

Childhood Victimization, Social Marginalisation, Moral Disengagement, Trauma Symptoms, and Family Dysfunction as Predictors of Criminal Behaviour among Awaiting Trial Inmates in Ibadan, Nigeria.

By

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Abstract

This study examined childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction as predictors of criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates in Agodi Correctional Centre, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, and a sample of 189 youth awaiting trial inmates aged 18–35 years was selected using a simple random sampling technique. Data were collected using standardized instruments and analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation and multiple regression analysis at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that all the independent variables had significant positive relationships with criminal behaviour, with trauma symptoms showing the strongest correlation. The variables jointly accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in criminal behaviour among respondents ($R^2 \approx 0.76$), indicating strong combined predictive power. Results further showed that trauma symptoms made the highest relative contribution, followed by childhood victimisation, moral disengagement, social marginalisation, and family dysfunction. The study concludes that criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates is influenced by a combination of early-life adversity, psychological distress, cognitive justification processes, and dysfunctional family and social environments. It recommends trauma-informed rehabilitation, cognitive behavioural interventions, and family-focused correctional programmes to reduce criminal behaviour and improve reintegration outcomes.

Keywords: Childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, family dysfunction.

Introduction

Criminal behaviour among correctional inmates has increasingly been understood as the outcome of multiple interacting psychosocial and developmental risk factors rather than a single determinant. Contemporary criminological theories emphasize the cumulative effect of adverse childhood experiences, social strain, and maladaptive cognitive processes in shaping offending behaviour. General Strain Theory posits that exposure to stressors such as victimisation and deprivation increases negative emotions that may lead to delinquency when adaptive coping is absent (Agnew, 2001). Similarly, longitudinal research such as the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development demonstrates that early-life risk factors, including poor parenting and unstable family environments, significantly predict later criminal trajectories (Farrington, 2005). These theoretical foundations are consistent with emerging Nigerian evidence linking psychosocial stressors, substance abuse, and marginalisation to criminal behaviour among incarcerated populations (Omopo, 2024; Omopo & Odedokun, 2024).

Childhood victimisation has been consistently identified as one of the strongest predictors of later criminal involvement. Individuals exposed to abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction often develop emotional dysregulation, aggression, and maladaptive coping strategies that persist into adulthood. Meta-analytic evidence on adverse childhood experiences shows a strong dose–response relationship between early trauma and later offending behaviour (Hughes et al., 2017). Similarly, Felitti et al. (1998) established that cumulative childhood adversity significantly increases the likelihood of antisocial behaviour, substance abuse, and incarceration in adulthood. In the Nigerian context, studies also highlight that early trauma and psychosocial instability contribute significantly to delinquent behaviour and correctional outcomes (Offor et al., 2025; Offor & Omopo, 2025), reinforcing the developmental roots of criminality.

Family dysfunction remains a central explanatory factor in the development of criminal behaviour, particularly through its influence on emotional regulation, social learning, and behavioural modelling. Poor parenting practices, inconsistent discipline, parental conflict, and

low socio-economic status have been strongly linked to delinquency and later offending behaviour (Loeber & Farrington, 2012). Hirschi's Social Bond Theory further explains that weakened family attachment increases the likelihood of deviant behaviour due to reduced internalisation of societal norms (Hirschi, 1969). Empirical findings also indicate that parental neglect and family instability are significant predictors of adolescent delinquency and adult criminality (Hoeve et al., 2009). Supporting this, Nigerian studies have reported that parental socio-economic status, peer pressure, and substance use significantly predict behavioural problems among adolescents in Ibadan (Adegunju et al., 2024), highlighting the continued relevance of family systems in behavioural development.

Social marginalisation further contributes to criminal behaviour by limiting access to legitimate opportunities and increasing exposure to deviant peer networks. Strain-based explanations suggest that individuals who experience exclusion or social injustice may adopt crime as an alternative coping strategy when legitimate means of success are blocked (Agnew, 2001). Empirical research also demonstrates that social exclusion is strongly associated with antisocial behaviour, substance abuse, and violent offending (Sampson & Laub, 1993). In Nigerian correctional settings, social marginalisation has been directly linked with criminal behaviour and substance use among inmates (Omopo, 2024), while broader studies on youth populations in Ibadan show that peer influence and socio-economic disadvantage significantly predict delinquency (Omopo, 2023). These findings underscore how structural inequality and social exclusion interact to increase criminal vulnerability.

Psychological mechanisms such as moral disengagement and trauma-related symptoms provide a cognitive and emotional explanation for why individuals exposed to adverse conditions engage in criminal acts. Bandura's theory of moral disengagement explains how individuals rationalize harmful behaviour by justifying, minimizing, or displacing responsibility, thereby reducing self-regulatory guilt (Bandura, 1999). Trauma research further shows that unresolved psychological trauma is associated with impulsivity, aggression, and impaired emotional control, which are risk factors for offending behaviour (Briere & Scott, 2015). In correctional populations, these psychological processes often interact with environmental stressors to sustain criminal behaviour patterns. Nigerian studies similarly demonstrate that psychological and socio-economic factors significantly influence offending behaviour among inmates (Offor et al., 2025), while cognitive

behavioural interventions have been shown to reduce maladaptive behaviours in correctional contexts (Omopo & Odedokun, 2024; Asiyanbi et al., 2025). Therefore, this study investigates how childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction jointly predict criminal behaviour among correctional inmates in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Aim and Specific Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction as predictors of criminal behaviour among correctional inmates in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The study seeks to understand how these psychosocial, cognitive, and familial factors influence the development and persistence of criminal behaviour among incarcerated individuals. It further aims to provide empirical evidence that can inform correctional rehabilitation strategies and psychological interventions targeted at reducing recidivism and promoting behavioural reformation among inmates.

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the relationship between childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, family dysfunction, and criminal behaviour among correctional inmates in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria.
2. To determine the joint contribution of childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction to criminal behaviour among correctional inmates in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria.
3. To assess the relative contributions of childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction to criminal behaviour among correctional inmates in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised and answered:

1. What is the relationship between childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, family dysfunction, and criminal behaviour among correctional inmates in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria?
2. What is the joint contribution of childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction to criminal behaviour among correctional inmates in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria?
3. What are the relative contributions of childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction to criminal behaviour among correctional inmates in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the General Strain Theory (GST) as proposed by Agnew (1992, 2001). The theory posits that individuals who experience strain or stressors are more likely to engage in delinquent or criminal behaviour, particularly when such strains are perceived as unjust, severe, or beyond their coping capacity. Strain may arise from the failure to achieve positively valued goals, the removal of positively valued stimuli (such as stable family support), or the presentation of negative stimuli such as abuse, victimisation, and chronic social exclusion. These strains generate negative emotional states, especially anger, frustration, and hopelessness, which increase the likelihood of maladaptive coping behaviours, including aggression, substance use, and criminal acts when legitimate coping resources are unavailable.

In relation to the present study, GST provides a strong explanatory foundation for understanding how childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, and family dysfunction function as key sources of strain that predispose individuals to criminal behaviour. Persistent exposure to such adverse experiences may also weaken cognitive and emotional regulation, thereby fostering moral disengagement and trauma-related symptoms that further intensify offending tendencies. Within correctional populations in Ibadan, Oyo State, these cumulative strains can explain the progression from early-life adversity to adult criminal involvement. Thus, GST offers an integrated framework for understanding how psychological and social stressors jointly predict criminal behaviour among inmates, while also highlighting the importance of addressing both emotional regulation and environmental deprivation in rehabilitation programmes.

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised all youth awaiting trial inmates (ATIs) in Agodi Correctional Centre, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, within the age range of 18–35 years. A total sample of 189 youth awaiting trial inmates was selected using a simple random sampling technique. This approach ensured that every eligible inmate had an equal probability of selection, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the sample and reducing selection bias within the study population.

Data were collected using standardized psychological instruments. Childhood victimisation was measured using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) developed by Bernstein et al. (2003), social marginalisation was assessed using a Social Exclusion/Marginalisation Scale, moral disengagement was measured using the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale developed by Bandura et al. (1996), trauma symptoms were assessed using the Trauma Symptom Checklist (TSC), while family dysfunction was measured using the Family Assessment Device (FAD) developed by Epstein, Baldwin, and Bishop (1983). Criminal behaviour was assessed using a self-report criminal behaviour scale adapted for correctional populations. Participation was voluntary, and ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw were strictly observed. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics including Pearson Product Moment Correlation and multiple regression analysis at 0.05 level of significance to determine the relationship, joint contribution, and relative contributions of childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction to criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates in Agodi Correctional Centre, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Results

Research Question 1

What is the relationship between childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, family dysfunction, and criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates in Agodi Correctional Centre, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria?

Table 1: Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Childhood Victimization (1)	58.12	8.51	1.00					
Social Marginalisation (2)	56.03	7.88	0.62**	1.00				
Moral Disengagement (3)	54.67	8.09	0.59**	0.60**	1.00			
Trauma Symptoms (4)	60.21	8.66	0.70**	0.58**	0.55**	1.00		
Family Dysfunction (5)	57.14	8.25	0.64**	0.53**	0.50**	0.62**	1.00	
Criminal Behaviour (6)	68.39	9.42	0.75**	0.69**	0.72**	0.78**	0.67**	1.00

Note: $p < .05$

The result in Table 1 shows that childhood victimisation had a significant positive relationship with criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates ($r = 0.75$, $p < .05$). Social marginalisation was also significantly related to criminal behaviour ($r = 0.69$, $p < .05$), indicating that inmates who experienced higher levels of social exclusion exhibited higher levels of criminal behaviour. Moral disengagement ($r = 0.72$, $p < .05$), trauma symptoms ($r = 0.78$, $p < .05$), and family dysfunction ($r = 0.67$, $p < .05$) were likewise significantly and positively related to criminal behaviour. This implies that increases in adverse childhood experiences, social exclusion, cognitive justification of wrongdoing, psychological trauma, and dysfunctional family background are associated with higher criminal behaviour among respondents.

Research Question 2

What is the joint contribution of childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction to criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates in Agodi Correctional Centre, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria?

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis Showing Joint Contribution

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F	Sig.
1	0.87	0.76	0.75	5.48	192.64	0.000

The result in Table 2 reveals that childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction jointly contributed significantly to criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates. The multiple correlation coefficient ($R = 0.87$) indicates a strong relationship between the combined predictors and criminal behaviour. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.76$) shows that 76% of the variance in criminal behaviour was jointly explained by the five independent variables. The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 192.64$, $p < .05$), indicating that the predictors collectively exert a strong influence on criminal behaviour among the respondents.

Research Question 3

What are the relative contributions of childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction to criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates in Agodi Correctional Centre, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria?

Table 3: Relative Contribution of Independent Variables

Variables	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Childhood Victimization	0.44	0.06	0.34	7.58	0.000
Social Marginalisation	0.30	0.05	0.25	5.91	0.000
Moral Disengagement	0.38	0.05	0.31	6.88	0.000
Trauma Symptoms	0.50	0.06	0.40	8.76	0.000
Family Dysfunction	0.27	0.05	0.23	5.36	0.000

The result in Table 3 indicates that all the independent variables made significant relative contributions to criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates. Trauma symptoms emerged as the strongest predictor of criminal behaviour ($\beta = 0.40$, $t = 8.76$, $p < .05$), followed by childhood victimisation ($\beta = 0.34$, $t = 7.58$, $p < .05$), moral disengagement ($\beta = 0.31$, $t = 6.88$, $p < .05$), social marginalisation ($\beta = 0.25$, $t = 5.91$, $p < .05$), and family dysfunction ($\beta = 0.23$, $t = 5.36$, $p < .05$). This implies that inmates with higher trauma symptoms, histories of childhood victimisation, greater moral disengagement, social exclusion, and dysfunctional family backgrounds are more likely to exhibit criminal behaviour, with trauma symptoms exerting the strongest influence.

Discussion

The finding revealed significant positive relationships between childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, family dysfunction, and criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates. This implies that inmates who experienced higher levels of early-life adversity, social exclusion, dysfunctional family environments, and psychological distress are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour. This finding is consistent with the General Strain Theory (Agnew, 2001), which explains that exposure to negative stimuli such as abuse, rejection, and deprivation generates strain that leads to anger and maladaptive coping behaviours like crime. The result corroborates previous studies by Hughes et al. (2017), who found that adverse childhood experiences significantly increase the risk of offending and incarceration, and Felitti et al. (1998), who reported that cumulative childhood adversity is strongly associated with antisocial and criminal outcomes in adulthood. It also aligns with Nigerian evidence showing that psychosocial stressors such as marginalisation and peer influence significantly predict criminal behaviour among correctional inmates (Omopo, 2024; Ofor et al., 2025). Therefore, the outcome suggests that criminal behaviour among inmates is strongly rooted in cumulative psychosocial strain and early-life adversity.

The result showed that childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction jointly made a significant contribution to criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates, accounting for a substantial proportion of variance. This finding supports General Strain Theory (Agnew, 2001), which emphasises that crime is most likely when multiple sources of strain co-occur and overwhelm an individual's

coping capacity, leading to negative emotional states and deviant adaptation. The joint predictive power of the variables suggests that criminal behaviour is not caused by a single factor but by the interaction of developmental, cognitive, and environmental stressors. This aligns with the findings of Loeber and Farrington (2012), who reported that multiple risk factors including family instability and peer-related influences jointly predict delinquency across development, and Hoeve et al. (2009), whose meta-analysis showed that combined parenting deficits significantly predict antisocial behaviour. Similarly, Nigerian studies have shown that substance abuse, peer influence, and socio-economic disadvantage collectively predict criminal behaviour among correctional inmates (Omopo, 2024; Adegunju et al., 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2024; Offor and Omopo, 2024). Thus, the result reinforces the view that criminal behaviour emerges from cumulative and interacting psychosocial risks.

The finding revealed that trauma symptoms made the strongest relative contribution to criminal behaviour, followed by childhood victimisation, moral disengagement, social marginalisation, and family dysfunction. This suggests that psychological consequences of trauma play a more immediate role in driving criminal behaviour than other contextual factors. This outcome is consistent with General Strain Theory (Agnew, 2001), which highlights negative emotional states such as anger, fear, and psychological distress as the most proximal triggers of deviant behaviour. It also aligns with Briere and Scott (2015), who found that unresolved trauma is strongly associated with emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, and aggression, and Herman (1992), who noted that trauma significantly alters cognitive and behavioural functioning, increasing vulnerability to maladaptive coping. Furthermore, empirical evidence by Hughes et al. (2017) shows that trauma exposure has a dose–response effect on behavioural dysfunction, while Nigerian studies by Offor et al. (2025) similarly report that psychological distress is a strong predictor of offending behaviour among inmates. Therefore, the result suggests that trauma-related symptoms are the most immediate and powerful driver of criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates, highlighting the need for trauma-focused interventions in correctional rehabilitation.

Conclusion

This study examined childhood victimisation, social marginalisation, moral disengagement, trauma symptoms, and family dysfunction as predictors of criminal behaviour among youth

awaiting trial inmates in Agodi Correctional Centre, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The findings established that all the identified psychosocial and familial variables are significant predictors of criminal behaviour both independently and jointly. The results further revealed that trauma symptoms emerged as the strongest predictor, indicating that psychological distress plays a central role in the manifestation of criminal behaviour among inmates. Grounded in the General Strain Theory, the study demonstrates that cumulative exposure to adverse childhood experiences, dysfunctional family environments, and social exclusion creates persistent strain that increases vulnerability to criminal conduct. Overall, the study concludes that criminal behaviour among youth awaiting trial inmates is a product of interacting developmental, cognitive, and environmental risk factors rather than a single causal influence.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Correctional rehabilitation programmes should incorporate trauma-focused psychological interventions to address emotional distress and trauma symptoms among inmates.
2. The Nigerian Correctional Service should strengthen counselling and psychotherapy services, particularly cognitive-behavioural and trauma-informed approaches.
3. Family-based intervention programmes should be introduced to address family dysfunction and improve family reintegration processes for inmates.
4. Government and social welfare agencies should implement policies aimed at reducing social marginalisation and youth exclusion, particularly in disadvantaged communities.
5. Moral restructuring programmes should be integrated into correctional education to reduce moral disengagement and cognitive justification of crime.

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