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EFFECTS OF ECONOMIC HARDSHIP ON YOUTH SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT IN BENIN METROPOLIS, BENIN CITY, EDO STATE, NIGERIA.

Charity UYI-EDEGBE[1] & Patience EHIZOGIE[2]

Department of Sociology and Anthropology.
Faculty of Social Sciences.
University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State.

Abstract

The current economic trajectory of Nigeria, characterized by hyperinflation and currency devaluation, has created a hostile environment for the youth population, particularly in urban centers like Benin City. Benin Metropolis serves as a unique case study due to its history as a hub for migration and its contemporary reputation for digital deviance. While macro-level data exists on national poverty rates, there is a scarcity of empirical research specifically quantifying how these economic stressors translate into behavioral modifications and psychosocial adjustments among youths in this specific locale. The study therefore investigated the influence of economic hardship on social behaviors, such as cybercrime and substance abuse, and to analyze the impact of financial deprivation on the psychological adjustment mechanisms of youths. A descriptive survey research design was employed. A sample size of 400 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula, and data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship (Pearson r) between economic hardship and maladaptive social behaviors, indicating that as financial pressure mounts, youths are increasingly resorting to cybercrime and prostitution as survival strategies. Furthermore, Pearson correlation analysis revealed that economic deprivation negatively impacts psychological adjustment, leading to high levels of anxiety and a pervasive desire to emigrate, known locally as the Japa syndrome. The study concludes that economic instability is not merely a financial crisis but a social security threat, recommending the immediate establishment of youth social safety nets and the domestication of economic empowerment programs to curb the rising tide of deviance.

Keywords: Economic Hardship, Youth Deviance, Social Behaviour, Psychological Adjustment, Benin Metropolis.

INTRODUCTION

The global economic landscape in the post-pandemic era has been defined by unprecedented volatility, shifting the existential realities of young people across the developed and developing worlds. International financial institutions have documented how global inflation and supply chain disruptions have disproportionately affected the youth demographic, who face a shrinking labor market and rising costs of living. The International Labour Organization (2022) reports that the global youth unemployment rate has remained stubbornly high, creating a generation defined by economic precarity. Stiglitz (2021) argues that this economic instability is fostering a global crisis of mental health among young adults who feel betrayed by the social contract. Furthermore, Gupta and Madhavan (2023) observe that economic stress is a primary driver of youth radicalization and social unrest in urban centers worldwide. World Bank analysts (2024) have also noted that the cost-of-living crisis is pushing millions of youths into the informal economy, where labor protections are nonexistent. Crucially, O'Connor (2022) highlights that this economic pressure is reshaping social norms, leading to the normalization of previously deviant behaviors as survival tactics in metropolitan areas globally.

Narrowing the focus to the African continent, the narrative of the youth bulge is increasingly being framed not as a demographic dividend but as a ticking time bomb due to the failure of economic structures to absorb this population. The African Development Bank (2023) indicates that, despite the continent possessing the youngest population in the world, the lack of economic opportunity is driving a massive wave of migration and social dislocation. Honwana (2020) conceptualizes this state as "waithood," where African youths are suspended in a prolonged adolescence, unable to attain the financial independence required for social adulthood. Resnick (2021) argues that this economic exclusion is the root cause of the rising political apathy and street-level violence observed in major African cities. Additionally, Somuu (2022) points out that in the absence of formal employment, African youths are turning to the digital economy, often venturing into cybercrime as a rational response to poverty. Mensah and Amankwah (2021) corroborate this by linking the rise in substance abuse across West African capitals directly to the despair caused by chronic unemployment and inflation.

In the Nigerian context, the economic situation has deteriorated sharply following the 2023 policy reforms, specifically the removal of the petrol subsidy and the unification of the exchange rate

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windows. These policies, while aimed at long-term fiscal stability, have unleashed hyperinflation that has decimated the purchasing power of the average Nigerian youth. The National Bureau of Statistics (2024) reported that food inflation has crossed the 30% threshold, pushing millions of youths below the poverty line. Rewane (2023) analyzes this misery index, arguing that the misery of the Nigerian youth is at an all-time high due to the simultaneous spike in energy and food costs. Akpata (2024) observes that this economic hardship has led to a breakdown of traditional family support systems, as parents can no longer support their adult children. Onanuga (2022) notes a direct correlation between the rising cost of living and the spike in violent crimes involving youths in urban centers like Lagos and Abuja. Furthermore, Eke (2023) highlights that the *Japa* syndrome, or the desperate urge to emigrate, is a direct psychological adjustment to the perceived hopelessness of the Nigerian economic environment.

Situating this dynamic within the Benin Metropolis reveals a sociological environment that is particularly susceptible to the shocks of economic hardship due to its unique history and social structure. Benin City, comprising Oredo, Egor, and Ikpoba-Okha Local Government Areas, has long been a commercial hub, but it has also gained a reputation as a center for irregular migration and digital deviance. Osagie (2021) notes that the economic downturn has intensified the pressure on Benin youths to succeed at all costs, leading to the glorification of internet fraud, known locally as "Yahoo." Idahosa (2022) highlights that the collapse of the industrial sector in Edo State has left youths with few legitimate pathways to wealth, thereby increasing the allure of cultism as a means of economic protection. Odigie (2023) argues that the social behaviour of Benin youths has shifted from communal respect to aggressive materialism, driven by the need to display wealth in a poverty-stricken environment. Ikuomola (2020) provides evidence that economic hardship has revitalized human trafficking networks as families pressure daughters to travel abroad to remit hard currency. Finally, Omorogbe (2024) observes that the mental health adjustment of youths in Benin is characterized by high levels of anxiety and drug dependency as they struggle to cope with the reality of the Nigerian economy.

The prevailing economic hardship in Nigeria has created a distinct sociological crisis in Benin City, where the social contract between the youth and the state appears to have collapsed. Empirical observation suggests that the youth population in Benin Metropolis is increasingly adopting maladaptive social behaviors, ranging from aggressive cybercrime to widespread substance abuse, as coping mechanisms for financial destitution. This shift represents a fundamental alteration in the social fabric, where deviance is being normalized as a legitimate response to hunger and lack. The problem is not merely that youths are poor, but that their poverty is driving a transformation in their social adjustment, leading to a culture of desperation that threatens the security and future of the state. While general studies exist on poverty, there is a critical lack of recent empirical research that specifically links the post-2023 economic policies to the specific behavioral and psychological adjustments of youths within the unique cultural context of the Benin Metropolis. The study seeks to investigate this nexus to understand how economic pain is reshaping the social identity of the Benin youth.

This study holds significant value for policymakers, sociologists, and security agencies. Academically, it provides granular data on the sociological consequences of macroeconomic shock, testing Strain Theory within a developing urban context. Practically, the findings will be indispensable for the Edo State Government and the Ministry of Youth Development in designing targeted social intervention programs. By understanding that cybercrime and drug abuse in Benin are often economic survival strategies rather than just criminal intent, authorities can shift from a purely punitive approach to a more rehabilitative and economically empowering one. Furthermore, the study offers insights for parents and counselors on the psychological toll of the economy on youths, aiding in better family support systems.

Objective of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to examine the effects of economic hardship on the social behaviour and adjustment of youths in Benin Metropolis. The specific objectives are to:

i. examine the relationship between economic hardship and social behaviour, specifically crime and substance abuse, of youths in Benin Metropolis and
ii. analyze the relationship between economic hardship and psychological adjustment, specifically coping mechanisms and mental health, of youths in Benin Metropolis,

Scope of the Study

The study is geographically delimited to the Benin Metropolis, which covers Oredo, Egor, and Ikpoba-Okha Local Government Areas of Edo State. The content scope focuses on Economic Hardship variables, such as inflation and unemployment, as independent variables, and Youth Social Behaviour and Adjustment as dependent variables. The time scope covers the period from 2020 to

2025, capturing the economic volatility following the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2023 fuel subsidy removal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Merton's Strain Theory

Robert Merton's Strain Theory posits that society sets cultural goals, such as financial success, but the institutional means to achieve them, such as education and jobs, are not equally available to everyone. When there is a gap between goals and means, individuals experience strain and may resort to innovation, which involves using illegitimate means to achieve the goals. This theory perfectly explains the situation in Benin Metropolis. The societal goal is wealth, but the economic hardship has blocked legitimate paths like employment. Consequently, youths resort to innovation in the form of cybercrime (Yahoo) to achieve the goal of financial success.

Relative Deprivation Theory

This theory suggests that people take action for social change in order to acquire something that others possess and which they believe they should have too. In the age of social media, Benin youths constantly see images of wealth on Instagram, which contrasts sharply with their economic reality.

This theory explains the psychological adjustment and anxiety. The gap between their lived reality of hardship and the digital reality of affluence creates frustration, leading to aggression and the desperate desire to Japa (migrate).

Empirical Review

A study on youth unemployment and crime in the Niger Delta found a strong correlation between the closure of industries and the rise of cultism (Idahosa, 2022). The findings indicated that cult groups provided an alternative economic safety net for unemployed youths. In a survey of undergraduates in Edo State, researchers investigated the motivations for cybercrime (Odigie, 2023). The study revealed that 70% of respondents viewed internet fraud not as a crime but as a necessary survival strategy against state failure.

Research on mental health in urban slums in Lagos highlighted that economic instability was the leading cause of depression and anxiety among young men (Onanuga, 2022). The study found that the pressure to provide amidst scarcity led to high rates of drug use.

Furthermore, a study on migration trends in Benin City confirmed that economic hardship was the primary driver of irregular migration, with families often selling assets to fund the dangerous journey to Europe (Ikuomola, 2020).

Research Gap

While studies like Idahosa (2022) and Odigie (2023) focus on crime, they often treat it in isolation from psychological adjustment. There is a lack of comprehensive research that connects the post-2023 subsidy removal specifically to both the social behaviour and the psychological coping mechanisms of youths in Benin Metropolis. This study fills that gap by providing a holistic view of how the recent economic shock has reshaped the entire lifestyle and mindset of the Benin youth.

METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted for this study was the descriptive survey method, selected for its ability to systematically describe the characteristics of a population without manipulating the environment. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was employed as the inferential statistical technique to determine the nature of relationships between variables and to test the study hypotheses. This design was particularly suitable for assessing the prevalent social behaviors and psychological adjustments among youths in response to economic hardship. The population of the study consisted of youths aged 18 to 35 residing in the three Local Government Areas that make up the Benin Metropolis, namely Oredo, Egor, and Ikpoba-Okha. According to projections from the National Population Commission based on the 2006 census, the youth population in this metropolitan area is estimated to be approximately 600,000. To ensure a representative sample, the Taro Yamane formula was utilized, resulting in a target sample size of 400 respondents.

The sampling technique employed was a multistage procedure involving stratification and random selection. In the first stage, the metropolis was stratified into the three constituent LGAs to ensure geographical spread. In the second stage, distinct neighborhoods were selected based on population density and socioeconomic status, encompassing both high-density areas like Upper Sakponba and commercial hubs like Ring Road. A simple random sampling technique was then used to select respondents within these clusters. Data collection was executed using a structured instrument titled the "Economic Stress and Youth Behavioural Inventory." The questionnaire was validated by experts in Sociology and Psychology at the University of Benin, and reliability was established through a pilot test which yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.82, indicating high internal consistency. Data were analyzed using Descriptive Statistics to profile the respondents and Pearson Product Moment Correlation to test the hypotheses using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The field survey was conducted over a period of four weeks across the Benin Metropolis. A total of 400 questionnaires were administered to youths in marketplaces, higher institution campuses, and recreational centers. Of these, 385 questionnaires were retrieved and certified valid for analysis, representing a response rate of 96%.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	210	54.5
Female	175	45.5
Employment Status		
Unemployed	180	46.8
Self-Employed (Hustling)	120	31.2
Formally Employed	85	22.0
Location (LGA)		
Oredo	130	33.8
Egor	125	32.5
Ikpoba-Okha	130	33.7
Total	**385**	**100.0**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data reveals a high rate of economic vulnerability. Only 22% of the respondents are formally employed, while the vast majority are either unemployed or engaged in informal self-employment, often referred to as "hustling." This high level of economic instability provides a robust basis for analyzing the impact of hardship.

Table 2: Mean Responses on Economic Hardship and Social Behaviour

Variable	**Mean ($\bar{x}$)**	**Std. Deviation**	**Decision**
Economic Hardship			
The cost of living has made survival difficult	4.60	0.50	Strong Agree
I cannot afford basic needs due to inflation	4.45	0.65	Strong Agree
Social Behaviour & Adjustment			
Cybercrime (Yahoo) is a survival strategy, not a crime	4.20	0.85	Agree
I use substances (drugs/alcohol) to forget money issues	3.90	0.95	Agree
My main goal is to leave Nigeria (*Japa*) at all costs	4.75	0.45	Strong Agree

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The findings are alarming. There is near-universal agreement that the cost of living is unbearable. Critically, the respondents agreed that cybercrime is a valid survival strategy (Mean = 4.20), indicating a normalization of deviance. The extremely high score for the intention to *Japa* (Mean = 4.75) shows that the primary adjustment mechanism is flight.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation

	Social Behaviour (Deviance)	Economic Hardship	Psychological Adjustment (Anxiety/Japa)
Social Behaviour	1		
Economic Hardship	0.765** (p = 0.000)	1	
Psychological Adjustment	0.810** (p = 0.000)	0.720** (p = 0.000)	1

** Pearson Correlation coefficient; significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); N = 385.

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

Hypothesis 1 Test:

Variable: Economic Hardship vs Social Behaviour (Crime).

Result: The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) is **0.765**, p = 0.000 (2-tailed), N = 385.

Decision: Significant positive relationship.

Narrative: As economic hardship increases, maladaptive social behaviors like crime and drug abuse significantly increase. Poverty is a direct driver of deviance in Benin.

Hypothesis 2 Test:

Variable: Economic Hardship vs Psychological Adjustment.

Result: The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) is **0.720**, p = 0.000 (2-tailed), N = 385.

Decision: Significant relationship.

Narrative: Economic stress is strongly linked to psychological instability and the desperate desire to migrate. The harder the economy becomes, the more youths become mentally disengaged from the Nigerian state.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study confirms that economic hardship acts as a catalyst for social deviance. This aligns with Merton's Strain Theory as cited by Osagie (2021). When the legitimate means to survival are blocked by inflation and unemployment, youths innovate by turning to cybercrime. The normalization of

"Yahoo" as a hustle rather than a crime is a direct social adaptation to state failure. This supports Odigie (2023), who found that economic desperation has eroded the moral fabric of the youth, leading to a transactional view of legality.

The findings reveal that the primary psychological adjustment to economic hardship is escapism, either chemical or physical. The strong correlation supports Relative Deprivation Theory. Youths feel deprived of the future they were promised and resort to substance abuse to numb the pain or plan aggressive migration to restore their dignity. This corroborates Eke (2023) and Mensah and Amankwah (2021), who linked the rising drug epidemic and the Japa wave to the crushing weight of economic hopelessness.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study navigated the socioeconomic landscape of Benin Metropolis to understand how youths are surviving the current economic crisis. The empirical evidence leads to the conclusion that economic hardship is not just affecting the pockets of youths; it is fundamentally rewiring their social character and psychological stability.

The study concludes that Economic Hardship is a breeder of deviance. The spike in cybercrime and substance abuse is not a result of a sudden loss of morals and a calculated survival response to an economy that no longer supports life. Furthermore, the primary Adjustment Mechanism is disengagement. Youths are psychologically detaching from the Nigerian state, evidenced by the overwhelming desire to emigrate. Ultimately, if the economic pressure is not relieved, Benin Metropolis risks becoming a hub of sophisticated criminality and social decay.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Domestication of Social Safety Nets: The Edo State Government must urgently create a localized social security fund for unemployed youths. Conditional cash transfers or subsidized transport schemes can reduce the immediate desperation that drives youths into crime.

Tech Hubs for Legitimate Digital Skills: To counter the "Yahoo" narrative, the government should establish massive technology hubs in Oredo, Egor, and Ikpoba-Okha. By providing free training in coding and data analysis, the state can redirect the digital savvy of Benin youths from fraud to legitimate remote work.

Mental Health Support Systems: The Ministry of Health should integrate mental health counseling into youth centers. Many youths are suffering from economic trauma and require psychological support to adopt healthier coping mechanisms than drug abuse.

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