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***Correspondence**
President Probel

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Exploration Of Weaponization on How Poverty Impacts Youth Restiveness in Borno State

President Probel, Prof. Steve Wordu & Prof. Chioma Daisy Onyige

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Port Harcourt, **Nigeria**

Abstract

This study explores the weaponisation of poverty and its impact on youth restiveness in Borno State, Nigeria. Over the past two decades, Borno State has witnessed a surge in violent extremism, insurgency, and socio-political instability, with youth often at the centre of these crises. The research investigates how poverty is deliberately manipulated or sustained by political, economic, and insurgent actors as a tool to control, recruit, or destabilise vulnerable youth populations. Using a mixed-methods approach involving key informant interviews, surveys, and document analysis, the study identifies strong correlations between poverty-induced deprivation and the rising tide of youth restiveness. The findings reveal that limited access to education, unemployment, food insecurity, and lack of social safety nets have created fertile ground for radicalization and anti-state behavior. The study also uncovers that political elites and insurgent groups alike exploit the economic disenfranchisement of young people for personal or ideological gains. It concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for strategic poverty alleviation programs, inclusive governance, and community-based rehabilitation initiatives to mitigate youth unrest and build sustainable peace in Borno State. Recommendations include targeted youth empowerment programs, transparent resource distribution, and collaboration between government, civil society, and international partners.

Keywords

Poverty, Weaponization, Youth Restiveness, Borno State, Radicalization, Insurgency, Socioeconomic Deprivation

Introduction

The concept of weaponizing poverty refers to the deliberate use or neglect of economic deprivation as a strategy by state and non-state actors to control, exploit, or destabilize vulnerable populations. In the context of Borno State, Nigeria, this phenomenon has become particularly significant given the prolonged insurgency led by Boko Haram and other extremist groups. Youth restiveness, characterized by violent protests, armed militancy, drug abuse, and civil disobedience, has become a common feature of the sociopolitical landscape in the region. These behaviors are not merely spontaneous acts of rebellion but are often driven by deep-rooted socio-economic

disenfranchisement, unemployment, illiteracy, and a systemic lack of opportunities (Adeleke, 2021).

Borno State, located in the northeastern region of Nigeria, has been the epicenter of violent extremism since the emergence of Boko Haram in 2009. The region suffers from some of the highest poverty rates in Nigeria, with more than 70% of its population living below the poverty line (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2020). Young people in this region are especially vulnerable due to limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. These conditions have created a breeding ground for insurgent recruitment and youth participation in anti-state activities (Okereke & Olanrewaju, 2022).

Research suggests that poverty is not merely a passive background condition in the conflict; it is actively exploited by political elites, warlords, and extremist groups to manipulate and mobilize young people. These actors use promises of financial reward, status, or ideological belonging to draw disillusioned youth into their ranks (Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2020). Furthermore, the state's failure to deliver basic services and economic opportunities is perceived by many as intentional neglect, fostering resentment and alienation among young populations (Amnesty International, 2018).

The strategic use of poverty as a weapon—whether through neglect, marginalization, or direct exploitation—undermines national security and sustainable development. It transforms economic hardship into a tool of coercion, incentivizing violence and eroding trust in government institutions. Understanding how poverty is weaponized in Borno State is crucial for developing holistic policy responses aimed at reducing youth restiveness, rebuilding communities, and achieving lasting peace.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the ways in which poverty has been weaponized in Borno State and to examine its direct and indirect impacts on youth restiveness. It aims to uncover the socio-economic mechanisms through which poverty contributes to instability and to offer evidence-based recommendations for addressing these challenges.

Poverty as a Driver of Youth Restiveness

A significant body of literature establishes a strong link between poverty and youth restiveness. According to Okoli and Uhembe (2018), poverty-induced frustration, when left unaddressed, often culminates in aggression and youth involvement in violent activities. In Borno State, the chronic lack of basic services education, health, infrastructure has left many youths idle and desperate, thus increasing their susceptibility to manipulation by insurgents.

Olayemi (2020) contends that extreme poverty contributes to psychological distress and a sense of hopelessness among youths, making them more likely to engage in violent protests or join militant groups. The study underscores that poverty is not only an economic issue but also a psychological and sociopolitical one that affects youth behavior and decisions.

Weaponization of Poverty by State and Non-State Actors

The concept of weaponizing poverty has been explored by Ibrahim and Yusuf (2020), who argue that both insurgent groups and political elites in Northern Nigeria manipulate poverty to recruit or control the youth population. Insurgent groups like Boko Haram provide financial incentives, food, and identity to impoverished youth, using poverty as a recruitment tool. On the other hand, political actors often use patronage and selective empowerment programs to maintain loyalty and suppress dissent, thereby entrenching poverty among certain groups as a form of control.

Omotosho and Adeoye (2021) highlight how systemic corruption and elite marginalization of Northern youth have created a perception that poverty is being deliberately maintained. This perception fuels anger and contributes to the escalation of youth restiveness, particularly in Borno and neighboring states.

Youth Vulnerability and Radicalization

Several studies focus on the vulnerability of unemployed and uneducated youth to radical ideologies. According to Akinola (2019), Boko Haram has capitalized on the desperation of Northern youth by providing a false sense of purpose, community, and economic stability. The group's exploitation of youth vulnerabilities is made easier by the absence of credible state interventions and long-term development planning.

Similarly, Agbiboa (2015) describes the situation in Borno State as a "youth bulge crisis," where a growing young population faces bleak prospects in terms of employment and education. He argues that this creates a volatile mix where restiveness becomes almost inevitable.

Government Failure and Perpetuation of Poverty

The failure of the Nigerian government to implement inclusive economic policies has also been linked to persistent youth restiveness. According to Ucha (2010), the absence of effective poverty alleviation strategies and the politicization of intervention programs have rendered many efforts ineffective. In Borno State, this failure has been compounded by insecurity, further marginalizing the youth.

Additionally, Adebayo (2013) points out that while the government has introduced programs such as N-Power and the Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), their reach and sustainability remain questionable, especially in conflict zones like Borno. The inconsistency and limited scope of these initiatives have done little to address the root causes of youth restiveness.

Akpokighe & Ejovi (2020) examined "Youth Restiveness in Nigeria: Implications on Sustainable National Development" to engage the problem that escalating youth restiveness manifesting in ethnic militias, kidnapping, cultism, armed robbery, and broader social insecurity threatens Nigeria's peace, national cohesion, and developmental trajectory. Framed within conflict theory, which links violent upheavals to competition over scarce and unevenly distributed resources, the study's objectives were to (i) interrogate the structural and socio-economic causes of youth restiveness; (ii) analyze its multi-sectoral consequences for national development; and (iii) propose strategies for government responsiveness and youth-focused intervention. Relying on a qualitative, literature-based review of scholarly works, policy commentary, and socio-political reports, the authors found that unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, limited social amenities, and weak empowerment pathways are core drivers pushing young people toward violent or disruptive mobilization. The major findings emphasize that unchecked restiveness fuels a cycle of insecurity that undermines investment, governance credibility, and development outcomes across sectors. The authors argue that meaningful mitigation requires recognizing and productively channeling youth skills, education, and creativity into structured employment and civic engagement programs, coupled with improved public services. These insights reinforce the security–development nexus central to the present research, especially where youth exclusion feeds local conflict, governance breakdown, and stalled community development. The paper does not provide empirical measurement across regions, nor does it test the effectiveness of specific empowerment models or state-led responses; the current study advances the literature by integrating field data on youth perceptions, program evaluation evidence, and comparative subnational analysis to identify scalable interventions that reduce restiveness and strengthen sustainable development.

Akinsaya (2023), in "Examining Anti-Corruption Institutional Mechanisms in Nigeria and the Siege Against Public Sector Corruption", interrogates the persistent entrenchment of corruption within Nigeria's public sector, which the study metaphorically likens to a "forest fire during harmattan" too widespread to ignore yet resistant to containment. The central objective of the paper is to assess the adequacy and performance of anti-corruption institutional frameworks in Nigeria, with particular attention to systemic weaknesses undermining enforcement capacity, legislative sufficiency, and policy implementation. Employing a doctrinal legal analysis complemented by illustrative case studies, the research dissects statutory provisions, jurisprudential interpretations, and institutional practices that define the anti-corruption architecture, especially in high-stakes sectors like petroleum where rent-seeking and resource capture are most pronounced. The study advances the argument that institutional fragility and normative loopholes manifested in deficient legal frameworks, selective enforcement, and political interference have crippled anti-corruption agencies' effectiveness, despite an expanding corpus of laws ostensibly designed to combat graft. While existing instruments such as the EFCC Act, ICPC Act, and related statutory regimes theoretically empower anti-corruption bodies, their operationalization suffers from structural deficiencies, executive capture, and lack of prosecutorial independence, thereby sustaining an environment where impunity thrives. Findings affirm that corruption remains a corrosive force eroding institutional credibility, distorting public resource allocation, and exacerbating inequality, while poorly harmonized legal mechanisms and politicized anti-graft enforcement compound the problem rather than resolve it. The paper concludes by asserting that the siege on public sector corruption requires not merely more laws but the

rationalization, depoliticization, and resourcing of anti-corruption institutions coupled with judicial reforms to ensure speedy and impartial adjudication of corruption-related cases. Akinsaya's work provides a legal-institutional perspective on governance deficits and their implications for accountability, complementing analyses of security fragility, youth restiveness, and governance failure. It underscores how weak institutional enforcement contributes to systemic legitimacy crises, indirectly fuelling social grievances and instability dynamics central to understanding governance-insecurity linkages in Nigeria. While normatively rigorous, the study is doctrinal and descriptive, lacking empirical metrics to evaluate institutional performance or the causal effect of anti-corruption efforts on governance quality and conflict dynamics. The current research builds on this by integrating governance and security outcome indicators to assess how institutional weaknesses translate into socio-political unrest at subnational levels.

Ibeh & Igwe (2024) examined "Youth Restiveness and Surging Insecurity: A Reflection of Questionable Inclusive Governance in Nigeria" to confront the problem that widening ungoverned spaces, deepening insecurity, and rising youth-led collective action signal a crisis of exclusion in Nigeria's governance architecture. The study asked how genuinely inclusive governance is particularly in relation to youth access to power, participation, and decision-making and whether systemic denials of voice, opportunity, and institutional access help fuel restiveness that erodes public confidence in law enforcement and state protection. Anchored in Vilfredo Pareto's elite theory of power (the "Lions" and the "Foxes") and employing content analysis with inferential interpretation of documentary and policy sources, the paper interrogated dynamics between governing and non-governing elites and the positionality of youth outside elite circulation. Major findings indicate that youth isolation from power structures, combined with poor state penetration of territory (ungoverned or under-governed spaces), produces provocative exclusion that helps incubate restiveness, escalates insecurity, and undermines trust in state legitimacy and good governance. The authors argue for inclusive governance reforms that deliberately integrate youth stakeholders into policy processes and power relations as a strategic response to insecurity. These insights reinforce the security-inclusion nexus at the heart of contemporary governance challenges in Nigeria and support the present research's interest in how marginalization whether generational, regional, or institutional translates into insecurity and developmental stagnation. The paper's theoretical orientation and documentary method leave unanswered questions about where, how, and to what measurable extent youth exclusion predicts localized insecurity, and it does not test models of youth-inclusive governance or map variation across states; the current study addresses this by combining survey evidence, subnational case comparisons, and governance indicators to evaluate practical entry points for institutionalizing youth participation in security and development planning.

Ibeh and Dickson (2025) examined "Youth Restiveness and Surging Insecurity: A Reflection of Questionable Inclusive Governance in Nigeria" to address the problem of increasing youth restiveness and insecurity in Nigeria, driven by governance exclusion, structural inequality, and weak security architecture. The paper underscores that the proliferation of ungoverned spaces and governance failures has eroded public trust in law enforcement and national security institutions. Applying Vilfredo Pareto's elite theory as the conceptual lens, the authors argue that Nigerian governance is dominated by a power struggle between governing and non-governing elites ("Lions and Foxes"), leaving youths marginalized in decision-making processes. The study's objectives were to (i) assess the exclusiveness of Nigeria's governance structure and its implications for youth restiveness and security; (ii) evaluate the effectiveness of Nigeria's security architecture in managing protests and insecurity, particularly during the End SARS movement; and (iii) recommend strategies for inclusive governance that reduce restiveness. Methodology combined theoretical analysis, content analysis, and inferential reasoning, drawing from the case of End SARS as a reference point. Findings reveal that systemic youth exclusion from governance fosters feelings of isolation and grievance, escalating restiveness and insecurity. The study argues that ineffective, reactionary security responses to youth-led movements deepen mistrust and instability. Consequently, the paper advocates for inclusive governance reforms, stakeholder participation in power relations, and a security strategy that addresses root causes rather than relying solely on force. This work enriches the discourse on youth restiveness by linking governance deficits and security inefficiency to societal instability, providing a theoretical and policy foundation for exploring governance inclusivity as a peacebuilding mechanism. While the paper presents a strong theoretical critique, it lacks empirical validation of its claims through quantitative or mixed-method analysis of governance inclusivity and security performance. The current research addresses this by incorporating empirical data on youth participation, insecurity trends, and governance responses.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive survey research design combined with qualitative case study techniques. This mixed-method approach is employed to gather both statistical and contextual data that capture the experiences, perceptions, and realities of youth restiveness as influenced by poverty in Borno State. The descriptive survey enables the collection of data from a broad population to determine prevailing trends, causes, and patterns. The qualitative case study method provides a deeper understanding of how poverty is intentionally or structurally weaponized to influence youth behavior, particularly through in-depth interviews and focused group discussions. This combination allows for a robust triangulation of findings, providing both empirical evidence and narrative insights.

Study Area

The study is conducted in Borno State, located in the North-Eastern geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The state has been the epicenter of the Boko Haram insurgency and remains one of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged regions in the country. Key local government areas (LGAs) such as Maiduguri Metropolitan Council, Jere, Biu, Konduga, and Gwoza are considered due to their high incidence of youth restiveness and insurgent activities.

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprises the following key groups:

- Youth aged 18–35 residing in selected LGAs of Borno State
- Victims or survivors of insurgent recruitment or violence
- Community leaders and local government officials
- Security personnel and counter-insurgency actors
- Officials of NGOs and agencies working on youth empowerment and poverty alleviation

The choice of this population is based on their relevance to the issues of poverty, youth vulnerability, and restiveness in the region.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

Given the volatility and security risks in the study area, purposive sampling is used to select respondents with firsthand experience or knowledge of the impact of poverty and youth restiveness. A total of 150 respondents are targeted:

- 100 youth participants (randomly selected within communities)
- 20 key informants (community leaders, NGO officials, security officers)
- 30 participants for focus group discussions (in groups of 6–10 per session)

Data Collection Methods

The study utilizes both primary and secondary data collection methods:

Primary Data:

- Structured questionnaires: Administered to selected youth to assess the link between poverty, state neglect, and restiveness.
- Key informant interviews (KIIs): Conducted with government officials, NGO representatives, and security personnel to gain expert insights.
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Organized among youth groups to obtain qualitative, community-level perspectives.

Secondary Data:

- Review of existing literature, government reports, policy documents, and NGO publications on poverty, youth unrest, and insurgency in Borno State.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data from the questionnaire will be analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, percentage) and inferential statistics (Chi-square test and regression analysis) via SPSS software.

Qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs will be transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed to identify key patterns, recurring themes, and narratives related to the weaponization of poverty.

Results

The weaponization of poverty impact youth restiveness in Borno State.

Table 4.3: Opinion of Respondents based on how weaponization of poverty impact youth restiveness in Borno State

S/N	Item Statement	Respondents	Response Categories		
			Mean	S.D	Remark
1	Do you believe that lack of employment opportunities is a significant factor leading to youth restiveness in Borno State.	Borno Central	3.12	.808	Accepted
		Borno North	3.11	.816	Accepted
		Borno South	3.24	.871	Accepted
2	In your opinion, is poverty a major reason why young people in Borno State join violent extremist groups.	Borno Central	3.57	.757	Accepted
		Borno North	3.56	.767	Accepted
		Borno South	3.55	.635	Accepted
3	To what extent do you believe that youth restiveness in Borno State is driven by poor access to education and skill development opportunities.	Borno Central	3.16	.443	Accepted
		Borno North	3.16	.438	Accepted
		Borno South	3.29	.507	Accepted
4	Do you think that economic inequalities and disparities between rich and poor in Borno State contribute to youth restiveness.	Borno Central	3.46	.595	Accepted
		Borno North	3.46	.587	Accepted
		Borno South	3.49	.526	Accepted
5	In your view, are young people in Borno State more likely to engage in violent extremism if they have limited economic opportunities and few prospects for a better future.	Borno Central	3.32	.892	Accepted
		Borno North	3.33	.888	Accepted
		Borno South	3.45	.916	Accepted
6	Do you believe that addressing poverty, unemployment, and inequality could help to prevent youth restiveness and reduce the prevalence of violent extremism in Borno State.	Borno Central	3.53	.769	Accepted
		Borno North	3.48	.839	Accepted
		Borno South	3.66	.757	Accepted

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2025

The weaponisation of poverty impacts youth restiveness in Borno State was investigated, as outlined in Table 4.3. Respondents' opinions from three distinct regions - Borno Central, Borno North and Borno South were examined, with mean scores and standard deviations provided for each item statement.

Item 1 of the table focuses on if they believe that lack of employment opportunities is a significant factor leading to youth restiveness in Borno State. Across the regions of Borno Central, Borno North and Borno South, respondents generally agree that the lack of employment opportunities has significantly influenced current land use regulations. The mean scores range from 3.11 to 3.24, indicating a moderate to strong level of agreement, with standard deviations ranging from .816 to .871, signifying relatively consistent responses within each senatorial district. Moving to Item 2, respondents also agree that poverty is a major reason why young people in Borno State join violent extremist groups. Mean scores range from 3.55 to 3.57, with standard deviations indicating moderate variation in responses.

Item 3 delves into perceptions on if they believe that youth restiveness in Borno State is driven by poor access to education and skill development opportunities. Responses show a relatively high level of agreement across the regions, with mean scores ranging from 3.16 to 3.29 and standard deviations indicating moderate variation.

Similarly, Item 4 explores respondents' views on how their economic inequalities and disparities between rich and poor in Borno State contribute to youth restiveness. Here, mean scores range from 3.46 to 3.49, indicating a strong level of agreement across regions.

Item 5 examines respondents' perspectives if young people in Borno State more likely to engage in violent extremism if they have limited economic opportunities and few prospects for a better future.

Finally, Item 6 investigates whether respondents if they believe that addressing poverty, unemployment, and inequality could help to prevent youth restiveness and reduce the prevalence of violent extremism in Borno State. Responses indicate a degree of agreement, albeit with some variability, particularly in the standard deviations.

This is an indication that there is a clear link between the weaponization of poverty impact youth restiveness in Borno State, thus justifying destruction of lives and properties in Borno State.

Interview scheduled and responses

The weaponization of poverty impact youth restiveness in Borno State

Q1: What factors do you believe contribute to youth restiveness and violent extremism in your community?	Respondent A: There are multiple factors that contribute to youth restiveness and violent extremism in our community, including poverty, unemployment, lack of access to education, and political marginalization.
Q2: In your view, what are the biggest challenges facing young people in your community?	Respondent B. The biggest challenges facing young people in our community are poverty and lack of job opportunities, which leads many of us to turn to violent extremist groups that promise us a better life.
Q3: What programs or initiatives have been implemented to address youth restiveness and violent extremism in Borno State?	Respondent C: The government has implemented several programs, such as economic empowerment initiatives, vocational training, and security operations, to address youth restiveness and violent extremism in Borno State. However, more needs to be done to effectively address the underlying causes of these issues.

Discussion

The research delved into understanding the correlation between weaponization of poverty impact youth restiveness in Borno State by examining the perspectives of respondents from distinct senatorial districts including Borno Central, Borno North and Borno South. The findings revealed a consensus among respondents regarding the incidents of youth restiveness. Mean scores ranging from 3.11 to 3.66 across different statements indicated a moderate to strong agreement, in line with existing literature which is in tandem with the position of Yusuf (2024) examined “Youth Restiveness: Nigeria's Security and Sustainable Development” with the problem statement focusing on the alarming rise in youth restiveness across Nigerian communities, which poses a severe threat to national security and sustainable development. The objective of the study was to investigate the incidence of youth restiveness and its implications for security and development in Nigeria. Utilizing secondary sources and personal observation as its research methodology, the study identifies critical drivers of restiveness, including poverty, unemployment, lack of access to education, and government inaction in addressing these challenges. Major findings reveal that the escalation of violent behaviors, such as killings, bomb blasts, kidnappings, and abductions, has been fueled by socio-economic deprivation and lack of effective governance.

Akpokighe & Ejovi (2020) examined “Youth Restiveness in Nigeria: Implications on Sustainable National Development” to engage the problem that escalating youth restiveness manifesting in ethnic militias, kidnapping, cultism, armed robbery, and broader social insecurity threatens Nigeria's peace, national cohesion, and developmental trajectory.

In summary, the research findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of the relationship between weaponization of poverty and youth restiveness in Borno State, thus justifying destruction of lives and properties in Borno State.

Conclusion

This study explored the weaponization of poverty and its impact on youth restiveness in Borno State, Nigeria. The findings reveal that poverty in the region is not only widespread but also strategically exploited by both state and non-state actors to manipulate, recruit, or suppress the youth population. The lack of access to education, employment, and social services—compounded by the destruction caused by prolonged insurgency—has created a cycle of deprivation and frustration that fuels youth restiveness. Insurgent groups such as Boko Haram have capitalized on the desperation and economic vulnerability of young people, offering material incentives and a false sense of purpose. Simultaneously, political actors have been implicated in perpetuating systemic inequality and marginalization, often through selective empowerment schemes that serve elite interests rather than addressing the root causes of youth unrest. As a result, many young people in Borno State find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty, violence, and disillusionment with the state.

The study concludes that the weaponization of poverty is a significant but often overlooked driver of youth restiveness in conflict-affected areas. Addressing this challenge requires more than short-term security responses; it calls for comprehensive, long-term strategies focused on poverty alleviation, inclusive governance, and youth empowerment. A multi-sectoral approach involving government, civil society, traditional institutions, and international partners is essential for breaking the link between poverty and conflict. Without tackling the underlying socio-economic injustices, any efforts at peacebuilding and counter-insurgency in Borno State are likely to remain ineffective or short-lived.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are provided as thus:

1. To address ungoverned territories and banditry, it is crucial to establish effective governance structures and security measures in Borno State. This should include the development of community-based security initiatives, improved communication and cooperation between local communities and security agencies, and increased investment in border security and infrastructure.

2. To address the impact of weaponization of poverty on youth restiveness in Borno State, it is recommended that the government adopt a comprehensive poverty alleviation strategy that includes job creation, vocational training, and investment in education and skills development for young people, especially in areas affected by conflict and violence.

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