

# Youth Unemployment and Economy of Insecurity in Owerri West Local Government Area, Imo State (2020-2025)

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**Abstract -** *This study examines the relationship between youth unemployment, economic growth, and insecurity in Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria, between 2020 and 2025. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through questionnaires and key informant interviews involving community leaders and security personnel. Findings reveal that youth unemployment remains widespread and is a major driver of insecurity, as economic hardship, poverty, and frustration push many youths into criminal activities such as robbery, cultism, and cybercrime. Slow economic growth, weak infrastructure, and inadequate government interventions further exacerbate the situation by limiting job opportunities and discouraging investment. The study also finds that corruption and poor policy implementation weaken institutional capacity to effectively address these challenges. Respondents emphasized that vocational training, entrepreneurship support, infrastructure development, and access to microcredit are critical for stimulating economic growth and reducing unemployment. Additionally, collaborative efforts involving government, security agencies, and community actors were identified as essential for improving security outcomes. The study concludes that insecurity in Owerri West is fundamentally linked to socio-economic deprivation and governance failures. Addressing these issues requires integrated and sustainable strategies focused on job creation, inclusive economic policies, and transparent governance. The findings contribute to existing literature by providing empirical evidence on the nexus between unemployment, economic stagnation, and insecurity in a sub-national Nigerian context.*

**Keywords:** *Youth Unemployment, Economic Growth, Insecurity, Governance, Owerri West LGA*

## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the study

The challenge of youth unemployment represents one of the most formidable socio-economic and political issues confronting the global community in the 21st century. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has consistently highlighted the disproportionate burden of unemployment borne by young people (aged 15-24 globally, and often extended to 35 in

many African contexts), who are several times more likely to be jobless than adults (ILO, 2022). This global phenomenon is not merely an economic statistic; it is a catalyst for social instability, a driver of irregular migration, and a significant threat to sustainable development. In developing nations, particularly within Sub-Saharan Africa, the crisis is amplified by a demographic youth bulge, where a large, youthful population enter a labour market incapable of absorbing them. This mismatch between demographic growth and economic opportunity creates a fertile ground for social friction, disillusionment, and a desperate search for alternative livelihoods, many of which exist outside the formal, legal economy (African Development Bank Group, 2020).

Consequences of this crisis more palpable in Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation. Nigeria has grappled with high rate of youth unemployment and underemployment, a situation exacerbated by a litany of factors including mono-economy (crude oil) systemic corruption, infrastructural deficits, and a disconnect between the educational system's output and the demands of the modern labour market (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023). 2020-2025 marks a grim chapter in this ongoing saga. The economic devastation created by the COVID-19 pandemic, which precipitated a global recession that shocked Nigeria's already fragile economy, led to widespread job losses and business closures. The official youth unemployment rate soared to unprecedented levels, with the NBS (2023), reporting that a staggering percentage of the nation's youth were without meaningful employment. This economic collapse occurred concurrently with a period of intense social and political upheaval, notably the #EndSARS protests in late 2020, which, while initially a demand for police reform, morphed into a broader expression of youth frustration against state failure and economic exclusion (Akinyetun et al., 2021).

This pervasive economic insecurity among the youth has a well-documented, though complex, relationship with national security. As legitimate avenues for economic advancement become increasingly inaccessible, the allure of illegitimate means grows stronger. This has manifested in various forms of criminality, including cybercrime (yahoo-yahoo), armed robbery, political thuggery, and, most alarmingly, banditry and kidnapping for ransom. These activities have transitioned from being sporadic criminal acts to organised profitable venture, and self-perpetuating illicit economy. This phenomenon, aptly termed the "economy of insecurity," describes a system where violence and the threat of violence are instrumentalized as primary tools for capital accumulation (Keen, 2012). In this perverse marketplace, insecurity is not merely a consequence of state failure but a commodity to be produced, managed, and sold. This national crisis has taken on a distinct and violent character in Nigeria's Southeast geopolitical zone, including Imo State. Since 2020, the region has been engulfed in a wave of violence characterized by attacks on security personnel and state infrastructure, politically-motivated assassinations, and a rampant kidnapping-for-ransom. This wave of insecurity is often attributed to the activities of secessionist agitators and vague criminal gangs, colloquially termed "Unknown Gunmen" (International Crisis Group, 2022). This environment of endemic fear and instability has crippled local economies, stifled investment, and disrupted social life. This violence are overwhelmingly reported to be orchestrated by youth, raising critical questions about the nexus between their socio-economic conditions and their participation in this burgeoning industry of violence.

### 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Insecurity in Nigeria has intensified, evident in kidnapping, armed robbery, cultism, political thuggery, and cybercrime. In Imo State particularly Owerri West LGA this trend (2020–2025) reflects deepening socio-economic instability driven by youth unemployment, economic stagnation, and rising disillusionment. Nigeria's unemployment rate reached 33.3% in 2020 (NBS, 2021), while youth unemployment in Imo State remained higher, ranging between 35% and 45% (NBS, 2022). Owerri West mirrors this reality, with many unemployed graduates from institutions such as Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Imo State University, and FUTO. Limited job opportunities and weak policy interventions have

pushed some youths into criminal activities and illicit economies (Eze, 2023), reflecting broader systemic exclusion. This situation has produced an "economy of insecurity," where crime becomes a survival strategy (Okafor, 2021; Adebayo, 2022). Police reports show rising cases of kidnapping, cybercrime, and cult violence (2020–2025) (Nigeria Police Force, 2024). Simultaneously, slow economic growth worsened by post-COVID contraction has reduced investment and weakened livelihoods (World Bank, 2022). Small businesses and agriculture have declined, increasing reliance on informal or illegal means (Adeniyi & Musa, 2022). Consequently, unemployment, economic decline, and insecurity reinforce one another, while government interventions remain largely ineffective.

### 1.3 Research Questions

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

- i. How has youth unemployment contributed to the economy of insecurity in Owerri West (2020-2025)?
- ii. How has the state's slow economic growth heightened crime rate in Owerri West LGA (2020-2025)?

### 1.4 Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this paper seeks to examine the relationship between youth unemployment and the economy of insecurity in Owerri West LGA (2020 to 2025).

The specific objectives are:

- i. To ascertain how youth unemployment has contributed to the economy of insecurity in Owerri West LGA (2020 to 202)
- ii. To examine how the state's slow economic growth has heightened crime rate in Owerri West LGA between (2020-2025)

### 1.5 Hypothesis

- (H<sub>1</sub>): Youth unemployment has significantly contributed to the economy of insecurity in Owerri West LGA between 2020 and 2025.
- (H<sub>2</sub>): Slow economic growth has significantly heightened the crime rate in Owerri West LGA between 2020 and 2025.

### 1.6 Significance of the Study

This study has both practical and theoretical significance. Practically, it offers evidence-based insights into the economic drivers of insecurity in

Owerri West LGA, helping policymakers design targeted interventions beyond short-term palliatives. It can inform youth empowerment and job creation programmes that reduce the economic incentives for crime, benefiting ministries of youth development, economic planning, and security. The findings will also support agencies like the Nigeria Police Force and Department of State Services by providing intelligence on the socio-economic motivations behind criminal recruitment, encouraging a shift toward proactive, community-based security strategies. For local communities and civil society organizations, the study highlights how economic hardship fuels youth vulnerability and social instability, promoting grassroots initiatives such as mentorship and local economic development. Theoretically, the research contributes to the political economy of crime by testing the concept of an “economy of insecurity” at a micro level. It also enriches the application of Strain Theory and Rational Choice Theory within the Nigerian context.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Youth Unemployment and the Economy of Insecurity (2020–2025)

Youth unemployment is a key structural driver of the “economy of insecurity,” where idle youth are absorbed into illicit, informal, and often violent activities due to limited legitimate opportunities. This relationship is grounded in Strain Theory, which argues that when societal goals are not matched by legitimate means, individuals resort to deviance. Similarly, General Strain Theory explains how economic hardship generates frustration that can lead to criminal behavior. Empirical studies support these claims, showing that youth unemployment increases incentives for crime, though outcomes depend on institutional quality and social conditions. In Sub-Saharan Africa, unemployment is compounded by rapid population growth, informality, and weak labour markets. High levels of underemployment and NEETs reflect deep youth exclusion (ILO, 2020; 2021). Evidence shows that unemployed youth often make rational choices, engaging in illicit activities such as cybercrime or smuggling when these offer better returns. Peer influence, normalization of illegal income, and political patronage further sustain these criminal economies. Effective interventions, however, require demand-driven employment programs combined with mentorship and social support. In

Africa broadly, youth unemployment correlates with violent crime and conflict. Studies highlight how economic deprivation and the availability of illicit markets create both supply and demand for criminal labour. Yet, employment programs alone are insufficient without addressing broader social incentives such as identity and protection offered by criminal networks.

In Nigeria, the unemployment–insecurity nexus is pronounced. High youth unemployment fuels recruitment into cybercrime, gangs, and organized theft, particularly in urban centers like Lagos and Port Harcourt. The informal sector, while absorbing labour, remains unstable, and economic shocks such as COVID-19 and inflation have worsened conditions. Graduate unemployment also contributes, as educated youth facing frustration turn to opportunistic crimes. In South-East Nigeria, rising unemployment is linked to cultism, kidnapping, and armed robbery. Weak governance, poor job creation, and fragile informal livelihoods intensify the problem. In Imo State, these dynamics are evident, with economic hardship and policy failures driving insecurity. Owerri West LGA reflects these patterns at a micro level. Rapid population growth, limited jobs, and reliance on informal livelihoods create vulnerability. Youth are drawn into crime through economic necessity, peer networks, and political patronage. Weak institutions and ineffective employment programs further deepen the cycle, reinforcing a localized economy of insecurity.

### 2.2 Slow Economic Growth and the Expansion of the Economy of Insecurity (2020–2025)

The period 2020–2025 was marked by severe global economic disruption, beginning with the COVID-19 pandemic and followed by uneven recovery, inflation, and weakened labour demand (World Bank, 2023). Young people were disproportionately affected, experiencing higher job losses and slower reintegration into the workforce (ILO, 2024). Rising youth unemployment and NEET populations increased reliance on precarious livelihoods and, in some cases, illicit survival strategies. Although lockdowns initially reduced certain street crimes, they disrupted education, apprenticeships, and small businesses. As economies reopened, crime rates rebounded, particularly in areas hardest hit by job losses (Li et al., 2023; Ullman et al., 2024). Evidence shows that slow economic growth becomes

criminogenic when combined with weak institutions and limited employment pathways.

Employment programmes that provide stable, market-linked jobs alongside mentoring and psychosocial support have proven effective in reducing youth involvement in violence (Blattman & Annan, 2016). However, short-term or poorly targeted interventions often fail to produce lasting change. Globally, slow growth increases insecurity by raising unemployment, reducing returns to legal work, and intensifying social strain. In Africa, GDP growth averaged about 3.2% between 2020 and 2024 insufficient to absorb the expanding youth population (AfDB, 2023). Inflation, fiscal constraints, and reduced investment limited job creation, pushing many into informal and unstable work (UNDP, 2023). Studies show that declining growth correlates with increased violent incidents, especially in weak governance contexts (Adekoya, 2022; Mazorodze, 2020). Across regions, slow growth has fueled illicit economies such as smuggling, trafficking, organized theft, and even extremist networks.

Nigeria exemplifies this trend. Between 2020 and 2025, the country faced pandemic shocks, inflation, exchange-rate instability, and fiscal pressures, resulting in persistently high youth unemployment (NBS, 2023). Economic growth lagged behind population growth, limiting job creation. Studies reveal a reinforcing cycle where economic decline fuels insecurity, which in turn discourages investment (Musa, 2023). Urban evidence from Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Owerri shows increased involvement in cybercrime, cult violence, and petty theft during economic shocks (Egwu, 2024; Ikpeme et al., 2024). Regional disparities worsen the situation. In the South-East, economic contraction in manufacturing and services reduced opportunities, pushing youths toward illicit activities such as kidnapping and political thuggery (BudgIT, 2023). Policy responses have been largely ineffective due to weak design and implementation (Omoju et al., 2023). Although integrated programmes combining skills, mentorship, and finance show promise, they remain limited in scale.

In Imo State, structural weaknesses limited industrialization and dependence on informal activities were exacerbated by post-pandemic shocks. Low GDP growth failed to absorb the growing youth population, increasing unemployment and insecurity

(BudgIT, 2023). Studies link economic stagnation with rising cultism, robbery, and kidnapping (Ebebe & Uzoagba, 2023; Onyeiwu, 2025). Weak institutions, underfunded employment programmes, and poor law enforcement further deepen the crisis. Owerri West LGA illustrates these dynamics at a micro level. Rapid population growth, disrupted small businesses, and inflation reduced incomes and increased youth unemployment (NBS, 2023). Many youths turned to informal and illicit activities, including cybercrime, extortion, and cultism, which have evolved into organized systems functioning as alternative labour markets. Weak enforcement and declining institutional trust have allowed these systems to expand.

Importantly, prolonged economic hardship has reshaped social norms, reducing the stigma associated with illicit activities and normalizing crime as a survival strategy. Across global, regional, and local contexts, evidence converges: slow economic growth between 2020 and 2025 intensified the economy of insecurity by expanding unemployment, weakening institutions, and legitimizing illicit livelihoods. Addressing this challenge requires integrated strategies that combine economic recovery, social protection, and effective security governance.

### 2.3 Gaps in Literature

Despite growing scholarship on macroeconomic instability and crime in Nigeria, key gaps persist in localized empirical analysis, particularly in Imo State and Owerri West LGA between 2020 and 2025 a period shaped by post-COVID fiscal contraction and rising youth crime. Existing studies largely rely on national or state-level data, overlooking micro-spatial dynamics and informal economic realities (Adebayo & Ayodele, 2021; NBS, 2023). Available datasets from BudgIT (2024) and NBS lack intra-state disaggregation, obscuring localized socio-economic stress. While Eze and Okonkwo (2022) acknowledge rising youth crime, they do not link it to measurable economic indicators like GDP growth. Theoretically, limited application of economic strain and opportunity-based crime models weakens analysis, as studies prioritize political instability over economic deprivation (Okolie & Nnaji, 2020). COVID-19's impact on micro-enterprises and crime patterns also remains underexplored. This study addresses these

empirical and methodological gaps by linking GDP trends with crime rates in Owerri West.

## 2.4 Theoretical Framework

To provide a comprehensive understanding, this research adopts a dual-theoretical approach using Strain Theory and the Economic Theory of Crime. While Strain Theory explains crime as a psychological and social adaptation to economic frustration, the Economic Theory of Crime frames criminality as a rational economic alternative when legitimate opportunities decline. Together, these theories will guide the analysis of how structural deprivation and economic calculation intersect to fuel insecurity in Owerri West.

### 2.4.1 Strain Theory

Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory explains deviant behavior as a product of the gap between socially approved goals such as wealth and stability and unequal access to legitimate means. This mismatch creates "strain" or anomie, pushing individuals, especially in marginalized settings, toward crime (Merton, 1938). Expanding this, Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory emphasizes that strain also arises from loss of positive conditions (e.g., jobs) and exposure to negative ones (e.g., poverty, frustration). Such pressures generate anger and increase the likelihood of deviant coping. This framework is highly relevant to Nigeria, particularly Owerri West LGA in Imo State. Between 2020 and 2025, COVID-19 disruptions, inflation, and weak GDP growth reduced economic opportunities (BudGIT, 2024; NBS, 2023). As small businesses and informal trade declined, many youths became excluded from legitimate livelihoods, reinforcing structural strain and increasing reliance on alternative, often illicit, survival strategies.

### 2.4.2 Economic Theory of Crime.

Gary S. Becker's Economic Theory of Crime views crime as a rational choice based on cost-benefit analysis. Individuals compare expected gains (money, status) with risks such as arrest or lost legal income. Isaac Ehrlich (1973) extended this by showing that both deterrence (punishment) and economic opportunities (jobs, wages) influence criminal decisions. When unemployment rises or wages stagnate, crime becomes more attractive, especially where enforcement is weak. In Owerri West, this framework explains rising youth crime between 2020

and 2025. Slow GDP growth, limited job creation, and declining real earnings (BudGIT, 2024; NBS, 2023) reduced the value of legal work. Meanwhile, returns from illicit activities such as cyber fraud and theft remained attractive, increasing the likelihood of criminal participation among economically marginalized youths.

## III. RESEARCH DESIGN

### 3.1 Methods of Data Collection

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine youth unemployment and insecurity in Owerri West LGA (2020–2025). Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to unemployed youths, security personnel, and community leaders, using Likert-scale items to ensure consistency and enable statistical analysis (Kumar, 2019). Key Informant Interviews with policymakers and police officers provided deeper qualitative insights (Bryman, 2016). Secondary data were obtained from National Bureau of Statistics records, BudGIT datasets, police reports, and publications by CLEEN Foundation and SBM Intelligence. These sources supported trend analysis and validation of findings. Data triangulation enhanced reliability and minimized bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). Ethical standards, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly maintained.

### 3.2 Sampling Technique

This study employs a multi-stage sampling technique to ensure representativeness across Owerri West LGA. First, the area was stratified into key communities Avu, Ihiagwa, Obinze, Eziobodo, and Nekede based on youth population and reported crime, ensuring geographic coverage (Cochran, 2018). Second, purposive sampling selected unemployed or underemployed youths (18–36) and key informants such as security officials and community leaders, given their relevance to the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Third, systematic random sampling was used within each ward, applying a sampling interval to reduce bias and enhance generalizability (Kothari, 2014). For qualitative data, snowball sampling identified crime-affected households and ex-offenders, enabling access to sensitive populations (Goodman, 2011). This combined approach strengthens reliability and captures both statistical trends and lived experiences of unemployment and insecurity.

### 3.3 Population of the Study

The study population comprises individuals relevant to examining youth unemployment and insecurity in Owerri West LGA (2020–2025). It primarily includes youths aged 18–36 who are unemployed, underemployed, or affected by insecurity, consistent with National Bureau of Statistics (2023) classifications. Owerri West, with an estimated population of 183,600, has a high youth concentration due to institutions like Federal Polytechnic Nekede and FUTO (Imo State Ministry of Economic Planning, 2024). Despite this, rising unemployment and crimes such as cybercrime, theft, and cult violence persist. The population also includes security personnel (Nigeria Police and vigilante groups), community leaders, local government officials, youth executives, and economic stakeholders like business owners and transport union leaders. Their inclusion provides diverse perspectives on unemployment and insecurity. Focusing on residents and active stakeholders ensures localized, reliable, and policy-relevant findings.

### 3.4 Sample Size Determination

Determining an appropriate sample size ensures statistical reliability and representativeness (Taherdoost, 2017). This study targets over 82,000 youths in Owerri West LGA (Imo State Ministry of Economic Planning, 2024; NPC, 2023). Using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 398 respondents was derived. To address non-response and incomplete data, a 10% adjustment increased the final sample to approximately 438 respondents, improving data completeness (Kothari, 2014). For the qualitative component, 15–20 key informants including security personnel, youth leaders, community heads, and government officials were selected purposively for interviews. This range aligns with established standards for achieving data saturation in socio-economic studies (Guest et al., 2020). Overall, the combined quantitative and qualitative sampling ensures both representativeness and in-depth insights, strengthening the validity and policy relevance of the study.

### 3.5 Research Instrumentation

This study employs structured questionnaires and Key Informant Interview (KII) guides, consistent

with a mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The questionnaire has four sections: demographics; unemployment indicators (duration, job search, opportunities); experiences of insecurity (theft, cybercrime, cultism, police interaction); and perceived links between unemployment and crime. Items use a five-point Likert scale for quantitative analysis (Likert, 1932; Kothari, 2014). KII guides, designed for security personnel and community leaders, include open-ended questions to capture in-depth insights on how unemployment influences crime (Bryman, 2016). Instruments were validated by experts from Federal Polytechnic Nekede and Imo State University. A pilot test with 20 respondents improved clarity and reliability (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997). This approach ensures comprehensive analysis of unemployment–insecurity dynamics.

### 3.6 Validity and Reliability of Instruments

Ensuring validity and reliability is essential for credible findings. Validity assesses whether instruments measure intended constructs, while reliability ensures consistency (Cohen et al., 2018). Content validity was achieved through expert review by scholars in development studies, criminology, and research methodology from Federal Polytechnic Nekede and Imo State University, confirming coverage of youth unemployment and insecurity variables (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2015). Face validity was established via preliminary testing to ensure clarity and contextual relevance (Kumar, 2019). Reliability was tested through a pilot study with 20 respondents outside the study area, using Cronbach's Alpha, with 0.70 as the acceptable threshold (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). For qualitative data, triangulation, audio recording, and field notes ensured consistency and accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These measures strengthen the robustness of the research instruments.

### 3.7 Method of Data Analysis

Data analysis transforms raw data into meaningful insights. This study adopts a mixed-method approach. Quantitative data from questionnaires are coded and analyzed using SPSS (version 25). Descriptive statistics frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations summarize unemployment and insecurity patterns (Field, 2018). Inferential tools, including Pearson Product Moment Correlation and regression analysis, examine relationships and predictive effects between unemployment and crime indicators such as cyber fraud, theft, and cultism

(Bryman & Bell, 2015; Gujarati & Porter, 2009). Qualitative data from interviews are analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying patterns like economic pressure and youth crime (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Findings from both methods were triangulated to ensure consistency and depth. This integrated approach strengthens validity and supports evidence-based conclusions on unemployment and insecurity in Owerri West (2020–2025).

#### IV. EMPIRICAL VERIFICATION

##### 4.1 How youth unemployment triggers economy of insecurity:

Youth unemployment has increased significantly in Owerri West LGA (2020 – 2025): Findings show strong agreement (over 80%) that youth unemployment is rising in Owerri West, reflecting widespread awareness of economic hardship. This aligns with scholarly views that unemployment drives insecurity and criminality (Aghedo, 2021; Okoye & Eze, 2020). Minimal disagreement reinforces this consensus, supporting the link between unemployment and insecurity (2020–2025). The majority of unemployed youths in Owerri West lack access to sustainable job opportunities. Out of 374 respondents, 77.2% agreed that unemployed youths lack access to sustainable jobs, indicating a major challenge. Only 8.5% disagreed, while 14.2% were undecided. This supports views that poor job creation and weak private-sector engagement significantly drive unemployment and insecurity in Owerri West.

Responses on Youth Involvement in Political Thuggery and Violence: The data shows that 327 respondents (87.4%) agreed that youth unemployment has increased social vices such as armed robbery and cybercrime in Owerri West LGA, while only 6.4% disagreed and 6.1% were undecided. This indicates that unemployment is a major driver of insecurity. The finding supports Strain Theory, which links deprivation to deviant coping, and Economic Theory of Crime, which explains crime as a rational response when legal opportunities are limited. Empirical studies by Adebayo (2013) and Okafor (2011) also confirm links between youth unemployment and crimes like fraud, robbery, and kidnapping. Similarly, Nwogwugwu and Alao (2020) argue that weak employment policies push youths into anti-social behaviour. Overall, findings show

unemployment significantly fuels social vices in Owerri West (2020–2025).

Youth Unemployment, Cultism and Kidnapping: The data shows that 325 respondents (86.9%) agreed that youth unemployment contributes to rising cultism and kidnapping in Owerri West LGA, while 5.9% disagreed and 7.2% were undecided. This indicates a strong perceived link between joblessness and violent insecurity. Unemployment is seen as a driver of youth involvement in illicit survival strategies due to poverty, frustration, and peer influence. This supports Strain Theory, which explains crime as a response to blocked legitimate opportunities. Adebayo (2013) notes that unemployed youths are easily recruited into crime due to economic frustration. Chinweuba and Eze (2020) similarly link unemployment to cultism and kidnapping in South-East Nigeria, while Akinbobola and Adesanya (2019) describe kidnapping as an emerging economic enterprise. Nwogu (2021) further argues that weak government job creation fosters organized crime recruitment. The findings confirm that unemployment intensifies cultism and kidnapping, supporting both strain and social disorganization perspectives. Addressing youth joblessness is therefore essential to reducing violent insecurity.

Unemployment and Recruitment into Criminal Activities: Findings show that 91.5% of respondents agree that unemployed youths are more vulnerable to recruitment into crime, while only 5.35% disagreed. This reflects a strong consensus that joblessness increases susceptibility to criminal networks. The result aligns with Strain Theory and Relative Deprivation Theory, which explain crime as a response to blocked opportunities and perceived inequality. Economic Theory of Crime also suggests individuals engage in crime when illegal gains outweigh legal options. Social disorganization theory further explains how weak community structures and poverty enable recruitment (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Nigerian studies (Adebayo, 2013; Ikelegbe, 2014; Obi, 2017) confirm that unemployed youths are targeted for gangs, cults, and cybercrime due to financial incentives and peer pressure. Thus, unemployment increases both exposure and willingness to join criminal groups, making prevention dependent on job creation, skills development, and social inclusion.

**Youth Unemployment and Local Economic Decline:** A total of 74.33% of respondents agree that youth unemployment weakens the local economy, while 11.5% disagreed. This suggests strong belief that joblessness reduces economic productivity in Owerri West. Mechanisms include reduced consumption, declining business income, and shrinking local demand. Unemployment also leads to skill erosion and discourages investment due to insecurity concerns. These effects align with economic theories of labour-market decline (Becker, 1968; Merton, 1938). In Owerri West, where the economy depends on small businesses and informal trade, youth purchasing power is critical. Studies by Adebayo (2013) and Nwogwugwu and Alao (2020) confirm that unemployment reduces economic vibrancy and increases. **Youth Unemployment, Economic Instability and Insecurity:** The study shows that 85.31% of respondents agree that youth unemployment contributes to economic instability and insecurity. Only 9.89% disagreed. Unemployment reduces productivity, household income, and tax revenue while increasing dependency and crime risk (Adebayo, 2013; Aiyedogbon & Ohwofasa, 2012). It also fuels insecurity through youth involvement in crime and political violence (Ikelegbe, 2014; Omitola, 2014). Strain Theory explains this as a result of blocked opportunities, while Economic Theory of Crime highlights rational engagement in crime when legal options are limited. Studies by Sampson and Groves (1989) show that weak community structures reinforce insecurity cycles. Therefore, unemployment creates a self-reinforcing cycle of poverty, insecurity, and economic decline.

**Vocational Training and Skill Acquisition:** An overwhelming 83.7% of respondents agree that vocational training reduces unemployment-related insecurity. Only 13.6% disagreed. This supports human capital theory (Schultz, 1961), which emphasizes skills development as a path to productivity and employment. Social Disorganization Theory also explains that improving skills reduces crime by strengthening community stability. Studies (Ajufo, 2013; Okoro & Ezeani, 2014; Ogunyemi & Laguda, 2019) show that vocational education reduces youth restiveness and promotes self-employment. Ibrahim and Yussuf (2020) confirm that skills programs reduce youth involvement in crime. Thus, vocational training is both an economic and security intervention. Recommendations include expanding training

centres, integrating entrepreneurship education, and improving monitoring systems.

**Government Neglect and Insecurity:** Findings show that 94.4% of respondents believe government neglect of youth empowerment worsens insecurity. Only 3.5% disagreed. This reflects widespread perception of policy failure due to weak implementation, underfunding, and political interference. Studies (Adebayo, 2013; Nwogwugwu & Alao, 2020; Obi, 2017) confirm that neglect of youth policies increases unemployment and crime. Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis explains that deprivation leads to aggression, while social disorganization theory links weak institutions to crime. Thus, government neglect creates frustration, exclusion, and criminality. Effective youth empowerment, transparent governance, and inclusive policy design are essential to reduce insecurity. Across all findings, a consistent pattern emerges: youth unemployment is strongly linked to cultism, kidnapping, recruitment into crime, economic decline, and insecurity in Owerri West LGA (2020–2025). The results align with major criminological and economic theories and emphasize the need for integrated responses combining employment creation, skills development, and effective governance.

4,2 How slow Economic growth heightened insecurity in Owerri West (2020-2025)

**Slow Economic Growth in Imo State (2020–2025):** A large majority (84.22%) of respondents perceive that Imo State's economic growth has been slow between 2020 and 2025, indicating widespread belief in economic stagnation. Only 2.41% disagreed, while 13.37% were undecided. This suggests general consensus on weak economic performance, though some uncertainty reflects uneven personal experiences. Perceived slow growth implies reduced investment, weak business activity, declining household income, and limited employment opportunities. These outcomes align with development economics, which links low growth to reduced labour demand and weakened fiscal capacity (Todaro & Smith, 2015; Aiyedogbon & Ohwofasa, 2012). In criminological terms, stagnant growth increases insecurity by limiting legitimate opportunities for youths. Strain Theory and social disorganization theory explain that blocked opportunities and weak institutions increase deviant behaviour (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Nigerian studies also link weak growth and unemployment to

crime and youth restiveness (Nwogwugwu & Alao, 2020; Ikelegbe, 2014).

**Infrastructure and Local Business Growth:** Out of 374 respondents, 89% agreed that poor infrastructure negatively affects business growth, while 4.5% disagreed. This shows strong consensus that infrastructure deficits constrain economic activity. Infrastructure such as roads, electricity, and transport systems is essential for productivity and investment (Todaro & Smith, 2015). Studies confirm that weak infrastructure increases SME costs and reduces competitiveness (Eberhard et al., 2018; Akinwale, 2010; Oyebanji & Bello, 2021). In Imo State, poor infrastructure limits market access and increases unemployment, reinforcing poverty and economic stagnation.

**Industrialization and Youth Employment:** A total of 94.1% of respondents agreed that lack of industrialization contributes to youth restiveness and crime. This reflects near consensus that weak industrial activity limits employment opportunities. Strain Theory and Economic Theory of Crime explain how blocked legal opportunities increase deviant choices. Nigerian studies show that deindustrialization increases youth unemployment, militancy, and crime (Adebayo, 2013; Ikelegbe, 2014). Industrial revival through SMEs, agro-processing, and public-private investment is necessary to reduce insecurity.

**Decline in Small-Scale Enterprises:** About 82.9% agreed that declining small businesses contribute to economic hardship. SMEs are key drivers of employment and income in local economies. Their decline reduces household income, weakens demand, and increases unemployment. Studies show SMEs are essential for inclusive growth in developing economies (Todaro & Smith, 2015; Eberhard et al., 2018). Nigerian evidence links SME decline to poverty and insecurity (Adebayo, 2013; Nwogwugwu & Alao, 2020). Policy focus should include credit access, infrastructure, and market expansion for SMEs.

**Economic Stagnation and Illegal Survival Strategies:** A dominant 90.37% of respondents agreed that economic stagnation forces youths into illegal survival strategies such as theft and cybercrime. This supports strain and rational-choice theories, which explain crime as a response to blocked opportunities and low legal returns (Merton, 1938; Becker, 1968). Nigerian studies confirm that unemployment drives criminal adaptation (Adebayo, 2013; Ikelegbe, 2014). Reviving local economies and expanding employment programs is critical.

**Policy Failure and Youth Crime:** About 84.77% agreed that weak economic policies indirectly encourage crime among youths. Policy failure reduces job creation, weakens safety nets, and increases economic exclusion. This aligns with strain theory and rational-choice models (Merton, 1938; Becker, 1968). Studies show ineffective governance increases youth unemployment and insecurity (Adebayo, 2013; Nwogwugwu & Alao, 2020). Policy reforms should focus on youth employment, private-sector incentives, and social protection systems.

**Economic Growth and Crime Reduction:** A strong 92.78% agreed that a vibrant economy reduces crime in Owerri West. Economic growth improves employment, income, and social stability. Strain Theory and social disorganization theory show that improved economic conditions reduce deviance (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Nigerian studies confirm that economic development reduces youth restiveness (Adebayo, 2013). Key strategies include SME expansion, skills development, and public works.

**Policy Neglect and Youth Crime:** About 91.14% agreed that improving state economic growth would reduce youth crime. Growth increases legal opportunities and reduces incentives for crime. Economic and criminological theories show that improved livelihoods reduce deviance (Merton, 1938; Becker, 1968). Nigerian studies confirm this relationship (Adebayo, 2013; Nwogwugwu & Alao, 2020). Policy focus should prioritize job-rich growth, agro-industrial development, and vocational training.

**Vibrant Economy and Crime Reduction:** A total of 92.78% agreed that a vibrant local economy reduces crime. This reflects belief that economic strength ensures safety. Strain Theory and social disorganization theory explain how strong economies improve social control and reduce crime (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Nigerian studies confirm this

relationship (Adebayo, 2013; Nwogwugwu & Alao, 2020). SME development and job creation remain central solutions. Economic Growth and Crime Prevention: About 91.14% agreed that improved economic growth reduces youth crime. Growth reduces unemployment and strengthens institutions. Becker’s economic theory and strain theory explain that better opportunities reduce criminal incentives (Becker, 1968; Merton, 1938). Nigerian evidence confirms this trend (Adebayo, 2013). Across all findings, there is overwhelming consensus that slow economic growth, weak infrastructure, poor industrialization, SME decline, and policy failure collectively drive unemployment and insecurity in Owerri West (2020–2025). The evidence strongly aligns with strain theory, rational-choice theory, and social disorganization theory, showing that economic deprivation and blocked opportunities are central drivers of youth involvement in crime.

On how to reduce youth unemployment in Owerri West LGA, findings show that vocational and technical skill training (31.3%) and government job creation programmes (25.3%) are perceived as the most effective measures for reducing youth unemployment in Owerri West LGA. This reflects a strong preference for practical, capacity-building interventions that directly improve employability and income generation. This aligns with Adebayo and Opeyemi (2019) and Olanrewaju (2021), who argue that skills acquisition significantly reduces unemployment and youth restiveness in Nigeria. Public-sector job creation and entrepreneurship support also enhance inclusive growth and discourage engagement in illicit activities

(Nwachukwu & Eke, 2020). Education reform (17.9%) and private investment (13.2%) are also important for aligning labour-market needs with skills. Overall, a multi-sectoral approach integrating education, skills development, entrepreneurship, and public-private partnerships is essential for addressing unemployment-driven insecurity.

Respondents prioritized youth empowerment/startup funds (28.6%) and infrastructure incentives (24.6%) as key drivers of job creation and cost reduction, supported by Todaro and Smith (2015) and World Bank (2020). Governance (15.8%) and diversification (16.6%) were seen as medium-term, while security (14.4%) sustains progress. Unemployment (31.82%), corruption (26.20%), and poverty (24.33%) were identified as main causes of insecurity, aligning with Adebayo (2013) and Ikelegbe (2014). These factors promote crime and weaken institutions (Nwogwugwu & Alao, 2020). Findings support integrated strategies combining job creation, governance reforms, and social interventions.

#### 4.3 Key Informant Interview

##### Documented Incidents Linked to Owerri West LGA (selected)

The following table presents a summary of major crime and insecurity incidents reported in Owerri West Local Government Area between 2020 and 2025. Data are derived from police statements, NGO reports, and credible media monitoring sources. It captures categories such as kidnapping, theft/robbery, cultist clashes, political thuggery, and cybercrime.

Date / Period	Event Description	Category	Location	Casualties / Notes
2021-04-09	Owerri custodial centre attack / mass prison break affecting Owerri area (knock-on effects in Owerri West)	Attack on security / political thuggery	Owerri area (affecting Owerri West)	Multiple inmates escaped; injuries reported
2022-03-19	Attack on police station reported in Owerri West (Umuguma area referenced)	Attack on security / political thuggery	Owerri West (Umuguma)	Reported injuries/fatalities in security personnel/community
2022-08-15	Attack on Avu junction targeting Hausa community; displacement and fatalities reported	Cultist clash / communal attack	Avu (Owerri West)	Several killed and injured; community displacement reported
2023-06-11	Clashes and reprisal killings in	Cultist clash / communal attacks	Nekede/Ihiagwa (Owerri West environs)	Multiple fatalities and injuries reported in

	Nekede/Ihiagwa and surrounding communities			human-rights investigations
2024-02-27	Reported kidnapping incidents in Owerri West environs as part of wider Imo kidnapping wave	Kidnapping	Owerri West environs	Victims abducted for ransom; some rescued/arrests reported
2020	Reported theft/robbery incidents (various local media reports)	Theft / Robbery	Owerri West (various communities)	Multiple petty-robbery and armed robbery reports (under-reported)
2021	Reported theft/robbery incidents and EFCC/anti-cyber operations in Owerri zone	Theft / Robbery; Cybercrime (region)	Owerri West / Owerri zone	Arrests and operations reported regionally
2022	Multiple reported kidnappings and cult/communal incidents (media/NGO summaries)	Kidnapping; Cultist clashes	Owerri West (various)	Several high-profile incidents reported (see Orogwe Aug 2022)
2023	Reported kidnappings and armed clashes; EFCC/anti-fraud activity in Naze, Nekede and Ihiagwa, Owerri zone	Kidnapping; Cybercrime; Cultist clashes	Owerri West / Owerri zone	Multiple incidents across the year; some arrests reported
2024	Reported kidnappings and arrests of suspected kidnappers in Orogwe (late-2024 police ops)	Kidnapping; Arrests	Orogwe (Owerri West)	Police operations neutralised/ arrested suspects in some cases
2025-01 to 2025-10	Isolated reported abductions and theft incidents (to Oct 25, 2025)	Kidnapping; Theft/Robbery	Owerri West (various)	Recent local media accounts reference abductions and rescue operations
2021-2024	EFCC / anti-cybercrime arrests and operations reported in Owerri/Imo zone (aggregated)	Cybercrime (EFCC operations)	Owerri zone (includes Owerri West)	Arrests of suspects involved in online fraud; demonstrates cybercrime presence

Source: Researcher, 2025

Between 2020 and 2025, Owerri West LGA experienced persistent security challenges, including kidnappings, cult-related violence, armed robbery, and cybercrime. The most severe period was 2022–2023, which coincided with post-COVID-19 economic hardship and rising youth unemployment. Police and NGO records indicate that kidnappings and cult clashes accounted for over 60% of reported insecurity cases, while cybercrime arrests increased significantly, reflecting youths’ growing involvement in digital fraud as a survival strategy. The 2021 prison break and its spillover effects further intensified insecurity in Owerri West and surrounding areas. These developments were consistently linked in qualitative interviews to unemployment, poverty, and weak governance, reinforcing the role of socio-

economic deprivation in driving insecurity during the period under review.

On youth unemployment situation respondents described youth unemployment as alarming and persistent, with rising idleness among graduates and frustration leading to crime. This reflects Nigeria’s youth unemployment rate above 40% (NBS, 2023). Causes include weak governance, low industrialization, and skill mismatch (Okafor, 2021). Male youths (18–36) were most affected (Emeh & Nkereuwem, 2020). Unemployment was strongly linked to crime and political violence (Aghedo & Eke, 2022), worsened post-COVID-19 (Adebayo, 2022), but skills training offers solutions (Okoye & Okechukwu, 2022). While as it regards to economic growth in Imo State, it was widely perceived as slow,

with inflation and post-COVID-19 challenges crippling small businesses. Respondents linked economic hardship to rising crime, as unemployed youths turned to illegal activities. Poor infrastructure and insecurity discouraged investment and farming, reinforcing economic decline. Government programmes like N-Power were seen as ineffective due to politicization and weak implementation. Institutional responses remained inadequate, though community actors played key roles in security. Overall, findings reveal a strong link between unemployment, weak growth, and insecurity in Owerri West.

## V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

### 5.1 Summary

This study examined the link between youth unemployment and the economy of insecurity in Owerri West LGA between 2020 and 2025. Findings show that widespread unemployment drives poverty, frustration, and involvement in crime, thereby sustaining insecurity. Weak economic growth, poor infrastructure, and ineffective government interventions further worsen the situation. The study concludes that addressing unemployment through skills development, job creation, and inclusive policies is critical to reducing insecurity and promoting sustainable socio-economic stability in the area.

### 5.2 Conclusion

The study concludes that youth unemployment is a central driver of the economy of insecurity in Owerri West LGA between 2020 and 2025. High unemployment levels have intensified poverty, social exclusion, and frustration, pushing many youths toward criminal activities. The situation is further aggravated by slow economic growth, weak infrastructure, and ineffective, politicized government interventions. Findings highlight that insecurity is both an economic and governance challenge. Addressing it requires coordinated efforts focused on job creation, skills development, and inclusive economic policies. Sustainable peace and development depend on transparent governance, improved service delivery, and meaningful youth engagement in productive economic activities.

### 5.3 Recommendations

i. Promote vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and revival of local industries to curb

youth unemployment. Reviving skill acquisition centres and investing in agribusiness can create sustainable jobs, while security-friendly business environments will attract investors. Evidence shows that practical skills reduce unemployment and youth restiveness.

- ii. Strengthen economic growth through improved infrastructure, stable electricity, and access to microcredit. Better roads and energy supply will boost small businesses, enhance productivity, and generate employment, thereby reducing crime linked to economic hardship.
- iii. Encourage multi-sectoral collaboration among security agencies, community leaders, and religious institutions to address insecurity. Implement transparent empowerment programmes, improve youth employment data, and institutionalize entrepreneurship education. Consistent, corruption-free policies aligned with citizens' needs are essential for long-term stability and reduced insecurity.

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