

Urbanisation and juvenile delinquency in Nigeria: Evidence from Nsukka Local Government Area, Enugu State

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Abstract

Juvenile delinquency has become an increasing social concern in many urbanising communities in Nigeria, raising questions about how urban social conditions influence youthful behaviour. Responding to calls for context-sensitive research in Africa, this study examines the relationship between urbanisation and juvenile delinquency in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State, prioritising local realities over externally driven assumptions. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design and relied exclusively on quantitative data. Using a multistage probability sampling technique, data were collected from 483 secondary school students between the ages of 10 and 18 years in selected schools within Nsukka LGA. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Z-test inferential techniques to examine patterns and differences in delinquent behaviour. The findings indicate that the overall level of self-reported juvenile delinquency in the study area is relatively low, with sexual misconduct emerging as the most commonly reported delinquent behaviour. The results further show that urban-related factors, particularly peer influence, urban poverty, exposure to violence, and weakened traditional social control, significantly shape juvenile delinquent

behaviour, with peer influence exerting the strongest effect. Crucially, this research argues that interventions must serve the interests of the local community by strengthening indigenous social control mechanisms rather than importing punitive models. The study concludes that urban social environments play a critical role in shaping juvenile behaviour. Hence, it recommends strengthened parental supervision, school-based guidance and counselling programmes, and community sensitisation initiatives to mitigate juvenile delinquency in urbanising communities.

Keywords: Adolescents, juvenile delinquency, peer influence, social control, urbanisation, urban poverty

Introduction

Throughout the world, juvenile offences are fast becoming an urgent concern and a major economic, social, health and governance issue (Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2024). Crime and delinquency, including violence of all kinds, adversely affect economic and social development, reinforce social exclusion and poverty, undermine citizenship and security, and reduce the capacity of the state to govern effectively (Bhuiyan et al., 2024). Dambazau (2007) defines juvenile delinquency as illegal acts, whether criminal or status offences, committed by juveniles or young people; thus, these young people are referred to as juvenile delinquents. Juvenile

delinquency is therefore a legal term for criminal behaviour carried out by minors recognised for having problematic behaviour.

Urbanisation in Nigeria has been accompanied by social and economic transformations that shape the experiences and behaviours of young people. According to Folorunsho et al. (2024), rapid urbanisation creates conditions that influence youth behaviour and social adjustment. In rapidly urbanising areas, factors such as urban poverty, weakened traditional social control systems, exposure to violence and increased peer pressure have been identified as critical drivers of juvenile

delinquency (Paat et al., 2025). These conditions often create environments where young people are more susceptible to engaging in deviant behaviours as they navigate complex social realities. Consequently, understanding how these urban-related social dynamics influence juvenile delinquency, particularly among secondary school students, is essential for developing context-specific interventions.

Urbanisation is more than just a physical process involving the expansion of roads, buildings and commercial activities. It also transforms the social environment in which young people grow and develop. Research has shown that rapid urban growth usually alters family structures and weakens informal social control mechanisms, thereby increasing adolescents' exposure to risk behaviours (Farhan & Al-Shawamreh, 2019). In many developing societies, urban expansion has been associated with factors such as overcrowding, economic hardship, weak parental supervision, and greater interaction with diverse peer groups (Ferdoos & Ashiq, 2015). Studies further indicate that adolescents living in urban environments are more likely to encounter social pressures and behavioural risks due to changing social norms and reduced community

monitoring (Akindele & Adebayo, 2021). Consequently, understanding juvenile delinquency requires attention not only to individual characteristics but also to the broader urban social conditions within which adolescents are socialised.

Studies have shown that rapid urbanisation in developing countries has significantly altered traditional patterns of social control, family structure, and community cohesion, especially in urban centres (Farhan & Al-Shawamreh, 2019). Similarly, Sennuga et al. (2023) observe that as rural–urban migration intensifies, cities gradually become centres of poverty, unemployment, informal economic activities, and weakened communal surveillance. These conditions are often associated with higher risks of juvenile delinquency (Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2024). Urban environments expose young people to diverse peer networks, crime-prone neighbourhoods, and competing social values that may conflict with traditional norms, thereby increasing the likelihood of engagement in deviant behaviour.

Juvenile delinquency has attracted scholarly and policy attention due to its implications for public safety, social cohesion, and long-term national

development. Globally, evidence suggests that urban areas tend to record higher concentrations of juvenile offending as a result of rapid population growth, socio-economic inequalities, weakened family supervision and declining informal social control mechanisms (Kokoravec et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024). Urban centres often expose young people to crime-prone environments, peer pressure, substance abuse, and alternative value systems that may encourage deviant behaviour (Miklósi & Kovács, 2025), particularly in contexts where state institutions struggle to respond effectively to rapid social change.

In Nigeria, juvenile delinquency represents a significant social challenge that undermines community security and youth development. Studies have linked rising youth involvement in cultism, drug abuse, theft, assault, and other delinquent behaviours to structural factors such as urban poverty, unemployment, family instability, and inadequate social welfare systems (Folorunsho et al., 2024; Jacobs et al., 2021). As Chineyemba (2023) noted, the rapid pace of urbanisation in many Nigerian towns has intensified these challenges by disrupting traditional kinship networks and informal systems of

social regulation that previously guided adolescent behaviour.

Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State exemplifies these broader national trends. Although historically regarded as a semi-rural town and educational hub, Stevenson (2020) contends that Nsukka has experienced increasing urban expansion driven by population growth, commercial activities, and the presence of tertiary institutions. This transformation has coincided with growing concerns among residents and security agencies about juvenile involvement in cult-related activities, illicit drug use, theft, and other forms of delinquency. Official records from the Nsukka Divisional Police Command indicate persistent cases of juvenile-related offences, which increased from 202 cases in the previous year to 311 cases, involving adolescents aged 10–17 years (Nigerian Police Force [NPF], Nsukka Division, 2024). This trend suggests that juvenile delinquency constitutes a significant social problem within the area.

Despite extensive studies on juvenile delinquency (Folorunsho et al., 2024; Nte et al., 2024; Taiwo, 2024), existing research in Nigeria has largely focused on

general causes of youth crime without sufficiently examining how specific urban social conditions, such as peer influence, urban poverty, exposure to violence, and weakened traditional social control, interact to shape delinquent behaviours among secondary school students. Furthermore, many studies have treated adolescents as a homogeneous group (Okoye et al., 2023; Badejo et al., 2020), with limited attention paid to school-based populations who experience unique social pressures within urban settings. This creates a gap in understanding the context-specific mechanisms through which urbanisation influences juvenile delinquency among students.

Furthermore, despite the visibility of juvenile delinquency in Nsukka LGA, existing explanations often rely on general assumptions such as moral decline or individual deviance (e.g. Eze & Clara, 2021; Udoikah et al., 2023) with limited empirical attention given to the role of urbanisation as a structural driver of delinquent behaviour. There is a noticeable gap in localised empirical studies that examine how urban social conditions, such as peer influence, urban poverty, exposure to violence and weakened traditional social control shape juvenile delinquency at the local

government level. Addressing this gap is important for the development of evidence-based interventions and policies tailored to the realities of rapidly urbanising communities. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to examine the influence of urban social conditions on juvenile delinquency among secondary school students in Nsukka Local Government Area, Enugu State. Specifically, the study investigates how factors such as peer influence, urban poverty, exposure to violence, and weakened traditional social control contribute to delinquent behaviours among adolescents. The study aims to provide context-specific insights that can inform policy and intervention strategies by focusing on school-based youth within a rapidly changing urban environment.

Conceptual clarity

It is important to distinguish between juvenile behaviour and juvenile delinquency. Juvenile behaviour refers broadly to the actions and conduct of young people, which may be positive, neutral, or negative. In contrast, juvenile delinquency specifically refers to behaviours that violate legal or social norms, including acts such as theft, violence, truancy, and substance abuse. This study adopts the latter definition and

focuses exclusively on delinquent behaviours among adolescents.

Furthermore, while the primary focus of this study is on the influence of urban social conditions on juvenile delinquency, existing literature suggests that individual and contextual factors such as gender, disciplinary practices, and residential location (rural–urban differences) may shape the manifestation and intensity of delinquent behaviours. In addition, although the study is situated within an urban context, the inclusion of rural respondents provides a comparative perspective that helps to contextualise the unique effects of urban social conditions.

In this study, urbanisation refers to the process through which a once semi-rural area gradually takes on the social and economic features of a town or city. These features include higher population density, increased commercial activity, migration, and changing lifestyles. Juvenile delinquency, as previously noted, refers to repeated or serious behaviour by adolescents that violates school rules, family expectations, or legal standards. By clearly distinguishing between these two concepts, the study avoids conceptual ambiguity and facilitates a

clearer understanding of how changes in the urban environment may shape the behaviour of young people.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on Strain theory and Differential Association Theory. These theories provide a useful framework for understanding juvenile delinquency within rapidly urbanising contexts. Together, these theories explain how structural conditions and social interactions shape juvenile behaviour. Strain Theory, as advanced by Robert K. Merton, explains deviant behaviour as a response to the disjunction between socially valued goals and the limited means available to achieve them. While the theory is often applied to adult economic aspirations, its relevance to adolescents lies in age-specific expectations such as academic success, social recognition, peer acceptance, and access to material symbols of status. In urban environments characterised by poverty, inequality, and limited institutional support, secondary school students may experience strain when they are unable to meet these expectations. For instance, students from low-income backgrounds may struggle to meet educational demands or social standards shaped by consumer culture,

leading to frustration and feelings of relative deprivation. This strain may increase the likelihood of engaging in delinquent behaviours such as truancy, theft, substance use, or aggression as alternative coping mechanisms.

On the other hand, the differential association theory, proposed by Edwin Sutherland (1939), posits that delinquent behaviour is learned through interaction with others, particularly within intimate peer groups. In urban settings, adolescents are often exposed to diverse peer networks, including those engaged in deviant activities. Factors such as weakened parental supervision, overcrowded living conditions, and exposure to street life increase the likelihood of forming associations with delinquent peers. Through these interactions, young people learn the techniques, motivations, and justifications for engaging in delinquent acts. In the context of this study, peer influence represents a critical mechanism through which urban social conditions are translated into juvenile delinquency. For example, students may adopt behaviours such as bullying, substance use, or minor criminal acts in order to gain acceptance or status within peer groups.

The relevance of these theories to the present study is in their ability to connect broader social conditions with individual behaviour. Literature has shown that adolescents who live in socially disorganised environments that are characterised by weak family supervision and reduced community control are more likely to experience negative peer influence and engage in delinquent behaviour (Gottfredson et al., 1991). Similarly, a study conducted in urban settings found that parental monitoring and informal social control are good protective factors against adolescent problem behaviour and delinquency (Fulkerson et al., 2008). Thus, while Strain Theory helps to explain how urban poverty, inequality and social pressures create frustration among adolescents, Differential Association Theory describes how delinquent behaviour is learned and strengthened through peer interactions. These two theories provide a good framework for understanding how urban social conditions influence juvenile delinquency among secondary school students in Nsukka Local Government Area.

Based on the theoretical framework and supporting empirical insights, the following hypotheses are formulated to

examine both the primary influence of urban social conditions and the moderating role of selected demographic and contextual variables.

H1. Males are more likely to exhibit delinquent behaviour than females.

H2. Urban juveniles are more likely to exhibit delinquent behaviour than their rural counterpart.

H3. Juveniles who are not punished for acts of misbehaviour are more likely to commit delinquent acts than juveniles who are punished for acts of misbehaviour.

Methodology

Study design and area

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between urbanisation and juvenile delinquency in Nsukka Local Government Area (LGA) of Enugu State, Nigeria. The cross-sectional design was considered appropriate for this study because it allows for the systematic collection and analysis of data on social behaviours and associated factors at a single point in time. The study area, Nsukka LGA, is one of the seventeen local government areas in Enugu State and comprises both urban

and rural communities. The major towns that make up Nsukka LGA are Ede-Oballa, Edem, Ehalumona, Ibagwa-Ani, Alor-uno, Nsukka, Obimo, Lejja, Okpuje, Obukpa, Opi and Okutu. Nsukka LGA is bordered by other local governments, which include Udenu LGA, Igbo-etiti LGA, Igbo-Eze South LGA and Uzo-Uwani LGA. The area has experienced increasing urban expansion driven by population growth, educational institutions and commercial activities. This makes it a suitable setting for examining urban-rural differences in juvenile delinquency.

Study population

The target population for the study consisted of 2,162 secondary school students between the ages of 10 and 18 years enrolled in Senior Secondary School classes (SS I–SS III) in selected public secondary schools within Nsukka LGA. This age range was considered appropriate because it captures juveniles who are legally and sociologically recognised as being at a stage of heightened vulnerability to delinquent behaviour. The schools selected are St. Theresa's Secondary School, Nsukka, Queen of the Rosary Secondary School, Nsukka, Community Secondary Ede-Oballa and Community Secondary School, Ibagwa-Ani. Data gathered from the

Zonal Post Primary School Management Board (PPSMB) shows the population distribution of SSI –SSIII students is 2162.

Although the primary focus of this study is on urban social conditions and their influence on juvenile delinquency, rural respondents were included to provide a comparative baseline for understanding the distinctiveness of urban experiences. The inclusion of rural participants does not imply that the study is primarily a rural–urban comparative analysis; rather, it allows for a more nuanced interpretation of how urban-specific factors shape delinquent behaviours relative to less urbanised settings. This approach is consistent with prior studies that incorporated comparison groups to strengthen internal validity and enhance the contextual interpretation of findings.

Sample and sampling procedures

A sample size of 483 respondents was drawn from a target population of 2,162 secondary school students enrolled in Senior Secondary School classes (SS I–SS III) in Nsukka Local Government Area. The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations: $n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$, where N = total population of secondary school students in Nsukka LGA, e = margin of

error (0.05), and n = required sample size. The sample size represents approximately 22.4 per cent of the study population and was considered sufficiently large to ensure statistical power, reduce sampling error and allow for meaningful subgroup comparisons. The relatively large sample also supports the use of parametric statistical tests under the assumptions of the central limit theorem. To ensure representativeness across different settlement types, a multistage probability sampling technique was adopted.

In the first stage, all public secondary schools in Nsukka Education Zone were stratified into urban and rural categories based on their location. From these strata, four schools were selected using simple random sampling to ensure that both urban and rural areas were adequately represented in the study. In the second stage, proportional allocation was applied to determine the number of respondents selected from each school, based on the size of the student population in each school as provided by the Enugu State Post Primary School Management Board. This procedure ensured that schools with larger enrolments contributed proportionately more respondents to the sample. This approach enhanced representativeness.

In the final stage, systematic sampling was employed to select individual respondents within each selected school. Class registers served as sampling frames, and a sampling interval of four was determined by dividing the total number of students in each class by the number of questionnaires allocated to that class. After selecting a random starting point, every fourth student on the register was included in the study until the required sample size was achieved. This method ensured equal selection probability for all eligible students and minimised selection bias. The multistage sampling procedure enhanced the geographical spread of the sample, ensured balanced urban–rural representation, and enhanced the generalizability of the findings within Nsukka Local Government Area.

Data collection instrument

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire designed to measure the prevalence and patterns of juvenile delinquency and related urban social factors. The questionnaire consisted of sections covering respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, residential location (urban or rural), disciplinary experiences, peer influence, and self-reported delinquent behaviours. Responses on delinquency

items were aggregated to generate composite scores ranging from 0 to 55, with higher scores indicating higher levels of delinquent behaviours.

Juvenile delinquency was operationalised using a composite scale derived from respondents' self-reported involvement in selected delinquent behaviours, including truancy, fighting, theft, substance use, and disobedience to school authority. Each item was measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often). The individual items were aggregated to form an index of juvenile delinquency, thereby facilitating the computation of mean scores and standard deviations.

To improve the quality of the data, the questionnaire was subjected to face validity assessment before administration. It was also pre-tested among students outside the selected schools to ensure that the items were very clear and suitable for the respondents' age group. The feedback we got from the pre-test helped to improve the wording of some questions and reduce ambiguity. In addition, the questionnaire was designed in simple language so that respondents could understand and answer without confusion. Because the study dealt with

sensitive behaviour such as delinquency, special care was taken to protect privacy and reduce fear of disclosure. This helped improve the reliability of the responses. These steps were taken to enhance the credibility of the findings and make the results more suitable for interpretation.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarise respondents' characteristics and patterns of delinquent behaviour. To test the study hypotheses, the Z-test statistic was employed to examine differences in mean delinquency scores across groups, including sex (male and female), residential location (urban and rural), and disciplinary experience (punished versus not punished). The Z-test was considered appropriate given the relatively large sample size ($N = 480$), which satisfies the assumptions of normality under the central limit theorem. All hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance. Given that the key variables in this study, including juvenile delinquency and selected urban social factors, were measured using Likert-scale items and composite indices, the use of

descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation is appropriate for summarising central tendencies and variations in responses.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from school authorities and respondents. Anonymity and confidentiality of respondents were assured, and no identifying information was included in the questionnaire. The study adhered to established ethical standards for research involving minors.

Results

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The sample was fairly balanced by sex, with females (51.0%) slightly outnumbering males (49.0%). Most respondents were aged 17–18 years (58.3%) and were evenly distributed across SS I–SS III classes. An overwhelming majority identified as Christians (98.8%). Most respondents reported that their parents were married (85.4%) and employed (59.8%). In terms of living conditions, a substantial proportion resided in flats or duplexes, while family size was relatively large, with most respondents reporting

having five or more siblings. More than half of the respondents were primarily cared for by their biological parents.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (N = 480)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	235	49.0
	Female	245	51.0
Age (years)	14–16	200	41.7
	17–18	280	58.3
Class level	SS I	160	33.3
	SS II	159	33.1
	SS III	161	33.5
Religious affiliation	Christianity	474	98.8
	Islam	5	1.0
	African Traditional Religion	1	0.2
	Other	0	0.0
Parents' occupational status	Working	287	59.8
	Not working	193	40.2
Type of residence	One-room apartment	46	9.6
	Two–three room apartment	98	20.4
	One-room flat	58	12.1
	Two–four room flat	124	25.8
Residential location	Bungalow	53	11.0
	Duplex	101	21.0
	Urban	301	62.7
	Rural	179	37.3
Number of siblings	None	18	3.8
	One	36	7.5

	Two	60	12.5
	Three–four	74	15.4
	Five–six	148	30.8
	Seven–eight	108	22.5
	More than eight	36	7.5

Types of self-reported delinquent behaviour

Table 2 summarises the major types of self-reported delinquent behaviour measured in the study. Although the overall level of juvenile delinquency was relatively low, sexual misconduct emerged as the most commonly reported form of delinquent behaviour. Other forms of delinquency, including theft, substance-related behaviour, and violent acts, were reported less frequently. The pattern in Table 2 shows that delinquent behaviour among the respondents is not evenly distributed. Instead, it appears in specific forms, with sexual misconduct standing out more clearly than other behaviours. This finding suggests that

adolescents in the study area may be more exposed to private or hidden forms of misconduct than to openly violent acts. Although the relatively lower reporting of violent behaviour may be associated with factors such as school supervision, social pressure, or fear of punishment. However, the presence of theft, substance-related behaviour, and sexual misconduct still shows that delinquency remains a real concern, even if the overall level is not very high. This pattern is important because it suggests that prevention efforts should not only focus on violence, but also on behaviour that may be less visible but still harmful to youth development

Table 2: *Types of self-reported delinquent behaviour among respondents (N = 480)*

<i>Type of delinquent behaviour</i>	<i>Relative prevalence</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Sexual misconduct</i>	Most commonly reported (N =182, [37.9%])	Includes behaviours related to inappropriate sexual conduct as self-reported by respondents

<i>Theft / property-related acts</i>	Less commonly reported (N =124, [25.8])	Includes stealing and other minor property offences
<i>Substance-related behaviour</i>	Less commonly reported (N =96, [20.0])	Includes alcohol or drug-related behaviour
<i>Violent behaviour</i>	Least commonly reported (N =78, [16.3])	Includes fighting and physical aggression

Sex differences in juvenile delinquency

H₁: Males are more likely to exhibit delinquent behaviour than females.

The first hypothesis examined whether male juveniles were more likely to exhibit delinquent behaviour than their female counterparts. Contrary to the hypothesis,

results showed that female respondents recorded a higher mean delinquency score (M = 13.44, SD = 16.15) compared to male respondents (M = 7.60, SD = 8.18). The difference in mean scores was statistically significant (Z = 4.94, p < .001), indicating a significant gender difference in delinquent behaviour among the respondents.

Table 3: *Descriptive statistics scores for males and females on the extent of their delinquency according to self-report*

Sample	Variable	N	X	Std. Err.	SD
1	Male	235	7.60	.53379	8.18
2	Female	245	13.44	1.03198	16.15

Urban–rural differences in juvenile delinquency

H₂: Urban juveniles are more likely to exhibit delinquent behaviour than their rural counterpart.

The second hypothesis investigated whether urban juveniles were more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour than rural juveniles. The results revealed that

urban respondents recorded substantially higher mean delinquency scores ($M = 15.33$, $SD = 14.56$) than their rural counterparts ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 3.02$). This difference was statistically significant ($Z = 12.74$, $p < .031$), indicating a

significant difference in delinquent behaviour between urban and rural respondents, with urban juveniles exhibiting higher levels of delinquent behaviour.

Table 4: *Descriptive statistics scores for urban and rural respondents on the extent of their delinquency according to self-report*

Sample	Variable	N	X	Std. Err.	SD
1	Urban	301	15.33	.83926	14.56
2	Rural	179	2.59	.22557	3.02

Note. N = number, X = mean scores, SD = standard deviation, Std. Err. = standard error.

Disciplinary practices and juvenile delinquency

H₃: Juveniles who are not punished for acts of misbehaviour are more likely to commit delinquent acts than juveniles who are punished for acts of misbehaviour.

The third hypothesis examined whether juveniles who were not punished for misbehaviour were more likely to engage in delinquent acts than those who were punished. Contrary to the hypothesis, the results indicated that respondents who reported having been punished recorded higher mean delinquency scores ($M =$

12.76 , $SD = 14.41$) than those who reported not being punished ($M = 7.07$, $SD = 10.06$). The difference was statistically significant ($Z = 5.69$, $p < .004$). This result suggests that punitive disciplinary practices alone may not effectively deter delinquent behaviour and may, in some cases, be associated with higher delinquency levels. This underscores the importance of considering not only whether punishment occurs, but also the nature, consistency, and context of disciplinary practices within families and schools.

Table 5: *Descriptive statistics scores for children who are punished for misbehaving versus children who are not punished for misbehaving, on the extent of their delinquency according to self-report*

Sample	Variable	N	X	Std. Err.	SD
1	I have been punished	296	12.76	.83730	14.41
2	I have not been punished	184	7.07	.74117	10.06

Note. N = number, X = mean scores, SD = standard deviation, Std. Err. = standard error.

Discussion

The findings suggest that self-reported juvenile delinquency among respondents was not uniformly widespread, as the more frequently reported behaviours were concentrated in specific categories, particularly sexual misconduct, while theft, substance-related behaviour, and violent acts were reported less frequently. This pattern is consistent with previous studies, which suggest that serious and violent delinquency may be less common among school-attending adolescents, whereas non-violent and status-related behaviours may occur more frequently within peer settings (Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2024; Bhuiyan et al., 2024). The prominence of sexual misconduct may reflect increased exposure to media content, changing social norms, and reduced parental

supervision, particularly in urbanising communities.

Contrary to widely held assumptions in criminological literature that males are more prone to delinquent behaviour than females (Orji, 2019; Hassan & Abdulkareem, 2023), this study found that female respondents recorded higher mean delinquency scores than their male counterparts. These findings challenge traditional gendered explanations of delinquency and suggest a shifting pattern of adolescent behaviour within the study context. Studies have similarly observed a narrowing gender gap in non-violent delinquency, particularly in behaviours related to sexuality and school-based misconduct (Badamasi, 2024; Savolainen). From a theoretical perspective, this finding can be

interpreted through strain theory, which suggests that social pressures associated with urban life may affect female adolescents. Differential Association Theory further explains how female juveniles, through close peer interactions, may learn and internalise behaviours that deviate from traditional gender norms.

The finding that female respondents recorded higher mean delinquency scores is important because it challenges the common belief that delinquency is mainly a male problem. One possible explanation is that social change in urban areas is affecting boys and girls differently. Girls may now have greater freedom, greater exposure to social media and more contact with peer groups that influence their behaviour. They may also be more likely to report some forms of misconduct, especially those that are less physical and more social in nature. This does not mean that girls are more criminal by nature. Rather, it suggests that the social context is changing and traditional gender expectations may no longer fully explain adolescent behaviour. The result, therefore, calls for prevention programmes that address both male and female adolescents in equal measure.

One of the most significant findings of the study is the markedly higher level of delinquent behaviours among urban juveniles compared to their rural counterparts. This result strongly supports existing literature that links urban residence with increased exposure to delinquency-promoting conditions (Park et al., 2025). Urban environments tend to concentrate on risk factors such as poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, weakened informal social control, and exposure to deviant peer networks (Folorunsho et al., 2024; Jacobs et al., 2021). In Nsukka LGA, ongoing urban expansion appears to have disrupted traditional community structures that once regulated juvenile behaviours. This finding aligns closely with Strain Theory, as urban juveniles are more likely to experience frustration arising from unrealised aspirations and limited access to legitimate means of success. Differential Association Theory further explains how urban settings facilitate frequent interaction with delinquency-prone peers, thereby increasing the likelihood of learning and adopting delinquent behaviours.

The findings indicate that juveniles who reported being punished exhibited higher levels of delinquent behaviours than

those who were not punished, suggesting that punishment alone may not be an effective deterrent to delinquency. This result echoes the findings of previous studies that highlight the limited effectiveness of punitive disciplinary practices when they are inconsistent, harsh, or not accompanied by emotional support and guidance (Mokano & Letuma, 2025; Hossain et al., 2025). From a theoretical standpoint, strain theory suggests that harsh or poorly administered punishment may intensify feelings of frustration and alienation, thereby increasing the likelihood of delinquent behaviours. Differential association theory also implies that punitive environments may push juveniles toward peer groups that reinforce deviant behaviours, especially when family or institutional bonds are weak.

The finding on punishment also deserves careful interpretation. The result does not imply that punishment causes delinquency. Instead, it may suggest that punishment is regularly administered after delinquent behaviour has already manifested, or that punishment is not always applied in a fair and supportive manner. When punishment is harsh, inconsistent, or unaccompanied by proper guidance, it may fail to change

behaviour. In some cases, it may even foster resentment, secrecy, or conflict between young people and adults. Consequently, punishment alone should not be seen as a comprehensive solution. A more effective approach is to combine discipline with communication, monitoring, counselling, and trust-building. This interpretation is important because it moves the discussion beyond simple blame and helps explain how family and school responses can either reduce or worsen delinquent behaviour.

Furthermore, the findings of this study provide empirical support for both Strain Theory and Differential Association Theory in explaining juvenile delinquency within an urbanising Nigerian context. Strain Theory is useful in explaining how structural conditions associated with urbanisation, such as poverty, inequality, and weakened social control, create pressures that predispose juveniles to delinquency. Differential association theory complements this explanation by highlighting the mechanisms through which delinquent behaviour is learned and sustained through peer interactions. The strong influence of peer groups observed in this study further underscores the importance of social learning processes in shaping juvenile behaviours.

Policy and practical implications

These findings carry significant implications for policy and intervention. Addressing juvenile delinquency in urbanising communities like Nsukka LGA requires moving beyond punitive measures to focus on strengthening family support systems, school-based counselling, and community-level youth engagement. Specifically, interventions targeting peer group dynamics, promoting positive role models, and reinforcing informal social control mechanisms are likely to prove more effective in reducing delinquent behaviours.

At the family level, parents should be encouraged to monitor their children closely, know their friends, as well as create time for regular interaction at home. Schools should enhance guidance and counselling services to identify students who show early signs of risky behaviour. Furthermore, community leaders, religious bodies and youth groups should also work together to build safe spaces where adolescents can take part in positive social activities. In addition, local government authorities should support community awareness campaigns on the dangers of drug abuse, theft, violence and

sexual misconduct. These interventions should not rely only on punishment; rather, they should also focus on education, emotional support, and positive role modelling. In a growing urban environment like Nsukka, prevention must be shared by families, schools and the community.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between urbanisation and juvenile delinquency in Nsukka Local Government Area, Enugu State, and found that delinquent behaviour is shaped by a wide range of social conditions such as residential location, peer influence, gender dynamics and disciplinary practices. The higher levels of delinquency reported among urban respondents suggest that rapid urban transformation, weakened informal social control, and changing youth environments play an important role in shaping adolescent behaviour. These findings reinforce the need to move beyond individualised and externally imposed explanations of African youth deviance by centring local realities, community experiences and structural conditions. In this sense, the study contributes to decolonial knowledge production by bringing context-specific

evidence from Nsukka rather than relying solely on imported assumptions about juvenile delinquency. The study therefore recommends stronger parental supervision, school-based counselling, positive peer engagement and community-led youth interventions in rapidly urbanising communities.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. First, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce

underreporting bias due to the sensitive nature of delinquent behaviour. Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw definitive causal inferences. Future research could build on these findings by incorporating longitudinal designs, qualitative methods, or comparative analyses across different urban and rural settings to deepen understanding of the urbanization–delinquency nexus in Nigeria.

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