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Child abuse as a predictor of the level of involvement in gang activity among children in rural North-Central, Nigeria

Abdullateef RAJI, Lanre A. SULAIMAN, Issah MOSHOOD and Sunday J. AKOR

ABSTRACT

The menace of child abuse is serious malady with devastating consequences. While the influence of child abuse on crime has generally been investigated, its effects on the level of involvement in gang activity among underage individuals have not been examined in Nigeria. This study examined how exposure to child abuse, in terms of its degree and form, predicted the level of involvement in gang activity among underage individuals. The individual-in-family theory was the theoretical framework used for this research. The sample comprised 264 male and female underage gang members aged 9-17 years residing in rural communities in north-central Nigeria. The cross-sectional data were analyzed using t-tests and regression. The findings of the study revealed that children who experienced child abuse were more actively involved in gang activity than children who did not experience child abuse. Regarding the characteristics of the abuse, the age at first abuse, the form of abuse, and the frequency of abuse were predictors of the level of involvement in gang activity. These findings imply that social workers need to raise awareness about the harmful effects of child abuse and neglect, especially, regarding child gang involvement.

KEY TERMS: child abuse; child gang; crime; level of participation; Nigeria; underage

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AUTHOR DETAILS

- Raji, Abdullateef (PhD), Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. raji.al@unilorin.edu.ng
- Sulaiman, Lanre Abdul-Rasheed (PhD), Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Sociology, University of Pretoria, South Africa. u24141072@tuks.co.za; rasheed_sulaimon@yahoo.com
- Moshood, Issa (PhD), Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. issah.m@unilorin.edu.ng
- Akor, Sunday Joseph (PhD), Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. akorsj@unilorin.edu.ng

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INTRODUCTION

Child abuse is a negative phenomenon that exists in all countries. Research has explored the influence of child abuse and neglect on juvenile delinquent behaviors. However, the extent to which exposure to child abuse, in terms of its degree and form, predicts a child's position in a gang and their level of engagement in gang activity has not been well established. This gap formed the basis of this research, which sought to explore how exposure to child abuse, in terms of its degree and form, predicts a child's position in a gang and their level of engagement in gang activity. The research is guided by the theory of individual-in-family. The theory views the human family as a system in which the actions of each family member influence and are influenced by the actions of others. The theory suggests that children who lack parental support and supervision may seek a sense of identity and belonging elsewhere, potentially joining gangs. The introduction is followed by sections on the background to the study, literature review, theoretical framework methodology, findings, discussion of findings, and conclusion.

BACKGROUND

Gang membership has been linked to delinquent and serious criminal acts among young children, particularly in cases of knife and gun crime in Hong Kong, United Kingdom, and different parts of the world, including Nigeria (Chui, Khiatani & Kiconco, 2020; Chui et al., 2023). Child gangs perpetuate cycles of violence; their membership is linked with higher rates of delinquency, tolerance of deviance, and commitment to antisocial peers (Breen, Daniels & Tomlinson, 2019; Fox et al., 2015).

More recently, the focus on child gang membership among young children has been amplified by the various cases of child gang activities reported in the Nigerian media. Gangs such as Aiye, One Million Boys, Badoo, Vikings, Eiye, Toba Boys, Skippo Boys and others are distributed mostly among the low-income and upscale medium communities and strike even broad daylight. Their membership, which was mainly restricted to university campuses, has spread into the inner streets of the town, with kids from even primary and junior secondary schools recruited by different groups (Bakare, 2018). For instance, Anazia (2017) reported that in September 2017, 15 children who were between the ages of 13 and 15 were arrested with arms and ammunition of different types in Uromi and Orobo towns, Benin City in Edo State; they all confessed to being members of the Hallah of the Night and Eiye Confraternity. In July 2015, Ebonyi State Police Command halted over 40 students who had just finished their NECO examinations in Izzi local government area of the state from being initiated into a cult called Junior Vikings (Anazia, 2017).

Based on the suspected nexus between child gangs and violent crime, social work practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and police have investigated the salient causes and effects of child gang activity on young people and society at large. For instance, in Nigeria, studies (see Agwano & Joseph-Obi, 2018; Gbenemene & Ogu, 2018) revealed the influence of lack of parental guidance, breakdown of family ties, and peer influence on gang activities in Rivers State.

Beyond the shore of Nigeria van der Westhuizen and Gawulayo (2020) investigated the influence of domestic violence on gang involvement in Cape Town, South Africa. Furthermore, studies (Basto-Pereira et al., 2022; Fox et al., 2015) investigated the forms of abuse (physical, sexual, and emotional) that predicted gang involvement. Equally important, Chui et al. (2023) investigated how the degree of abuse (minimal, moderate, and severe maltreatment) predicted greater delinquent behaviours and gang involvement.

However, the extent to which exposure to child abuse, in terms of its degree and form, predicts a child's position in a gang and their level of engagement in gang activity has not been well established. Thus, this study addressed this consequential gap in the literature by answering the following research questions: To what extent do exposure to child abuse, its degree and form, predict the child's position in a gang in rural communities? To what extent do exposure to child abuse, its degree and form predict the level of engagement in gang activity in rural communities?

LITERATURE

Psychological resources such as strong bonds and empathy within the family domain may be essential in protecting children from joining gangs. According to van der Westhuizen and Gawulayo (2020), many children disclose that gangs provide them with opportunities for support and companionship, making them feel they have people to depend on when they have a need. If a cogent motivation to join a gang derives from the needs for protection and belonging, it is therefore expected that strong bonds within the family and good childcare could deter children from joining a gang. Van der Westhuizen and Gawulayo (2020) assert that good parental care and strong family bonds might decrease a child's propensity to seek antisocial ways of fulfilling the needs for support, belonging, and protection.

Different studies have been conducted on child abuse and crime. For instance, van der Westhuizen and Gawulayo's (2020) qualitative analysis of the causes of youth gangs in the Cape Flats, Cape Town, South Africa, shows that, among other factors, exposure to child abuse and neglect and intra-spousal violence are some of the

causes of youth gang violence. Basto-Pereira et al. (2022) conducted an intercontinental study involving a sample of 3797 young persons aged 18–20 years. They found that sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect were consistently associated with delinquent behaviours across the ten countries selected for the study. A critical appraisal of the intercontinental study by Basto-Pereira et al. (2022), shows that while the form of child abuse that are associated with delinquent behaviours are demonstrated, the influence of the degree of abuse is not demonstrated.

In Hong Kong, Chui et al. (2023) conducted a latent profile analysis of the association between child abuse and gang organisational structures, non-violent delinquency, and violent delinquency. They sampled 161 youth gang members, with an average age of 16.8 years and an age range of 12 to 24 years. They first identified the variations in the form (sexual abuse, physical abuse, and emotional abuse) and degree (minimally abused, moderately abused, and severely abused) of victimisation experiences using latent profile analysis. Thereafter, they conducted non-parametric tests and post-hoc analyses. Their findings revealed that 91.9% of the respondents experienced poly-victimisation, that is, they reported at least two forms of abuse in the past. Also, 'moderate' and 'severe' abuse profiles were associated with being in gangs and greater delinquent behaviours compared to 'minimal' abuse profile. Although, Chui et al. (2023) demonstrated how degree of abuse determined juvenile criminal behaviour and being in gangs, it failed to show the depth (level) of involvement in gang activities.

Studies (Agwanwo & Joseph-Obi, 2018; Gbenemene & Ogu, 2018), though few, have also been conducted on child gangs in Nigeria. Agwanwo and Joseph-Obi (2018) using a qualitative method, gave an account of juvenile gang violence in five communities of Rivers State, Nigeria. Their findings revealed that juvenile gangs violence worsened the violent situation in the study communities through intra and inter gang wars/rivalries and other delinquent behaviours. Furthermore, they found that peer influence, breakdown of family ties/values, poverty, were the factors causing child gang involvement in the selected communities.

The descriptive analysis of the causes of gang activities in River State, Nigeria, shows that majority of the respondents opined that lack of parental supervision, poor parental discipline, parental absence, and absence of parental affection and warmth are the factors causing gang violence in the state (Gbenemene & Ogu, 2018). It is important to note that while Gbenemene and Ogu (2018) gave a descriptive account of the indices of emotional abuse and neglect causing gang violence in Rivers State, Nigeria, the study did not expand its scope to include other forms of child abuse, such as physical and sexual child abuse.

A critique of the existing literature on child abuse and child gang shows that most studies demonstrate how child abuse leads to gang involvement. However, the extent to which exposure to child abuse, its degree, and its form predict the hierarchical position and level of engagement in gang activity has not been established. This fundamental gap is what this study addressed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is guided by the individual-in-family theory. The theory assumes that the family context significantly predicts an individual's well-being and personal growth (ASWDNet, 2023). The theory views the human family as a system in which the actions of each family member influence and are influenced by the actions of others. The behavior and development of an individual are deeply influenced by interactions and relationships within the family. The theory suggests that children who lack parental support and supervision may seek a sense of identity and belonging elsewhere, potentially joining gangs.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Ikyurav-ya in Benue State; Ile-Apa and Ejidongari, both in Kwara State; Gbajibo Muwo, Ibelu West, Beri, and Kudu, all in Niger State; Obehira-Uvete in Kogi State; and Angwan Makama in Nasarawa State. The study population comprised all underage gang members between the ages of 9 and 17 in these areas. A snowball sampling technique was used to select young children who belong to gangs. Initially, some high school students and teachers in rural communities were contacted to identify potential underage gang members. These gatekeepers provided information on where and how to find potential members. This initial information enabled the researchers to locate some underage gang members, who then helped the researchers find additional members.

An interviewer-administered questionnaire was used. This method involved administering the questionnaire on a one-on-one basis with the aid of research interviewers. The interviewers were trained for two days on the research instrument and on the ethical administration of the questionnaire. The research instrument was prepared in English and translated into two languages spoken in sampled rural communities in north-central Nigeria: Hausa and Pidgin. In total, 283 interviews were conducted, out of which 264 were completed, resulting in a response rate of 93.3%.

This research was approved by the Department of Sociology Ethical Review Committee, with approval number DERC/ASN/2023/2014. The guidelines for conducting research involving young people were followed. Consent was obtained from the guardians, parents, or custodians of the children, as well as from the children

themselves. Only young people whose parents, guardians, or custodians and they themselves consented to participate were interviewed. Participation in this research was entirely voluntary, and participants had the freedom to decline any question or withdraw from the study at any time, without any undue pressure. Other ethics such as autonomy, non-maleficence, privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality were strictly followed while doing this research.

Measures

Child abuse was measured using the adapted Child Abuse and Trauma Scale (CATS) developed by Sanders and Becker-Lausen (1995). CATS is a retrospective measurement used to gauge the intensity or degree of stress or trauma experienced during one's childhood. The adapted CATS used for this study comprised three subscales: physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.

Child abuse was measured by asking the following questions: 'Have you ever been abused before?' (yes/no); 'What form of child abuse were you subjected to?' (psychological/emotional abuse - ridiculed or put down by your parent or guardian; physical abuse - kicked, beaten, punched, choked, whipped, suffocated by your parent or guardian; sexual abuse - experienced oral and vaginal sex or fondled by your parent or guardian); 'What was the outcome of the abuse?' (1 = very mild to 4 = very severe); 'How frequently did the abuse occur?' (1 = not often to 3 = often); 'How old were you the first time you were abused?'

The level of involvement in gang activity was measured by asking the following questions: "how long have you been in the gang?". On a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being the least point, and 4 representing the highest point, the respondents were asked to rate their level of participation in the gang activity, their position in the gang, and the importance of the gang.

It is important to note that the questions were translated to Hausa and Pidgin languages. In Hausa, the questions were translated to be: "An taba cin zarafinka/zarafinki?" ; "Wane irin cin zarafi aka taba yi maka/kiba?"; "Cin mutunci ko tozartarwa - wanda ya shafi tsorata ko firgita"; "Barazana da ya Shafe lafiyan jiki- shuri, duka, tsunguli, shakewa, bugu da bulala, makurewa daga wurin iyaye ko ubangida; "Cin zarafi na jima'i"; Wanda ya taba samunka/Ki ta hanyan Magana da baka ko da Al aura ko runguma daga iyaye ko ubangida; Mai ya biyo bayan tozarchin? (1= mafi karanchi 4= Babba sosai); Kaman sau nawa tozarchin ya faru?(1= ba sosai ba 3= sosai); "Shekarun ka nawa aka fara cin zarafinka?"; "Tsawon wani lokachi ka kasance a chikin kungiya? 1= na mafi karanchin lokachi, 2= na dan lokachi, 3= na tsawon lokachi, 4= na mafi girman lokachi tare da samun mukami babba.

The Pidgin translation: "Dem don ever abuse you before?" (Yes/No); "Your papa or mama don ever insult you or make you feel small before?"; "Your papa or mama don ever beat, kick, punch, choke, whip, or suffocate you before?"; "Dem don ever touch you for private place, like do oral or vaginal sex with you, or touch you in bad way?" (1 = e no too serious, 4 = e serious well well); (1 = e no too happen, 3 = e happen well well); How old you be the first time dem abuse you?; "How long you don dey inside the gang?; Rate how you take dey involved for the gang, from 1 go reach 4, wey 1 be the least and 4 be the highest; "Wetin be your position inside the gang?" and "How important this gang be for you?"

Data analysis

Both inferential and descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. Frequency distribution, percentages, mode, mean and standard deviation were the descriptive statistics used to describe the data, while independent samples t-test, bivariate and multivariate regression analysis were the inferential statistics used to find out how exposure to child abuse, its degree, and form predict the position in a gang, and the level of engagement in gang activity.

RESULTS

The frequency distribution analysis reveals the following: 87.5% of the participants were males, the majority (76.5%) were secondary school students, 48% were Yorubas, while 61.4% were from low-income families. In addition, majority of the respondents (83.7%) experienced child abuse; over one-third of the children (35.6%) experienced physical abuse; 37% reported that consequences of the abuse were very severe, similarly, 37% experienced child abuse very often. The descriptive statistics for the continuous variables revealed that age of the respondents ranged from 9 to 17 years with a mean age of 13.7 ($SD = 2.4$). The mean age at first abuse was 9.6 ($SD = 4.6$). The duration in the gang ranged from 1 to 5 years with a mean year of 3.1 ($SD = 1.2$), the level of participation in gang activity, and the importance of the gang ranged from 1 to 4 with a mean score of 2.7 ($SD = 1$) each, while the position occupied in the gang ranged from 1 to 4 with a mean position of 1.4 ($SD = 0.6$).

Table 1 unveils the results of the independent t-test for child abuse based on the position occupied in the gang, along with the findings from the bivariate and multivariate regression analyses. The *t*-Test result in Table 1 shows a relationship between child abuse and the child's position in the gang. Children that experienced child abuse

occupied higher positions compared with those that did not experience child abuse. For example, the mean score of the position occupied in the gang among those who experienced child abuse was 1.45 ± 0.6 which is more than that of those that experienced no child abuse 1 ± 0.2 . This relationship was found to be statistically significant as $t(262) = -4.406, p < .001$.

The relationship between the characteristics of the abuse and position occupied by the child in the gang can be found in model 1 in Table 1. The results of the regression analysis revealed that form of child abuse was a significant predictor of the position of the child in the gang. With sexual abuse as reference group, children who experienced physical abuse had .652 position score higher than those that experienced sexual abuse, while children who experienced emotional abuse had .221 position score less than those that experienced sexual abuse. This relationship was significant at .05 level.

The results of the simple linear regression analysis of frequency of abuse and position of the child in the gang can also be found in model 1 in table 1. Frequency of abuse was found to be a significant predictor of the child's position in the gang. The regression (see model 1 in Table 1) shows that for every one unit increase in the frequency of abuse, a .309 unit increase in the position score is predicted. This relationship was found to be highly statistically significant at .001 level. With respect to the severity of the outcome of abuse, model 1 in table 1 further revealed outcome of abuse to be a significant predictor of the position of the child in the gang. The regression (see model 1 in table 1) shows that for every one unit increase in the severity of the outcome of abuse, a .226 unit increase in the position score is predicted. This relationship was found to be highly statistically significant at .001 level.

The multivariate regression analysis of the child abuse variables that predict the position of the child in the gang can be found in model II in table 1. The overall test of the model in Table 1 shows that the independent variables (age at first abuse, form of abuse, frequency of abuse, and outcome of abuse) statistically significantly predict the dependent variable (the position of the child in the gang), $F(6, 257) = 56.952, p < .001$, hence, the regression model is a good fit of the data. As shown in model II in Table 1, age at first abuse ($p < .001$), and form of abuse ($p < .05$) significantly predict the child's position in the gang.

Table 1: t-Test of child abuse and position in the gang; and Regression Analyses

Variable	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>p</i>	
Child abuse					Sig. (2 tailed)
No	1.0233	-4.406	262	0.000***	
Yes	1.448				
Model I Bivariate Regression			Model II Multivariate Regression		
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Sig.	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
	B		B	Beta	
F= 54.145					
R ² = .171					
Constant	1.805	.000***	3.941		.000***
Age at abuse	0.092	.000***	-0.166	-0.746	.000***
F= 448.389					
R ² = .838					
Sexual Abuse (Constant)	2.883	.000***	3.941		.000***
no abuse	-1.86	.000***	-2.918	-1.042	.000***
physical abuse	0.787	.000***	0.143	0.066	.035*
emotional abuse	-0.883	.000***	-0.108	-0.041	0.148
F= 1740.553					
R ² = .869					
(Constant)	1.11	.000***	3.941		.000***
frequency of abuse	0.873	.000***	0.366	0.391	.000***
F= 1322.526					
R ² = .835					
(Constant)	0.988	.000***	3.941		.000***
outcome of abuse	0.658	.000***	0.051	0.071	0.279

t*** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$;F= 56.952; R² = .571

As for child abuse and importance of gang membership, the *t*-Test results in table 2 show a relationship between child abuse and importance of gang membership. Children that experienced child abuse rated the gang higher than those that were not abused. For example, the mean score of importance of gang membership among those who experienced child abuse was 2.9955 which is more than that of those that experienced no child abuse 1.1395. This relationship was found to be statistically significant as $t(262) = -14.332, p < .001$. The bivariate regression analyses (see model 1 in table 2) revealed that age at first abuse, form of abuse, frequency of abuse and outcome of abuse were significantly associated with importance of gang membership.

With respect to the multivariate regression analysis, the overall test of the model in table 2 shows that the independent variables (age at first abuse, form of abuse, frequency of abuse, and outcome of abuse) statistically

significantly predict the dependent variable (importance of gang membership), $F(6, 257) = 515.352, p < .001$, hence, the regression model is a good fit of the data. As shown in model II in table 2, age at first abuse ($p < .001$), form of abuse ($p < .05$), and frequency of abuse ($p < .001$), significantly predict the importance of gang membership.

Table 2: t-Test of child abuse and importance of gang membership; and Regression Analyses

Variable	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>		
Child abuse				Sig. (2 tailed)		
No	1.1395	-14.33	262	0.000***		
Yes	2.9955					
Model I Bivariate Regression				Model II Multivariate Regression		
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
	B	Beta		B	Beta	
F= 54.145						
R ² = .171						
Constant	1.805		.000***	3.941		.000***
Age at abuse	0.092	0.414	.000***	-0.166	-0.746	.000***
F= 448.389						
R ² = .838						
Sexual Abuse (Constant)	2.883		.000***	3.941		.000***
no abuse	-1.86	-0.664	.000***	-2.918	-1.042	.000***
physical abuse	0.787	0.365	.000***	0.143	0.066	.035*
emotional abuse	-0.883	-0.335	.000***	-0.108	-0.041	0.148
F= 1740.553						
R ² = .869						
(Constant)	1.11		.000***	3.941		.000***
frequency of abuse	0.873	0.932	.000***	0.366	0.391	.000***
F= 1322.526						
R ² = .835						
(Constant)	0.988		.000***	3.941		.000***
outcome of abuse	0.658	0.914	.000***	0.051	0.071	0.279

t**p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001.F= 515.352; R² = .923

As for child abuse and level of participation in gang activity, the *t*-Test results in table 3 show a relationship between child abuse and level of participation in gang activity. Children that experienced child abuse were more actively involved in gang activity than children that did not experience child abuse. For example, the mean score of the level of participation in gang activity among those who experienced child abuse was 2.9 which is more than 1.2 that of those that experienced no child abuse. This relationship was found to be statistically significant as $t(262) = -14.121, p < .001$. Table 3 shows the relationship between age at first abuse and level of participation in gang activity. The results of the regression analysis reveal that age at first abuse was associated with the level of participation in gang activity. This relationship was found to be highly statistically significant at .001 level. Similarly, form of abuse was found to be associated with level of participation in gang activity (see model II in table 3). With sexual abuse as the reference group, children who experienced physical abuse had .787 participation score higher than those that experienced sexual abuse, while children who experienced emotional abuse had .883 participation score less than those that experienced sexual abuse. This relationship was highly significant at .001 level.

Frequency of abuse was also found to be a highly significant predictor of level of participation in gang activity. From the regression analysis (see table 3), a unit increase in the frequency of abuse would lead to .867 unit increase in the participation score. This relationship was found to be highly statistically significant at $p < .001$. Similarly, outcome of abuse was also found to be associated with the level of participation in gang activity. A unit increase in the severity of the outcome of abuse would lead to .653 increase in the level of participation in gang activity. From the multivariate regression analysis, the overall test of the model in table 3 shows that the independent variables (age at first abuse, form of abuse, frequency of abuse, and outcome of abuse) statistically significantly predict the dependent variable (level of participation in gang activity), $F(6, 257) = 487.824, p < .001$, hence, the regression model is a good fit of the data. As shown in table 4, age at first abuse ($p < .001$), form of abuse ($p < .05$), and frequency of abuse ($p < .001$), significantly predict level of participation in gang activity.

Table 3: t-Test of child abuse and participation in gang activity; and Regression Analyses

Variable	Mean	F	D.F	P	
Child abuse				Sig. (2-tailed)	
No	1.1628	T= 14.121	262	0.000***	
Yes	2.9955				
Model I Bivariate Regression			Model II Multivariate Regression		
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Sig.	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
	B		B	Beta	
F= 52.314					
R ² = .166					
(Constant)	1.825	.000***	3.941		.000***
Age at first abuse	0.09	.000***	-0.166	-0.749	.000***
F= 433.274					
R ² = .833					
Sexual Abuse (Constant)	2.883	.000***	3.941		.000***
no_abuse	-1.837	.000***	-2.895	-1.038	.000***
physical_abuse	0.787	.000***	0.143	0.067	.038*
emotional_abuse	-0.883	.000***	-0.108	-0.041	0.157
F= 1683.158					
R ² = .865					
(Constant)	1.124	.000***	3.941		.000***
frequency of abuse	0.867	.000***	0.366	0.393	.000***
F= 1275.893					
R ² = .830					
(Constant)	1.004	.000***	3.941		.000***
outcome of abuse	0.653	.000***	0.051	0.071	0.289

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.F= 487.824; R² = .919

DISCUSSION

The main goal of the study was to examine how exposure to child abuse, its degree and form predict the hierarchical position in a gang, and the level of engagement in gang activity. Results of the *t*-Test indicated that child abuse was significantly related to the position occupied by the child in the gang. Children that experienced child abuse occupied higher position in the gang compared with those that did not experience child abuse. Hence, abused children were likely to be ranking members of the gang while those that experienced no abuse were likely to be ordinary member of the gang. Age at first abuse was found to be related to the position of the child in the gang. The lower the age at first abuse, the higher the position of the child in the gang.

Form of abuse was found to be significantly related to the position occupied in the gang. With sexual abuse as a reference group, children who experienced physical abuse had .331 position score higher than those that experienced sexual abuse, while children who experienced emotional abuse had .246 position score less than those that experienced sexual abuse, holding all other variables (age at first abuse, frequency, and outcome of abuse) constant.

The relationship between child abuse and the importance of gang membership to the child was also established. The *t*-Test result reveals a significant relationship between child abuse and the importance of gang membership. In fact, those who experienced child abuse value the gang a lot than those who did not experience child abuse. It is not uncommon for abused children to rate the gang very high as the gang might provide them opportunities for support and companionship and makes them believe they have people to depend on when they have a need.

Age at first abuse was also found to be a significant predictor of importance of gang membership. From the multiple regression, a decrease of .166 in the importance of gang membership for every one unit increase in the age at first abuse, holding all other variables (form of abuse, frequency, and outcome of abuse) constant. Hence, the lower the age at first abuse, the higher the importance of gang membership. The form of abuse was also found to be a predictor of importance of the gang. Using sexual abuse as reference group, children who experienced physical abuse had .148 importance score higher than those that experienced sexual abuse, while children who experienced emotional abuse had .108 importance score less than those that experienced sexual abuse, holding all other variables (age at first abuse, frequency of abuse, and outcome of abuse) constant.

Similarly, frequency of abuse was also found to be a significant predictor of importance of gang membership. The higher the frequency of abuse, the higher the importance of gang membership. Finally, the study examined the influence of child abuse on the level of participation in gang activity. The *t*-Test results show a relationship between child abuse and level of participation in gang activity. Children that experienced child abuse were more actively involved in gang activity than children who experienced no child abuse. This finding corroborates the findings of Basto-Pereira et al. (2022) and van der Westhuizen and Gawulayo's (2020) on the impact of childhood maltreatment and neglect on adolescent gang involvement. They found childhood experiences of maltreatment and neglect were associated with an increased risk of joining stable gang later in adolescence.

Age at first abuse was a predictor of the level of participation in gang activity. Those that experienced child abuse at a very early age, were more actively involved in gang activity. Similarly, form of child abuse was found to be a significant predictor of the level of participation in gang activity. Specifically, those that experienced physical abuse were more likely to be actively involved in gang activity compared to those abused sexually, and emotionally. This corroborates the finding of De La Rue and Espelage (2014) who found a correlation between harsh discipline which can be likened to child physical abuse, and the intention to join child gang. They reported that children disciplined in a very harsh way (physical abuse) were more disposed to joining a gang than children that were not severely disciplined.

Lastly, the frequency of abuse was found to be a significant predictor of the level of participation in gang activity. This is in line with what was discovered by Currie and Tekin (2006). They reported that the probability of a child engaging in crime increases as he experienced multiple forms of maltreatment.

Implications of the Study

Our findings have fundamental implications for social work practice in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa. Social workers need to raise awareness about the harmful effects of child abuse and neglect, especially, regarding child gang involvement. There is need to educate families about the importance of proper parental care and supportive home environment. Also, social workers must clamor for laws, policies, and interventions that aimed at eradicating all forms of abuse against children and support the prevention of gang involvement.

Limitations

The study has a few limitations. It captured only gang members using non-random sampling method which might not be representative of the real population. Also, the study was restricted to north-central geo-political zone which is just one geo-political zone out of the 6 geo-political zones in Nigeria. Thus, similar study could be replicated in other geo-political zones in the country. In addition to that, the study did not account for the views of the security agents, and children not in gang. Hence, to better understand the influence of child abuse on the level of involvement in gang activity, it will be fundamental also to sample the security agents, children not in gang, and also extend the search lights to other factors that could affect the level of involvement in gang activity.

CONCLUSION

A significant number of studies have investigated the correlates of gang involvement, however, how exposure to child abuse, its degree and form predict the hierarchical position in a gang, and the level of engagement in gang activity has not been investigated. This hiatus is what this study filled. By and large, the study revealed that age at first abuse, form, and frequency of abuse were the predictors of importance of gang membership and level of

participation in gang activity. Children who were exposed to abuse at an early age, experienced frequent physical abuse, valued the gang, and participated more in its nefarious activities. This suggests that child abuse is not only detrimental to the child's health but also increases the likelihood of joining and actively participating in a gang as a way to seek comfort or relief from the abuse. Thus, child abuse must be aggressively tackled in order to curb the menace of child gang in Nigeria.

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