



AGE STRUCTURE AND VIOLENT CRIME: A DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF YOUTH VIOLENCE IN BENIN METROPOLIS, NIGERIA



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Abstract

Youth violence in Nigeria has drawn sustained scholarly and policy attention amid persistent unemployment, widening economic precarity, and a marked youth bulge. Benin Metropolis, a cultural hub and migration corridor with a complex pattern of urbanization and crime, provides a particularly instructive context. This study examines how the age structure among young people aged 15–29 shapes the prevalence, pattern, and risk of violent crime in Benin Metropolis. Drawing on youth bulge, relative deprivation, social disorganization, and routine activity theories in an integrated analytical framework, the study develops an empirical strategy integrating secondary administrative records and a population-based youth survey to estimate age-structured patterns of violent offending and victimization. Drawing on data from the National Youth Policy, UNODC, and ACLED incident records for Edo State, the study synthesizes youth-weighted age structures, unemployment and school-to-work transitions, and neighborhood disorder as enabling conditions for violence. The study used multilevel modeling framework where individual-level factors are nested within neighborhood-level characteristics to explain variation in violent crime risk across localities of Benin Metropolis. To illustrate, the study incorporates descriptive evidence from extant studies on youth

violence in Benin City and security incident statistics reported for Edo State. This study offers theoretically integrated model connecting age structure to violent crime; operational measurement plan for youth-centric risk and protective factors; an empirical design ready for field implementation in Benin Metropolis; and policy implications tailored to municipal and state agencies, emphasizing targeted employment and youth mediation programmes, among others. This provides a replicable template for Nigeria's cities where rapid demographic change intersects with urban insecurity. Youth is operationalized as persons aged 15–29; violent crime encompasses homicide, armed robbery, aggravated assault, sexual violence, and cult-related clashes; and the primary unit of analysis is individuals nested within neighborhoods.

Keywords: Youth bulge; Age structure; Violent crime; Benin Metropolis; Social disorganization; Routine activity; Relative deprivation; Multilevel modeling

Introduction

Nigeria is undergoing profound demographic change. The median age is among the lowest in the globe, with the share of youths has grown consistently over the last two decades. This population momentum coincides with uneven urbanization, underemployment, and community level strains that shape opportunities for crime. These variations are questioned through the concept of a youth bulge, where a relatively large numbers of young people if they are not adequately incorporated into schooling, work, and societal life may uphold risks of violence, whether interpersonal, communal, or organized (Ismail, 2021; National Youth Policy, 2019–2023; UNODC, 2023/2024).

Benin Metropolis (Benin City and contiguous localities in Oredo, Egor, and IkpobaOkha LGAs) is emblematic of these dynamics. It is a vibrant center of education and commerce, a node in internal and transnational migration, and a site where young people go through precarious labour markets and complex social expectations. Recent reporting on Edo State underscores patterns of violence against civilians, riots, and other incidents distributed across several LGAs, with Oredo (that contains a substantial portion of the metropolis) recording the highest numbers in some recent years (EUAA/ACLED, 2021). At the same time, health and social research in Benin City documents high prevalence of intimate partner and dating violence among youths, pointing to the diffusion of violence across both public and private spheres (Ogboghodo et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, this study asks: How does age structure, particularly the size and composition of the youth cohort, affect levels and patterns of violent crime in Benin Metropolis? To address this question, the study combines theoretical synthesis with a concrete empirical strategy to be implemented with local data partners. While comprehensive, city level, age disaggregated crime statistics remain fragmented in Nigeria, triangulation of administrative data, event databases, health/household surveys, and a bespoke youth survey can advance an evidence based understanding suited to urban governance in Benin Metropolis (Ezemenaka, 2021; UNODC, 2023).

Objectives of the Study

Generally, the objective seeks to investigate “Age Structure and Violent Crime: A Demographic Analysis of Youth Violence in Benin Metropolis, Nigeria”. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the association between neighborhood youth dependency ratios (and broader age structure indicators) and violent crime incidence in Benin Metropolis.
2. Identify individual and family level risk and protective factors mediating the age structure–violence link (e.g., school enrollment, NEET status, exposure to inter-parental violence, peer networks).
3. Investigates spatial variation in youth related violence and examine built environment correlates (street lighting, proximity to schools/markets, transport hubs).
4. Translate findings into age targeted prevention and intervention strategies for municipal and state stakeholders.

The study fills a critical gap in city-specific, age-aware crime analysis for Nigerian cities. Its outputs, including risk maps, empirically derived subgroup profiles, and neighborhood guardianship models, can directly inform youth employment schemes, violence interruption programmes, and safe school routes.

Literature Review

Age Structure and the Youth Bulge Thesis

Classic and contemporary work argues that a good number of youth cohort, especially when combined with opportunities that has been constrained, may generate risks of civil conflict and criminal violence. The youth bulge framework emphasizes the ratio of youths (e.g., 15–24 or 15–29) to the working age and older population, arguing that relative cohort size influences competition for jobs, political voice, and social status, thereby shaping propensities toward various forms of violence

(Abbo, 2017; Ismail, 2021). Nigeria's youth share is high by regional standards, and national policy documents highlight rising youth unemployment during the 2010s, with peaks noted around the mid 2010s (Federal Republic of Nigeria, National Youth Policy, 2019–2023). Although labour market indicators have since fluctuated, structural underemployment continues to persist.

The youth bulge thesis does not mean determinism. Cross national and sub-national studies consistently find conditional effects: youth heavy age structures raise risks where institutions are weak, schooling and job absorption are low, and social control is fragmented; conversely, strong social integration and inclusive growth can transform large youth cohorts into a demographic dividend (Ismail, 2021).

Relative Deprivation, Strain, and Frustration–Aggression

Relative deprivation (RD) theory posits that perceived gaps between expectations and attainments generate frustration that can manifest in aggression or deviance. In youth dense urban settings, visible disparities between school leavers and university students, formal and informal workers, or digitally connected youths and offline institutions can heighten RD, particularly where civic channels for redress are weak. Nigerian analyses of youth violence repeatedly reference RD inflected mechanisms alongside material precarity (Bisina, 2021; National Youth Policy, 2019–2023). Strain theories similarly connect disconnected goals, negative stimuli, and inadequate coping resources to offending.

Social Disorganization and Neighborhood Contexts

Social disorganization theory emphasizes how neighborhood disadvantage, residential instability, and weak collective efficacy weaken informal social control, increasing opportunities for crime. In Benin Metropolis, rapid in migration, informal settlements, and unequal access to social infrastructure can generate pockets of disorder where youth-weighted age structures interact with low guardianship. Routine activity theory complements this by focusing on the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and absence of capable guardians in space and time conditions common near transport nodes, markets, off campus student housing, and nightlife districts.

Youth Violence in Nigeria and Benin Metropolis

Empirical studies in Nigeria document varied manifestations of youth violence from cult-related clashes and street robbery to intimate partner and dating violence. A Benin City study of young persons (15–24)

reported substantial prevalence of dating violence and identified associated risk factors including prior exposure to family violence (Ogboghodo et al., 2019). Extensive reviews noted that Nigerian scholarship is often constrained by limited access to reliable administrative data, leading to qualitative emphasis or mixed methods designs (Ezemenaka, 2021). Event data aggregators (e.g., ACLED) and international datasets (UNODC) partially fill gaps; for instance, 2020 security incident summaries for Edo State show a mix of violence against civilians, riots, and battles across 13 of 18 LGAs, with Oredo documenting the highest numbers (EUAA/ACLED, 2021). These patterns motivated localized, age disaggregated inquiry.

Migration, Gendered Exclusion, and Local Criminal Markets

Benin Metropolis is located along internal and transnational migration corridors. Analyses of gendered exclusion and unauthorized markets in Edo State including sex market dynamics, trafficking risks, and violence exposure underscore how marginalization and limited opportunities for young people can entrench coercion and victimization (Chatham House, 2024). These dynamics interact with age structure: a large youth cohort navigates constrained, sometimes predatory markets, intensifying risks for both perpetration and victimization (Chatham House, 2024; EUAA/ACLED, 2021; Ogboghodo et al., 2019).

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on four complementary theoretical perspectives, each contributing distinct explanatory leverage while sharing the core assumption that demographic structure shapes the social conditions under which violence either flourishes or is contained. The youth bulge perspective, associated with Urdal, Ismail, and related scholars, holds that a disproportionately large cohort of young people aged 15–29 intensifies competition for jobs, educational places, and social recognition. When state institutions and labour markets fail to absorb this cohort productively, the resulting exclusion elevates the probability of both collective and interpersonal violence (Abbo, 2017; Ismail, 2021; Federal Republic of Nigeria, National Youth Policy, 2019–2023). A key assumption is conditionality: youth bulge does not deterministically cause violence; its effects are amplified by weak governance, low school absorption, and limited formal employment. In Benin Metropolis, where structural youth unemployment has been persistently embedded, this perspective offers a direct entry point for analysis. Its main limitation is the risk of ecological fallacy, as neighbourhood-level age composition may mask substantial individual variation in offending propensity.

Relative deprivation theory, developed by Gurr and extended within strain traditions by Merton and Agnew, posits that perceived injustice arising from the gap between aspirations and attainments generates frustration that, when coping resources or civic outlets are lacking, may externalize as aggression or deviance (Bisina, 2021). In youth-dense urban settings such as Benin Metropolis, visible economic disparities between school leavers and university graduates, formal and informal workers, and digitally connected and offline youth intensify these dynamics. The framework attends to the subjective experience of blocked aspirations; its limitation is the difficulty of operationalizing deprivation perceptions at scale without bespoke survey instruments.

Social disorganization theory, rooted in Shaw and McKay and refined through collective efficacy research by Sampson and colleagues, locates crime risk in neighbourhood structural conditions. Where rapid immigration, housing instability, and poverty erode social cohesion and shared norms, informal social control weakens and crime concentrates. In Benin Metropolis, informal settlements, high youth dependency ratios, and uneven infrastructure access replicate these conditions. The theory is well suited to ecological analysis but is limited in accounting for individual-level variation and for resident agency in high-risk areas.

Routine activity theory, proposed by Cohen and Felson, focuses on the convergence in time and space of three elements: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. Youth activity patterns across schools, transit hubs, nightlife venues, and off-campus housing create recurring conditions for such convergence. The theory complements social disorganization by shifting the analytical focus from structural causes to situational opportunity, and is particularly useful for identifying crime-prone micro-places. Its primary limitation is that it treats offender motivation as given rather than explaining its origin.

Analytically, these four perspectives are integrated rather than applied in parallel. Youth bulge and relative deprivation theories jointly explain individual-level motivation and strain; social disorganization theory explains why certain neighbourhoods generate higher baseline risk; and routine activity theory accounts for the spatial and temporal concentration of violent events. Three hypothesized pathways guide the empirical design: first, neighbourhood youth dependency ratios reduce school enrolment and raise NEET rates, increasing exposure to deviant peer networks and violent offending; second, exposure to inter-parental violence normalizes aggression, raising the likelihood of dating violence and general offending;

and third, built environment characteristics, particularly lighting density, proximity to active guardians, and community policing presence, moderate the opportunity structure for violence in high youth-concentration areas.

Study Area: Benin Metropolis

Benin Metropolis is made up of Benin City and contiguous urbanized areas within Oredo, Egor, and IkpobaOkha Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Edo State. It hosts major tertiary institutions, markets, craft guilds, and transport corridors linking to Lagos, the South-South, and the North. The metropolis exhibits heterogeneous neighborhoods, ranging from congested inner-city quarters to peri-urban settlements, with differing levels of infrastructure and social services. Security incident reporting indicates that violence clusters in specific LGAs and localities (EUAA/ACLED, 2021), reinforcing the need for neighborhood level analysis.

Methodology

The study adopts a mixed method, cross-sectional design combining secondary quantitative data with primary field data. Secondary sources include police-recorded violent crime statistics, conflict and violence event data for Edo State localized to Benin Metropolis, and population denominators required computing age structure indicators. These are supplemented by primary survey data collected from youths aged 15–29, as well as key informant interviews and limited ethnographic mapping of crime hotspots. This triangulated approach is appropriate for a context where administrative crime data are incomplete, permitting the study to cross-validate findings across independent sources while capturing both aggregate neighbourhood patterns and individual-level risk factors.

Data Sources and Measures

Administrative and event data constitute the first data stream. Police-recorded violent crime data, comprising quarterly incident counts of homicide, armed robbery, aggravated assault, rape/sexual assault, and cult-related violence for police divisions within Oredo, Egor, and IkpobaOkha, was obtained subject to access agreements. Conflict and violence event data from ACLED, geo-referenced to Edo State and filtered to localities within Benin Metropolis, provide an independent record of violence against civilians, riots, and battles (EUAA/ACLED, 2021). Population denominators, drawn from ward- or LGA-level age-structured estimates, permit computation of youth dependency ratios, youthful population share (15–24 and 15–29), and age-standardized crime

rates. Built environment data from municipal sources, covering street lighting density, school proximity, police post locations, market areas, and transport hubs, operationalize guardianship and opportunity proxies in line with routine activity theory.

The primary data source is a population-based youth survey targeting residents aged 15–29 years.

A multistage cluster design is used to draw the primary sample, selecting enumeration areas across the three LGAs proportional to youth population, followed by systematic household sampling and random selection of one eligible youth per household. Power analysis targeting detection of a small effect ($OR \approx 1.3$) of NEET status on violence victimization at 80% power and $\alpha=0.05$ indicates a minimum of approximately 1,200 respondents; the study will oversample to 1,500 to allow subgroup analysis by sex, schooling status, and migration background.

Survey instruments cover demographics, schooling and employment status, migration history, exposure to inter-parental violence (items adapted from the NDHS domestic violence module), peer networks, substance use, prior offending (a self-report delinquency index), victimization experiences over the preceding 12 months (including physical assault, robbery, and sexual violence), and neighbourhood disorder accessed via a collective efficacy scale. Ethics and safety protocols include informed consent and assent, with guardian consent obtained for minors; private interviewing settings; referral pathways for GBV disclosures; and enumerator training on trauma-informed practice and data protection.

Key Variables

Three outcome variables are specified: individual-level violent offending (self-reported in the past 12 months), violent victimization, and neighbourhood violent crime rate derived from police and event data. Key exposures include individual age (in single years and squared to capture the age-crime curve), youth dependency ratio and youthful population share at the neighbourhood level, NEET status, school enrolment, inter-parental violence exposure, neighbourhood collective efficacy, and built environment guardianship indicators. Covariates encompass sex, household economic status, migration status, housing tenure, household size, routine activities (night-time mobility), and substance use.

Analytical Strategy

The analytical strategy proceeds in four integrated stages, each building on the preceding one. The first stage is descriptive: age-specific

prevalence rates of offending and victimization are computed, and spatial maps of violent crime rates and youthful population share are generated by neighbourhood to identify geographic concentrations and age-crime curve patterns consistent with Hypothesis 1.

The second stage employs bivariate analysis, using chi-square tests and t-tests to compare outcomes across NEET versus non-NEET youth and high versus low youth dependency neighbourhoods. These tests establish preliminary effect magnitudes and guide variable selection for the multivariate models that follow.

Third, two-level logistic models are specified for individual-level offending and victimization outcomes, with respondents nested within neighbourhoods. This multilevel structure is theoretically motivated by the social disorganization and youth bulge frameworks, which jointly predict that neighbourhood-level conditions moderate individual-level risk. Fixed effects are included for age, NEET status, inter-parental violence exposure, and relevant covariates; random intercepts by neighbourhood capture unexplained between-area variation; and cross-level interaction terms (e.g., NEET status $\times$ neighbourhood youth dependency ratio) test the mediating pathways specified in the theoretical framework.

Fourth, count models using negative binomial regression are applied at the neighbourhood level to model violent crime counts, with offsets for the population at risk. Negative binomial models are chosen over Poisson regression because crime count data typically display overdispersion; their use ensures unbiased standard errors. Predictors include youthful population share, collective efficacy scores, lighting density, and police post proximity. Sensitivity analyses are performed by alternating youth age bands (15–24 versus 15–29) and using alternative guardianship measures to test robustness.

Measurement validity is addressed through the use of validated scales for collective efficacy and victimization, pilot testing of instruments, and cognitive testing with target respondents before full deployment. Reliability is accessed via Cronbach's alpha for multi-item constructs and inter-rater reliability checks during hotspot audits.

Triangulation of survey victimization data against police and event data patterns, and cross-validation of hotspot maps against key informant accounts, reduces single-source dependence. Bias is further managed through anonymous self-administered survey sections for sensitive items,

non-response weighting, and post-stratification by age and sex to improve sample representativeness.

The study follows national and institutional ethics guidelines, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and participant safety, especially in GBV modules. Enumerators receive specialized training, and referrals to support services are pre-arranged.

Descriptive Context and Illustrative Evidence

This section synthesizes publicly available evidence to ground the empirical design; it does not substitute for the proposed field data collection.

1. Security incident patterns in Edo State: ACLED summed up reporting indicates that in 2020 there were 53 documented security incidents throughout the state with combination of battles, riots, violence against civilians, and isolated remote violence events with incidents distributed across 13 of the 18 LGAs and the highest numbers in Oredo LGA, the major aspect of Benin Metropolis (EUAA, 2021).

2. Youth violence and victimization in Benin City: A study among young persons (15–24) in Benin City reported substantial prevalence of dating violence and identified determinants including prior exposure to family violence and certain behavioral correlates (Ogboghodo et al., 2019).

3. National youth profile and labour market pressure: Nigeria's National Youth Policy (2019–2023) documents elevated youth unemployment in the mid 2010s and emphasize the resultant effects of sustained NEET levels for social stability and crime risk.

4. Global/UNODC youth violence context: UNODC youth homicide factsheets indicated that youths account for a significant share of homicide victimization globally, with marked gender differences; this underscores the need for age and sex disaggregated analysis in local settings.

Implication: These indicators support the plausibility of a youth bulge–violence nexus in Benin Metropolis operating through labour market stress, family violence exposure, and neighborhood disorganization, amenable to empirical testing with the proposed design.

Hypotheses and Results

Based on theory and the contextual evidence, we posited:

H1 (Age curve): Violent offending follows an age crime curve peaking in late adolescence/early adulthood (17–24), reducing thereafter.

H2 (Youth concentration): Neighborhoods with higher youthful shares (15–29) exhibit higher violent crime rates, net of socioeconomic controls.

H3 (NEET effect): NEET youths have higher odds of violent offending and victimization than in school/in work peers.

H4 (Family violence): Exposure to inter-parental violence is positively associated with both perpetration of dating violence and general violent offending among youths.

H5 (Guardianship moderation): Built environment guardianship (lighting density; proximity to active guardians; presence of community policing posts) attenuates the positive association between youthful share and violent crime.

Discussion

Interpreting the Age Structure–Violence Link

The youth bulge thesis cautions against simplistic determinism: age structure functions as a background condition whose effects depend substantially on mediating institutions (Ismail, 2021). In Benin Metropolis, the coexistence of large youth cohorts, uneven school-to-work transitions, and pockets of neighbourhood disorganization plausibly heightens risk exposure. As Abbo (2017) and others observe, however, the same demographic profile, when coupled with targeted investments, participatory governance, and youth-led social enterprises, can generate civic energy and economic dynamism. Translating that potential into reality requires deliberate policy: expanding educational and employment absorption while strengthening informal and formal mechanisms of social control in high youth-concentration areas.

Gendered Patterns and Intimate Partner Violence

Local evidence of high dating violence prevalence among youths in Benin City (Ogboghodo et al., 2019) indicates that any youth violence strategy must integrate GBV prevention, not only street crime suppression. School based and community interventions that address norms, teach non-violent conflict resolution, and offer survivor centered services are essential. The gendered pattern of homicide and serious assault documented globally argues further for sex-disaggregated programming and mentoring that addresses masculinity norms alongside survivor-centred services (UNODC, 2021).

Spatial Targeting and Everyday Guardianship

Routine activity theory indicates that micro-places, such as bus parks, markets, nightlife corridors, and school perimeters, are critical sites for prevention. City authorities can improve lighting, regulate alcohol outlets, and deploy trained guardians (including community safety volunteers) during peak hours. Integrating youth employment with urban service programmes, such as Safe Streets and Safe Schools youth corps, aligns crime prevention with economic inclusion and addresses youth bulge-driven motivation simultaneously.

Data Systems and Research Capacity

A recurrent theme in Nigerian scholarship is the limited availability and reliability of city level crime statistics (Ezemenaka, 2021). This study's design, which triangulates administrative, event, and survey data, can strengthen local evidence systems. Over time, institutionalized data sharing among police divisions, health facilities, and academic institutions in Benin Metropolis can enable routine monitoring of youth violence trends and evaluation of intervention effectiveness (Ezemenaka, 2021).

Policy Implications

1. Targeted youth employment and skills programs in high risk neighborhoods, linked directly to urban service roles (street lighting maintenance, school route safety, waste management) to convert potential motivated offenders into guardians and community assets.
2. School to work bridges: apprenticeships with craft guilds and SMEs; internship subsidies; first job incentives geared to 18–24-year-olds.
3. Violence interruption and mediation teams staffed by trained, credible messengers from local communities to de-escalate youth conflicts, especially around campuses and markets.
4. Built environment upgrades: expand public lighting and CCTV at micro hotspots; redesign bus parks for natural surveillance; partner with transport unions for guardianship.
5. GBV-integrated youth services: confidential reporting, survivor support, and school/community programs addressing norms that condone violence.
6. Data partnerships: formal MOUs for data sharing; periodic victimization surveys; ward-level dashboards integrating youth demographics and safety indicators.

7. Civic engagement: youth councils advising on safety planning; microgrants for neighborhood projects that strengthen collective efficacy.

Limitations

Data availability: City-level, age-disaggregated police data may be incomplete; event data may undercount certain forms of violence.

Cross-sectional design: Limits causal inference; future waves should adopt panel designs.

Self-report biases: Under- or over reporting in sensitive modules; mitigated by anonymity and ACASI options.

Conclusion

The concentration of youths in Benin Metropolis is both a challenge and an opportunity. Age structure shapes the context in which routine activities, family dynamics, and neighborhood conditions either constrain or facilitate violent crime. An integrated empirical strategy, combining city specific administrative data, event reporting, and a representative youth survey, can quantify these relationships and guide precise, humane interventions. Investing in youth inclusion, guardianship of public spaces, and reliable local data systems offers the most promising path to safer neighborhoods and a thriving metropolis.

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