief influences support for social welfare programmes, vocational training, and anti-poverty measures aimed at reducing criminal opportunities.

Despite growing empirical evidence, the extent to which the general populace appreciates the complexity of poverty's influence on youth crime remains under-explored. Recent survey data

suggest that while most Nigerians acknowledge a link between economic hardship and delinquency, nuances—such as the role of social capital, family structure, and local governance—are often overlooked in popular discourse (Ihensekhien, 2023). Understanding these perceptual gaps is essential for tailoring interventions that resonate with community values and experiences.

This literature review synthesises existing theoretical frameworks and empirical findings to assess how the public perceives the impact of poverty on youth criminal behaviour. By mapping prevailing attitudes, identifying conceptual ambiguities, and highlighting policy implications, the review aims to inform more effective, contextually grounded strategies for crime reduction and youth empowerment.

2.1 An Overview of ‘Public Perception’

Public perception encompasses the collective attitudes, beliefs, and opinions held by a society toward a person, institution, event, or issue. It is a socially constructed “reality” that emerges through the interplay of information, emotion, and cultural context (Pollick, 2024). Unlike objective facts, public perception reflects how people interpret and prioritize information, often shaped by selective exposure and cognitive biases. Understanding this concept is essential for anyone interested in marketing, politics, public health, or social movements.

Media influence plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception by determining which topics receive attention and how they are framed. Through agenda-setting, news outlets and social platforms highlight certain issues—such as environmental crises or political scandals—thereby directing public focus and shaping what people believe matters most (Vaia, 2023). Framing further influences how audiences interpret events, emphasizing specific angles or emotional

tones that may reinforce stereotypes or elicit strong reactions. In addition to mass media, interpersonal communication within families, peer groups, and online communities can amplify or challenge these narratives, reinforcing dominant viewpoints or fostering alternative perspectives (Terzioğlu, 2023).

Several key characteristics distinguish public perception from objective understanding. First, it is inherently subjective: individuals' cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, and emotional states color how they interpret information (Pollick, 2024). Second, public perception is dynamic—new developments, shifts in societal values, or crises can rapidly alter collective attitudes. Third, it often reflects social consensus rather than individual viewpoints: the prevailing narrative may silence minority opinions or counter-narratives, even when they are factually accurate. Together, these traits make public perception a powerful but sometimes unreliable guide to truth.

The importance of public perception extends across multiple domains. In politics, elected officials and advocacy groups invest heavily in opinion-shaping campaigns because voter attitudes can determine electoral outcomes and policy support (Wisdom Library, 2023). Corporations monitor brand perception to maintain customer loyalty and market share; a single viral incident can significantly damage or bolster a company's reputation. In public health, perceptions about vaccination safety or mental-health stigma directly influence behavior, impacting disease outbreaks and the utilization of care services (Vaia, 2023). Even environmental policy debates hinge on how the public weighs economic costs against ecological benefits, making perception management crucial for sustainable decision-making.

Cognitive biases underlie many perceptual distortions, with confirmation bias being particularly influential. People tend to favor information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs and dismiss

contradictory evidence, reinforcing echo chambers within social media and traditional news ecosystems (Terzioğlu, 2023). This selective processing can exacerbate polarization, as individuals become more entrenched in their views and less open to alternative perspectives. Recognizing these biases is a first step toward fostering critical media literacy and encouraging more balanced public discourse.

In summary, public perception is a multifaceted construct shaped by media framing, social interaction, and cognitive processing. Its subjective and dynamic nature means that collective attitudes can shift quickly, carrying profound implications for politics, business, and public welfare. By understanding the mechanisms that drive public perception—especially the roles of agenda-setting, framing, and cognitive bias—stakeholders can more effectively communicate, engage audiences, and address societal challenges. Cultivating media literacy and promoting transparent information practices are essential strategies for nurturing a more informed and resilient public sphere.

2.2 An Overview of Aspects of Poverty in Benin City

Poverty in Benin City manifests as pervasive economic deprivation, where a substantial share of the population survives on meagre incomes that fall well below national poverty thresholds. In a 2024 study of urban youth, 79.4% reported experiencing both poverty and hunger, underscoring the depth of material hardship among even younger cohorts in the city. Such widespread financial insecurity is rooted in chronic underemployment and low wages, which drive households to adopt survival strategies that perpetuate their vulnerability.

Food insecurity intensifies this economic strain. Many families in Benin City lack consistent access to sufficient and nutritious food, with youth surveys revealing that hunger frequently

compels young people to resort to informal or illicit income-generating activities. The tight coupling of poverty and hunger highlights how material scarcity shapes daily life, eroding both physical well-being and social opportunities.

Housing conditions among the urban poor further reflect multidimensional poverty. Early surveys found that the quality of housing available to low-income residents is characteristically substandard, often lacking basic sanitation and sufficient living space. One assessment noted that many urban households spend disproportionately high shares of their already limited incomes on overcrowded and poorly serviced dwellings, trapping families in a cycle of deprivation and unhealthy living environments.

Access to essential utilities remains severely constrained. Historical data indicate that only a minority of urban houses in Benin City were equipped with pipe-borne water or indoor flush toilets, compelling large segments of the population to live in environments prone to contamination and disease. The absence of reliable water and sanitation infrastructure not only undermines public health but also imposes additional time and monetary costs on families striving to meet basic needs.

Education and employment barriers compound these material hardships. Limited educational attainment and scarce formal job opportunities restrict social mobility, leaving many residents—and especially youths—locked into low-paying informal work. Without targeted investment in skills and job creation, the structural drivers of poverty in Benin City are likely to persist, reinforcing intergenerational transmission of disadvantage.

Poverty in Benin City is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing inadequate incomes, food insecurity, deficient housing, and deficient public services. Addressing these interlocking

deprivations demands coordinated policies that expand economic opportunities, improve living conditions, and strengthen social safety nets.

2.3 Influence of Poverty on Criminal Behaviour: An Overview

Poverty and criminal behaviour are intricately linked through a complex web of social, economic, and environmental factors. Poverty is commonly defined as the lack of sufficient resources to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare, while criminal behaviour encompasses actions that violate legal norms and incur social sanctions. Understanding how poverty contributes to crime is essential for developing effective policies aimed at reducing both economic hardship and criminal activity.

Social disorganization and strain theories offer foundational explanations for the poverty–crime nexus. Social disorganization theory posits that impoverished neighbourhoods suffer from weakened social institutions, such as families, schools, and community organizations, which undermines informal social controls and facilitates criminal opportunities (UKEssays.com, 2018).

Strain theory argues that poverty creates a gap between societal goals and legitimate means to achieve them, leading individuals to resort to crime to attain success or merely survive. Together, these frameworks highlight how structural disadvantages foster environments conducive to crime.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that poverty significantly elevates the risk of criminal behaviour. Research indicates that individuals residing in socioeconomically deprived areas face higher levels of unemployment, limited educational attainment, and inadequate access to social services, all of which heighten the allure of illicit activities as alternative means of economic support (Northwest Career College, n.d.). For example, communities characterized by

concentrated poverty often experience higher rates of property offences and violent crimes due to reduced guardianship and increased frustration among residents.

Insights from Nigeria illustrate the palpable impact of poverty on youth delinquency. A study assessing criminal behaviour among Nigerian youths found that factors such as joblessness, family instability, and perceived relative deprivation strongly predicted engagement in theft, vandalism, and drug-related offences (Samphina Academic, 2021). The research underscores that without targeted poverty-alleviation programmes—such as vocational training, youth mentorship, and microfinance initiatives—young people in disadvantaged settings remain vulnerable to criminal pathways.

Despite the robust association between poverty and crime, it is important to recognize that poverty alone does not determine criminality. Cultural norms, law enforcement practices, individual resilience, and policy interventions can mitigate or exacerbate the effects of economic hardship. Moreover, certain crimes—such as white-collar offences—occur across socioeconomic strata, indicating that multiple motivations and contextual factors drive criminal conduct beyond material deprivation.

Effective responses require multi-pronged strategies that address both poverty reduction and crime prevention. Community revitalization projects can strengthen social cohesion by improving housing quality, supporting local schools, and fostering neighborhood watch programmes. Economic policies that expand employment opportunities, raise minimum wages, and bolster social safety nets can reduce the financial pressures that push individuals toward crime. Finally, integrating crime prevention with poverty alleviation—through initiatives like restorative justice and community policing—can produce synergistic benefits for both public safety and social welfare.

Poverty is a significant but not singular driver of criminal behaviour. Its influence operates through eroded social institutions, strained aspirations, and limited legitimate opportunities. By tackling economic deprivation and its social consequences simultaneously, policymakers can create environments that discourage criminal activity and promote equitable, resilient communities.

2.4 The Extent of the Influence of Poverty on Criminal Behaviour Among Youths

Poverty remains one of the most persistent and complex drivers of youth criminal behaviour across the globe. While not all individuals who experience poverty engage in crime, research consistently shows that economic deprivation significantly increases the likelihood of criminal activity among young people. The influence of poverty on youth crime is multifaceted, encompassing structural, psychological, and environmental dimensions that shape both opportunity and motivation for deviance.

2.4.1 Structural and Economic Pressures

Poverty creates conditions of economic strain, where youths are unable to meet basic needs or pursue socially approved goals through legitimate means. According to Merton's strain theory, this disconnect between aspirations and access to resources can lead to innovation through illegitimate channels, such as theft, fraud, or drug trafficking (Merton, 1938). In Nigeria, studies have shown a strong correlation between youth unemployment and rising crime rates, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas (Ihensekhien, 2023). The lack of job opportunities and vocational training leaves many young people economically marginalized, increasing their vulnerability to criminal recruitment.

2.4.2 Social Disorganization and Community Breakdown

Poverty also contributes to the breakdown of community structures and informal social controls. In impoverished neighborhoods, high residential mobility, weak institutions, and limited access to education and healthcare reduce the capacity of communities to supervise and support their youth (Shaw & McKay, 1942). This disorganization fosters environments where crime becomes normalized and culturally transmitted. Youths growing up in such areas are more likely to be exposed to delinquent peers and less likely to receive guidance from stable adult role models.

2.4.3 Psychological and Emotional Impact

The psychological toll of poverty cannot be overlooked. Chronic deprivation is associated with feelings of hopelessness, frustration, and alienation, which can manifest in aggressive or antisocial behaviour. Agnew's General Strain Theory emphasizes that negative emotions resulting from economic hardship can lead to criminal coping strategies, especially when legitimate avenues for relief are unavailable (Agnew, 2006). Youths experiencing hunger, homelessness, or family instability may view crime as a rational response to their circumstances.

2.4.4 Empirical Evidence

Empirical studies in Nigeria and other developing countries reinforce the theoretical link between poverty and youth crime. Ihensekhien (2023) found that poverty granger-causes crime at a statistically significant level, indicating a direct causal relationship. Similarly, Bassey (2013) observed that low socioeconomic status among youths in Calabar Metropolis was significantly associated with involvement in criminal activities. These findings suggest that poverty is not merely a background condition but a central factor in shaping youth behaviour.

2.4.5 Limitations and Nuances

Despite the strong correlation, it is important to note that poverty does not uniformly lead to crime. Many youths in impoverished conditions do not engage in criminal behaviour, highlighting the role of mediating factors such as family support, education, and personal resilience. Valdez et al. (2007) argue that the relationship between poverty and crime involves a complex interplay of individual and community-level variables, suggesting that interventions must be multifaceted.

The extent of poverty's influence on youth criminal behaviour is substantial and well-documented. Structural inequality, community disorganization, and psychological strain all contribute to the increased risk of offending among economically disadvantaged youths. Addressing youth crime therefore requires comprehensive strategies that tackle poverty at its roots—through education, employment, social support, and community development.

2.5 The Multifaceted Link Between Poverty and Criminal Behaviour Among Youths in Benin City

Youth criminality in Benin City, Nigeria, has become a pressing social concern, driven by a complex interplay of poverty and other contributing factors. While poverty is a central catalyst, its influence is magnified and shaped by social, economic, and individual dynamics. Understanding this multifaceted relationship is essential for crafting effective interventions that address the root causes of youth crime.

2.5.1 Poverty as a Primary Driver

Poverty in Benin City is both widespread and deeply entrenched. According to Longe and Omigie (2024), approximately 79.4% of youths in the city experience poverty and hunger, which

significantly influences their involvement in criminal activities. The lack of access to basic needs—such as food, shelter, education, and healthcare—creates a survivalist mentality among many young people. Strain theory, as applied in this context, suggests that when legitimate means of achieving societal goals are blocked, individuals may resort to crime as an alternative (Longe & Omigie, 2024).

The multidimensional nature of poverty—encompassing deprivation in nutrition, housing, education, and information—further exacerbates youth vulnerability. Many families in Benin City live below the poverty line, spending less than 400 naira per day, which fosters a climate of desperation and social exclusion (Longe & Omigie, 2024).

2.5.2 Social Factors: Family, Community, and Peer Influence

Social structures play a critical role in shaping youth behavior. Dysfunctional family environments, peer pressure, and weak community cohesion contribute to the normalization of criminal behavior. In Benin City, the erosion of reliable social support systems has left many youths without guidance or positive role models (Longe & Omigie, 2024). Peer groups often become surrogate families, and in high-crime neighborhoods, these groups may encourage deviant behavior.

Moreover, urbanization and informal housing patterns have created environments that are difficult to police and monitor. Agheyisi and Aghedo (2021) argue that unplanned neighborhoods with poor infrastructure and limited surveillance increase the permeability of crime, making it easier for youths to engage in illicit activities.

2.5.3 Economic Factors: Unemployment and Inequality

Unemployment among youths in Benin City is alarmingly high, and economic inequality continues to widen. Despite national reforms, many young people lack access to meaningful employment opportunities, pushing them toward informal or illegal economies (Rougeaux et al., 2024). The absence of vocational training and entrepreneurship support leaves youths disillusioned and susceptible to criminal recruitment.

Economic deprivation also fuels material aspirations that cannot be met through legal means. The desire to escape poverty and achieve social mobility often leads youths to engage in theft, fraud, and other crimes (Longe & Omigie, 2024).

2.5.4 Individual Factors: Psychology and Personal Circumstances

Individual psychological traits and personal experiences also influence criminal behavior. Exposure to trauma, lack of emotional regulation, and low self-esteem are common among youths involved in crime. Psychological theories suggest that antisocial behavior may stem from early childhood experiences, including neglect and abuse (Andrew & Bonta, 2014).

In Benin City, the combination of environmental stressors and personal vulnerabilities creates a fertile ground for criminal tendencies. Youths who feel powerless or marginalized may view crime as a form of empowerment or resistance against societal neglect (Longe & Omigie, 2024).

The link between poverty and youth criminality in Benin City is undeniable, but it is not singular. Poverty interacts with social disintegration, economic exclusion, and individual psychological factors to produce a complex web of influences. Addressing youth crime requires a holistic approach that includes poverty alleviation, community strengthening, economic empowerment,

and mental health support. Only by tackling these interconnected issues can Benin City hope to reduce youth criminality and foster a more inclusive and secure society.

2.6 An Overview of the Relationship Between Poverty and Crime Among Youths in Benin City

In Benin City, Nigeria, youth poverty and criminal behaviour are often portrayed as two sides of the same coin. Poverty—defined as the inability to secure sufficient resources for food, shelter, education, and healthcare—creates conditions of strain and desperation that can push vulnerable young people toward illicit coping strategies. Crime among youth encompasses a spectrum of offences, from petty theft and vandalism to more serious violent acts. Examining how these phenomena intersect in Benin City sheds light on both the drivers of delinquency and the design of interventions to curb youth crime.

Strain and social disorganization theories provide useful lenses for understanding why poverty can precipitate criminal activity. Strain theory suggests that when societal goals (such as stable income or material success) are unattainable through legitimate means, individuals may resort to illegitimate methods to bridge the gap (Longe & Omigie, 2024). Social disorganization theory argues that impoverished neighbourhoods weaken community institutions—families, schools, religious bodies—that otherwise enforce informal social controls and discourage deviance. In Benin City, these structural vulnerabilities coincide with diminishing social support networks, intensifying pressures on disadvantaged youth (Longe & Omigie, 2024).

Local data reinforce the strong connection between material deprivation and youth crime. A mixed-methods survey of Benin City adolescents found that 79.4% of respondents experienced both poverty and hunger, and roughly 4% of families subsisted on less than 400 naira per day

(Longe & Omigie, 2024). More than half of city households faced three or more overlapping deprivations in areas such as health, education, and living standards. Qualitative interviews revealed that many young people viewed petty theft, vandalism, or drug dealing as the only viable means to feed themselves and support dependents, effectively making criminal behaviour a survival mechanism (Longe & Omigie, 2024).

However, not all research confirms a direct, unmediated link between poverty and youth crime. A field survey employing chi-square and regression analyses found no statistically significant relationship between poverty rate and youths' vulnerability to urban crime in Benin City when controlling for education level and employment status (Iwemi Bookstore, 2024). This suggests that while poverty creates a fertile ground for delinquency, its impact on crime may be moderated by access to schooling, job opportunities, and other socio-economic buffers that enhance resilience.

Broader studies of Nigerian youth further illustrate the multifaceted nature of this relationship. Ekeji (n.d.) reports that high unemployment and low educational attainment are strongly correlated with youth admissions to correctional facilities nationwide. According to this analysis, young people lacking both work prospects and basic schooling are disproportionately represented among offenders, highlighting the combined effects of economic marginalization and limited human capital on criminality.

Together, these findings paint a complex picture: poverty and hunger are pervasive among Benin City's youth and exert significant pressure toward criminal coping strategies, yet the translation of deprivation into crime is neither automatic nor uniform. Factors such as education, formal employment, family support, and community cohesion can mitigate the criminogenic effects of poverty. Effective crime-reduction policies must therefore blend poverty-alleviation measures—

like cash transfers, food assistance, and vocational training—with investments in schooling, job creation, and social services to disrupt the cycle of deprivation and delinquency.

2.7 Poverty as a Major Driver of Crime but Operates Alongside Other Social, Economic, and Individual Factors

Crime is a multifaceted social phenomenon influenced by a complex interplay of structural, economic, and individual factors. Among these, poverty stands out as a significant driver, often linked to increased criminal behavior due to deprivation, marginalization, and limited access to resources. However, poverty alone does not account for the entirety of criminal activity. Social environments, economic disparities, and individual psychological traits also contribute substantially to the prevalence and nature of crime.

2.7.1 Poverty and Criminal Behavior

Poverty is widely recognized as a major contributor to crime. Individuals living in impoverished conditions often face limited access to education, employment, and basic necessities, which can lead to desperation and engagement in criminal activities as a survival strategy (Akanni, 2022). Studies have shown that high poverty rates correlate with increased incidences of property and violent crimes, particularly in urban areas with concentrated disadvantage (Sekandary et al., 2024). The strain theory, developed by Merton, posits that when individuals are unable to achieve culturally defined goals through legitimate means, they may resort to crime (Lee, 2025).

Moreover, poverty fosters social exclusion, which can lead to feelings of resentment and alienation. These emotions may manifest in criminal behavior as a form of rebellion against perceived systemic injustices (CrimPsy, 2024). In this context, poverty is not merely a lack of

income but a multidimensional condition that includes inadequate housing, poor health care, and limited social mobility.

2.7.2 Social Factors: Environment and Community Dynamics

Beyond poverty, social factors such as family structure, peer influence, and community cohesion play critical roles in shaping criminal behavior. Dysfunctional family environments—characterized by neglect, abuse, or parental criminality—are strongly associated with delinquency (CrimPsy, 2024). Communities with weak social bonds and low collective efficacy often experience higher crime rates due to diminished informal social controls (Academia.edu, 2009).

Peer influence, particularly among adolescents, can normalize criminal behavior, especially in environments where crime is prevalent and opportunities for lawful success are scarce. Cultural norms within certain subcultures may also glorify violence or deviance, further perpetuating cycles of crime (CrimPsy, 2024).

2.7.3 Economic Factors: Inequality and Unemployment

Economic inequality and unemployment are closely intertwined with crime rates. Areas with high levels of joblessness and income disparity tend to exhibit elevated crime levels, as individuals struggle to meet basic needs or aspire to lifestyles they cannot afford through legal means (CrimPsy, 2024; IOSR Journals, 2016). Economic deprivation can lead to psychological stress and a breakdown in social cohesion, both of which are conducive to criminal behavior.

Youth unemployment is particularly concerning, as it leaves young individuals vulnerable to recruitment by gangs or involvement in illicit activities. Addressing economic factors through

job creation, vocational training, and equitable resource distribution is essential for long-term crime prevention.

2.7.4 Individual Factors: Psychology and Personality

Individual psychological traits and mental health conditions also influence criminal behavior. Traits such as impulsivity, aggression, and lack of empathy are commonly associated with criminal tendencies (CrimPsy, 2024). Disorders like antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) exacerbate these behaviors, making rehabilitation more challenging.

Exposure to trauma, especially in childhood, can significantly impact psychological development and increase the likelihood of criminal activity. Cognitive distortions and emotional dysregulation further contribute to impulsive and violent behavior (PoliceOfficer.org, 2024). While these factors are often shaped by social and economic conditions, they also reflect the unique psychological makeup of individuals.

While poverty is undeniably a major driver of crime, it operates within a broader matrix of social, economic, and individual factors. Effective crime prevention strategies must therefore adopt a holistic approach—addressing poverty through social welfare programs, strengthening community structures, promoting economic equity, and providing mental health support. Only by acknowledging and tackling the multifaceted nature of crime can societies hope to reduce its prevalence and foster safer, more inclusive communities.

2.8 Gaps in Literature

Public perception of how poverty influences youth criminal behaviour in Benin City has been the focus of several empirical investigations, yet key areas remain underexplored. First, most local studies quantify the prevalence of poverty and its correlation with crime without examining how

residents interpret these links. For instance, Longe and Omigie (2024) report a 79.4% prevalence of poverty among Benin City youths and connect this to increased offending, but they do not probe whether the public views poverty itself—or related factors such as hunger or lack of opportunity—as the primary catalyst for crime.

Second, research on community perceptions in Benin City emphasizes trust in policing or vigilante groups rather than poverty's role in criminality. Omoruyi and Olaniyan (2025) explore attitudes toward vigilante effectiveness, while Ichekejournal (2021) examines views on police performance in kidnapping cases. Neither study systematically asks residents to attribute causes of youth crime to economic deprivation, leaving a gap in understanding the weight the public assigns to poverty compared with peer influence, family breakdown, or moral values.

Third, methodological limitations restrict depth of insight into public beliefs. Quantitative surveys dominate, capturing broad trends but offering little nuance about why individuals hold certain views or how narratives about poverty circulate in different social groups. Fadiran's (2025) content analysis of broadcast media highlights sensational crime framing, yet there is no qualitative follow-up to explore how media exposure shapes residents' opinions about poverty's influence on youth delinquency.

Fourth, demographic diversity in perceptions remains largely unexamined. Existing studies rarely disaggregate data by gender, age cohort, education level, or income bracket when assessing causal attributions. As a result, we lack clarity on whether, for example, older adults are more inclined than youths to blame poverty, or if higher-educated residents discount economic explanations in favour of dispositional attributions.

Fifth, theoretical engagement with perception formation is limited. While Halsey and White (2008) identify media framing and personal experience as drivers of public attitudes toward youth crime, local research in Benin City has not systematically applied attribution theory, cultivation theory, or moral panic frameworks to analyse how people construct causal narratives about poverty and crime.

Sixth, there is an absence of longitudinal or comparative studies. No research tracks shifts in public perception over time, despite evolving economic conditions and crime patterns in Benin City. Similarly, comparative analyses with other Nigerian cities or regions are missing, precluding insights into whether perceptions in Benin City are unique or part of broader national trends (Egbe & Lamidi, 2021).

Finally, youth voices are marginal in the literature on public perception. Although youth experiences appear in poverty and crime prevalence studies, few projects engage young people as active informants reflecting on how poverty shapes their own choices or how they perceive community attitudes toward their conduct.

Addressing these gaps requires mixed-method, longitudinal, and comparative research designs that integrate qualitative interviews, focus groups, and theoretical lenses to unpack how diverse Benin City residents attribute youth criminal behaviour to poverty and related social factors.

2.9 Summary of literature review

Public perception of how poverty drives youth crime in Benin City has been intermittently documented but rarely synthesized. Empirical studies reveal a strong association between lived poverty and offending: Longe and Omigie (2024) found that 79.4% of local youths experience multidimensional poverty and hunger, a reality many residents link directly to survival-driven

crimes such as theft and burglary. Despite this perception, few studies ask citizens explicitly whether they view poverty itself as the primary catalyst for delinquency, rather than a background condition among other risk factors.

Survey-based research on public attitudes tends to focus on law-enforcement efficacy rather than causal attributions. Omoruyi and Olaniyan (2025) assess beliefs about vigilante groups' crime-preventive roles but do not explore whether respondents see poverty reduction as equally or more important. Similarly, Ichekejournal (2021) documents widespread distrust in police handling of kidnappings but stops short of examining whether residents attribute youth offending to economic hardship or to moral failings. This narrow framing leaves a gap in understanding the weight the public assigns to poverty relative to social disintegration or peer influence.

Media studies suggest that broadcast crime coverage shapes simplistic causal beliefs. Fadiran (2025) demonstrates that sensational reporting in Benin City often emphasizes violent or moral narratives, downplaying structural drivers like poverty. Cultivation theory predicts that heavy exposure to such framing leads audiences to overestimate the role of individual pathology and underestimate socioeconomic determinants (Gerbner et al., 2002). Yet no locally grounded work has combined media-content analysis with surveys of viewers' attributions regarding poverty and crime.

Broader literature on public perceptions highlights demographic divergences in causal attributions. Halsey and White's (2008) review finds that higher-educated individuals are more likely to make external (situational) attributions for youth crime, while less-educated citizens default to internal (dispositional) explanations (Weiner, 1985). In Benin City, however, there is no disaggregated data showing whether age, gender, or income affect beliefs about poverty's influence—a notable omission given the city's socioeconomic diversity.

Although residents of Benin City routinely observe that poverty and hunger push youths toward criminal coping strategies, the literature lacks systematic, mixed-methods studies capturing these perceptions. Existing research privileges evaluations of policing and vigilante action, neglects the interactive role of media framing, and fails to explore demographic variation in attribution patterns. Addressing these gaps is essential for aligning policy interventions with public beliefs about poverty reduction as a crime-prevention strategy

2.10 Review of relevant Theories

Strain Theory and Social Disorganization Theory remain highly relevant in explaining modern youth crime rates, especially in urban and economically disadvantaged communities. Here's how each theory applies today:

Strain Theory and Modern Youth Crime

Strain Theory, particularly in its modern form as General Strain Theory (GST), continues to be a powerful lens for understanding youth crime. According to Agnew (2006), GST identifies three major types of strain that can lead to delinquency:

- Failure to achieve positively valued goals (e.g., academic success, financial stability)
- Removal of positive stimuli (e.g., loss of a loved one, eviction)
- Presentation of negative stimuli (e.g., abuse, discrimination)

In today's context, many youths face intense academic pressure, social exclusion, and economic hardship. These strains are amplified by social media comparisons, unstable family environments, and limited access to mental health support. Studies show that such stressors are positively correlated with various forms of youth deviance, including truancy, drug use, and theft.

Importantly, GST has been applied to diverse youth populations—including street youth, college students, and marginalized ethnic groups—demonstrating its broad applicability in explaining modern crime patterns.

Social Disorganization Theory and Youth Crime Today

Social Disorganization Theory links high crime rates to neighborhood-level factors such as poverty, residential instability, and ethnic heterogeneity. These conditions weaken informal social controls—like community supervision and collective efficacy—which are essential for preventing youth crime (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003).

Modern urban neighborhoods with high turnover and limited resources often lack the cohesion needed to monitor and guide young people. As a result, delinquent behaviors can become normalized and culturally transmitted across generations. Even when the population changes, crime rates in these areas tend to remain high, suggesting that the environment itself perpetuates youth offending.

Recent research emphasizes the role of community-level interventions—such as improving education, promoting social integration, and strengthening neighborhood ties—as effective strategies to reduce youth crime rooted in social disorganization.

Both Strain Theory and Social Disorganization Theory offer compelling explanations for the persistence of youth crime in modern society. Strain Theory highlights the psychological and emotional toll of unmet aspirations, while Social Disorganization Theory underscores the structural breakdown of communities. Together, they suggest that addressing youth crime requires not only punitive measures but also systemic reforms that reduce strain and rebuild social cohesion.

Public perception of how poverty fuels youth criminality in Benin City can only be understood by examining both traditional criminological explanations of offending and social-psychological theories of belief formation. Strain and anomie perspectives argue that economic deprivation itself pressures marginalized youths toward illegitimate means of achievement, while social disorganization and opportunity theories locate crime in the breakdown of neighborhood controls and the emergence of illicit markets. Learning and control theories emphasize the role of peer networks and weakened social bonds in transmitting or deterring crime, and rational choice and routine activities frameworks highlight how poverty constrains risk calculations and guardianship. Finally, attribution, media framing, and moral panic models explain why residents emphasize—or downplay—poverty’s impact when accounting for youth crime.

Robert Merton’s strain theory posits that society’s emphasis on material success, coupled with unequal access to legitimate means, generates pressure—or “strain”—that can lead to deviance (Merton, 1938). In Benin City, where many youths lack stable jobs or educational credentials, observers may readily link theft or robbery to anomie induced by blocked opportunities. Agnew’s (1992) general strain theory extends this by identifying additional stressors—such as family conflict or hunger—that exacerbate frustration and undermine coping, thereby making poverty a multifaceted catalyst for delinquency rather than a singular cause.

Social disorganization theory shifts focus from individual psyches to neighborhood structures. Shaw and McKay (1942) demonstrated that communities marked by poverty, residential mobility, and institutional decay lose informal social controls, creating fertile ground for crime. In Benin City’s slum districts—where schools, churches, and youth groups may be under-resourced—residents often perceive crime as an endemic feature of a disordered environment. Cloward and

Ohlin's (1960) differential opportunity theory complements this by showing how deprived areas spawn alternative, illegitimate opportunity structures, such as gangs or black markets, which local youths may view as viable avenues for status and income.

Learning and control theories illuminate mechanisms by which poverty's pressures translate into criminal acts. Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory holds that delinquent behavior is learned through intimate peer relations, so that in impoverished neighborhoods where criminal definitions dominate, youths internalize pro-crime norms (Sutherland, 1947). Conversely, Hirschi's (1969) social control theory argues that strong attachments to family, school, and community inhibit offending; poverty can weaken these bonds—by forcing parents into long work hours or undermining school attendance—thus eroding the informal restraints that typically deter youths from crime.

Subcultural theories further nuance these processes. Albert Cohen (1955) observed that economically marginalized youths may form oppositional subcultures that invert mainstream values, celebrating toughness or disrespect for authority. In Benin City, some residents interpret youth gangs as adaptive subcultural responses to systemic marginalization rather than mere moral failings. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) similarly describe how distinct criminal, conflict, or retreatist subcultures emerge based on available illegitimate opportunities.

Rational choice and routine activities theories add environmental and decision-making dimensions. Cornish and Clarke (1986) argue that offenders, even under economic duress, engage in cost-benefit analyses—so poverty increases offending when the perceived rewards of crime outweigh anticipated sanctions. Routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979)

maintains that crime occurs when motivated offenders encounter suitable targets in the absence of capable guardians. Residents who focus on street lighting, policing, and community watch programs subscribe to this pragmatic framework, seeing poverty-driven absenteeism (parents at work, homes left unlocked) as creating crime opportunities.

Understanding public perceptions requires social-psychological attribution theories. Weiner's (1985) model differentiates internal attributions (blaming youths' character) from external attributions (blaming situational factors like poverty). In Benin City, individuals with higher education or media literacy often make more external attributions, emphasizing poverty's structural role, whereas others default to dispositional explanations. Media framing and cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 2002) further demonstrate that repeated sensational coverage of youth crime without context cultivates simplistic causal beliefs, leading some citizens to overstate moral deviance and understate socioeconomic drivers.

Moral panic and labeling theories explain how certain youth crimes become symbols of broader social anxieties. Cohen (1972) shows that when a moral panic captures public attention—such as heightened alarm over “Yahoo boys” (internet fraudsters)—poverty's influence is often overshadowed by demonizing rhetoric. Becker's (1963) labeling theory then suggests that youths stigmatized as “criminals” internalize these labels, reinforcing offending cycles and shaping community perceptions that crime is intrinsic to particular social groups.

Integrating these frameworks reveals that public perceptions in Benin City are not monolithic. Some residents emphasize poverty's structural pressures (strain, disorganization), others highlight cultural or individual factors (learning, character), and still others focus on opportunity and environment (routine activities, rational choice). Simultaneously, attribution biases, media consumption, and moral panics filter which explanations resonate. A comprehensive study of

public beliefs must therefore measure both objective neighborhood conditions and the cognitive frameworks through which locals interpret poverty and youth crime.

2.11 Theoretical Frameworks Explaining Public Perception of Poverty's Influence on Youth Criminality

Understanding public perception of the influence of poverty on youth criminal behaviour requires a multidisciplinary approach that draws from criminology, sociology, psychology, and media studies. While criminological theories explain how poverty may contribute to youth offending, social-psychological and media theories help unpack how the public interprets and attributes causes to such behaviour. Together, these frameworks offer insight into both the reality of youth crime and the beliefs that shape societal responses to it.

1. Strain Theory

Strain Theory, originally developed by Merton (1938), posits that individuals engage in criminal behaviour when they are unable to achieve socially approved goals through legitimate means. In the context of youth poverty, this theory suggests that economic deprivation creates pressure that may lead young people to commit crimes as alternative means of survival or success. Agnew's (2001) General Strain Theory expands this idea by identifying specific strains—such as financial hardship, family instability, and social marginalization—that increase the likelihood of delinquency. Public perception often aligns with this theory when people view youth crime as a consequence of systemic inequality and blocked opportunities.

2. Social Disorganization Theory

Social Disorganization Theory, developed by Shaw and McKay (1942), explains how poverty undermines community structures and informal social controls. In impoverished neighborhoods,

weakened institutions, lack of supervision, and limited access to resources contribute to higher rates of youth crime. Residents may perceive these areas as breeding grounds for delinquency, reinforcing the belief that poverty directly influences criminal behaviour. This theory helps explain why public concern often focuses on “high-crime” zones associated with economic deprivation.

3. Social Learning Theory

Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory emphasizes that behaviour is learned through observation and imitation. In environments where poverty is prevalent, youths may be exposed to criminal role models or peer groups that normalize deviant behaviour. The public may interpret youth crime as a learned response to impoverished surroundings, especially when they observe generational cycles of offending. This perception supports the idea that poverty not only creates conditions for crime but also fosters cultural transmission of criminal norms.

4. Attribution Theory

Attribution Theory, developed by Weiner (1985), explores how individuals explain the causes of behaviour. People tend to make either internal (dispositional) or external (situational) attributions. In the context of youth crime, those who view poverty as a root cause are making situational attributions, while others may blame personal failings, such as laziness or lack of discipline. Research shows that education level and socioeconomic status influence attribution style—more educated individuals are likely to recognize structural factors like poverty (White & Halsey, 2009). This theory is crucial for understanding why public opinion varies widely on the issue.

5. Media Framing and Cultivation Theory

Media plays a powerful role in shaping public perception. Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) suggests that the way media presents information influences how audiences interpret it. If youth crime is framed as a moral failure rather than a socioeconomic issue, the public may overlook poverty's role. Cultivation Theory (Gerbner et al., 2002) adds that repeated exposure to sensationalized crime stories can distort viewers' understanding, leading them to overestimate the prevalence of youth violence and underestimate structural causes like poverty. These theories explain how media narratives contribute to public misconceptions or oversimplifications.

6. Labeling Theory

Labeling Theory, introduced by Becker (1963), argues that societal reactions to deviance can reinforce criminal identities. When poor youths are labeled as "criminals" or "troublemakers," they may internalize these identities, leading to further offending. Public perception often reflects this dynamic, especially when poverty is seen not as a cause but as a marker of deviance. This theory highlights the stigmatizing effect of public discourse and its potential to perpetuate youth crime.

The public perception of poverty's influence on youth criminal behaviour is shaped by a complex interplay of theoretical frameworks. Strain, social disorganization, and social learning theories explain how poverty contributes to crime, while attribution, media framing, and labeling theories reveal how the public interprets and responds to these behaviours. Understanding these perspectives is essential for developing informed policies and public education strategies that address both the causes of youth crime and the beliefs that shape societal reactions.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the procedure used in conducting this study, under the following sub-heads:

3.1 Research design

3.2 Population of the study

3.3 Sample size

3.4 Sampling procedure

3.5 Sampling techniques

3.6 Research instrument

3.7 Validity of the instrument

3.8 Reliability of the instrument

3.9 Method of data collection

3.10 Method of data analysis

3.1 Research Design

A cross-sectional descriptive survey was conducted, utilizing quantitative techniques to capture a broad snapshot of public opinion (Fadiran, 2025).

3.2 Population of the study

The study population comprises adults (18+) across the three local government areas of Benin City: Oredo and ikpoba okha . The Target population within these local government areas were residence of these local government areas who has stayed for a period of two years long enough to be able to understand the terrain of the areas. This is irrespective of their ethnic affiliation, religion affiliation educational attainment, socio-economic background or sex.

3.3 Sample size

In term of the sample size, 100 respondent were selected for the study across the target area, that is 30 respondent in Egor, 30 respondent in Ikpoba okha, and 40 respondent in Oredo . The Oredo respondent were more than others because Oredo has more population than the other two local government areas

3.4 Sampling Procedure

To ensure that respondent were selected across the three targeted local government for the study i.e Egor, Oredo and Ikpoba okha . In doing this the proportional sampling frame was use in selecting the respondent in each of the strata proportional to the population of each local government

3.5 Sampling techniques

The study employed a multi stage approach in selection of respondent

The first stage through the use of purposive sampling method, purposively targeted individuals that are 18years and above from among the entire population in the target area.

The second stage : Stratified random sampling to ensure representation across the targeted local government.

Final stage , In the third stage in each of the local governments so selected for the study the total number of the respondent were selected using the accidental sampling method. This method enable the study to select respondent that were available until the last respondent was eventually selected.

3.6 Research instrument

The instrument for data collection was structured questionnaire which was divided into four section with section A focus on Demographic data. Section B focus on the perception of the residents of Benin city on poverty as a major contributing factor to youth involvement in crime . Section C focus on factors that contribute to youth involvement in crime . Section D focus on the correlation with support for social welfare versus primitive crime prevention strategies.

For detailed analysis the questionnaire consisted of close end , open ended and classification questions.

For those that were literate copies were administered to them ,while those that are not literate were assisted which was later retrieved from them .

3.7 Validity of the Instrument

The validity of the data collection instrument was given necessary attention to ensure that the instrument (questionnaire) measured the importance and objectives of the study. Therefore, The

validity was adopted with the help of the project supervisor and experts in the field of Development and criminology. And their evaluation declare the research instrument to have content validity.

3.8 Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability of the instrument was tested using the test-retest method within an interval of two weeks. After two weeks, the same instrument was re-administered to the same students to determine the consistency in their response. Cronbach Alpha reliability statistics was used to confirm the instrument reliability .

3.9 Method of Data Collection

The study use the survey method of data collection specifically the one time survey method which enabled the study to collect information from a subset of the target population once and for all without having to go back to same population for another round of data collection.

3.10 Method of Data Analysis

Quantitative data was be analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means) and inferential tests (Chi-square) to explore relationships between perceptions and demographics. Qualitative responses from open-ended items was coded thematically.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Data presentation

Item A : Percentage distribution of respondents by Demographic characteristics

Item	Option	Frequency	% of respondents
1. Age	18–25	45	45%
	26–35	35	35%
	36– 45	15	15%
	46 and above	5	5%
		100	100%

Gender	Male	54	54%
	Female	46	46%
		100	100%
2. Education	No formal education	6	6%
	Primary school	10	10%
	Secondary school	44	44%
	Tertiary	40	40%
		100	100%
3. Monthly income (₦)	Below 50,000	38	38%
	50,000- 100,000	32	32%
	100,001–150,000	15	15%
	150,001–200,00	10	10%
	Above 200–000	5	5%
		100	100%

Source : Researcher 2025 field work

Interpretation of Demographic Data

1. Age Distribution

Dominance of Youth (18–35 years): A combined **75%** of respondents fall within the **18–35 age bracket**, This is the prime age range for economic activity, social mobility, and unfortunately, vulnerability to criminal influences.

This age group is most affected by unemployment, peer pressure, and economic hardship. Their overrepresentation in the sample strengthens the relevance of the study to youth crime, as they are statistically more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of urban crime.

2. Gender Composition

Slight Male Majority (54%): The gender split is relatively balanced, but the slight male dominance is significant. Males are disproportionately represented in crime statistics globally and locally.

Male perspectives may reflect firsthand experiences or peer observations of criminal behavior, making their responses crucial for understanding the gendered dynamics of poverty-driven crime.

3. Educational Attainment

High Literacy Levels (84% with Secondary or Tertiary Education): Despite economic challenges, a large portion of respondents have formal education, with **44% completing secondary school** and **40% attaining tertiary education**.

This suggests that education alone may not be sufficient to deter youth crime if economic opportunities are lacking. It also indicates that respondents are likely to be informed and capable of articulating nuanced views on poverty and crime.

4. Monthly Household Income

Low-Income Majority (70% earn ₦100,000 or less): With **38% earning below ₦50,000** , the data reveals a population living near or below the poverty line.

Financial hardship is a dominant reality for most respondents. This economic strain is a critical factor in understanding motivations for crime, especially theft, fraud, and gang involvement. The small percentage (5%) earning above ₦200,000 highlights stark income inequality, which can fuel resentment and social tension.

The demographic profile paints a picture of young, low-income, moderately educated individuals, many of whom are navigating a fragile socioeconomic landscape. These conditions, youthful energy, limited income, and unmet aspirations, create fertile ground for criminal behavior, especially when social support systems are weak.

Item B : The extent at which residents of Benin City perceive poverty as a major factor contributing to youth involvement in criminality.

Percentage Distribution of respondents view

Item	Option	Frequency	% of Respondents
1. Poverty as reason for youth crime	Yes	85	85%
	No	10	10%
	Do not know	5	5%
		100	100
1b. Reason for yes	Poverty limits choices and pushes youth towards crime		
2. Extent of belief	Very high extent	60	60%
	High extent	25	25%
	Low extent	10	10%
	Very low extent	5	5%
		100	100

3. Ranking of factors	Poverty (1st), unemployment (2nd), peer group (3rd), Family background (4th)		
4. Poverty leads to desperation	Yes	88	88%
	No	8	8%
	Do not know	4	4%
		100	100%
5. Poverty reduction helps	Yes	80	80%
	No	12	12%
	Do not know	8	8%
		100	100
5b. Reason for Yes	Empowerment and education reduce criminal		

	tendencies		
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Source researcher 2025 field work

Interpretation: Poverty and Youth Crime Perception in Benin City

1. Poverty as a Root Cause of Youth Crime

A striking 85% of respondents affirm that poverty is a major reason why youth engage in criminal behavior. This overwhelming consensus reflects a deep societal awareness of the economic pressures facing young people.

The qualitative response encapsulates a widely held belief that crime is often a survival strategy, not merely a moral failing.

Only 10% disagreed, and 5% were uncertain, suggesting that denial or ambiguity about poverty’s role is minimal.

2. Strength of Belief in Poverty-Crime Link

60% of respondents rated the link between poverty and youth crime at a “very high extent”, with another 25% choosing “high extent.”

This intensity of belief suggests that residents are not only aware of poverty’s impact but may have witnessed or experienced its consequences firsthand.

3. Ranking of Contributing Factors

When asked to rank causes of youth crime, respondents placed:

Poverty first

Unemployment second

Peer group influence third

Family background fourth

This hierarchy reveals a structural understanding of crime: economic deprivation (poverty and unemployment) is seen as more influential than social or familial factors.

It also implies that interventions targeting economic empowerment may be more effective than those focused solely on behavioral or family counseling.

4. Poverty and Desperation

An overwhelming 88% agree that poverty leads to desperation, which in turn drives youth toward crime.

This perception underscores the psychological toll of poverty not just material lack, but emotional strain, hopelessness, and risk-taking behavior.

The small minority (8% No, 4% Don't know) suggests that desperation is a nearly universal experience among low-income youth in Benin City.

5. Belief in Poverty Reduction as a Solution

80% of respondents believe that poverty reduction programmes can help curb youth involvement in crime.

The rationale reflects a forward-looking mindset, where crime prevention is tied to opportunity creation.

This belief supports policy shifts toward social welfare and job creation, rather than punitive measures alone.

The remaining 12% who disagreed and 8% who were unsure may reflect skepticism about government effectiveness or past failures of such programmes.

The data reveals a highly informed and economically conscious population, with a clear understanding of the structural roots of crime.

Residents of Benin City do not view youth crime as random or purely moral — they see it as a predictable outcome of poverty, desperation, and lack of opportunity.

This perception aligns with global criminological theories and supports evidence-based interventions such as:

Job creation

Vocational training

Social safety nets

Community empowerment

Item C

6. Contributing factors	Unemployment, peer pressure, poor education, lack of parental guidance.
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Interpretation: Drivers of Youth Criminal Behavior in Benin City

6. Contributing Factors: A Triad of Vulnerability

The open-ended responses reveal a multi-dimensional understanding of youth crime. These factors span:

Economic hardship (Unemployment): Youths without jobs or income are more likely to seek alternative, often illegal, means of survival. This aligns with global criminological theories that link economic deprivation to increased criminality.

Social pressure (Peer influence): Young people are highly susceptible to group dynamics, especially in environments where crime is normalized or rewarded.

Educational gaps (Poor education): Limited access to quality education reduces awareness of legal consequences and restricts legitimate opportunities.

Family dysfunction (Lack of parental guidance): Weak family structures fail to instill discipline, values, and emotional support, leaving youth vulnerable to external influences.

Together, these factors form a vicious cycle: poverty leads to poor education, which leads to unemployment, which fosters desperation and susceptibility to peer pressure.

7. Social Factors

Factors	Frequency	% of Respondents
Peer group influence	70	70%
Family background	65	65%

Lack of community support	50	50%
Other influences (e.g drug abuse , poor governance)		

Source researcher 2025 field work

The structured responses show high agreement on key social contributors:

Peer group influence (70%): This is the most cited factor, indicating that social circles are powerful incubators of criminal behavior. In communities where crime is prevalent, peer groups often serve as gateways to gangs, theft, and drug-related offenses.

Family background (65%): Dysfunctional homes — marked by poverty, abuse, or neglect — create emotional instability and weaken moral foundations.

Lack of community support (50%): The absence of mentorship, youth programs, and safe recreational spaces leaves young people idle and disconnected, increasing their risk of criminal engagement.

Item	Response	Frequency	% of Respondent
7b most influencing factors	Per group influence	45	45%

7b. Most Influential Factor: Peer Group Influence (45%)

Nearly half of respondents identified peer group influence as the most powerful driver of youth crime.

This underscores the social contagion effect where behaviors, attitudes, and norms are transmitted through close-knit groups.

In urban settings like Benin City, peer groups often substitute for family and community, especially when those institutions are weak or absent.

Youths may engage in crime not out of necessity alone, but to gain acceptance, status, or protection within their peer networks.

This finding suggests that interventions must target group dynamics, not just individual behavior. Programs that promote positive peer leadership, mentorship, and group-based vocational training could be more effective than isolated punitive measures.

Residents of Benin City perceive youth crime as a socially embedded phenomenon, not merely a personal choice.

The interplay of economic deprivation, social pressure, and institutional failure creates a high-risk environment for youth.

The dominance of peer group influence highlights the need for community-based solutions, such as:

Youth clubs and safe spaces

Peer mentoring programs

Group-targeted job creation and education initiatives

This section makes it clear: crime prevention must be holistic, addressing not just poverty, but the social ecosystems that shape youth behavior.

Item D: Percentage distribution of respondents view on public perceptions correlation with support for social welfare versus punitive crime prevention strategies

Item	Option	% of Respondents	Frequency
8. Support for poverty reduction programmes	Yes	82%	82
	No	10%	10
	Do not know	8%	8
		100	100
Why	“Crime is often a survival strategy in poverty.”		
8b. Job creation effectiveness	Extremely effective	65%	65
	Somewhat effective	25%	25
	Not effective	10%	10
		100%	100
9. Poverty reduction reduces crime	Yes	84%	84
	No	10%	10
	Do not know	6%	6
		100%	100

Item	Option	% of Respondents	Frequency
Why	“Addressing root causes like poverty prevents desperation and criminal choices.”		

Source researcher 2025 field work

Interpretation: Public Support for Social Welfare in Crime Prevention

1. Overwhelming Support for Poverty Reduction Programmes (82%)

A commanding 82% of respondents support government initiatives aimed at reducing poverty as a strategy to prevent crime.

This reflects a clear public endorsement of social welfare over punitive measures, suggesting that residents view crime not as a moral failing but as a symptom of economic deprivation.

The justification reveals a compassionate and systemic understanding of criminal behavior. It implies that many youths are driven to crime by necessity, not malice.

2. Belief in Job Creation as a Crime Prevention Tool

65% of respondents believe job creation programmes are extremely effective in reducing youth crime, with another 25% rating them as somewhat effective.

This suggests that the public sees economic empowerment as a direct deterrent to criminal activity, especially among youth who are idle or underemployed.

Only 10% view job creation as ineffective, possibly reflecting skepticism about implementation or past failures of government programs.

3. Strong Belief That Poverty Reduction Will Lower Crime Rates (84%)

A near-unanimous 84% of respondents agree that addressing poverty would significantly reduce youth crime in Benin City.

The rationale, reinforces the idea that crime is a consequence of unmet needs, not inherent deviance.

This belief aligns with global criminological models such as strain theory, which posits that individuals resort to crime when legitimate means of achieving societal goals are blocked.

Strategic Insights

Public Preference for Preventive Over Punitive Measures

The data shows a clear public preference for preventive, welfare-based strategies rather than punitive or enforcement-heavy approaches.

Residents believe that crime prevention begins with economic justice, not just policing or incarceration.

Shift in Crime Policy Paradigm

These perceptions suggest a paradigm shift in how crime should be addressed:

From reactive punishment to proactive support

From criminalization of poverty to empowerment of the poor

This shift demands that policymakers prioritize:

Job creation

Vocational training

Youth entrepreneurship

Community development

Public Mandate for Inclusive Governance

The strong support for poverty reduction as a crime prevention strategy provides a public mandate for inclusive, equity-driven governance.

It also implies that punitive-only approaches may lack legitimacy among the population, especially if they ignore the socioeconomic roots of crime.

Residents of Benin City overwhelmingly perceive poverty as the engine behind youth crime and believe that social welfare interventions, especially job creation, are the most effective tools for prevention. This data provides a compelling case for reorienting crime policy toward economic empowerment, community support, and systemic reform.

4.2 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first concern of this study was that the understanding the demographic landscape of a population is central to diagnosing the root causes of social issues such as youth criminality. In Benin City, Nigeria, the interpretation of demographic data from this survey reveals a compelling narrative: crime among youth is not an isolated behavioral anomaly but a predictable outcome of structural vulnerabilities. The data paints a portrait of a population dominated by young, low-income, moderately educated individuals, many of whom are navigating a fragile socioeconomic terrain. This discussion explores the implications of age, gender, education, and income distribution in relation to youth crime and supported by comparative insights.

The survey reveals that 75% of respondents fall within the 18–35 age bracket, with a mean age of 28.9 years. This age group represents the prime window for economic productivity, social mobility, and identity formation. However, it is also the demographic most vulnerable to criminal influences. This is in agreement with Longe & Omigie (2024) that youth in Benin City are disproportionately affected by unemployment and poverty, which often push them toward deviant survival strategies. The overrepresentation of this age group in the sample strengthens the relevance of the study, as it aligns with national crime statistics that identify young adults as both the primary perpetrators and victims of urban crime. Comparatively, similar studies in Lagos (Adebayo, 2022) and Port Harcourt (Eze & Nwankwo, 2021) show that youth crime peaks between ages 20–35, reinforcing the notion that economic marginalization during early adulthood is a consistent predictor of criminal behavior across Nigerian cities.

The survey indicates a slight male majority (54%), a statistically significant detail given the global and local overrepresentation of males in crime statistics. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023) reports that over 80% of convicted offenders in Nigeria are male, a trend attributed to societal expectations, risk-taking behavior, and exposure to street-level peer networks. In Benin City, males are more likely to be involved in gang activity, armed robbery, and drug-related offenses. This gendered pattern suggests that male respondents may offer firsthand insights into the dynamics of youth crime, either through personal experience or peer observation. Their perspectives are crucial for understanding the gendered dimensions of poverty-driven criminality, which often go underexplored in policy discourse. Despite economic challenges, 84% of respondents have attained at least secondary education, with 44% completing secondary school and 40% reaching tertiary levels. This high literacy rate challenges the assumption that crime is rooted in ignorance or lack of schooling. Instead, it reveals a paradox: educated youth

are still vulnerable to crime when economic opportunities are scarce. Mbah (2001) argues that education without empowerment breeds frustration and rebellion, a sentiment echoed in the survey findings. The data suggests that while respondents are capable of articulating nuanced views on poverty and crime, their education has not translated into economic security. This disconnect between educational attainment and employability underscores the need for reforms that link learning to labor market outcomes.

The income data is perhaps the most telling. 70% of respondents earn ₦100,000 or less, with 38% earning below ₦50,000 and a mean income of ₦89,000. These figures place the majority of the population near or below the poverty line, especially in an urban center like Benin City where the cost of living continues to rise. According to Statista (2023), Nigeria's urban poverty rate exceeds 40%, and youth are disproportionately affected. The small percentage (5%) earning above ₦200,000 highlights stark income inequality, which can fuel resentment, social tension, and a sense of injustice—factors known to exacerbate criminal behavior. This economic strain is a critical factor in understanding motivations for crime, particularly theft, fraud, and gang involvement. As Bello et al. (2023) note, crime hotspots in Benin City correlate strongly with areas of high unemployment and low income. The demographic profile emerging from this data is clear: young, low-income, moderately educated individuals navigating a precarious socioeconomic landscape. These conditions youthful energy, limited income, and unmet aspirations create fertile ground for criminal behavior, especially when social support systems are weak or absent. It aligns with global criminological theories such as **strain** theory (Merton, 1938) and developmental criminology, which emphasize the role of structural deprivation in shaping deviant behavior.

The demographic data from Benin City offers a sobering yet insightful lens into the drivers of youth criminality. Age, gender, education, and income are not isolated variables, they are interconnected determinants that shape the lived experiences of young people. The findings underscore the need for multi-sectoral interventions that address economic empowerment, educational reform, and community support. Only by confronting the structural roots of crime can policymakers hope to build a safer, more equitable future for the youth of Benin City. The relationship between poverty and youth criminality has long been a subject of sociological inquiry, and the findings from Benin City offer a compelling, data-driven affirmation of this link. The interpretation of survey results reveals a population that is not only aware of the socioeconomic roots of crime but also deeply affected by them. This essay explores the nuanced perceptions of residents regarding poverty as a driver of youth crime, highlighting the structural, psychological, and policy dimensions of the issue, and situating the findings within broader criminological discourse.

A resounding 85% of respondents affirm that poverty is a major reason why youth engage in criminal behavior. This overwhelming consensus reflects a societal consciousness shaped by lived experience, not abstract theory. This perception aligns with strain theory (Merton, 1938), which posits that individuals resort to deviance when legitimate means of achieving societal goals are blocked. In Benin City, where unemployment and economic stagnation are prevalent, youth often face limited pathways to success, making crime a rational alternative. Longe & Omigie (2024) reinforce this view, noting that “hunger and hopelessness are the breeding grounds of youth criminality” in the region. Comparatively, similar studies in Lagos (Adebayo, 2022) and Nairobi (Mutua & Wanjiru, 2021) show that urban youth across Africa perceive

poverty as the primary catalyst for criminal behavior, suggesting that this is not a localized anomaly but a continental pattern.

The intensity of belief is further underscored by the 60% who rated the link as ‘very high’ and the mean score of 3.4 on a 4-point scale. This strong collective conviction indicates that residents are not merely speculating. They are speaking from direct observation and experience. This depth of belief suggests that poverty is not just a contributing factor, it is the dominant driver of youth criminality. The data resonates with findings from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021), which reported that economic hardship is the leading cause of youth involvement in crime across sub-Saharan Africa. When asked to rank causes of youth crime, respondents placed poverty first, followed by unemployment, peer group influence, and family background. This hierarchy reveals a structural understanding of crime, where economic deprivation is seen as more influential than social or familial factors. Such a ranking challenges traditional criminological models that emphasize family dysfunction or peer pressure. Instead, it supports macro-level interventions focused on economic reform. Bello et al. (2023), using geoinformatics to map crime hotspots in Benin City, found that areas with the highest poverty and unemployment rates also had the highest youth crime rates—validating the public’s prioritization of economic factors.

An overwhelming 88% of respondents agree that poverty leads to desperation, which in turn drives youth toward crime. This perception highlights the psychological dimensions of poverty not just material lack, but emotional strain, hopelessness, and risk-taking behavior. Desperation manifests in impulsivity, aggression, and a diminished sense of future orientation. Mbah (2001) argues that “poverty-induced frustration often leads to rebellion and deviance,” a sentiment

echoed in the survey's findings. The minimal dissent (8% No, 4% Don't know) suggests that desperation is a nearly universal experience among low-income youth in Benin City. The belief that poverty reduction can curb youth crime is held by 80% of respondents, with the rationale reflecting a forward-looking, solution-oriented mindset. This belief supports policy shifts toward social welfare and job creation, rather than punitive measures alone. Global evidence supports this view. Brazil's "Bolsa Família" program and South Africa's youth employment initiatives have shown that targeted poverty alleviation can significantly reduce crime rates (World Bank, 2020). The 12% who disagreed and 8% unsure may reflect skepticism about government capacity, corruption, or past failures of similar programs.

The interpretation of poverty and youth crime perception in Benin City offers a powerful indictment of structural neglect and a hopeful blueprint for reform. The data reveals a population that understands the economic and psychological roots of crime, and that supports preventive, welfare-based solutions over punitive responses. Policymakers must heed this call, investing in inclusive development and community resilience to break the cycle of poverty and crime. Only then can Benin City move toward a future where youth are not driven to crime by desperation, but empowered by opportunity. The phenomenon of youth criminality in Benin City, Nigeria, is not merely a product of individual deviance but a reflection of deeper structural, social, and cultural vulnerabilities. The interpretation of survey data from residents reveals a nuanced and multi-dimensional understanding of the factors that drive young people into criminal behavior. These insights, grounded in both open-ended and structured responses, underscore the urgent need for holistic interventions that address the root causes of crime rather than its symptoms. The open-ended responses from residents highlighting unemployment, peer pressure, poor education, and lack of parental guidance paint a vivid picture of the interconnected forces that shape youth

behavior. At the core lies economic hardship, with unemployment emerging as a primary driver. Youths without access to stable income or employment opportunities are more likely to seek alternative, often illegal, means of survival. This aligns with strain theory (Merton, 1938), which posits that when legitimate avenues to success are blocked, individuals may resort to deviance.

Peer pressure compounds this vulnerability. In environments where crime is normalized or even rewarded, young people are highly susceptible to group dynamics. This is particularly true in urban centers like Benin City, where informal peer networks often substitute for formal institutions. Educational gaps further exacerbate the problem. Limited access to quality education not only restricts legitimate opportunities but also diminishes awareness of legal consequences. As Longe & Omigie (2024) argue, “education without empowerment breeds frustration and rebellion,” a sentiment echoed in similar studies across Nigeria. Family dysfunction marked by poverty, abuse, or neglect, adds another layer of risk. Without strong parental guidance, youths lack the emotional stability and moral foundation necessary to resist negative influences. Together, these factors form a vicious cycle: poverty leads to poor education, which leads to unemployment, which fosters desperation and susceptibility to peer pressure.

Structured responses from the survey reveal high agreement on key social contributors to youth crime. Peer group influence (70%) stands out as the most cited factor, followed closely by family background (65%) and lack of community support (50%). These findings suggest that youth crime in Benin City is not an isolated phenomenon but a socially embedded **crisis**. Peer groups, in particular, serve as powerful incubators of criminal behavior. In communities where crime is prevalent, these groups often act as gateways to gangs, theft, and drug-related offenses. The social contagion effect where behaviors, attitudes, and norms are transmitted through close-knit

groups is especially potent in urban settings. As Bello et al. (2023) note, “peer networks in Benin City often function as alternative social institutions, shaping identity and behavior in the absence of formal support.” Family background also plays a critical role. Dysfunctional homes create emotional instability and weaken moral foundations, making youths more vulnerable to external influences. The lack of community support manifested in the absence of mentorship, youth programs, and safe recreational spaces further isolates young people, increasing their risk of criminal engagement. Other factors such as drug abuse and poor governance reflect systemic failures that compound individual vulnerabilities.

When asked to identify the most influential factor, 45% of respondents chose peer group influence. This underscores the centrality of social dynamics in shaping youth behavior. In Benin City, where family and community structures are often weak or absent, peer groups frequently substitute for these institutions. Youths may engage in crime not out of necessity alone, but to gain acceptance, status, or protection within their peer networks. This finding has profound implications for policy and intervention. It suggests that efforts to reduce youth crime must target group dynamics, not just individual behavior. Programs that promote positive peer leadership, mentorship, and group-based vocational training could be more effective than isolated punitive measures. Comparative studies in South Africa and Brazil have shown that community-based interventions such as youth clubs and peer mentoring can significantly reduce crime rates when they foster positive group identity and social cohesion.

Youth criminal behavior in Benin City is driven by a complex interplay of economic, social, and cultural factors. The survey data provides compelling evidence that poverty, peer pressure, educational gaps, and family dysfunction are not isolated issues, they are interconnected

vulnerabilities that demand systemic solutions. The public's recognition of peer group influence as the most powerful driver of crime underscores the need for group-focused, community-based interventions. Only by addressing the ecosystems of risk can policymakers hope to reduce youth crime and foster a safer, more equitable society.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary

The study conducted in Benin City offers a rich and revealing insight into how residents perceive the relationship between poverty and youth criminality. Through a combination of quantitative data and qualitative responses, the findings present a compelling narrative that positions poverty as a central driver of youth crime.

The findings revealed that: The most striking finding is that **85% of respondents** affirm poverty as a major reason why youth engage in criminal behavior. This overwhelming consensus reflects a deep societal awareness of the economic pressures facing young people. The qualitative response—“Poverty limits choices and pushes youth toward crime”—captures the essence of this belief, suggesting that crime is often a survival strategy rather than a moral failing. Only 10% disagreed, and 5% were uncertain, indicating minimal ambiguity about poverty’s role in youth criminality.

A significant 60% of respondents rated the link between poverty and youth crime at a “very high extent,” with another 25% choosing “high extent.” The mean score of 3.4 on a 4-point scale demonstrates a strong collective conviction that poverty is not merely a contributing factor but a dominant driver of youth criminality. This intensity of belief suggests that residents are not only aware of poverty’s impact but may have witnessed or experienced its consequences firsthand.

When asked to rank the causes of youth crime, respondents placed:

Poverty as the most influential factor,

Unemployment second,

Peer group influence third,

Family background fourth.

This hierarchy reveals a structural understanding of crime, where economic deprivation is seen as more influential than social or familial factors. It implies that interventions targeting economic empowerment—such as job creation and vocational training, may be more effective than those focused solely on behavioral or family counseling.

An overwhelming 88% of respondents agree that poverty leads to desperation, which in turn drives youth toward crime. This perception underscores the psychological toll of poverty, not just material lack, but emotional strain, hopelessness, and risk-taking behavior. The small minority (8% No, 4% Don't know) suggests that desperation is a nearly universal experience among low-income youth in Benin City.

A strong 80% of respondents believe that poverty reduction programmes can help curb youth involvement in crime. The rationale reflects a forward-looking mindset, where crime prevention is tied to opportunity creation. This belief supports policy shifts toward social welfare and job creation, rather than punitive measures alone. The remaining 12% who disagreed and 8% who were unsure may reflect skepticism about government effectiveness or past failures of such programmes. The data validates the hypothesis that poverty is not just a backdrop but a driving force in youth crime in Benin City. The study provides a robust foundation for rethinking crime prevention strategies in Benin City. By itemising and summarising the findings, it becomes clear that any effective approach must tackle the economic and social conditions that predispose youth

to criminal behavior. The public's perception offers not only insight but a mandate for change, one that prioritises empowerment over punishment, and opportunity over despair.

5.2 Conclusion

The results and findings from the study on poverty and youth crime perception in Benin City reveal a deeply rooted understanding among residents of the structural and socioeconomic forces that drive criminal behavior. The overwhelming consensus that poverty is a major contributor to youth crime, supported by strong belief scores and consistent ranking of economic factors, underscores the urgency of addressing deprivation not just as a social issue, but as a public safety imperative.

Respondents clearly perceive crime as a consequence of limited opportunities, emotional strain, and systemic neglect. Their support for poverty reduction programmes and job creation initiatives reflects a forward-thinking mindset that favors empowerment over punishment. The data also highlights the psychological toll of poverty, with desperation emerging as a near-universal experience among low-income youth.

Ultimately, these findings validate that youth crime in Benin City is not random or isolated, it is a predictable outcome of economic hardship, social pressure, and institutional failure. Effective crime prevention must therefore be holistic, integrating economic reform, educational access, community support, and youth-focused development strategies. This study offers a compelling mandate for policymakers to prioritize structural solutions that restore hope, dignity, and opportunity to the city's youth.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study on poverty and youth crime perception in Benin City, the following recommendations are proposed to guide policy, community action, and institutional reform. These recommendations aim to address the structural roots of youth criminality and promote sustainable, inclusive development:

1. Government and development agencies should prioritize poverty reduction initiatives that directly benefit youth. This includes conditional cash transfers, food security schemes, and subsidized housing. These programs must be transparent, inclusive, and tailored to the realities of urban poverty in Benin City.
2. Job creation must be central to crime prevention. Authorities should invest in vocational training centers, entrepreneurship hubs, and apprenticeship programs that equip youth with marketable skills. Public-private partnerships can be leveraged to create sustainable employment pipelines.
3. While many youths have formal education, the disconnect between schooling and employability must be addressed. Curriculum reform should emphasize life skills, digital literacy, and career readiness. Scholarships and school feeding programs can also reduce dropout rates among vulnerable populations.
4. governments and NGOs should develop youth clubs, mentorship networks, and safe recreational spaces to counteract peer group criminal influence. Community centers should offer counseling, conflict resolution, and leadership development programs.

5. Urban development strategies must include crime prevention components such as improved lighting, surveillance, and community policing. Slum upgrading and infrastructure investment can reduce environmental triggers of crime.
6. Family dysfunction contributes to youth vulnerability. Social welfare departments should offer parenting workshops, family mediation services, and support for single-parent households to rebuild the family unit as a protective factor.
7. Public skepticism about poverty reduction programs must be addressed through transparent implementation, regular audits, and citizen feedback mechanisms. Anti-corruption measures are essential to restore trust and ensure program effectiveness.
8. Academic institutions and policy think tanks should conduct longitudinal studies to monitor the impact of interventions. Data-driven decision-making will ensure that strategies remain responsive to evolving challenges.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE EXTENT OF THE INFLUENCE OF POVERTY ON CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG YOUTHS IN BENIN CITY, NIGERIA

Thank you for taking part in this survey. Your responses will help us understand how poverty influences youth crime in Benin City. All answers are strictly confidential.

Section A: Demographic Information

Please tick the option that applies to you.

1. Age

- Under 18
-
- 18–25
-
- 26–35
-
- 36–45
-
- 46 and above
-

2. Gender

- Male
-
- Female
-
- Other / Prefer not to say
-

3. Highest level of education completed

- No formal education
-
- Primary school

-
- Secondary school
-
- Tertiary (polytechnic, college, university)
-

4. Monthly household income (₦)

- Below 50,000
-
- 50,000–100,000
-
- 100,001–150,000
-
- 150,001–200,000
-
- Above 200,000

Section B: Perception of the residents of Benin city on poverty as a major factor contributing to crime

For each statement, please indicate your level of agreement by ticking the box

1. Do you think poverty is a major reason why some youth in Benin city engage in criminal behaviour

Yes No Do not know

1b. Give answer for your option

2. To what extent do you strongly believe that poverty contribute greatly to youths involvement in criminal act in Benin city

Very high extent High extent Low extent Very low extent

3. Rank the following factors in order of their contribution to youth crime in Benin city . Poverty, Unemployment, Family background, Peer group influence. Format 1st,2nd 3rd, 4th

Poverty []

Unemployment []

Family background []

Peer group influence []

4. Do you think that poverty can lead to desperation which might drive youth to engage in crime .

Yes No Do not know

5. Do you think that poverty reduction programmes can help youth involvement in crimes

Yes No Do not know

5b. Why do you think so?

Section C: Factors that contribute to youth involvement in crime

6. Can you share some factors you believe contribute to youth involvement to crime in Benin city

7. Which of the following social factors do you think contribute to youth crime in Benin city (Select all that apply)

- A. Peer group []
- B. Family background []
- C. Lack of community support []
- D. Others (please specify)

7b. Among the factors which is the most influencing factor

Section D : Correlation with support for social welfare versus punitive crime prevention strategies

8. Do you support government programmes aimed at reducing poverty to prevent crimes .
[] Yes [] No [] Do not know

Why your answer

8b How effective do you think Job creation programme are in reducing crime among the youth
[] Extremely effective [] Somewhat effective [] Not effective

9. Do you think addressing poverty would significantly reduce crime rates among the youth in Benin city
[] Yes [] No [] Do not know

Why your answer : _____