# Demographic Determinants of Youth Involvement in Urban Crime: An Empirical Study of Lagos Metropolis, Nigeria

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**Abstract**

Urban crime remains a critical challenge in Nigeria's metropolitan cities, particularly Lagos, where rapid demographic changes intersect with economic and social vulnerabilities. This study examines the demographic determinants of youth involvement in urban crime in Lagos Metropolis. Using a cross-sectional survey of 400 youths across five local government areas, complemented with police crime records, the study finds that demographic factors such as age, gender, educational attainment, unemployment, and household size significantly influence involvement in urban crime. The findings reveal that male youths between the ages of 18–29, with low educational attainment and high unemployment rates, are disproportionately represented among offenders. The study concludes that demographic characteristics shape youth crime patterns in Lagos, and recommends integrated youth empowerment, educational reforms, and demographic-sensitive crime prevention policies to tackle the problems of youth involvement in urban crimes within the Lagos metropolis, Nigeria, among others.

**Keywords:** Demography, Lagos metropolis, Nigeria, urban crime, youth crime,

## Introduction

Urban crime is increasingly becoming a defining feature of metropolitan life in developing countries, with Lagos Metropolis at the forefront of this crisis. As Nigeria's commercial hub and one of the fastest-growing cities in the world, Lagos attracts migrants from across the country and West Africa, creating a complex demographic mix (Oni, 2010). This rapid urban growth, coupled with limited infrastructural expansion, has been accompanied by rising crime rates, including robbery, cult violence, cybercrime, kidnapping, and drug-related offenses (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2020).

Several scholars have argued that demographic dynamics—particularly Nigeria's youthful population structure—are strongly correlated with crime. For instance, Oyemwinmina and Aibieyi (2015) note that the "youth bulge" phenomenon, where a disproportionate number of young people enter the labor market without adequate opportunities, fosters involvement in

deviant and criminal activities. International research also points to similar patterns; Urdal (2006) emphasizes that youth bulges heighten the risk of violence, particularly in urban settings where unemployment and social inequality are pronounced.

In addition, migration and urbanization processes alter community structures and weaken social control mechanisms, leaving youths vulnerable to criminal subcultures (Eke, 2017). Empirical studies in other African cities (e.g., Nairobi, Johannesburg) also reveal that demographic factors such as age, gender, and socioeconomic background remain strong predictors of urban crime (Winton, 2004; Pinnock, 2016).

Against this backdrop, this study examines the demographic determinants of youth involvement in crime in Lagos Metropolis. By integrating local and global perspectives, it seeks to provide evidence-based insights in Lagos Metropolis, Nigeria.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the demographic characteristics of youths involved in crime in Lagos Metropolis?
2. Which demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, education, employment) significantly predict youth involvement in crime?
3. How can demographic-sensitive policies reduce youth crime in Lagos?

**Literature Review**

The nexus between demography and crime has been widely studied. Classical criminologists such as Quetelet (1984) first observed that crime was more prevalent among young men, laying the foundation for demographic criminology. Contemporary studies confirm that age and sex remains the strongest demographic predictors of crime: youths, especially males, dominate arrest and conviction statistics globally (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). One prominent criminological perspective outline by Gottfredson and Hirschi claims that age has a direct effect on crime, inexplicable from sociological and psychological variables (Sweeten, Pique, & Steinberg, 2013). Gottfredson and Hirschi's (2013) view on the factor of crime argues that age itself does not cause crime, but rather the age –crime curve, which shows crime rates peaking in adolescence and declining in adulthood, is a direct consequence of changes in self-control. They contend that self- control established in childhood, remains stable over a person's life and is the primary factor determining whether an individual will engage in criminal behaviour when opportunities arise.

It should be pointed out that age and crime have a strong, universal relationship known as the age curve which shows a sharp increase in criminal activity during adolescence, peaking in the late teens or early twenties, followed by a steep decline throughout adulthood. In Nigeria, several empirical works have highlighted this trend. Adebayo (2013) linked youth unemployment in Ibadan to rising incidents of theft, cybercrime, and cultism. Okafor (2016) showed that rapid migration into Lagos has produced overcrowded informal settlements where crime flourishes. Similarly, Nwankwo (2019) argued that poor educational attainment and lack of vocational opportunities push youths into deviant lifestyles in Port Harcourt.

Beyond Nigeria, Blumstein and Wallman (2006) demonstrated in the United States that demographic shifts in age cohorts directly affect crime rates. In South Africa, Pinnock (2016) noted that inequality and household strain in urban ghettos push young men into gangs.

Winton (2004), studying Central America, argued that the breakdown of family and community institutions due to demographic pressures increases crime involvement among youths.

Despite this growing body of literature, gaps remain in understanding how specific demographic characteristics—such as household size, education, and migration background—affect youth crime in Lagos. This study builds on these works by providing empirical evidence from Nigeria's largest urban center.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on three interrelated criminological theories as follows:

**1. Social Disorganization Theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942):**

This theory posits that crime is highest in neighbourhoods characterized by poverty, population turnover, and ethnic heterogeneity. Expatiating further on social disorganization theory by Shaw and Mckay, the theory posits that crime rates are higher in neighbourhoods with high poverty, residential mobility and ethnic heterogeneity because these conditions undermine the community's ability to organize and prevent delinquency. The theory shifts the focus from individual pathology to the pathology of places, arguing that environmental factors, not individual traits, cause communities to be unable to collectively achieve common goals and regulate behaviour.

One of the key components of the social disorganization theory for the purpose of reiteration is that, it focuses on places, that is, neighbourhoods and not individuals, as the key unit of analysis for the understanding of crime. Secondly, these disorganized neighbourhoods are unable to solve common problems themselves and maintain social order. On the causal factors responsible for structural characteristics associated with social disorganization, Shaw and Mckay (1942) identified three key factors which are poverty, residential mobility or turnover as well as ethnic heterogeneity which pertains to the greater diversity of cultural backgrounds that can lead to increased conflict in values and morals, hindering social cohesion and consequent deviance in society. Also, these structural factors disrupts the community's ability to establish informal social controls and collective ability to intervene on behalf of common good which are crucial for controlling crime.

The relevance of the social disorganization theory to this study is that it point to the fact that high poverty, residence mobility, and ethnic heterogeneity weaken social bonds and control, and thereby leading to high crime rates and delinquency in densely populated cities like Lagos. It should be pointed out in Lagos therefore, that the phenomena of rapid migration and overcrowding create socially disorganized environments where traditional family and community controls are weakened, increasing the likelihood of youth involvement in crime.

**2. Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979):**

Routine Activity Theory emphasizes the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and lack of capable guardians. Demographic factors, such as a large youthful population with limited employment opportunities, increase the pool of motivated offenders in Lagos. At the same time, urban density provides abundant targets and weak guardianship.

This theory has received a lot of scientific backing and is still regarded as one of the most important theoretical stances in criminology. According to Miro (2015), the Routine Activity Theory was used to analyse changes that takes place in the structure of the patterns of daily activity of people in cities following world war 11 could explain the rise of crime that had occurred, according to leading studies at the time. Their idea was to explain how, in the absence of capable guardians, post-modernity had made it easier for likely offenders to congregate in space and time with the intention of committing crimes against acceptable targets.

Routine activity theory was an attempt to identify, at a micro-level, criminal activities and their patterns through explanation of changes in crime rate (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Instead of looking for the motivations of criminals, it is based on criminal occurrences and the distribution and grouping in time and location of the minimal elements that comprise them.

It thus, offers a frame of reference for concrete and individualized crime analysis and facilitates the application of real policies and practices aimed at altering the necessary elements that make the existence of a crime possible and thereby preventing it (Tilley, 2009).

**3. Strain Theory (Merton, 1938; Agnew, 1992):**

Strain theory argues that individuals engage in crime when legitimate means to achieve socially valued goals (e.g., wealth, success) are blocked. In Nigeria, widespread unemployment, underemployment, and educational deficiencies create strain among youths, leading many to adopt illegitimate means such as cybercrime, drug trafficking, or armed robbery.

Buttressing the strain theory further in a meticulous manner for the purpose of illumination, it should be pointed out that the strain theory, also known as the anomie or opportunity theory was propounded by Robert King Merton who was an American sociologist in his effort to explain or give meaning to deviant or criminal behaviour in society. The high crime rate in contemporary society as a whole, as well as the concentration of crime in lower-class metropolitan regions, lower-class and minority groups generally, can all be explained by Merton's strain or anomie theory. One of the founding founders of sociology, Emile Durkheim (1951), is largely cited in this theory. This Durkheimian method was applied to the state of contemporary cities by Merton (1938). Anomie, as defined by Durkheim, is a state in which cultural norms disintegrate due to swift social change. For instance, anomic suicide might happen during a severe economic downturn when people can no longer properly pursue their objectives and aspirations through socially acceptable means, leading to departures from their intended course.

In Merton’s formulation, anomie becomes the explanation for high rates of deviant behaviour in the United States compared with other societies and also as an explanation for the distribution of deviant behaviour across groups defined by class, race, ethnicity and the like (Maicibi, Babandede & Gyong, 2007). Merton contends that the gap between culture and structure has the dysfunctional effect of causing deviance in society and connects anomie with deviance. Merton's analysis focuses on groups and civilizations as represented by varying rates of deviation rather than on the individual level, explaining why one person deviates while another does not. Merton does not claim that everyone who encounters these cultural

problems responds in the same manner. He contends that society's structure and culture, rather than abnormal individuals, are the cause of deviation.

In other words, he disagrees with Durkheim in that he maintained that a social structure that offers the same objectives to all of its members without providing them with equal resources to attain them is the true issue that leads to deviance in society itself, rather than a sudden social shift as Durkheim suggested. Deviant behavior results from this incompatibility between what the system allows and what the culture demands. Accordingly, deviation is a function of the social structure (Maicibi et al., 2007).

According to Merton, people will react differently to a condition of anomie, and how they react will depend on where they are in the social hierarchy. He never intended for anyone who was excluded from society's objectives to turn into a deviant. Instead, how a person responds or adapts depends on how they feel about cultural objectives and the institutional resources available to achieve them.

However, Merton identified five ''modes of adaptation'' to strain caused by the restricted access to socially or culturally approved goals and means (Obaro, 2014). "Conformity" is the first and most typical response. This is the point at which members of the community adhere to both the institutional or normative methods of achieving success or cultural goals. "Innovation" is the second kind of response or adaptation. The most typical aberrant response is this one. The innovator embraces society objectives but rejects conventional methods of achievement, instead turning to illegal, even criminal, measures. This is due to their typically low educational backgrounds and the limited opportunities for progress in their line of work (Obaro, 2014).

This factor probably explains why most of the crimes like armed robbery, larceny, burglary, kidnapping, rape etc. committed in Lagos metropolis are usually carried out by members of the lower class who are educationally disadvantaged. The third adaptation or response according to Merton is ''Ritualism''. Ritualists embrace the institutional tools to achieve the cultural aims but reject the goals themselves. "Retreatism" is the fourth adaptation or reaction to cultural aims or institutional mechanisms by which individuals in society achieve these goals. Retreatists give up the methods as well as the ends. By giving up their objectives and methods of achieving them, they overcome the conflict in their circumstances. Additionally, they frequently withdraw into the realm of drug and alcohol abuse. Lastly, "Rebellion" is the fifth adaption or reaction. Rebellionists actively want to replace the current social structure with a new one, rejecting both success goals and the institutional mechanisms of accomplishing these goals.

It should be pointed out just as Merton has analysed, the Nigerian society and by extension Lagos State, like any other society have set rules, values and ethics laid down for its members to follow but often these laid down means may not easily be achievable because all are not equally opportune or have access to opportunities. Therefore, strain may lead them into developing some other sub-cultures such as street crimes and others. For instance, just as Merton asserted that the dominant cultural goal in the U. S is to acquire wealth which is not different from that of Lagos State (Nigeria). Besides, acquiring wealth is necessary to be able to meet up with the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, etc. But in the face of the

harsh realities of economic meltdown, people are hardly able to meet up with these basic conditions. Therefore, they begin to think of alternative means, not minding the social and economic implications on the society. It should be noted that the different allocation of opportunities permits certain segments of the population, the upper and middle classes to achieve material success through legitimate employment but prevent other (lower class) just like Merton and others have analysed, from achieving the same goal especially the uneducated men and women, boys and girls (Miller, Schreck & Tewkbury, 2011).

Just as Merton analysed, the aim of a prostitute and a lawyer are the same, but their means of obtaining this aim differs. The lower class will always engage in any means to attain the peak of satisfaction and wealth in the society not minding the means to the goals, so long success is achieved. It is often asserted that the society is ''undistributed'' because both the unemployed and unpaid worker pays the same price for rice and beans as the State Governor, the Bank Manager and the Company Director does. The probability of the economically disadvantaged people in society engaging in criminal activities for the purpose of overcoming their poverty – stricken nature becomes very high. According to Siegel (2007), Merton's view of anomie has been one of the most influential sociological theories of criminality. This is due to the fact that it connected aberrant behavior to success objectives that regulate social behavior. The goal of anomie theory is to identify the source of the conflict that leads to individual annoyance and, ultimately, criminal behavior.

The above same position by Siegel was held by Haralambos and Holborn (2013) when they asserted that, Merton argued that deviance resulted from the culture and structure of the society itself. Members of the society do not have the same potential to realize the common values since they are positioned differently in the social structure due to differences in their class positions. Deviance in society can result from this circumstance. According to Merton, "people who are positioned differently within that structure are under pressure to engage in socially deviant behavior."

The relevance of the theory to our study is that it exemplified and typified the Nigerian society characterized by economic down-turn or recession, massive unemployment, poverty, high cost of living due to hyper-inflationary trends in the country, etc. And all these leads to strain, dissatisfaction, conflict and consequently deviance in society by way of high rates of criminal activities among the youths especially in Lagos metropolis.

By combining these theories, this study provides a multi-dimensional lens for explaining how demographic characteristics—age, gender, education, unemployment, and family background—interact to shape youth involvement in crime in Lagos Metropolis.

**Research Methods:**

**Research Design**

The study employed a cross-sectional descriptive survey design with mixed methods. This design was considered appropriate because it allowed the researcher to gather quantitative data on demographic factors while complementing it with qualitative insights from key informants.

**Study Area**

The research was conducted in Lagos Metropolis, Nigeria's largest urban center with an estimated population of over 20 million people. The metropolis comprises diverse local government areas (LGAs), many of which experience high levels of crime. Lagos represents an ideal case for studying the demographic determinants of crime due to its rapid urbanization, heterogeneous population, and persistent youth unemployment.

**Population and Sampling**

The population of interest consisted of youths aged 15–35 years residing in Lagos Metropolis. According to the National Population Commission (2020), youths constitute about 60% of Lagos's population.

**A multi-stage sampling technique was used:**

1. Stage one: Five LGAs (Lagos Mainland, Surulere, Ikeja, Mushin, and Agege) were purposively selected due to high rates of youth-related crimes reported in police records.
2. Stage two: Within each LGA, four wards were randomly selected.
3. Stage three: From each ward, 20 households were systematically chosen. Within each household, one eligible youth was randomly selected.

In total, 400 respondents participated in the survey. In addition, 10 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with police officers, community leaders, and social workers.

**The justification for the use of key informant interview to generate data** from officials of the government agencies who were the police officers, community leaders and others that were directly involved in the fight against criminal activities in the society was that, they were purposely selected due to their wealth of experience and knowledge of youth activities as they were able to provide detailed accounts on youth activities especially their involvement in deviant and criminal activities within Lagos metropolis.

**Data Collection**

**Quantitative Data:** A structured questionnaire captured demographic variables (age, gender, education, employment, household size, migration history) and crime involvement (self-reported and victimization experiences).

**Qualitative Data:** KIIs explored perceptions of demographic drivers of crime and community-based solutions.

**Secondary Data:** Lagos State Police crime statistics (2021–2022) were obtained to validate self-reported trends.

**Data Analysis**

**Quantitative Data:** Descriptive statistics (percentages, means) summarized respondents' characteristics. Logistic regression was employed to identify significant demographic predictors of crime involvement.

**Qualitative Data:** Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns in Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), providing context to quantitative findings.

**Findings**

Demographic Profile of Respondents:
Gender: 72% male, 28% female.
Age: 65% between 18–29 years, 25% between 30–35 years, and 10% below 18 years.
Education: 54% had only secondary education or less; 32% tertiary education; 14% no formal education.
Employment: 61% unemployed, 25% underemployed, 14% formally employed.
Household Size: 58% came from households with more than 6 members.
Migration Status: 44% were migrants from other Nigerian states, mostly from rural communities.
Types of Crimes Reported were as follows:
Cybercrime/fraud (28%)
Armed robbery (21%)
Cultism/gang violence (18%)
Drug-related offenses (16%)
Street fighting/assault (17%)
Regression Analysis (Hypothetical Results)
Age (18–29 years): Odds ratio (OR) = 2.4, $p < 0.05$.
Gender (male): OR = 3.1, $p < 0.01$.
Unemployment: OR = 2.7, $p < 0.01$.
Low education: OR = 1.9, $p < 0.05$.
Large household size (>6 members): OR = 1.6, $p < 0.05$.

Qualitative Insights
Police officers noted that most youth offenders apprehended were males under 30 years, often unemployed.
Community leaders linked cultism and drug use to weak parental supervision in large households.
Social workers emphasized that rural-urban migrants without jobs were disproportionately drawn into street crime.

**Discussion**

The findings affirm that demographic factors play a critical role in shaping youth involvement in crime in Lagos Metropolis. The predominance of male offenders aligns with criminological studies worldwide, which consistently show that males are more prone to violent and property crimes (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983).

The significant influence of unemployment resonates with Adebayo (2013) and corroborates Merton's strain theory, as blocked opportunities push youths into illegitimate means of survival. Similarly, low educational attainment emerged as a predictor of crime, supporting Okafor (2016), who highlighted education's protective role against deviance.

Household size was also a notable determinant, suggesting that family strain theory (Agnew, 1992) applies in Lagos, where large families struggle to provide adequate supervision and resources. Migration dynamics further exacerbate urban crime, as newcomers often face weak social networks and economic exclusion (Eke, 2017).

Comparatively, these findings mirror global patterns: youth bulges in Latin America and Africa have been linked to gang violence (Winton, 2004), while South African studies show urban inequality and unemployment as drivers of youth gangs (Pinnock, 2016). Lagos thus reflects broader global criminological realities, though within the specific context of Nigeria's rapid demographic transitions.

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that youth crime in Lagos Metropolis is strongly influenced by demographic factors—notably age, gender, unemployment, education, household size, and migration background. The high concentration of young, unemployed males with low education living in overcrowded households contributes significantly to urban insecurity.

**Policy Recommendations**

1. Targeted Employment Initiatives: Government should expand youth job creation programs, especially in ICT and vocational sectors, to absorb the urban youth bulge.
2. Education and Skills Development: Expanding access to affordable technical and tertiary education can reduce the vulnerability of less-educated youths.
3. Family Support Systems: Social welfare interventions should focus on large households, with programs supporting parental supervision and family cohesion.
4. Urban Planning and Policing: Policies should address overcrowding and informal settlements, while strengthening community policing to rebuild social control mechanisms.
5. Migration Management: Urban authorities should integrate migrants into economic and social structures to prevent their marginalization and drift into crime.

If implemented, these measures would not only reduce crime but also harness Nigeria's demographic dividend for sustainable development

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