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YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND NATIONAL SECURITY IN NIGERIA: A HUMAN NEEDS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract
Insecurity in Nigeria manifested through insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, and violent crime, which has become one of the country's most pressing governance challenges. While youth unemployment is often viewed as an economic issue, its far-reaching implications for national security remain inadequately examined. This study investigates the relationship between youth unemployment and national security in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to identify the major causes of youth unemployment and assess its effects on national security. Anchored on Abraham Maslow's Human Needs Theory, the study adopts a qualitative research design, drawing data from interviews with representatives of non-governmental organisations, police officials, and community-based organisations, as well as analysis of relevant policy documents and reports. Findings reveal that unmet basic and psychological needs among unemployed youth contribute to frustration, social alienation, and increased vulnerability to criminal recruitment and violent extremism in the country. The study concludes that addressing youth unemployment through inclusive economic policies and targeted empowerment programs is essential for promoting sustainable national security in Nigeria.

Key words: Youth unemployment, Insecurity, Human Needs, Nigeria, Governance

Introduction

National security has emerged as a central concern for states worldwide, evolving significantly in response to changing geopolitical, technological, and societal conditions. Traditionally, national security was primarily associated with military defense and territorial integrity (Buzan, 1991, P. 116). However, the concept has broadened to encompass economic stability, political sovereignty, social cohesion, information security, and the protection of critical infrastructure, reflecting the complex and interconnected nature of modern threats.

In the current era of globalisation and rapid technological change, threats to national security have becomes so enormous such that sustaining it goes beyond kinetic or/and military deployment (United Nations Development Programme, 1994). Terrorism remains a persistent global security challenge, destabilising regions and weakening National security of a state (Hoffman, 2017, p. 298). Groups such as ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and the Sahel, and Boko Haram in Nigeria have used violence to advance ideological and political objectives, resulting in mass casualties, population displacement, and severe economic disruption across West

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Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia (Olofinbiyi,, 2021, p. 1). Many countries also grapple with internal conflicts rooted in ethnic, religious, or communal divisions (Fearon & Laitin, 2003, p. 75). In countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Myanmar, and India, cultural and religious diversity combined with resource scarcity and political manipulation has intensified communal clashes, including farmer–herder conflicts and ethno-religious violence (Collier, & Hoeffler, 2004, p. 563).

Furthermore, transnational organised crime presents a growing global threat, encompassing drug trafficking, human trafficking, cybercrime, and arms smuggling (UNODC, 2021). Countries like Mexico, Brazil, Libya, Somalia, and Nigeria, faces escalating insecurity linked to banditry, kidnapping, and armed robbery particularly, in Nigeria's northwest, resulting in widespread displacement, loss of lives, and economic hardship (Akinyetun, 2022, p. 1483). Nigeria's experience reflects global trends, with unique local dynamics. According to Osakwe (2014, p. 23), these threats to National security are turbulent and disorienting to the scholars, policy makers, security experts and citizen in Nigeria. It means all things to all people. It is against these foregoing that efforts at mitigating threats to national security pre-occupy minds of every citizen of the country.

In any part of the world, Youth unemployment remains critical challenge with far-reaching implications for national security (Uddin, 2013, p. 397). In its 2024 report, the World Economic Forum (WEF) noted that the global youth unemployment rate stood at 13 percent**,** affecting nearly 65 million young people worldwide (WEF, 2024). The International LabourOrganisation (ILO) further observes that, while regions such as North America and Europe have maintained relatively low rates, other regions including Africa**,** the Arab States**,** East Asia**,** South-east Asia**,** and the Pacific have experienced increases in youth unemployment since 2023 (ILO, 2024).

This high level of youth joblessness poses a profound threat to human security (OECD, 2015). This is because when young people cannot secure decent work and fulfill their basic human needs, their exclusion undermines social stability, inclusion, and justice. Indeed, Gilbert F. Houngbo**,** Director-General of the ILO, justifies this assertion that peaceful societies rely on three core ingredients *stability, inclusion,* and *social justice,* all of which hinge on decent work for young people.

The inability of unemployed youth to meet fundamental needs such as food, shelter, and a sense of purpose can generate deep frustration and disillusionment (Agnew, 2001, p. 319). The ramifications extended beyond individual hardship. Mass youth unemployment erodes social cohesion, weaken trust in governmental institutions, and destabilise democratic governance (GSDRC, 2016). Several countries illustrate this dynamic. In Morocco**,** for example, youth unemployment has reached approximately 35.8 percent**,** leading to recent youth-led protests demanding jobs and better social services (Reuters, 2025). These demonstrations reflect how economic exclusion can quickly transform into political unrest (Reuters, 2025). In Zimbabwe, studies have documented how chronically unemployed youths are mobilised into political violence, sometimes acting as militia members for political parties highlighting a clear link between joblessness, manipulation, and instability (Mude, 2014, p. 1; Maringira&Gukurume, 2018, p. 3). This study therefore examines the relationship between youth

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unemployment and Nigeria's National security.

Statement of the Problem

Youth unemployment in Nigeria represents a significant and growing challenge with profound implications for national security. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the youth unemployment rate (ages 15–24) reached 8.4% in the first quarter of 2024**,** decreasing slightly from 8.6% in Q3 2023, but this still reflects a large number of young Nigerians who are not gainfully employed (NBS, 2024). In Q1 2024, 14.4% of youth were classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), further underlining systemic exclusion from productive economic engagement (NBS, 2024).

Moreover, in Q2 2024, while overall unemployment in Nigeria fell to 4.3%, youth unemployment remained high at 6.5%**,** and the NEET rate stood at 12.5% (NBS, 2024). These figures indicate that a substantial proportion of young people lack stable employment or meaningful training opportunities, leaving them vulnerable to frustration, marginalisation, and disillusionment. When unemployed youths struggle to fulfill basic needs such as food, housing, and a sense of purpose, they result in resentment, grievance, and a willingness to engage in risky or destabilisingbehaviour (Urdal, 2004; World Bank, 2021; Agbai, 2023). On the other hand, when this problem persists over time, this widespread youth exclusion jeopardises social cohesion, weakens trust in political institutions, and can contribute to rising instability and insecurity (UNDP, 2023).

A careful search into the above studies showed that economic marginalisation contributes to grievance formation, social exclusion, and potential engagement in destabilisingbehaviour. However, empirical work rarely identifies causal pathways at the micro level in Nigeria, so also little is known about how unemployment translates into specific behavioural outcomes that threatens national security in Nigeria; an academic lacuna the study filled. The current study examines the relationship between youth unemployment and national security in Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives

The main aim of this study is to examine the effects ofyouth unemployment on national security in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

i. identify the major causes of youth unemployment; and
ii. determine the effects of youth unemployment on national security

Review of Empirical Study

Across many existing literature, youth unemployment is deeply entangled with national security outcomes in Nigeria, and most scholars view this relationship through broader human security concerns. Sen (1999, p. 88) establishes the philosophical foundation by arguing that national security is impossible when citizens' basic needs remain unmet. By rooting his work in Natural State theory, he emphasises that hunger, disease, poverty, political exclusion, and weak social amenities are core drivers of instability. His study offers a macro, conceptual understanding of why human insecurity directly translates into national fragility.

World Bank (2012) builds on this by exploring unemployment specifically, describing how limited opportunities expose young people to criminal recruitment and extremist manipulation. The work moves from theoretical framing to practical policy

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analysis, critiquing state programmes like NYSC and NSIP for weak funding, misalignment with labour-market realities, and limited sustainability. It highlights the need for structural reforms especially in education, vocational training, and public–private collaboration.

Okafor (2011, p. 358) provide a geographically grounded perspective, showing how unemployment undermines human security in Delta State's maritime communities. Their use of mixed methods and human needs theory highlights the real-life impact of joblessness on vulnerable populations. However, their focus on coastal communities leaves national-level generalisation uncertain. Institute for Economics and Peace (2024**)** widens the discussion by documenting how unemployment accelerates banditry, kidnapping, political thuggery, and broader social vices.

The descriptive evidence is rich, but the absence of strong analytical modelling weakens claims about causality. Critical contextual factors like institutional weakness, governance quality, and community resilience are not fully accounted for. Urdal **(2004)** brings in youth bulge and frustration–aggression theories to explain why jobless youth in Port Harcourt drift into insecurity. The study adds theoretical diversity but treats "unemployed youths" as a single block. Differences among sub-groups (graduates vs. non-graduates, skilled vs. unskilled) are not unpacked, and Port Harcourt is not situated within broader national patterns. The existing scholarship strongly agrees that **youth unemployment undermines human security, which in turn destabilises national security**. However, the literature remains fragmented across theories, regions, and methodological strengths.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Human Needs Theory**,** which explains how failure to meet basic human needs can push individuals toward behaviours that threaten national security. The theory was introduced by Maslow (1943, p. 370**)** and later expanded by Burton (1990)**.** Human needs theorists argue that the roots of protracted conflict lie in people's persistent attempts to satisfy unmet needs at individual, group, and societal levels. These needs include both physical and non-physical elements essential for dignity, development, and wellbeing (Galtung 1999, p. 9). Maslow conceptualised needs as hierarchical, beginning with physiological needs, food, water, and shelter, followed by safety, belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Rothman, 1997, p. 7).

Burton (1990), however, reinterprets these needs in conflict studies, arguing that they are **non-hierarchical**, universal, and non-negotiable. Needs such as identity, security, recognition, and participation are pursued simultaneously, and when unmet, they generate frustration and grievance that may escalate into conflict (Rothman, 1997, p. 7). The theory's strength lies in its holistic explanation of human behaviour, it goes beyond material deprivation to include psychological and social needs, helping to illuminate deeper drivers of unrest, especially in contexts marked by exclusion and weak governance.

However, critics note that needs such as identity and dignity are abstract and difficult to measure empirically. The theory also assumes universality across cultures, which can overlook local differences in values and motivations. Applied to this study, Human Needs Theory offers a useful lens for understanding how **youth unemployment fuels insecurity in Nigeria.** When

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unemployed youths cannot meet essential needs such as food, safety, belonging, recognition, they may experience frustration and social exclusion. These conditions can push them toward crime, gang activity, political thuggery, cyber fraud, cultism, or recruitment into extremist groups. In Nigeria's context of chronic unemployment and limited social support, unmet needs deepen grievances and weaken trust in institutions. Thus, Human Needs Theory clarifies why prolonged youth unemployment constitutes a significant threat to national security.

Methodology

This study adopted a **qualitative research design**, relying on data generated through **Key Informant Interviews (KII)**and**In-Depth Interviews (IDI).** Inaddition, **secondary data** were sourced from relevant journal articles, government publications, newspaper reports, and documentaries related to the research topic. A total of**twenty-one (21) participants** who possessed informed knowledge of the subject matter were purposively selected from different locations across Nigeria. Participants for the KII sessions included senior security operatives drawn from the **Nigeria Police Force, and the Department of State Services.** Participants for the IDI sessions included leaders of religion institutions, communities' leaders and youth leaders.

To reach the relevant respondents, the study employed a **snowball sampling technique,** which enabled initial contacts to refer additional participants with the required expertise and experience. A **semi-structured interview guide** was utilised for both KII and IDI sessions, allowing flexibility for participants to express detailed narratives and personal experiences. Interviews were conducted through **online and social media platforms,** providing wider access to respondents across the country. All participants were briefed on the purpose of the research, and **informed consent** was obtained prior to data collection. The principles of **confidentiality and anonymity**were strictly upheld throughout the study. Data were captured using digital devices such as tablets and smartphones, with the permission of participants. A total of 12 KII and 9 IDI sessions were carried out. The generated qualitative data were analysed using **content analysis,** which allowed for systematic identification of patterns, themes, and insights emerging from the interview transcripts and were supported by the secondary materials. Both the primary and secondary were thematically discussed.

Data Presentational and Discussion of the Findings

The Major Causes of Youth Unemployment in Nigeria

Data were collected in response to the causes of youth unemployment in Nigeria. Based on the informants' opinions obtained through Key Informants and In-depth interview conducted, the result **showed corruption and biased recruitment processes,** population expansion, outdated school curricula were major factors responsible for youth unemployment in the country.

According to a community leader,

> *Corruption and bias recruitment exercise has discouraged many youths to seek for legitimate work or job because they will always feel is business as usual. Also, this process has relegated the best candidate to the dustbin and incompetency (Interviewee, 2025).*

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A security operative lends credence,

> *Youth unemployment in Nigeria is a multifaceted challenge driven by several interconnected factors. One major cause is the rapid population growth, which outpaces the economy's capacity to generate sufficient employment opportunities. Consequently, millions of young people enter the labour market each year with limited prospects for gainful employment. In addition, there is a significant mismatch between the skills acquired through formal education and those demanded by employers. The educational system largely emphasises theoretical knowledge rather than practical and vocational training, leaving many graduates inadequately prepared for the realities of the workplace. Furthermore, the industrial and manufacturing sectors, which traditionally serve as major sources of employment, have not expanded at a pace capable of absorbing the growing workforce. This slow growth is largely attributable to inconsistent government policies, inadequate infrastructure, and limited investment in key productive sectors such as manufacturing, agro-processing, and construction (Interviewee, 2025).*

A security operative lends credence about corrupt practices in the government recruitment exercise,

> *I My brother and I paid close to one million naira to secure an appointment about ten years ago. We were told by the person assisting us that he would have to settle several senior officers to ensure that our names were included in the final list of shortlisted applicants. The question is, how many people can afford to pay such an amount of money? We were fortunate to have come across a sincere person. Many of my peers paid money into the wrong hands (Interviewee, 2025).*

A religious leader has different story regarding causes of youth unemployment

> *The school curriculum is not designed in a way that provides self-employment opportunities for youths in the country. Many children who graduate from university are unemployed because they are waiting for the government to employ them. But government cannot employ everybody. Besides, the available jobs are limited compare to the population of the youths in the country. Our education curriculum needs to be over hauled to accommodate self-employment training for youths going to school (Interviewee, 2025)*

A youth leader who happens to be member youth association of Nigeria has this to say

> *Although many youths want to be self-employed, they face unreliable electricity; poor roads, weak internet penetration, and insecurity discourage business growth, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, reducing job creation (Interviewee, 2025).*

The oral evidence collected indicates that the causes of unemployment in Nigeria are complex and multifaceted. Among these factors, are improper recruitment processes and corruption emerge as significant factors. This finding aligns with assertion that nepotism and corrupt hiring practices not only limit employment opportunities for many youths but also weaken public institutions by placing incompetent or unqualified individuals in key roles (Onah, 2017, p.183).This current finding suggests that many young people are compelled to

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pay large sums of money to secure employment, meaning that only those who can afford such payments can access government jobs.

Conversely, those unable to pay are effectively excluded. In this context, bias in recruitment is also prevalent. According to Ijewereme (2015, p. 1), bribery, favoritism, and nepotism in employment practices positively correlate with unemployment rates. Hence, many appointments depend more on personal relationships or connections with recruitment officers rather than on merit.Closely related to this finding arepopulation expansion and outdated school curricula. The evidence clearly indicates that the number of unemployed individuals in Nigeria far exceeds the availability of existing job opportunities.

As World Bank (2013) argues, Nigeria's demographic surge continues to produce more job seekers than the economy can absorb, resulting in a persistent employment gap. This shows that Nigeria's labour force expands at a rate that outpaces the economy's ability to generate sufficient employment opportunities. Rapid population growth places significant pressure on the labour market, leading to structural unemployment. This particular challenge could have been mitigated if the national educational curriculum were designed to promote graduate self-reliance.

Participants in the current study expressed the view that Nigeria's educational curricula do not in any meaningful way support job creation; instead, they contribute to producing graduates who remain unemployed. The concerns raised by participants reflect long-standing critiques of Nigeria's education–employment disconnect. For instance, Okolie et al. (2021, p. 23) argues that the curriculum remains largely outdated and disconnected from the skills demanded by contemporary industries, resulting in graduates who are not adequately prepared for available job roles, while to Olu etal. (2021, p. 1) entrepreneurship education exists in Nigerian universities, it is often theoretical and insufficiently structured to foster genuine self-employment among graduates. It is therefore safe to submits whether directly or not, the nature of education curricula in Nigeria are not sufficient enough in producing self –employable graduates thereby worsening the existing employment challenges in the country.

The Effects of Youth Unemployment on National Security in Nigeria

Data were collected in response to the effects of youth unemployment on national security. Based on the informants' opinions obtained through Key Informants and In-depth interview conducted, the result **showed**youth involvement in criminalities, cultism/thuggery andviolent extremism were the major effects of youth unemployment on National security. A member of civil liberty organization said thus,

> *Although selfishness and the desire for quick wealth cannot be completely dismissed, many Nigerian youths who engage in criminal activities are driven into such behaviour by unemployment. In my village in Edo State, some graduates have turned to cybercrime as an alternative to physical crime. Others have even chosen to discontinue their education, believing that formal schooling will not lead to meaningful employment (Interviewee, 2025).*

A security operative lend credence has this to say,

> *Unemployment has a direct impact on national security, as many individuals*

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> *involved in political violence, urban kidnapping, and cybercrime are predominantly unemployed youths. For example, reports from Lagos indicate that several arrested criminals were jobless young people, many of whom confessed that their involvement in crime stemmed from their inability to secure gainful employment (Interviewee, 2025).*

A religious leader has different story regarding causes of youth unemployment

> *Unemployment exerts a profound influence on national security, as a significant proportion of individuals involved in political violence, urban kidnapping, and cybercrime are unemployed youths. Evidence from several cases across the country reveals that many apprehended offenders were jobless young people, some of whom admitted that their involvement in criminal activities was motivated by their inability to secure stable employment (Interviewee, 2025).*

It can be inferred from the oral evidence that unemployment among youths may lead to depression, which in turn can increase their likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour. This finding proved that Nigeria youth involving in cyber and physical crime were encourage and leverage on non-availability of meaningful job to do. Unemployment often causes psychological distress, including feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and depression (Adebayo, 2013, p. 91). In Nigeria, prolonged joblessness among young adults undermines their self-esteem and emotional well-being, making them more vulnerable to negative coping strategies. This aligns human needs theory that when some basic human needs unmet, they generate frustration and grievance that may escalate into conflict or violent (Rothman, 1997). This is the situation of some Nigeria youths who actively get involve in crime due to frustration.

Cultism, thuggery, and violent extremism were also identified as direct consequences of youth unemployment for national security in Nigeria. The findings suggest that idle youths are easily recruited as political thugs, manipulated into ethno-religious extremism, and drawn into cult-related activities that threaten the peace and safety of communities. As Ibrahim and Adedoyin (2020) note, political elites often exploit the economic vulnerability of idle young people by recruiting them for intimidation, ballot snatching, and other forms of political violence. Similarly, youth unemployment increases susceptibility to radicalisation. Jobless youths facing social and economic exclusion are more easily indoctrinated by extremist groups promising identity, belonging, and material rewards. Ajani (2021) argues that unemployment significantly fuels violent extremism by creating a pool of frustrated youths vulnerable to ideological manipulation. In essence, human needs when compromised or being denied by structural violence, the consequences go beyond individual, but as well affects social security of the society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Youth unemployment in Nigeria is not just an economic issue but a deep structural challenge that spills into almost every corner of national life. Corrupt and biased recruitment practices lock out capable young people, while rapid population growth and outdated educational curricula worsen an already shrinking pool of opportunities. As a result, many youths experience frustration, hopelessness, and depression conditions that push some toward cybercrime, physical crime, political thuggery, cultism, and

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violent extremism. What stands out strongly is that when young people's basic needs such as economic security, dignity, belonging, and opportunity are denied, the consequences do not stay private or personal. They ripple outward, weakening institutions, fueling insecurity, and destabilising communities. if Nigeria fails to address youth unemployment meaningfully, the country will continue to grapple with rising insecurity, social unrest, and the loss of human potential that could otherwise drive national development. It is against the foregoing that this study suggests thus:

i. Government agencies should improve on transparent, technology-driven recruitment processes to eliminate bribery, nepotism, and favouritism. Digital application portals, external monitoring, and strict penalties for corrupt hiring practices will help ensure that qualified youths access opportunities fairly.
ii. The national curriculum should be redesigned to emphasize practical skills, digital competence, entrepreneurship, and problem-solving. Partnerships between universities, industries, and the private sector will ensure that graduates acquire the skills the labour market actually demands.
iii. Youth unemployment should be addressed through inclusive economic policies and targeted empowerment programs for promoting sustainable national security in Nigeria.
iv. Introducing unemployment benefits, like temporary job schemes, and social welfare programmes will provide a safety net for youths, reducing the desperation that often drives criminal behaviour.
v. Finally, National development plans must prioritize youth inclusion. Policies should be intentionally designed to integrate youths into decision-making, employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities.

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