



CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES IN NIGERIA: DOES MOTHER'S MARITAL STATUS MATTER?

LORRETTA FAVOUR CHIZOMAM NTOIMO, BOB CHARLESTINE ELWANGE,
BABATUNDE GBADEBO, & FAVOUR CHUKWUNONYEREM NTOIMO

Abstract

This study examines whether mother's marital status predicts involvement in a particular type of criminal activity. Data were obtained from a survey of 249 male inmates, and interview with Senior Officers in two prisons in Osun State, Nigeria. Multinomial logistic regression was used to examine the relative risk of committing a crime against property, crime against persons and victimless crime. The interviews were content analyzed. The majority of the respondents committed crime against property, and 40% were from single mother households. The inmates whose mothers never married, divorced or separated were at a higher risk of committing a crime against property than victimless crime, compared to inmates whose mothers were in a union (RRR 4.45 $p < .05$). Relative to respondents from two-parent homes, respondents whose mothers were widows were less likely to be involved in crimes against property and persons than victimless crime (RRR 0.19 $p < .01$). The significant association between mother's single marital status and involvement in crime against property is suggestive of a link with large financial strain. To curb crime against property and persons and victimless crimes in Nigeria, there is need to pay attention to the marital status of mothers and empower women to strengthen the welfare of children in both the intact and disrupted families.

Keywords: Mother, Marital Status, Criminal activity, Prison, Nigeria

Introduction

Although the Federal and State governments in Nigeria are making effort to combat criminal activities, the crime rate has continued to rise. For instance, offences against persons, such as homicide and kidnapping, increased from 35,109 in 2008 to 38,955 in 2009, and offences against property, such as theft and armed robbery, increased from 47,626 in 2008 to 64,286 in 2009 (Nigeria Police Watch, 2013). In 2012, 54,144 persons were incarcerated in prisons in Nigeria, a 38% increase from 39,153 in 2004 (Walmsley, 2012). The United Nations Office on





Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported a homicide rate of 34.5 per 100,000 population in Nigeria in 2016, and an increase in the rate of persons held in prison per 100,000 population from 28.8 in 2004 to 36.5 in 2018 (UNODC, 2018). Rising rates of criminal activities increase the insecurity of lives and property in a country; discourages foreign and local investments, and results in continual loss of human capital as an increasing number of youths get involved in crime and are incarcerated (Le Pichon, 2005). This underscores the need to curb crime more effectively, and curbing crime requires information on underlying factors, such as family-related characteristics such as mother's marital status, that expose people to crime.

In the traditional African setting, mothers are expected to be vanguards of standard socio-religious values as well as agents of transmission of such values to children (Suda, 1996); when a child fails, parents, mothers in particular are blamed. Emphasising this, (Hunter & Nixon, 2001) argue that anti-social behaviour in children is not a simple case of blaming parents, but rather mothers specifically, and single mothers in general are targeted and labelled a problem in child outcome. However, Huesmann (2007) shows that exposure to violence in the media also increases violent behaviour, irrespective of individual and parental characteristics.

Studies in Nigeria that relate aspects of the family to children's involvement in crime and other anti-social behaviour have been focused on the influence of single motherhood on children's academic performance (Lawal & Adediran, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2009; Yara & Tunde-Yara, 2010), and social behavioural problems (Odu & Paulina, 2008); child rearing practice and delinquent behaviour (Emmanuel et al., 2012); and family structure and juvenile delinquency (Sanni et al., 2010). Little or no attention has been paid to how mother's marital status relates to the type of crime children get involved in. In light of the above background and the gap in the literature in Nigeria, this study examines whether a mother's marital status as single, married/living together, widowed, divorced/separated, predicts involvement in particular types of crime. Empirical evidence on this will not only contribute to the body of existing knowledge on family structure and behavioural outcomes in children, but it will also be significant for programmes to curb crime. It will also provide useful evidence for the rehabilitation of people who have committed crimes, and for a reformation of family support programmes and laws in Nigeria.





Materials and Methods

Study design and setting

This study was a cross-sectional mixed method research conducted in two prisons in Osun State, Nigeria. Administratively, the country is made of thirty-six States and a Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Each state has at least two prisons. Data were obtained from 249 randomly selected male prison inmates and two welfare officers, in the two prisons in Osun State, South-Western Nigeria. Osun State has an estimated population of 4,140,228 in 2012 and 4,705,589 in 2016, the prison population rate of 24.5 in 2012 and 18.2 per 100,000 in 2016 (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 2018; National Bureau of Statistics/The Nigerian Prisons Service, 2017).

There are two prisons in Osun State, Ile-Ife and Ilesa prisons, with a total of 645 male inmates at the time of the survey in 2013, 142 convicted, and 503 awaited convictions. Ile-Ife prison is a smaller prison, referred to as medium because it takes inmates whose offence attract a maximum of seven years. It had fewer inmates and there were no female inmates. There was a total of 202 inmates in Ile-Ife prison, 161 awaited court trial, and 41 had been convicted. Ilesa prison is a bigger prison; it takes male and female inmates without any maximum limit in the number of years of imprisonment. There were 443 male and 16 female inmates in Ilesa prison; 342 and 12 male and female, respectively, were awaiting conviction, whereas 101 male and 4 females were already convicted. The females were left out of the study because they were few.

Sampling technique

A sample size of 241 was derived using the formula for a small sample when population size is known as proposed by Krejcie and Morgan, (1970).

$$S = \frac{x^2 NP(1 - P)}{d^2 (N - 1) + x^2 P(1 - P)}$$

Where x^2 is table value of chi-square @ d.f. =1 for confidence level 0.05

N= population size

P= population proportion (assumed to be 0.50)

d =degree of accuracy (expressed as a proportion 0.05)





To adjust for non-response, 10% (24) was added to derive a total sample of 265 inmates. Stratified proportional random sampling technique was used to allocate sample to each prison. Each prison was treated as a stratum, and the sample size was proportionally assigned to each prison. The overall male prison population in the state was 645, Ile-Ife prison constituted 31% and Ilesa was 69%. Based on this percentage, 31% of the sample size was assigned to Ile-Ife (82), and 69% was allocated to Ilesa prison (183). All male inmates who were raised by mothers only or both parents were eligible for selection. The response rate was 94%.

Data collection

A structured questionnaire and key informant interview were used to collect primary data for this study in January 2013. The questionnaire was used to collect data from the inmates, whereas key informant interview was conducted with the Prison Officers. The questionnaire contained questions on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, including mother's marital status, offence committed, and prison status, among others. Prison welfare officers assisted in the selection of respondents and administration of the questionnaire because the principal investigator who also conducted the data is female. The welfare officers were taken through each question and the principal investigator was available to provide explanations where necessary. Prison officers assisted the illiterate respondents to understand and fill in the questionnaire.

Key informant interview was conducted by the principal investigator with two senior welfare officers in Ilesa prison: The two senior officers were the Chief Inspector of Prison, who had worked for 30 years in the prison; and a Senior Inspector of Prisons who had eleven years of working experience in the prison. The informants were purposively selected because of their long-time interaction with the inmates. One of their primary duties was counselling and mediation between inmates and their families. This brought them into regular one-on-one contact with inmates and their families. The interview revolved around their perception of the influence of family background on adult children's involvement in the different forms of criminal activities.

Official permission to conduct this study was obtained from Nigerian Prison Service in Osogbo, the capital of Osun State, and the Prison Officers in-charge of each prison. All the respondents





were informed of the purpose of the research; written or oral consent was obtained before the questionnaire was administered on the inmates.

Variables and measures

The dependent variable, criminal activity, was defined as any acts that violated the criminal statutes in Nigeria and measured as a categorical variable. Following the Nigerian police categorisation, the acts were grouped into three; an offence against property, offence against persons and offence against lawful authority. Offence against the lawful authority is referred to as victimless offence in this study, adopting the definition coined by Macionis (2009). Victimless offences or crimes are acts against authority that do not directly harm other people. Responses on what offence the respondents committed were allocated to each of the three categories. Offence against property included acts such as stealing, armed robbery, burglary. Offence against persons comprised acts such as murder, kidnapping, rape, assault. Victimless offences included dealing in hard drugs, breach of the public peace, bribery and corruption, and examination malpractice. The key independent variable was mother's marital status, disaggregated into three categories: other single mothers (never married, separated and divorced), widowed, and married. Married was the reference category. Other covariates which were added as control variables include the respondent's characteristics and mother's other characteristics. The respondent's characteristics included age categorised into ≤ 24 years old, 25-28, 29-35, and 36 and above; ethnic origin grouped into Yoruba and Others because the majority of the prisoners were Yoruba; highest level of education defined in two categories of \leq secondary, and tertiary; occupation (before incarceration) was categorised as student/unemployed, and working. Also included were the respondent's marital status categorised into never married and ever married; number of respondent's siblings ≤ 5 and 6 and above; prison status – awaiting trial, and convicted; and place of upbringing categorised into urban and rural. Other characteristics of the respondents' mothers that were included as covariates were occupation grouped into white-collar, trading, and other; highest education categorised into no education/primary, secondary, and tertiary.

Analytic strategy





The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. The questionnaire was coded and data entry and cleaning were conducted using SPSS 20.0. The profile of the respondents is presented using frequency and percentage. Multinomial logistic regression was used to estimate the relative risk of being involved in any of the three categories of crime. Multinomial logistic regression was appropriate because the outcome variable had more than two categories (3) and could provide the relative risk of committing any of the three categories of crime. The multivariate estimation controlled for other background characteristics of the respondents, and their mothers. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.005$, and $p < 0.10$ was considered marginal significance.

Results

Univariate analysis in Table 1 shows that the mean age of the respondents was 29 (sd 7.8), the majority of the respondents were of Yoruba ethnic origin (the dominant ethnic group in Osun State); never married, of Catholic religious affiliation, and attained secondary or lower education. Most of them were either self-employed or engaged in paid employment before incarceration; and concerning family background, 18% had mothers who were never married, separated or divorced, whereas about 22% had widowed mothers, and close to 60% had mothers who were in a union. Many of the respondents (56%) had 5 or less maternal siblings.





Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of the study population, Osun State Prisons, Nigeria

Variable	Percentage (n=249)
Respondents' Characteristics	
Age	
<=24	26.9
25-28	26.4
29-35	25.2
36+	21.5
Mean	29 (sd 7.8)
Ethnic origin	
Yoruba	70.9
Other	29.1
Highest level of education	
<=secondary	60.4
Tertiary	39.6
Occupation	
Student/unemployed	39.0
Working	61.0
Religion	
Catholic	40.0
Other Christian	32.2
Islam & other	27.8
Marital Status	





Never married	51.7
Ever Married	48.3
Sibling	
<=5	56.1
6+	43.9
Prison status	
Awaiting trial	78.8
Convicted	21.2
Offence committed	
Crime against property	47.6
Crime against persons	17.6
Victimless crime	34.8
Place of upbringing	
Urban	63.3
Rural	36.7
Mother's Characteristics	
Marital status	
Other single	18.1
Widowed	21.9
Married	59.9
Occupation	
White-collar	25.2
Trading	50.8
Other	16.0



Highest education	
No education/primary	32.6
Secondary	31.0
Tertiary	36.4
Single Mother got social support	
No	55.8
Yes	44.2
Type of support received by single mother	
Regular Visit	24.0
Encouragement	22.0
Financial support	48.0
Other	6.0
Source of support received by single mothers	
Parents	37.5
Other relatives	46.9
Other	15.6

The majority had mothers who were traders and were brought up in urban areas. Among those whose mothers were single, 56% reported that their mothers received some support. The most common was financial support from close relatives, mainly parents and uncles.

Close to half of the respondents committed a crime against property (48%). Commenting why there are many cases of stealing and armed robbery, the key informants attributed it to poverty, and family disruption through divorce and separation. The Senior Inspector of Prison said: *“in homes where there is inadequate finance to take care of the needs of children, they are likely to be exposed to bad peers who will introduce them to crime”*.





One of the Key Informants observed that single mothers exercised weak control over their children, particularly male children. The Informant however pointed out that strong religious affiliation by a single mother might moderate the effect of single motherhood on adult children's likelihood of getting involved in crime.

If a single mother is seriously religious and brings up her children in the Christian or Muslim way, they are likely to continue with their mother, forget about their father, and will not be involved in any criminal act. I think religion goes a long way to help (Chief Inspector of Prison).

The result of multivariate analysis is presented in Table 2. The respondents whose mothers never married, divorced or separated (other single mothers) were more likely to be involved in crime against property than victimless crime, relative to adult children from two-parent households (RRR 4.45 $p < .05$).

Corroborating this result, one of the Key Informants attributed the high prevalence of crime against property to a broken home.

when we interview these boys, we understand that their parents are not living together; it makes them leave home so early to start fending for themselves, as early as age 15, 16, 17 years they have already rented their apartment, staying alone. That is how they get involved with criminal peers while looking for how to sustain themselves (Senior Chief Inspector of Prison).

Relative to those who had married parents, respondents whose mothers were widows were significantly less likely to be involved in crime against property (RRR 0.19 $p < .01$), and crime against persons (RRR 0.11 $p < .01$).





Table 2. Results of Multinomial Logistic Regression, Mother’s marital status and adult children’s involvement in criminal activities

Variable	Crime against property (CAPr) RRR (CI)	Crime against persons(CAPs) RRR (CI)
Mother’s marital status		
Other Single	4.45(1.25-15.8)*	1.11(0.24-5.00)
Widowed	0.19(0.06-0.54)**	0.11(0.02-0.52)**
Married (RC)		
Respondent’s marital status		
Never married		
Ever married (RC)	0.60(0.20-1.83)	0.24(0.05-1.05)†
Age		
<=24	0.34(0.06-1.79)	1.33(0.20-8.84)
25-28	0.62(0.13-2.87)	1.40(0.23-8.45)
29-35	0.26(0.07-0.93)*	0.16(0.03-0.86)*
36+(RC)		
Mother’s education		
No education/primary	0.44(0.14-1.38)	0.99(0.24-4.05)
Secondary	0.61(0.20-1.84)	0.86(0.19-3.77)
Tertiary (RC)		
Mother’s occupation		
White-collar	0.28(0.06-1.20)†	1.60(0.29-8.65)
Trading	0.73(0.23-2.28)	0.60(0.14-2.54)
Other (RC)		
Respondent’s siblings		
<=5	0.61(0.27-1.36)	0.60(0.21-1.66)
6+ (RC)		
Place of upbringing		
Urban	0.30(0.12-0.70)**	0.43(0.15-1.25)
Rural (RC)		
Mother’s religion		
Catholic	2.95(1.13-7.69)*	0.51(0.15-1.79)
Other Christian	1.98(0.60-6.50)	2.18(0.58-8.19)
Islam & other (RC)		
Ethnic origin		
Yoruba	0.97(0.36-2.62)	0.35(0.11-1.12)†
Other (RC)		

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Occupation

Student/unemployed	1.69(0.71-4.04)	1.41(0.45-4.44)
Employed (RC)		

Education

<=secondary	1.16(0.47-2.83)	2.67(0.85-8.41)†
Tertiary (RC)		
Intercept B	2.465*	1.870†
Pseudo R ² (Nagelkerke)	0.43	

CI = confidence interval 95%; Victimless Crime was the reference category; *p<0.05, **p<0.01

***p<0.001 †P0.10

Speaking further on the vulnerability of children brought up in single mother households, the key informants attributed a higher tendency for children in single mother home to be involved in crime to financial lack. However, he said that the effect of a father’s absence and financial deprivation can be moderated by support from relatives and friends, and involvement in religious activities.

If the single mother is well-behaved and her relatives know the marital disruption was not her fault, then, her uncle or other relatives may take over the care of her children, but it is not in all cases. These days everybody takes care of himself and his children, so, help from extended relatives can only be to some extent. (Chief Inspector of Prison)

Other statistically significant mother’s characteristics were white-collar occupation which was marginally associated with involvement in crime against property; affiliation to the Catholic denomination significantly increased the relative risk of committing a crime against property. Statistically significant characteristics of the respondents included being never married, which marginally reduced the likelihood of being involved in crime against persons; being 29-35 years old decreased the odds of committing a crime against property and persons relative to victimless crime. Upbringing in an urban area decreased the likelihood of getting involved in crime against property relative to victimless crime. Compared to respondents from other ethnic groups inmates who were of Yoruba ethnic origin were marginally less likely to commit crimes against persons. Respondents who did not attain tertiary education were marginally more likely to be involved in crime against persons.

Discussion

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This study examined the association between a mother's marital status and adult male children's involvement in acts that violate criminal laws in Nigeria. The results indicated that relative to respondents whose mothers were in a union, those whose mothers were divorced, separated or never married were significantly more likely to be involved in crime against property than victimless crimes. They were insignificantly more likely to commit a crime against persons. This result supported a previous study in Ethiopia that showed a positive correlation between involvement in property crimes such as theft, burglary and robbery and growing up in a single parent family (Wassie et al., 2020). The finding was also related to studies in North America, Australia, and Brazil that found single motherhood a higher risk factor for anti-social behaviour outcome in children relative to those raised in two-parent family (Bor et al., 2004; Cavanagh, 2008; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Curto et al., 2011; Pougnet et al., 2011), and externalizing behaviour problems in adulthood (Sillekens & Notten, 2020). This result suggests that financial strain often associated with single mother households (Thomson et al., 1994) may have exposed the adult male children to theft, robbery, burglary and other crimes against property. Poverty exposes children to anti-social behaviour, but economic resources mediate the negative effects single motherhood has on child outcome (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). In a study conducted in the USA, single mothers by choice who were financially well-off, engaged in stable employment and highly educated had children with no unusual outcome (Bock, 2000). McLanahan(2004) exposition on diverging destinies allude to this, children of mothers with better socio-economic status are experiencing advantages while those of low socioeconomic status mothers are disadvantaged. To reduce the prevalence of crime against property in Nigeria, there is the need for economic empowerment interventions targeted at single mothers particularly those who are never married, divorced and separated and their adult children.

The majority (43%) of never married, divorced and separated single mothers in this study had tertiary education, and 40% of them had white-collar jobs as primary and secondary school teachers, nurses and government workers (table not shown). This indicates that those who had tertiary education were likely to be the one who had white-collar employment. Given the higher likelihood for women to be in low-wage employment than men(Chant & Pedwell, 2008), and the





low wage associated with the aforementioned types of white-collar employment in Nigeria, these mothers are likely to have insufficient income that can take care of children adequately, especially if they have many children. However, there was a marginally significant less risk of involvement in crime against property by respondents whose mothers had a white-collar job. This indicates that they may still be better off than their counterparts who are traders.

Also, being reared in a single mother family instigates a sense of deprivation in children, which may result in negative emotion, such as anger against the absent father or society. According to Agnew, (1992, 2001), such emotions block the positive view of alternatives and lead to involvement in any kind of crime. Another likely reason why the adult male children whose single mothers are not widows were more likely to be involved in crime against property and persons is mother's inability to implement strong parental control on male children, as observed by the Inspector of Prisons during the key informant interview and supported in previous studies (Pougnnet et al., 2011; Wright & Cullen, 2001). A social policy or programme that provides opportunities to link children in single mother households to social fathers, male mentors and foster fathers may be necessary in Nigeria to assuage the negative emotions against the absent father.

Widowhood resulted in lower relative risk of involvement in crime against property and persons, but a higher risk for a victimless crime. This may be because the death of a family member, according to Agnew, (2001) is a strain caused by natural cause, depending on the circumstance of the death, such strains may not be perceived as unjust, and may not lead to criminal coping. Also, more widows are likely inherit their husband's property which attenuated the likelihood of their children getting involved in crime against property. Although studies show that widows experience neglect, loss of social network, and poor welfare (Gubrium, 1974; van de Walle, 2011; Young, 2006), it is likely that in a pro-marriage society, such as Nigeria, widows and their children will receive more social support from relatives than mothers whose single status are culturally disapproved (Chant, 2007).

In response to an open-ended question (result not shown), some of the respondents avowed that not heeding to their mother's teaching and advice led them to crime. This suggests that mothers





are still vanguards of expected socio-religious values in Africa and they are transmitting the same to children (Suda, 1996). However, the influence of media portrayal of success and the non-traditional definition of masculinity in terms of wealth and financial security seem to be having an overriding influence on young adults raised in disadvantaged families (Agnew, 1992, 2001; Huesmann, 2007).

Respondents from two-parent households committed more of crime against property and persons compared to those whose mothers were widows, and they committed more victimless crime than respondents whose mothers were never married, divorced/separated. Although being in a two-parent family is protective of some adverse conditions that may increase the risk of involvement in crime, it does not altogether prevent involvement in crime and other antisocial behaviour especially if the parental union is conflictual, parenting style is negative, and one of the parents or siblings has been involved in anti-social behaviour (Eriksson et al., 2016; Jaffee et al., 2003; Scott et al., 2012; Xiong et al., 2020).

Limitations of the study

Due to constraints of resources, the current study was limited to 249 respondents in one of Nigeria's 36 States. Therefore, one limitation of this study is the small sample size. There is the need to conduct a similar study that will involve more than one state in Nigeria and adult children who are not prison inmates. Another limitation of this study is the cross-sectional nature of the data which does not permit inference of causality. The results only reflect the conditions as at the time of the survey. Despite these limitations, this study provides useful insight into the relationship between mother's marital status and involvement in crime against property and persons, and victimless crime, which will be useful to guide programme and policies to curb crime in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The relationship between mother's marital status and the type of crime committed by an adult male child has been demonstrated in this study. There is the need to pay attention to mother's marital status in efforts to curb the different types of crime in Nigeria. Also, expedient is the need for empowerment interventions that target women to strengthen the welfare of children in both two-





parent and single mother households, and a functional an institutionalised mechanism to enforce the involvement of divorced and separated fathers in the welfare of their children.

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Authors' Profile

Lorretta Favour Chizomam Ntoimo is a Sociologist/Demographer. She obtained her PhD in 2012 at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. She was a Fogarty International Centre/University Research Centre postdoctoral fellow at the Demography and Population Studies Programme, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa in 2014. Currently, she is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Demography and Social Statistics, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria. Dr Ntoimo is a highly motivated and result-oriented researcher whose goal is to contribute to family demography, singlehood research, maternal, child and adolescent health and population health in Africa.

Elwange Charlestine Bob holds Master of Arts degree in Demography. He is a lecturer at Kyambogo University, Uganda, in the Department of Sociology and Social Administration where he teaches first, second and third year students offering Demography and Reproductive Health. He also teaches Basic Demographic Methods, Basic Statistics, Population and Health, Household and Family Demography.

Babatunde M. Gbadebo is a Medical Demographer and public health scientist with broad research interests in demography and medical health research. He obtained his BSc, MSc and PhD degrees in Demography and Social, Statistics from the Department of Demography and Social Statistics, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Dr Gbadebo has over ten years of teaching and research experience as an applied statistician and medical demographer.

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Ntoimo Favour Chukwunonyerem is a fourth year Law student in the Faculty of Law, Enugu Campus, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria. She has a strong interest in family law, criminal law and arbitration. She has participated in several volunteer capacities as an assistant in family and crime research

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