

Early Childhood Trauma, Attachment Insecurity, Emotional Dysregulation, and Substance Abuse as Predictors of Delinquent Behaviour among Adolescents in Foster Care in Ibadan, Nigeria

By

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Abstract

The study evaluated early childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse as predictors of delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care in Ibadan. Using a correlational research design, 150 adolescents aged between twelve and eighteen from Ibadan foster care institutions were purposively sampled to conduct the study. Standardised instruments - Childhood Trauma Questionnaire; Attachment Insecurity Scale; Emotional Dysregulation Scale; and Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory were harnessed to assess the key variables. Positive correlations were revealed by results that showed key predictor variables and delinquent behaviour. In this respect, multiple regression analysis was adopted in which the combination of predictors accounted for 62% of the variance in delinquent behaviour, with early childhood trauma emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .325$), followed by emotional dysregulation ($\beta = .309$), attachment insecurity ($\beta = .228$), and substance abuse ($\beta = .187$). The results indicate that the above-mentioned variables contribute significantly to delinquent behaviour in foster care adolescents, calling for further action and intervention efforts. Hence, the critical requirement of the research is viewed as having implications for trauma, emotional regulation, attachment issues, and substance use among aspiring delinquent behaviours within this vulnerable group.

Keywords: Childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, substance abuse, delinquent behaviour

1. Introduction

Behaviour considered delinquent has become a serious issue in socio-economic, cultural, and national contexts concerning truancy, stealing, aggression, use of drugs, and vandalism, all of which are perilous religions to an individual and society at large (Silas, Ebenuwa-Okoh, & Ugoji, 2023). Many of the youths said to have been involved in delinquent behaviour are associated with risk factors, such as disruptions in family protective factors, social-economic deprivation factors, traumatic childhood events, and drug use (Wada et al., 2021). All of these disorders are barriers toward educational achievement and steer youths toward mental disorders and a host of issues regarding social integration. Researchers have studied the pathways leading into delinquency and the psychological and environmental factors influencing such behaviours. In sub-Saharan Africa, risk factors of delinquent behaviour would include socio-political instability, poverty, and limited access to education (Yusuf et al., 2021). Urbanisation, fragmented family structures, peer pressure, and exposure to violence increase the risk of youth deviance (Ajokpaniovo et al., 2021), especially in urban settings where marginalised adolescents are faced with unfulfilled emotional needs compounded by community disorganisation and unemployment.

For Nigeria, Igunma et al. (2022), unresolved trauma or abuse constitutes predisposing factors for engaging in risky behaviour, including substance abuse and violence. Substance abuse is thought to be a precursor for antisocial behaviour by Wada et al. (2021). Neglect, ineffective communication, and low self-esteem have all been identified as predictors that set the child on the chronic trajectory. Prevention or early detection is key. Similar problems are affecting Ibadan in Oyo State. Being an educational centre, lots of adolescents are undergoing foster care, many of whom have met with early-life adversities, psychosocial stressors, and lack of family supervision, therefore constituting more delinquency risks (Omopo, 2023). Peer pressure, alcohol abuse, and emotional maladjustments are some of the factors that significantly contribute to deviance (Adegunju, Asiyebi, & Omopo, 2024; Omopo & Odedokun, 2024). Unresolved childhood trauma was found to impair the stability of relationships across South-Western Nigeria (Offor & Omopo, 2025). Those variables, when considered with social isolation, economic disadvantage, and institutional neglect, foster maladaptive coping and delinquent behaviour.

In the study, the psychological predictors concerning juvenile delinquency in the adolescents of Ibadan's foster care system were identified as: Early Childhood Trauma, Attachment Insecurity, Emotional Dysregulation, and Substance Abuse. These variables were selected, because they are

most associated with youth behavioural outcomes. According to Omopo, Offor, and Ogunbowale (2024), there is a strong relationship between trauma and deviance, while substance abuse accounts to usage of risky behaviours as found by Omopo and Odedokun (2024). In addition, peer influence and not well-adapted attachments cause deviant behaviour in Nigerian adolescents (Omopo, 2024; Omopo et al., 2024). Delinquent acts occur as a product of internal and external vulnerabilities that interact across time. Early childhood trauma refers to events such as neglect, abuse, and loss of a caregiver at an age-younger than twelve which deviate from the typical course of development. Consistently, empirical evidence indicates that adolescents who have history of trauma have a propensity for aggressive, rule-breaking, or criminal behaviours (Omopo, Offor, & Ogunbowale, 2024). Offor and Omopo (2025) further implicated traumatic early-life experiences to explain worse coping skills among adults and a higher mortality rate among Nigerian women. Early trauma impairs social functioning and increases the risk of delinquency in adolescent stage.

Attachment insecurity augments a child's obliteration of trust and emotional regulation owing to irregular emotional caregiving. Adolescents with attachment insecurity tend to demonstrate low self-esteem, compliance, and overall emotional regulation thereby getting involved in lawlessness. According to Omopo (2023), adolescents from broken parental relationships are more prone to delinquent behaviours like stealing and aggression. Studies conducted in remand homes also showed that the attachment disorder has a salubrious effect on aggression and deviance (Yusuf et al., 2021).

The use of substances is a prevailing factor for delinquency in Nigeria, where illegal drugs have readily become accessible. Psychoactive substances impair sound judgment and cause poor impulse control making the individuals more vulnerable to peer pressure and social conflict. Olanrewaju et al. (2022) establish that drug use among university students in South-West Nigeria would significantly relate to disruptive behaviour, academic failure, and aggression. Omopo and Odedokun (2024) have stated the diagnostic features of dependence on substances and its consequences among marginalised youths. It is maladaptive when people turn to substance abuse to use it as a tool for emotion regulation, trauma, or isolation.

Despite the literature, very few studies have looked at how childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse combine to affect delinquent behaviour,

particularly in foster care populations in Ibadan. Much of the existing literature isolates one or two variables without considering their interaction or additive ability to cause delinquency. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by exploring the combined role of these psychosocial factors in delinquency.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The research is directed at the assessment of how early childhood trauma and attachment insecurity, along with emotional dysregulation and substance abuse, relate to delinquent behaviour amongst adolescents in foster care institutions in Ibadan, Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine the relationship between early childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, substance abuse, and delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care settings in Ibadan
2. To determine the combined effect of early childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse on delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care settings in Ibadan
3. To assess the relative contributions of early childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse to delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care settings in Ibadan,

1.2 Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses will be tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant relationship between early childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, substance abuse, and delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care settings in Ibadan
2. There is no significant combined effect of early childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse on delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care settings in Ibadan
3. There is no significant relative contribution of early childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse to delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care settings in Ibadan

2. Methods

The correlational research design was adopted to investigate how early childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse are factored into delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care at the Ibadan Foster Care Centre. The sample of this study were individuals aged 12-18, randomly selected with a sample size of 150 purposively chosen to be represented in a research study contending that they had historical childhood documented in order to form part of the result from such trauma. Collected baseline data through self-constructing questionnaires and was tested with standardised instruments like the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) (Bernstein et al., 1997), Attachment Insecurity Scale (AIS) (Collins & Read, 1990), Emotional Dysregulation Scale (EDS) (Gratz & Roemer, 2004), and Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory (SASSI) (Miller, 1985) for dimensions of trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse measured individually. Participation was made voluntary and confidential. Ethical considerations on informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and minimal harm were observed. Data were encoded and analyzed with SPSS version 26 handling descriptive statistical analyses that present an overview of the sample characteristics. Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analyses tested the relationships and contributions of the variables to delinquent behaviour. The study is expected to contribute further into the deep understanding of the psychosocial factors influencing delinquency in foster care adolescents, therefore, providing interventions appropriate for this vulnerable group.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Demographic Representation of the Participants

Table 1: Demographic Representation of Participants

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency (n = 150)	Percentage (%)
Age		
12-14 years	60	40.0
15-16 years	50	33.3
17-18 years	40	26.7
Gender		
Male	123	82.0
Female	27	18.0
Educational Level		
Junior Secondary School	70	46.7

Senior Secondary School	80	53.3
Length of Stay in Foster Care		
1-3 years	90	60.0
4-6 years	40	26.7
7+ years	20	13.3

The Table 1 represents the demographic profile of the 150 study participants. Most of the study participants were adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 years with a majority of them in the 12-14 years age group (40%). In terms of gender, there were more male participants, accounting for over two-thirds at 82%, compared to females, 18%. Regarding level of education, 53.3% of the participants were in the senior secondary, while 46.7% were in junior secondary. The period of being under foster care varied among the participants: 60% had spent between one and three years, 26.7% had spent four to six years, while 13.3 had been in care for seven years or more. This illustrates an illustration of a diverse group of adolescents enjoying different stages of their life under foster care, which was significant for the analysis of psychosocial factors that link to delinquent behaviour.

3.2 Hypothesis One

There is no significant relationship between early childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, substance abuse, and delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care settings in Ibadan, Nigeria.

Table 1: Correlation Matrix Showing Relationship between Independent Variables and Delinquent Behaviour (n = 150)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Early Childhood Trauma	1				
2. Attachment Insecurity	.46*	1			
3. Emotional Dysregulation	.38*	.42*	1		
4. Substance Abuse	.51*	.44*	.47*	1	
5. Delinquent Behaviour	.63*	.59*	.55*	.69*	1

Note: *p < 0.05

Among the independent variables and the dependent variable, delinquent behaviour, Table 1 reveals the Pearson correlation coefficients. The relationship with ante-child trauma is classically moderate in the positive direction towards delinquent behaviour ($r = .63$, $p < .05$), suggesting that the more trauma the subjects encountered, the more tendency they had to commit delinquent acts.

The presence of attachment insecurity also correlated positively and significantly with delinquent behaviour ($r = .59, p < .05$), pointing to the fact that a person would experience deviant behaviour with unstable attachment styles. Emotional dysregulation behaved just like that ($r = .55, p < .05$), indicating the place for dealing poorly with emotional resources in delinquent outcomes. Furthermore, substance abuse recorded the strongest positive correlation with delinquent behaviour ($r = .69, p < .05$), implying that adolescents with a higher experience of substance abuse were less likely to hide delinquent tendencies. Since all the correlations were significant at the 0.05 level, the null hypothesis was rejected. Foster adolescents with early childhood trauma will tend to exhibit more delinquent behaviour than those without a traumatic history. Their behaviours were dyed with internalised pain from very early life, such as feelings of abandoned and neglected offspring, which would impinge on their emotional and impulse-control growth. Psychological events like abuse, neglect or protracted exposure to domestic violence seem to further reinforce these adolescents' predisposition behavioural disorder

According to Omopo, Offor, and Ogunbowale (2024), research has found that childhood trauma clearly predicts substance abuse among psychiatric patients in Ibadan. Also, Offor and Omopo (2025) argue that childhood trauma reduces relational stability among females in Lagos as cognitive behaviour therapy seems ameliorating their psychosocial functions. Adolescents with insecure attachment are significantly more likely to commit delinquent acts associated with aggression or withdrawal. Unstable care-giving histories, especially those characterised by unsteady public display of emotion from the caregivers or abrupt changes in caregivers, inhibit the internal working models of self and others relating to secure development. Silas, Ebenuwa-Okoh, and Ugoji (2023), observed that poor parenting styles, especially authoritatively poor and negligent styles, actually encouraged delinquent behaviours among secondary school students to tighten the link between the insecure attachment and antisocial tendencies. Both emotional dysregulation and poor coping mechanisms have been empirically shown in studies by Igunma et al. (2022) as well as Adegunju, Asiyanbi, and Omopo (2024) to be associated with substance abuse. Olanrewaju et al. (2022) and Omopo and Odedokun (2024) also linked substance abuse to delinquent behaviours.

3.3 Hypothesis Two

There is no significant combined effect of early childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse on delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care settings in Ibadan, Nigeria.

Table 2: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis Showing the Combined Effect of Predictors on Delinquent Behaviour (n = 150)

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	.79	.62	.60	4.23	2184.62	4	546.16	30.55	.000*
Residual					1342.88	145	9.26		
Total					3527.50	149			

Note: *p < 0.05

Multiple regression analysis revealed a strong link between trauma in early childhood, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse in predicting foster adolescent delinquent behaviours. The predictors accounted for 62% of the variance in delinquent behaviour, as measured by an R value of .79 and an R² value of .62. Indeed the deviation of regression model was proved to be statistically significant with $F(4, 145) = 30.55$, $p < .05$, thus confirming the combined role of these psychosocial variables in delinquency. Given its 4.23 standard error, it can be inferred that the model is a reasonably well fit one and that about "trauma in early childhood, problems with attachment, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse were important predictors of deviant behaviour". This thus reinforces the assumption that these do not act separately, but interplay in increasing the chances for deviant behaviour to happen in especially foster care settings.

This study reveals psychosocial vulnerabilities involving childhood trauma, insecure attachment, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse into complex play by relating these factors to delinquent behaviours. For such adolescents who end up in foster homes, their parents might have grown them in an unsafe or abusive environment, resulting in developing insecure attachments and difficulties in regulating emotion. The combination of those vulnerabilities results in impulsivity and antisocial behaviours typical among young people, which are often compounded by substance abuse as coping mechanisms for dealing with the emotional pain that is still unresolved. The research findings also agree with Igunma et al. (2022) and Silas, Eбенуwa-Okoh, and Ugoji (2023), which concluded that trauma and substance abuse

significantly relate to delinquency. Omopo and Odedokun (2024), calls for psychological intervention such cases. Integration such as this is imperative in mitigating risk factors relating to delinquent behaviour and propelling behaviour change over a period.

3.4 Hypothesis Three

There is no significant relative contribution of early childhood trauma, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse to delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care settings in Ibadan, Nigeria.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients Showing the Relative Contributions of Predictors to Delinquent Behaviour (n = 150)

Predictor Variables	Unstandardised Coefficients (B)	Standard Error	Standardised Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	3.281	2.134	–	1.537	.127
Early Childhood Trauma	.312	.073	.325	4.274	.000*
Attachment Insecurity	.204	.068	.228	2.999	.003*
Emotional Dysregulation	.276	.069	.309	4.000	.000*
Substance Abuse	.152	.064	.187	2.375	.019*

Note: *p < 0.05

As Table 3 indicates, the regression coefficients reflect how the various and individual predictors had their relative propensity in predicting delinquent behaviour within foster care adolescents. The highest predictor was early childhood trauma ($\beta = .325$, $p < .05$), followed by emotional dysregulation ($\beta = .309$, $p < .05$), attachment insecurity ($\beta = .228$, $p < .05$), and substance abuse ($\beta = .187$, $p < .05$). From these results, it can be inferred that each of these psychosocial variables significantly predicts delinquent behaviour. This model shows that the most profound influence is early trauma meaning that any form of abuse/neglect during the early years occurs with disruptions in normal developmental processes and maladaptive behaviours. Emotional dysregulation plays a significant role, for adolescents with emotional regulation problems may externalise their emotions through aggression or delinquent ways; attachment insecurity follows closely since this highlights that emotional attachments during childhood are preferably stable, while substance abuse even though very much significant comes last, showing that it could be a response to underlying issues, not a major direct cause of delinquency.

The regression analysis findings have thrown light on the interactions between psychological and environmental factors in activating delinquent behaviour. Early trauma, emotional dysregulation, and attachment insecurity appear to create some internal circuit, where the severity of one factor causes an exacerbation of others, resulting in worse behavioural outcomes. Substance abuse is an important contributor, but arguably a secondary response to primary psychosocial problems. This points to the need for intervention that tackles not just the immediate behavioural sequelae but also the root causes to delinquency-from trauma recovery to emotional regulation and attachment security. Cheung and Huang (2024) and Harris et al. (2023) studies also shows that early trauma, emotional dysregulation, and attachment insecurity are key predictors of delinquent behaviour in vulnerable youth populations.

4. Conclusion

The study reveals that early childhood trauma, emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse are factors contributing to delinquent behaviour among foster adolescents. Early childhood trauma was found to be the strongest predictor, which implies that early adversity has a prolonged effect on later development. Emotional dysregulation and attachment insecurity were close behind, indicating difficulty with both emotion regulation and the ability to form secure attachments simply heightens the odds for delinquent behaviours. Substance abuse, however, was noted as somewhat less significant; perhaps it is less of an independent predictor and more so a consequence of the root causes. This implies that interventions should aim to work on trauma and emotional regulation difficulties and not limit their focus simply on delinquent behaviour.

4.1 Limitations

There are certain limitations worth mentioning. Firstly, self-reported data may be biased due to social desirability or recall issues. The study utilised small sample size due to the low availability of the participants due to some of them being engaged in certain educational and vocational exposures. Future studies will need to be larger, more diverse and longitudinal to help better understand the complex dynamics leading to delinquent behaviour in foster care adolescents.

4.2 Recommendations

Foster care systems should implement trauma-informed care approaches in recognition of the fact that childhood trauma is a major causative factor in delinquency. Psychosocial support and coping skills training should be offered. Programmes should include emotional and behavioural skills such as emotional regulation using therapies such as CBT and DBT, while strengthening attachment security through positive mentorship styles and group therapy. Substance abuse prevention should also include early education and targeted treatment. There should be longitudinal research to determine the long-term potential developmental consequences of childhood trauma, together with certain contextual challenges presented by peer influences and social support. Additionally, future studies ought to examine the efficacy of emotional regulation and attachment-oriented programmes, while considering variables such as gender, ethnicity, and culture as contributory dimensions to delinquency.

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