

## RURAL CRIME: THE SOCIAL COST OF YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

The spate of criminal activities in rural Nigeria poses threat to the livelihood of rural families and food security. The absence of social infrastructures contributed to the rising unemployment that drives criminality in rural Nigeria. The aim of the review is to examine the factors that are contributing to rural crime in Nigeria. Secondary data were used to describe the trends of youth unemployment in Nigeria. Population dynamics, poverty and lack of access to resources drive youth unemployment which fuels crime in rural areas in Nigeria. The increasing number of unemployed youth (27.3 million in 2010 and 44.2 million in 2018) paved way for crime to thrive in rural areas. The review concluded that the absence of employment opportunities in rural areas fuels the increased criminality which is greatly affecting the livelihoods of rural dwellers in Nigeria and recommended that infrastructural development and provision of employment opportunities in rural communities will contribute to the reduction of rural crime in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Youth unemployment, rural poverty, population dynamics, social discrimination, resource scarcity.

### INTRODUCTION

Youth is an important phase of human development, marking the transition into adulthood. The period also ushers in a need for independence through the attainment of better livelihood and socio-economic outcomes and the drive to contribute to national development. Nigeria's population, like most African countries, is a relatively young population, with the youth accounting for nearly half of the country's population. This has been described as a demographic dividend that can drive national development, considering the innovativeness, creativity, ability to take risks, and openness to new ideas and opportunities that are characteristics of youth.

However, there are only limited opportunities available to the teeming youth population in Nigeria for achieving their socio-economic aspirations of a better life through gainful and productive employment. The sharp increase in youth unemployment in the last decade is glaring. Youth unemployment rate rose from 6.8% in 2010 to 34.9% in 2020 (NBS, 2018a; 2020b). The situation is worse in rural areas where youth unemployment is as high as 28% compared to 25.4% in urban areas in 2020 (NBS, 2020b). Youth in rural areas are identified as a category of the marginalised in the society (Moore, 2015).

Rural youth suffer from an array of social neglect that further contributes to their poor socio-economic well-being. Agriculture, which can transform rural Nigeria, with the right production environment, has become unattractive to the youth due to the poor state of rural infrastructures and their lack of tenure rights to access productive inputs such as land, credit, planting materials, and technological equipment, etc. that could enhance their production capacity. The limited capacity of the youth to access inputs has been a discouraging factor to their engagement in agriculture as a means of livelihood. These socio-economic deprivations have led to

situations where the youth engage in criminal activities as a means of livelihood, posing threat to the livelihood of rural farm families and national food security. The paper therefore, observed the limited attention given to criminal activities in rural areas in Nigeria as a major research gap. Studies on the nature of rural crime, vis-à-vis enablers of such crimes are scarce in scholarly literature. Based on this, the main objective of the review is to examine how youth unemployment is contributing to rural crime in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper reviews the drivers of youth unemployment, trends in youth unemployment, dimensions of rural crime and effect of rural crime on rural livelihoods in Nigeria.

### METHODOLOGY

The review used secondary data from the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (NBS) from the period of 2010 to 2020 to describe the trends in youth unemployment in Nigeria, using descriptive statistics such as charts and percentages. Literature from journals, articles and internet sources were also reviewed.

#### Drivers of youth unemployment in Nigeria

A number of factors contribute to the rising levels of youth unemployment in rural areas in Nigeria.

#### Population dynamics

The NBS (2018b) demographic statistics for 2017 puts Nigeria's population at 193,392,517, while projections by the United Nations World Population Prospect (UN, 2019) estimated Nigeria's population to be 200,964,000 in 2019 which is expected to increase to 401,315,000 by 2050. While the high population, especially the youth bulge in Nigeria can be harnessed to drive the economy, NBS (2018a) noted that the dividend can only be useful by providing economic activities and creating jobs for the growing labor force in Nigeria.

The population dynamics in Nigeria, evident in the youth population that account for over half of the nation's population is a contributory

factor to youth unemployment in Nigeria. The youth population in the labor force in Nigeria rose from 27.3 million in 2010 to 40 million in 2020 (Figure 1). The increase in the working-age population of the youth with a dwindling of rural opportunities is a major driver of criminal activities in rural areas.

This is because the absence of employment opportunities fuels dissatisfaction and frustration. The lack or limited skills of young people limit their performance in economic development processes (Baah-Boateng, 2016).

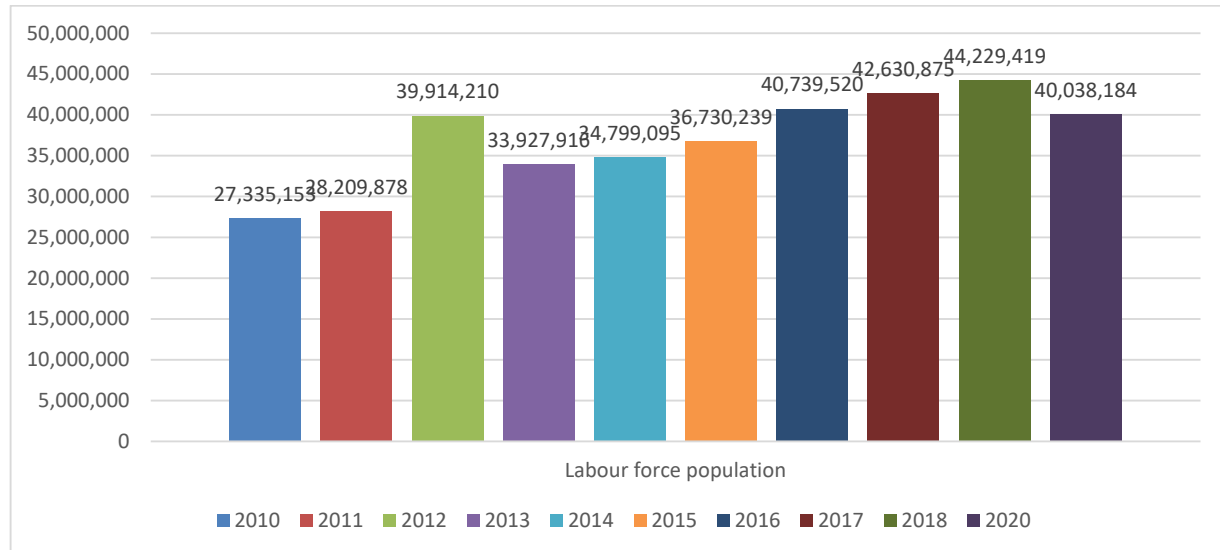


Figure 1: Youth Labor Force Participation in Nigeria (2010-2020)

Source: Computed by the Researcher from NBS (2018a; 2020b)

#### ***Limited access to productive resources***

The dwindling opportunities in the rural areas in Nigeria present a challenge to the future of the rural youth considering their vulnerability to acquiring relevant assets that can enhance their capacities. For example, traditionally, land ownership is through family inheritance where the land is controlled by the older members of the family. This limits the right to ownership to landed property even when they desire to venture into livelihood activities that require the acquisition of land. The chances of accessing land for agricultural purposes favour the adults more than the youth and as noted by International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (2019), while one in three adults owns a plot of land, one in ten youth has ownership of a plot of land in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The rapid population growth with increasing urbanization contributes to fragmentation of land and the challenge of tenure security, also serves as discouragement to youth who are interested in agriculture, with the attendant effect of unemployment (Moore 2015; IFAD 2019). The alternative of non-farm enterprises is also challenged by their inability to access credit to start non-farm businesses (Baah-Boateng, 2014). Access to markets and services that will enhance their productive capacity also discourages the rural youth from participating in Agriculture. For instance, NBS (2012) reported that of the estimated 64 million youth in Nigeria, only 12.6 million youth had access

to markets. According to the FAO (2012), the unattractiveness of agriculture to youth is tied to the risks, intensive nature, and low productivity associated with farming.

#### ***Technological dynamics***

A major challenge of rural livelihood development in Nigeria is the poor state of infrastructural development in rural areas. Despite the socio-economic benefits that abound in rural areas, they lack good road networks, storage, and processing facilities, and communication network for enhanced market connectivity. Employment creation through agriculture for rural youth has been low due to the traditional use of technology that limits the scale of production with the attendant drudgery. The result is that the youth perceive agriculture as an occupation for the elderly (FAO, 2012), and in the absence of alternatives take to crime as a means of livelihood. The need to pay attention to the technological revolution that is driving agriculture at the global level is imperative in Nigeria. Rural youth should not be left out in advancements of technology as a driver of agricultural transformation. The use of traditional implements for agriculture is no longer sustainable in the era of advanced technologies that have brought about changes in agricultural production through the use of advanced machinery, processing and storage equipment.

IFAD, (2019) noted that technological dynamism is driving economic and social change

and significantly changing the ways people live. Advances in technological use can be used to open opportunities for rural families through access to marketing, processing, and knowledge that are needed to transform rural Nigeria.

**Rural poverty**

The associated effect of population and technological dynamics, limited access to productive resources that has left rural communities deprived of opportunities, accumulate to poverty in rural areas in Nigeria. Recent data of the NBS (2020) indicated that 4 in 10 people in Nigeria are living below the national poverty line which is put at

40.1% (Figure 2). The report is more worrisome for the rural areas where the poverty rate is put at 52.10% compared to urban poverty which is put at 18% (Figure 2).

The large divide between rural and urban poverty rates is an indication of the increasing socio-economic inequality that exists in Nigeria, further confirming the social neglect that the rural families are subjected to. Poverty in Nigeria reveals a large inequality divide between the urban and rural areas, which is a predictor to rural crime, as noted by Van Dijk (2008).

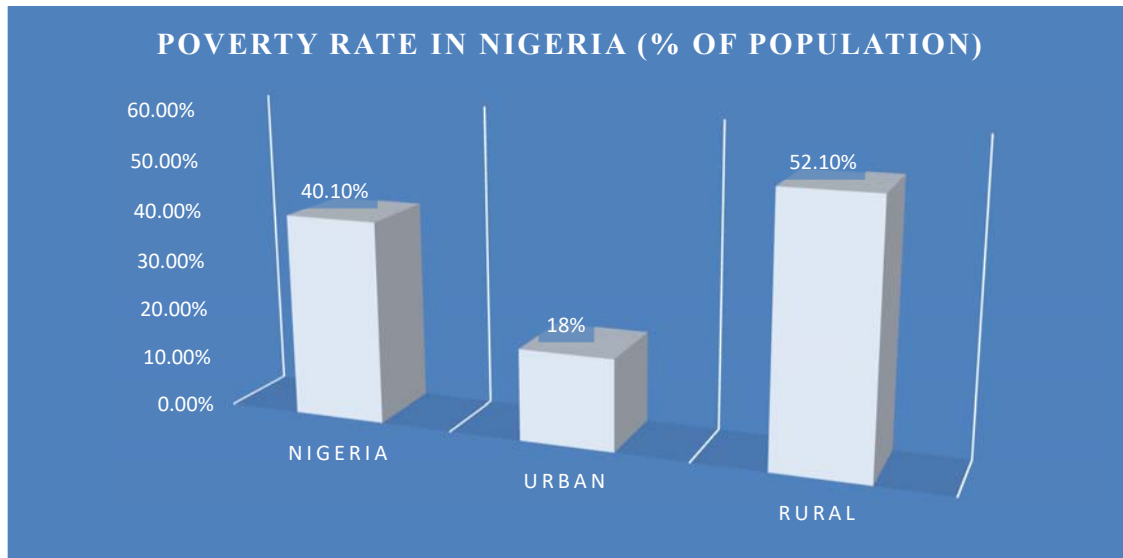


Figure 2: Poverty Rate in Nigeria according to Location  
Source: Computed by the Researcher from NBS (2020a) data

**Trends in Youth Unemployment in Rural Areas in Nigeria**

Given the factors that drive unemployment described above, the situational analysis of the trend of youth unemployment in Nigeria provides evidence for the rising levels of rural crime which is perpetrated by the youth and enabled by the social, economic, and political systems in the country.

**Unemployment by age in Nigeria**

Disaggregating youth unemployment from the age perspective reveals that the youth, which is

categorised as young people 15-34 years, top the list of unemployed in Nigeria. Compared to other age categories, unemployed youth population in 2010 increased from 1.8 million to about 14 million in 2020, whereas unemployed adults increased to 2,242,945 (adults aged 45-54) and 1,437,289 (adults aged 55-64) respectively in 2020 (Figure 3). Huma (2016) noted that the lack of experience and relevant skills put the youth at a disadvantage compared to adults in acquiring employment opportunities.

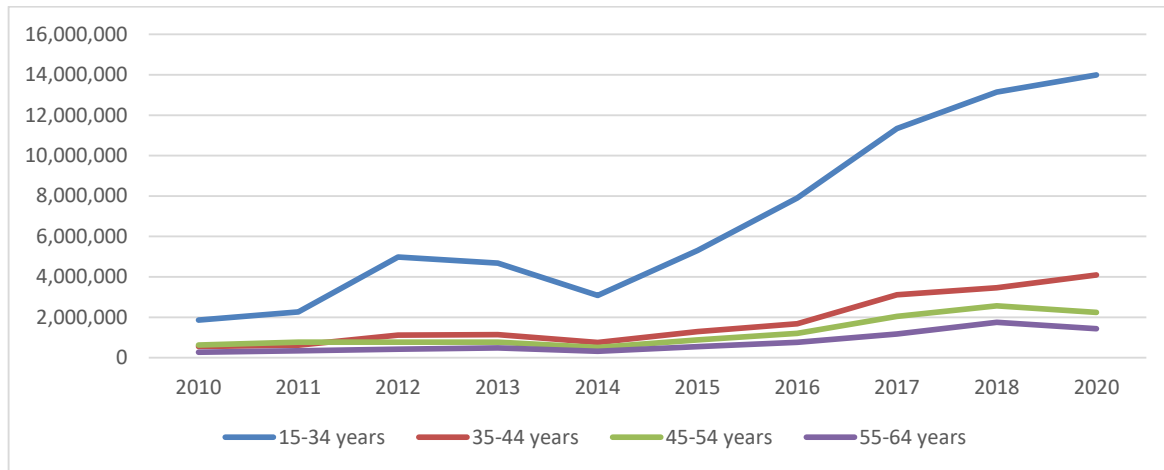


Figure 3: Total Unemployed in Nigeria by Age (2010-2020)  
Source: Computed by the Researcher from NBS (2018a; 2020b) data

**Unemployment by location in Nigeria**

Unemployment rates in rural areas were lower than urban unemployment rates before 2012 (Figure 4). This could be attributed to the relative security experienced in rural Nigeria where people could go about their livelihood activities without fears of kidnappings, attacks, or destruction of their means of livelihoods. However, with the spate of insecurity in rural areas since the last decade, there

has been a hike in unemployment in rural areas, from 4.9% in 2010 to 28% in 2020 (Figure 4). The inability of the government to provide for the unemployed, most of whom are domiciled in the rural areas encourages criminal activities in the rural areas. This is in agreement with Bourgiognon (2000) and Van Dijk (2008) who noted that inequality and poverty encourages criminal activities.

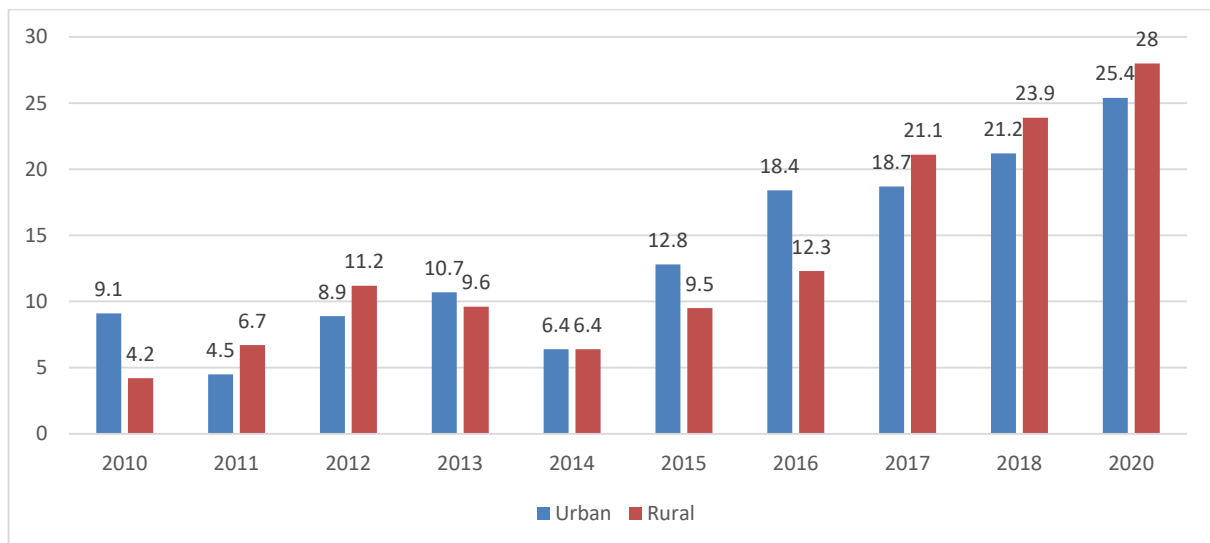


Figure 4: Urban-Rural Unemployment Rate in Nigeria (2010-2020)  
Source: Computed by the Researcher from NBS (2018a; 2020b) data

**Dimensions of rural crimes in Nigeria**

Criminality in Nigeria is multifaceted. While some crimes are due to dynamics of development such as population growth and urbanization, others result from social discrimination or exclusion of segments of the society from developmental processes. Crimes in rural areas in Nigeria range from militancy, theft, burglary, kidnapping, banditry, ethnic or religion-

related, rapes, farmers and herders’ conflicts, etc. (Achumba, *et al*, 2013; Kuna and Ibrahim, 2015). The social context that drives these crimes, has to be understood, given the alarming levels that criminality in rural areas have assumed in Nigeria.

**Crimes caused by social discrimination/exclusion**

The spate of criminal activities in the Niger Delta region have been associated with social

discrimination or exclusion from social benefits. Kidnappings for ransom, killings and destruction of properties have been used by angry youths in the region to express their dissatisfaction against oil exploration companies and the government. This is in response to the failure to tackle the environmental problems generated by oil drilling, especially the pollution of water sources and farmlands by oil spills. Achumba *et al* (2013) noted that pervasive inequality engenders criminal activities in the Niger Delta. The failure of oil companies to carry out their corporate social responsibilities is a key driver of criminal activities in the region (Achumba, *et al*, 2013).

Social neglect in the northern region also fuels banditry. Ojo (2020) observed that the failures of the government to address the socio-economic concerns in the northern part of the country, provides a thriving ground for rural banditry in Nigeria. The educational deprivations, lack of employment opportunities, and heightened poverty in the northern part of the country brought about a rise in rural banditry in the north. Rural bandits engage in kidnapping for ransom, killing of rural families, burning of houses and in some cases whole communities, raping of women and girls, theft of crops and cattle rustling, etc. (Ojo, 2020; Kuna and Ibrahim, 2015).

#### **Crimes caused by scarcity of resources**

Scarcity of resources such as water due to irregular rainfall patterns in the south and desert encroachment in the north; reduction in agricultural land for farming due to population growth, urbanization, land degradation, and flooding; and the growing utilisation of cropland for non-food production (Grote, 2014), is a prime driver of criminal activities in rural areas in Nigeria. Conflict for resource control fuels the clashes between farmers and herders in several parts of the country and has led to the loss of farmlands, animals, properties worth millions of Naira and loss of hundreds of lives, and many rural households have been displaced because of such conflicts (Blench (2010).

#### **Crimes caused by development**

The challenge of housing the over 200 million people in Nigeria has led to conflicting situations as areas that were previously used for farming by rural households are fast disappearing due to urbanization and the need for land, leading to increase in crimes. Supporting this, Fasona and Omojola, (2005) noted that the need for agricultural land due to rising population in Nigeria is a major contributor to the growing conflicts that are taking criminal dimensions in different parts of the country. Additionally, the rapid technological and economic changes in the operations of agricultural activities and the development of infrastructures is also contributing to the accessibility and attractiveness of rural areas as points of operations for perpetrators of

rural crimes (Bunei *et al*, 2013; Barclay and Donnermeyer, 2011, Grote and Neubacher, 2016). Advances in communication technology is also making it easy for criminals to track and kidnap victims (Oshita, Alumona and Onuaha, 2019).

#### **Effect of crime on rural livelihoods and national development**

Crime creates dysfunctionality in any social system as it threatens the stability of the society and denies the system of developmental benefits. The prevalence of crime in rural areas threatens the socio-economic, political, and social security of rural Nigeria and the destruction that accompanies such crimes has led to the loss of lives and properties. Criminal activities have led to situations where investors vacate communities where they operate, further worsening the livelihood potentials of such communities, and as noted by Adebayo (2013), crime limits the propensity of local investors to invest in Nigeria. In the Niger Delta region, a number of oil exploration companies have relocated from Nigeria due to hostility from the community youths.

Crime reduces the economic benefits that could accrue to families (Skaperdas, Soares, Willman, and Miller (2009). Rural crime leads to a reduction in the quality of life of rural dwellers due to the destruction of livelihood sources, further increasing their vulnerability to poverty outcomes. Theft of livestock, crops, equipment, and tools lead to loss of livelihood income (Grote and Neubacher, 2016). The persistence of crime in Nigeria deprives rural families of their means of livelihoods and promotes outmigration as people move away from areas where their lives and livelihoods are threatened, and in the process, they not only lost their cultural and traditional heritage but also, their displacement also displaces their means of livelihood, further worsening their poverty situation (Grote and Neubacher, 2016).

Attacks by bandits and herdsmen have led to situations where families flee their communities due to fear of reprisals, abandoning their farmlands with implications for their food security. Crime leaves victims with a sense of insecurity and emotional trauma, (Barclay *et al*, 2001; Ceccato 2016).

Rural crime does not only affect the livelihood of rural households; it also has implications for national development. The food security of the country is threatened when there are security issues. In crime prone zones, the youth tend to out-migrate, thereby diminishing the productive workforce of the rural areas. In Nigeria with an aging agricultural population, outmigration of youths from rural areas put the national food security at risk.

#### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Youth unemployment is the key driver of rural crime in Nigeria, occasioned by the growth in



population. The limited opportunities in rural areas fuel the frustration of rural youth who take to crime as a means of livelihood. The limited access to productive resources such as land tenure rights, credit facilities, and the persistent use of traditional equipment discourages the youth from engaging in Agriculture as a viable means of livelihood. These have contributed to the high levels of poverty in rural areas, with crime taken as an alternative for survival. Criminal activities in rural areas in Nigeria have led to dwindling socio-economic opportunities as livelihoods of families are destroyed, families displaced, loss of lives and properties and these put the rural food and national food security at risk.

To address the rising levels of crime in rural areas, the review recommends that:

1. the government should develop the capacity of rural youth and provide employment opportunities in the rural areas as a way of checkmating the rising levels of rural crime in Nigeria.
2. the government should provide an enabling environment for the private sector to engage in rural infrastructural development, which is critical for rural development.
3. the government should address the challenge of accessing productive inputs such as land and credit to encourage youth engagement in agricultural activities.
4. the government should focus on pro-poor policies that are targeted at rural areas as a way of reducing rural crime.

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