

# **PARENTAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS, FAMILY STRUCTURE AND LIVING ENVIRONMENT AS PREDICTORS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN LAGOS, NIGERIA**

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**Abstract.** This study sets out to find out whether parental socio-economic status, family structure and living environment are predictors of violence against children. Three hypotheses were formulated to guide the investigation. Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study and the population of the study consisted of all the children in public primary schools and in junior secondary schools within Lagos state of Nigeria. A multistage sampling technique was adopted for the study. Random samples of twenty five children were picked from each of the sixteen schools selected. This gives a total 400 participants that were used for the study. Experts in Sociology, measurement and evaluation certified the content validity of the questionnaire, while the co-efficient of the reliability of the four sections of the questionnaire were ascertained to be 0.63; 0.68; 0.66 and 0.73, respectively for sections A,B,C and D. Chi-square statistical tools was used to test the hypotheses for-

culated. Major findings of the study include the fact that parental socioeconomic status significantly influence violence against children, family structure significantly influence violence against children and that living environment also significantly influence violence against children. This study conclude by recommending among others that the Lagos State government should put machinery in motion to improve the poverty level of individuals living in Lagos State of Nigeria and should also make available social services and amenities that are supportive of family well being in order to avoid any form of violence against children.

*Keywords:* parents, children, socioeconomic status, family, living conditions, violence, Lagos

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## **Introduction**

Violence against children is a broad term used to describe all forms of abusive and neglectful acts perpetuated by adults or elder youths against children that may constitute harm or threat to the child's health or welfare. Violence against children may take place in homes, schools, orphanages, residential care facilities, on the streets and places of detention. It can affect the children's physical and mental health, impair their ability to learn and socialize and undermine their development as functional adults and good parents later in life. In the most severe cases, violence against children leads to death.<sup>1)</sup>

The challenges of living in any society are considered enormous, but the child's level of dependency on others makes the challenges they face more enormous as they may not have the wherewithal to resist unfavourable behaviours by others toward them. These unfavourable behaviours are considered as a form of violence against the children. Social learning theorists like Bandura (2001), Siegel (1995) believed that mental or physical acts may predispose a person toward violence. They argued that the activation of a person's

violent tendencies is achieved by factors in the environment. Therefore, the social learning theorists viewed violence as something learned through a process called "*behaviour modeling*". Bandura (2001) described children, who use aggressive tactics in their relationship with their peers, as those whose parents use similar tactics. Also, Bandura (2001) stated the importance of social factors in the formation of personality.

Similarly, Siegel (1995) pointed out four factors from social learning theorists, which produce violence and aggression against persons: (1) An event that heightens arousal such as a person frustrating or provoking another physical assault and verbal abuse; (2) Aggressive skills where learned aggressive responses are picked up from observing others, either personally or through the media; (3) Expected outcomes: this is the belief that aggression will in one way or another be rewarded. Rewards can come in the form of reducing tension or anger, gaining some financial advantage, building self esteem, or gaining the praise of others (4) Consistency of behaviour with values: this is the belief derived from observing others that aggression is justified and appropriate, given the circumstances of the current situation.

According to social learning theory, violence against children is both environmental and behavioural experiences. In the case of the environmental experiences, the theory argues that people who live in areas or neighbourhoods, where violence against children is pre-dominant are more likely to behave violently than those who live in areas whose norms stress conventional behaviour. Fromm (1995) established that personality arises and it is shaped in its own social and economic context. He stated further that, an individual's attitude, values and ideas are usually consistent with and shaped by their family social class and background, even though they are not totally determined by them. Fromm's theory also asserts that personality does not form in vacuum, but it is intimately linked with the society in which it was formed. That is to say, personality relationships are crucial to personality development as per-

sonality relationships are being influenced by wider social and economic factors. Pecora et al. (1992) have identified some social factors that are likely to predict violence against children; namely socio-economic factors, family structures and living environment.

Child abuse is the physical or psychological damaged caused to the child by the abusive behaviour of others, or the failure of others to protect a child from such damage (Boss, 1987). The vast majority of violence is carried out by people who are part of children's life; they are usually known to children and trusted by them. They include; parents, other youths, caregivers, teachers and school friends etc, while others are strangers. Children are often afraid to report violence because of the shame they feel about it, fear of reprisals by perpetrators, or the possible consequences for themselves and others. In Nigeria, and in many cases, parents who should protect their children are silent if the violence is perpetrated by a spouse or other family members or a powerful member of the society.

Pierson & Thomas (2002) argued that child abuse is a physical or psychological harm done to a child through a deliberate act or neglect. Such actions can be a/or combination of threatening, aggression and intimidation. Gelles (1997) sees child abuse to include not only physical assault but also malnourishment, abandonment, neglect, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. In Nigeria context, child abuses include child abandonment, sexual abuse, child neglect, vagrancy, kidnapping and hawking of wares (Ebigbo, 2009).

Physical child abuse include violent assaults that utilize instruments that can cause injury to the child leaving bruises, bites, burns, break or fracture bones and abrasions (Brown, 1991; Minett, 1994; O'Hogan & Smith, 1993; Dwyer & Strang, 2006). Sexual abuses are sexual acts by adults with children below the age of consent and are usually imposed on a child (Dwyer & Strang, 2006). The child is considered to be unable to alter and/or understand the perpetrator's behaviour due to his/her early stage of development or

powerlessness in the situation. The perpetrator's position or authority or trust enables him/her implicitly or directly to coerce the child into sexual compliance. Furthermore, child sexual abuse includes any type of molestation, penetration, fondling, inappropriate sexual talk or actions, exposure, sexual intercourse and exploitation as well as pornography (Berliner, 2000; Brown, 1991; Hefferman et al., 1988).

Another form of child abuse is neglect. Child neglect is any act of omission or commission, either by parents/guardians or the state which deprives a child of the basic necessities of life such as, care, love, warmth, attention, food, shelter, clothing, education and medical care (Goldman et al, 2003; Zuiawin, 1989; Hefferman et al., 1998; Johnson et al., 1997). Child neglect can be deliberate, for example, locking a child out of the house, or keeping the child locked in the house; not realizing that children need to be fed at regular interval because he/she only eats when he/she is hungry. Also, there exist the psychological or emotional maltreatment. Psychological/emotional maltreatment is a constant attitude or behavior towards a child which is detrimental to or impairs the child's emotional development. This may take the form of scapegoat, emotional rejection and isolation, contriving verbal abuse, threatening and taunting or shouting (Brown, 1991; Dwyer & Strang, 2006; Trocmé, 2005; O'Hagan & Smith, 1993; Hart & Brassard, 1987).

The socio-economic status of parents has been confirmed to be predictors of child abuse/violence. The presence of lack of economic opportunities for parents, low educational background, lowest skills and financial problems has all lead to frustrations anti unrest, potentially leading to violence against children (Brown, 1991; Pecora et al, 1992). Economic distress, unemployment, low income, illness in the family and inability to pay adequate medical care are stressors in the lives of many abusive parents (Olson & Defraim; 2000). This is tantamount to transfer of this aggression unto the child. Also, poverty leads to frustration and stressors constraining parents from providing

the kind of stimulating and nurturing care they desire for their children and guide parents to becoming violent more often (Bradley et al., 1994). Low income creates family stress, which in turn leads to higher chances of maltreatment of children (Plotnik, 2000).

Family structures in terms of marital conflict, family size, single parenthood and lack of social support have contributed to child violence (Goldman et al., 2003). Children living with single parents are at a higher risk of experiencing physical and sexual abuse and neglect than children living with two biological parents (Finkelhar et al., 1997; Olson & Detrain, 2000; Goldman et al., 2003). Chronically, neglecting families are often characterized by a chaotic household with changing constellation of adults and children lead to child violence (Polansky et al., 1992). Parents who maltreat their children experience isolation and less social support from family members. Such social isolation further compound child maltreatment and violence (Harrington & Dubowitz, 1999).

The living environment encompasses the home and neighbourhood where the child lives. These phenomena can determine the violence against children. The availability of services and amenities that are supportive to family well-being has important bearing on social relationship within the community and on whether or not adults and children become prey to violence (Gardner & El-Bushra, 2004). Some incidents of physical abuse on children are outcomes of their stressful living environments. Inadequate housing and overcrowding within both dwelling and neighbourhoods are predictors of violence by children brought up under such conditions (Pecora et al., 1992; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunns, 2000).

Thus, violence against children such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and emotional maltreatment and their seriousness, attracts the writers of this paper to look at the predictability of these social factors (parental so-

ocio-economic status, family structure and living environment) on violence against children.

### **Purpose of study**

The purpose of this study is to find out whether parental socio-economic status, family structure and living environment are predictors of violence against children. Secondly, the aim is also to recommend to stakeholders in children upbringing (i.e., government, parents, guardians, peer groups and other social agencies etc.) the importance of avoiding child abuse.

### **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses were tested: (1) parental socio-economic status does not significantly influence violence against children; (2) family structure does not significantly influence violence against children; (3) living environment does not significantly influence violence against children.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted descriptive research survey design. The population of this study consisted of all children in public primary schools and in junior secondary schools (JSS) within Lagos State of Nigeria. A multistage sampling technique was adopted for the study. First, ten percent of public schools (primary & junior secondary schools) within Lagos State were selected, giving a total of ten primary schools and six junior secondary schools. Random samples of twenty-five children were picked from each of the sixteen schools selected. This gives a total of 400 respondents that were used for the study.

The main instrument used for the research was a structured questionnaire tagged; "*Social Factors and Children Violence Questionnaire (SPCVQ)*". Its items were derived from existing literature. The response scale in the questionnaire is such that the highest number '4' indicates a strong

agreement, while the least '1' indicates a strong disagreement for positive questions vice-versa for negative questions. Experts in Sociology and Measurement and Evaluation certified the content validity of the questionnaire. In order to determine the reliability of the instrument, the Cronbach Alpha formula was used to determine the reliability coefficient. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. Section A measured violence against children. The items were made-up of adapted version of ISPCAN and UNICEF questionnaire.<sup>2)</sup> The adapted version yielded 0.63 reliability co-efficient. Section B measured parental socio-economic status. It was adapted from Adler (1997) instrument. The adapted version gave 0.68 reliability co-efficient. Sections C and D measured family structure and living environment respectively. They were adapted from Cao & Abdol (2004) instrument. The adapted version yielded 0.66 and 0.73 reliability coefficients, respectively. The researchers, with the assistance of the school teachers, administered the questionnaire to the subjects and collected their responses immediately after completion.

### **Presentation of data and interpretation of results**

*Ho<sub>1</sub>: Parental socio-economic status does not significantly influence violence against children*

The calculated Chi-square value from the table above is 106.6 and degree of freedom is 15, while the table value is 25.00 at 0.05 level of significance. Since the calculated value was found to be higher than the table value, it therefore implies that the null hypothesis one, which states that "Parental socio-economic status does not significantly influence violence against children", is rejected (Table 1). This means that parental socio-economic Status do influence violence against children. This therefore shows that the presence of lack of economic opportunities for parents, low educational background lowest skills and financial problems are all factors which can lead to frustrations and anti-unrest and can potentially lead to violence against children in Lagos State of Nigeria.



**Table 1.** Influence of parental socio-economic status on violence against children

Variables	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	Total frequency	X <sup>2</sup> calculated	X <sup>2</sup> Table	N	Remark
Parental socio-economic status Violence against children	1326.5	1000	106,602.25	106.6	25.00	16	Ho <sub>1</sub> rejected

P < 0.05; DF = 15

*Ho<sub>2</sub>: Family structure does not significantly influence violence against children*

The Table 2 represents the performance functions between the perception of students in primary and junior secondary school of the influence of family structure on violence against children.

**Table 2.** Influence of family structure on violence against children

Variables	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	Total frequency	X <sup>2</sup> calculated	X <sup>2</sup> Table	N	Remark
Family structure Violence against children	1280	1000	78,400	78.4	25.00	16	Ho <sub>2</sub> rejected

P < 0.05; DF = 15

The calculated Chi-square value from Table 2 is 78.4 while the table value is 25.00 at P < 0.05 level of significance with a degree of freedom of 15. Since the calculated value was found to be higher than the table value, it means that the null hypothesis two which states that “family structure does not significantly influence violence against children is rejected. This means that family structure do significant influence violence against children. This therefore shows that family structure in terms of marital conflict, family size, single parenthood and lack of social support are factors that can contribute to vio-

lence against children. These could make neglecting families be characterized by a chaotic, household with changing constellation of adults and children leading to child violence.

*Ho<sub>3</sub>: Living environment does not significantly influence violence against children*

Table 3 represents the performance functions of children in public primary and junior secondary schools within the Lagos State of Nigeria on how learning environment influence violence against children.

**Table 3.** The perception of the influence of learning environment influence violence against children

Variables	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	Total frequency	X <sup>2</sup> calculated	X <sup>2</sup> Table	N	Remark
Learning Environment Violence against children	1680	1000	462,400	462.4	25.00	16	Ho <sub>3</sub> rejected

P < 0.05; DF = 15

The calculated Chi-square value from Table 3, is 462.4 and the degree of freedom is 15 while the table value is 25.00 at 0.05 level of significance. Since the calculated value was found to be greater than the table value, it therefore implies that the null hypothesis three which states that living environment does not significantly influence violence against children is rejected. This means that living environment do significantly influence violence against children. This therefore shows that the living environment such as home and neighbourhood where the child lives can determine the violence against children. These can be characterized by inadequate housing and overcrowding as predictors by children brought up under such conditions in Lagos State of Nigeria.

## **Discussion**

This study has revealed that parental socio-economic status does significantly influence violence against children in primary and junior secondary schools in Lagos State of Nigeria. The study had also revealed that family structure does significantly influence violence against children in Lagos State of Nigeria. The study further showed that living environment does significantly influence violence against children in Lagos State primary and junior secondary schools. These results therefore showed that to enjoy the children of low socio-economic status of Lagos State of Nigeria are met exposed to violence, government and other stakeholders must endeavour to reduce the level of poverty pervading the Nigerian society with special attention to Lagos State which was the former capital of Nigeria and the present commercial nerve centre of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

These findings have similarities with the positions of Bradley et al. (1994) who believed that poverty leads to frustration and stressors constraining parents from providing the and of stimulating and nurturing care they desire for their children and guide parents to becoming violent more often. Low income according to Plotnik (2000) created family stress, which in turn leads to higher chances of maltreatment of children. The findings also shows similarities with the work of Goldman et al. (2003) who averred that family structure in terms of marital conflict, family size, single parenthood and lack of social support have contributed to child violence. In the opinion of Olsen & Detrain (2000), children living with single parents are at a higher risk of experiencing physical and sexual abuse and neglect than children living with two biological parents. Also, the findings are in line with the believe of Gardner and El-Bushra (2004) which say that the availability of services and amenities that are supportive to family well-being have important bearing on social relationship within the community and on whether or not adults and children become prey to violence.

## **Summary, recommendations and conclusion**

This study has drawn extensive information from the perceptions of primary and secondary school children in ten primary schools and six junior secondary schools of Lagos State of Nigeria. The result had shown that parental socio-economic status does significantly influence violence against children. The result of the study also showed that family structure do have significantly influence on violence against children. The study had also revealed living environment do significantly influence violence against children among primary and junior secondary school students in Lagos State government parents and guardians should put in Lagos an enabling environment to forestall violence against children. The state government should put machinery motion to improve the poverty level of individuals living within the Lagos State of Nigeria. This can be achieved through creation of job opportunities by the government and the provision of infrastructural facilities to boost economic activities. Furthermore, parents should endeavour to reduce the rate of occurrence of marital conflict and ensure manageable family size that will guarantee well being of every member of the family. Single parenthood should also be avoided as much as possible. The availability of social services and amenities that are supportive to family well-being is also recommended to be provided by the state government to the residents of Lagos State. It is only when these recommendations are implemented that violence against children can be reduced to barest minimum if it cannot be totally eradicated in Lagos State of Nigeria.

### NOTES

1. [http://www.unicef.org/nigeria/ng\\_publications\\_Violence\\_reportOAU.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/nigeria/ng_publications_Violence_reportOAU.pdf)
2. ISPCAN & UNICEF. *A collaborative multi-country instrument assessing violence against children*. Brisbane: ICAST-R Development Team at the School of Public Health, Queensland University of Technology, 2006.

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