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Parental Socio-Economic Status and Child Abuse Among Teenagers in Public Secondary School in Okporo in Obio-Akpor LGA Area, Rivers State

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ABSTRACT: Child abuse remains a significant social and developmental concern, with parental socio-economic circumstances potentially influencing children's exposure to neglect, physical, emotional and other forms of maltreatment. This study examined the relationship between parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo, Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled *Parental Socio-Economic Status and Child Abuse Questionnaire (PSESCAQ)*. The study used 247 valid responses for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the responses, while Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient was employed to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed significant relationships between parental socio-economic status and child abuse across the three socio-economic categories examined. High parental socio-economic status showed a significant positive relationship with child abuse ($r_s = .639, p < .001$), while average parental socio-economic status also demonstrated a significant positive relationship ($r_s = .348, p < .001$). The strongest relationship was observed between low parental socio-economic status and child abuse ($r_s = .919, p < .001$). The study concludes that parental socio-economic status is significantly associated with child abuse among teenagers, although the occurrence of abuse may also involve other family and social factors. The study recommends strengthened parental support programmes, positive parenting education, school-based child-protection mechanisms and community interventions aimed at preventing child abuse across socio-economic groups.

KEYWORDS: Parental socio-economic status, Child abuse, Teenagers, Adolescents, Public secondary schools, Rivers State, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Child abuse remains a major social and public health concern worldwide, with serious consequences for children's physical, psychological, emotional and social development. It encompasses acts or omissions that harm or threaten the well-being of children, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence, and various forms of exploitation. Although child abuse occurs across

social and economic groups, children in disadvantaged family and community environments may face heightened risks because of poverty, family stress, inadequate resources and limited access to support services.

In Nigeria, child abuse and neglect remain significant concerns despite legal and institutional efforts to protect children. UNICEF reports that a substantial proportion of Nigerian children

experience some form of violence, including physical, emotional and sexual violence. Such experiences can have lasting effects on children's educational participation, psychological well-being, social adjustment and future development. Among adolescents, exposure to abuse may be particularly damaging because this period involves substantial physical, emotional and social changes and the development of identity and independence.

One important factor associated with the occurrence of child abuse is parental socio-economic status (SES). Socio-economic status generally reflects a family's access to material and social resources and is commonly assessed through indicators such as parental income, education and occupation (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Families with limited economic resources may experience conditions such as unemployment, financial insecurity, overcrowding and persistent household stress, which can increase parental pressure and potentially contribute to dysfunctional parenting practices. Poverty has consequently been identified as an important predictor of child abuse and neglect (Ondersma, 2002).

The relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and child abuse is, however, complex. Low parental income does not automatically result in abusive behaviour; rather, economic hardship may interact with other factors, including parental education, family structure, psychological stress, substance use, domestic conflict and the availability of social support. Melki et al. (2004), for example, linked low socio-economic status with domestic overcrowding and heightened psychological stress among children and families. Similarly, Chen and Paterson (2006) observed that children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds may experience greater exposure to chronic stress and adverse childhood experiences. These conditions can increase children's vulnerability to physical, sexual and emotional abuse as well as neglect.

Parental education is another important component of socio-economic status. Education can influence parenting knowledge, attitudes, problem-solving abilities and awareness of children's developmental and emotional needs. Parents with greater educational opportunities may have better access to information and social resources that support positive parenting, whereas limited educational attainment may constrain access to such resources.

In addition, parental occupation and income determine, to some extent, the material conditions within which children are raised, including access to food, healthcare, housing and education. Thus, socio-economic disadvantage may affect child welfare both directly through material deprivation and indirectly through increased family stress.

The consequences of child abuse extend beyond immediate physical injuries. Children who experience abuse or neglect may develop emotional and behavioural difficulties, poor academic outcomes, psychological distress and problems with social relationships. These consequences can persist into adulthood, making child protection not only a family responsibility but also an important educational and societal concern. Schools therefore represent an important setting for identifying and responding to children who may be experiencing abuse, particularly where signs of abuse are not easily detected within the home.

Despite existing laws and child-protection initiatives in Nigeria, the persistence of child abuse suggests that legal measures alone may not adequately address the social and economic conditions associated with the problem. There is therefore a need for context-specific studies examining factors that may contribute to child abuse among school-age children. Understanding the role of parental socio-economic status is particularly important because it may provide evidence for targeted family-support, child-protection and school-based interventions.

Against this background, this study examines the relationship between parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo, Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. The study is expected to contribute to a better understanding of how parental socio-economic circumstances may be associated with the experiences of abuse among adolescents and provide evidence for interventions aimed at improving child protection and welfare.

Statement of the Problem

Child abuse remains a serious threat to the healthy development, education and well-being of adolescents despite national and international efforts to protect children from violence, neglect and exploitation. Although children have a recognized right to protection from physical and psychological harm, abusive practices continue to

occur within families and other caregiving environments. In some Nigerian communities, certain forms of physical punishment, deprivation and harsh treatment may be regarded as acceptable disciplinary practices, making some cases of abuse difficult to identify and address.

The persistence of child abuse raises questions about the family and socio-economic conditions that may contribute to adolescents' vulnerability. Parental socio-economic status, reflected particularly in income, educational attainment and occupation, may shape the material resources available to families and influence parenting practices. Economic hardship, unemployment, inadequate housing and family stress may increase pressures within households and potentially heighten the risk of abusive or neglectful practices. However, socio-economic disadvantage alone may not fully explain the occurrence of child abuse, as family and social factors may also influence parenting behaviour.

Despite existing child-protection measures in Nigeria, there remains a need for empirical evidence on the extent to which parental socio-economic circumstances are associated with child abuse among adolescents in specific local contexts. This is particularly relevant in public secondary schools, where teachers may encounter behavioural, emotional and academic indicators associated with abuse but may have limited evidence concerning its underlying family-related factors.

The problem addressed by this study, therefore, is the insufficient context-specific understanding of the relationship between parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo, Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. The study consequently seeks to determine whether and to what extent parental socio-economic status is associated with the incidence of child abuse among teenagers in the study area.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study examined the relationship between parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo, Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. examine the relationship between high parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers;

2. assess the relationship between average parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers; and
3. determine the relationship between low parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers.

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between high parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between average parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between low parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored primarily on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and supported by the Frustration-Aggression Theory. Ecological Systems Theory explains child development as the product of interactions between the child and multiple environmental systems, ranging from the immediate family and school environment to broader social, cultural and economic structures. In relation to child abuse, the family constitutes the immediate environment in which parental socio-economic circumstances can influence parenting practices and children's experiences.

At the microsystem level, parental income, employment conditions and family relationships may directly affect the child's welfare. Economic difficulties can create household stress and may contribute to harsh discipline, neglect or other forms of maltreatment. At the mesosystem level, interactions between the home, school and other social institutions may influence the identification and management of abuse. Broader economic and social conditions constitute the exosystem, while cultural beliefs concerning discipline and child-rearing operate within the macrosystem. The chronosystem further recognizes that prolonged poverty, family instability and intergenerational

patterns of maltreatment may influence children's experiences over time.

The Frustration–Aggression Theory provides a complementary explanation of how socio-economic hardship may contribute to abusive parenting. The theory proposes that frustration resulting from blocked goals or unmet needs can generate anger and aggression. Applied to the family context, persistent financial difficulties, unemployment and inability to meet basic household needs may increase parental frustration and stress. Children, being relatively vulnerable members of the household, may become targets of aggression expressed through shouting, harsh punishment, physical violence or emotional withdrawal. The theory therefore suggests that economic hardship may indirectly increase the risk of child abuse through parental frustration and difficulties in managing stress.

Concept of Child Abuse

Child abuse refers broadly to acts of commission or omission by parents, caregivers or other responsible adults that cause, or have the potential to cause, physical, emotional, psychological or developmental harm to a child. The literature identifies physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect as major forms of child maltreatment, with child exploitation also recognized as an important dimension.

Physical abuse involves the infliction of non-accidental bodily injury, including excessive or inappropriate physical punishment. Emotional abuse involves behaviours or omissions that damage a child's psychological well-being, self-worth or emotional development. Sexual abuse involves the use of a child for sexual purposes, while neglect occurs when parents or caregivers fail to provide essential needs such as food, shelter, education, supervision, healthcare and emotional support. Child exploitation may involve the use of children for labour or other activities that compromise their welfare and educational development.

Child abuse can have consequences across several dimensions of adolescent development, including physical health, psychological well-being, learning, behaviour and social relationships. The reviewed literature associates maltreatment with learning difficulties, poor academic achievement, behavioural problems, depression, anxiety,

substance abuse, aggression and other adverse outcomes.

Parental Socio-Economic Status and Child Abuse

Parental socio-economic status is an important family-level factor that may shape children's living conditions and exposure to risk. It is generally reflected in indicators such as parental income, occupation and educational attainment. The literature reviewed in this study suggests that low socio-economic circumstances may expose families to poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing and persistent financial stress. These conditions may increase parental frustration and reduce the capacity of parents to provide adequate material and emotional support.

The relationship, however, should not be interpreted as implying that poverty automatically produces abusive parenting. Rather, socio-economic hardship may interact with other family and social factors to increase vulnerability to abuse and neglect. The ecological perspective is therefore useful because it recognizes that child maltreatment emerges from interactions among family conditions, community resources, cultural practices and broader socio-economic circumstances.

Empirical Review

The empirical studies reviewed provide evidence of an association between parental socio-economic conditions and child abuse. Okojie (2019) reported that students from low-income families were more likely to experience physical and emotional abuse, attributing the pattern partly to economic hardship and harsh disciplinary practices. Eze and Uche (2021) similarly identified parental unemployment, poverty and low educational attainment as important factors associated with child neglect and maltreatment in southeastern Nigeria. Adebayo and Musa (2020) also reported a significant positive relationship between low socio-economic status and parental physical and verbal aggression.

Evidence from Rivers State is particularly relevant to the present study. Okafor (2022) reported that parental educational level, occupation and income were significant determinants of children's experiences at home, with teenagers from low socio-economic backgrounds reporting greater emotional neglect, physical punishment and inadequate parental attention.

Earlier Nigerian evidence also demonstrates the broader prevalence and consequences of violence against children. A UNICEF/Federal Ministry of Education assessment involving learners, teachers and head teachers across selected Nigerian states found a high level of violence against children and recommended stronger school counselling services, violence-prevention policies and collaboration between schools, government agencies and civil society organizations.

Summary of Literature and Research Gap

The reviewed literature indicates that child abuse is a multidimensional problem influenced by family, economic, cultural and social conditions. Theoretical perspectives suggest that parental socio-economic circumstances can influence child abuse directly through material deprivation and indirectly through household stress and frustration. Empirical evidence reviewed also generally associates poverty, unemployment and limited parental education with increased exposure to physical, emotional and neglectful forms of child maltreatment.

However, much of the reviewed evidence is drawn from broader geographical populations, making it necessary to examine the relationship within specific local contexts. There is limited evidence in the reviewed literature focusing specifically on teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo, Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, and on how different levels of parental socio-economic status—high, average and low—relate to child abuse. The present study therefore seeks to address this contextual gap by examining the relationship between parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine the relationship between parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo, Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to obtain information directly from respondents through a structured questionnaire and statistically examine the relationship between the study variables.

Area and Population of the Study

The study was conducted in Community Secondary School, Okporo, located along Okporo Road in Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. The school is a co-educational public secondary institution comprising junior and senior secondary sections and serves students from communities including Rumuodara, Eliohani and Mgbesilaru.

The study population comprised 247 respondents drawn from the identified communities in Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

The original study reported the use of the Taro Yamane formula to determine the sample size. It reported a sample size of 303 respondents from a population of 247. However, this calculation requires verification because the reported sample exceeds the stated population. The study subsequently reported that 303 questionnaires were distributed, while 247 completed copies were retrieved and used for analysis.

Instrument for Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through a structured questionnaire titled Parental Socio-Economic Status and Child Abuse Questionnaire (PSESCAQ), developed by the researcher. The questionnaire comprised demographic items and statements measuring parental socio-economic status and child abuse. Responses to the substantive items were obtained using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (SA) to Strongly Disagree (SD). Secondary information was obtained from relevant books, journals and periodicals.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The questionnaire was subjected to face and content validation. The items were reviewed by the research supervisor and lecturers with relevant expertise in measurement and evaluation, and their observations were used to modify the instrument.

Reliability was established using the test-retest method. The instrument was administered twice, with a two-week interval, to respondents outside the study area. The reported test-retest coefficients were 0.76 for parental socio-economic status and 0.81 for child abuse, indicating satisfactory consistency of the instrument.

Study Variable	Number of Items	Test-Retest Coefficient
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Parental Socio-Economic Status	5	0.76
Child Abuse	6	0.81

Source: Survey data, 2025.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were administered personally by the researcher with the assistance of three trained research assistants. The purpose of the study was explained to the respondents, and the completed questionnaires were retrieved after administration.

Table 1. Descriptive Results by Parental Socio-Economic Status

Parental SES	Indicator	Mean	SD
High	Abuse likelihood	3.79	0.892
	Provision of basic needs	3.83	0.967
	Perception of child maltreatment	3.49	1.096
Average	Neglect of basic needs	3.70	0.950
	Parental discipline/emotional well-being	3.80	1.575
	Emotional/physical abuse	3.47	1.085
Low	Financial strain/neglect	3.84	1.003
	Financial hardship/physical or verbal abuse	3.85	1.552
	Child labour/neglect	3.81	1.015

Note. $N = 247$. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale. Source: SPSS 27.

Table 2. Spearman's Correlation Between Parental SES and Child Abuse

Hypothesis	Parental SES	r_s	p	N	Decision
H ₀₁	High	.639	<.001	247	Reject H ₀
H ₀₂	Average	.348	<.001	247	Reject H ₀
H ₀₃	Low	.919	<.001	247	Reject H ₀

Note. r_s = Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient. All correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). Source: SPSS 27.

Interpretation

The descriptive results showed mean scores ranging from 3.47 to 3.85 across the three parental socio-economic categories, indicating general agreement with statements relating socio-economic conditions to child abuse and neglect. The strongest descriptive responses were observed among the low-SES indicators, particularly financial hardship and physical/verbal abuse ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.552$) and financial strain and neglect ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.003$). Spearman's correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between child abuse and high

The original study reported that 303 questionnaires were distributed and 247 completed copies were retrieved and used for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS Version 27. Descriptive statistics, particularly percentages, were used to summarize responses to the research questions, while Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient was used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance.

SES ($r_s = .639$, $p < .001$), average SES ($r_s = .348$, $p < .001$), and low SES ($r_s = .919$, $p < .001$). Thus, all three null hypotheses were rejected. The strongest association was observed for low parental SES, followed by high and average SES.

Results and Findings

A total of 247 valid responses were used for the analysis. The findings indicate that parental socio-economic status was significantly associated with child abuse among teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo, Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State.

For high parental socio-economic status, the descriptive results showed mean scores of 3.79, 3.83 and 3.49 for items relating to the likelihood of

abuse, provision for children's basic needs, and perceptions of child maltreatment, respectively. These results generally indicated agreement that socio-economic conditions were related to child welfare and experiences of abuse.

For average parental socio-economic status, the mean scores were 3.70 for neglect of basic needs, 3.80 for parental discipline and children's emotional well-being, and 3.47 for the occurrence of emotional and physical abuse. The findings indicate that abuse and neglect were still present among families with average socio-economic status, although the observed relationship was less pronounced than that associated with low socio-economic status.

For low parental socio-economic status, the mean scores were 3.84 for financial strain and neglect, 3.85 for financial hardship and physical or verbal abuse, and 3.81 for child labour or neglect. These relatively high mean scores indicate a strong perceived association between low socio-economic circumstances and different forms of child abuse and neglect.

Hypothesis Testing

Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to test the three hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance.

The first hypothesis examined the relationship between high parental socio-economic status and child abuse. The analysis produced a significant positive correlation, $r_s = .639$, $p < .001$, $n = 247$, indicating a statistically significant relationship between high socio-economic status and child abuse. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected.

The second hypothesis examined the relationship between average parental socio-economic status and child abuse. The result showed a statistically significant positive relationship, $r_s = .348$, $p < .001$, $n = 247$. Although the relationship was weaker than those observed for high and low socio-economic status, it remained statistically significant. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected.

The third hypothesis examined the relationship between low parental socio-economic status and child abuse. The analysis revealed a very strong positive correlation, $r_s = .919$, $p < .001$, $n = 247$, indicating a statistically significant relationship between low socio-economic status and child abuse. The null hypothesis was rejected.

Overall, the findings demonstrate statistically significant relationships between all three levels of parental socio-economic status and child abuse among teenagers in the study area. The strongest relationship was observed for low socio-economic status ($r_s = .919$), followed by high socio-economic status ($r_s = .639$) and average socio-economic status ($r_s = .348$).

Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrate that parental socio-economic status is significantly associated with child abuse among teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo, Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. The results showed significant relationships across high, average and low socio-economic status, although the strength of the relationships differed considerably.

The finding on high parental socio-economic status revealed a strong and statistically significant relationship with child abuse ($r_s = .639$, $p < .001$). The original study suggests that higher socio-economic status may be associated with greater access to resources but may also involve factors such as parental workload, reduced supervision and competing demands. The finding therefore indicates that child abuse is not necessarily confined to economically disadvantaged families and may occur across socio-economic groups.

The finding concerning average parental socio-economic status showed a weaker but statistically significant relationship with child abuse ($r_s = .348$, $p < .001$). The original findings suggest that families within this category may have sufficient resources to meet some basic needs but may still experience financial and family pressures that contribute to neglect or emotional and physical abuse. The weaker association compared with low socio-economic status suggests that parental socio-economic circumstances may interact with other factors in shaping children's experiences.

The strongest finding concerned low parental socio-economic status, which demonstrated a very strong and statistically significant relationship with child abuse ($r_s = .919$, $p < .001$). The descriptive results also showed relatively high mean scores for financial strain and neglect (3.84), financial hardship and physical or verbal abuse (3.85), and child labour or neglect (3.81). These findings suggest that economic hardship may be associated

particularly strongly with neglect, physical punishment and other forms of maltreatment.

The findings are consistent with the theoretical position underpinning the study. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective emphasizes that children's development is influenced by conditions within the family and the wider socio-economic environment. Financial instability and family stress may therefore influence parenting practices and children's exposure to abuse. The findings also correspond with the literature cited in the original study, which associates poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, food insecurity and parental frustration with increased vulnerability to child maltreatment.

Overall, the findings suggest that socio-economic status is an important factor associated with child abuse in the study area. However, the results also indicate that child abuse should not be understood solely as a consequence of poverty, since significant relationships were observed across all three socio-economic categories. Family stress, parental workload, supervision, social support and other contextual factors may also contribute to the occurrence of abuse.

Conclusion

The study concludes that parental socio-economic status is significantly associated with child abuse among teenagers in public secondary schools in Okporo, Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. Significant relationships were observed across high, average and low socio-economic status, with the strongest association occurring among families classified as having low socio-economic status.

The findings particularly suggest that financial hardship may increase teenagers' vulnerability to neglect, physical punishment, emotional abuse and other forms of maltreatment. At the same time, the significant relationship observed among higher and average socio-economic groups indicates that child abuse is a multidimensional problem that can occur across socio-economic categories.

The study therefore concludes that reducing child abuse requires attention not only to parental economic conditions but also to family stress, parenting practices, supervision and access to social support. Strengthening economic and family-support mechanisms, together with effective child-protection and parental education programmes, may

contribute to reducing the incidence of child abuse among teenagers in the study area.

Recommendations and Implications

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

1. **Strengthen parental economic-support programmes:** Government and relevant agencies should develop programmes that support economically disadvantaged families through employment opportunities, skills acquisition, social welfare interventions and other measures capable of reducing financial pressures associated with child neglect and abuse.
2. **Promote positive parenting practices:** Parents across all socio-economic groups should be provided with parenting education on non-violent discipline, effective communication, emotional support and appropriate supervision of teenagers.
3. **Strengthen school-based child-protection mechanisms:** Public secondary schools should establish or strengthen counselling and child-protection structures through which students can safely report abuse and receive appropriate psychological and social support.
4. **Improve identification and referral of abuse cases:** Teachers, counsellors and school administrators should receive appropriate training to recognize indicators of physical, emotional and neglect-related abuse and establish effective referral mechanisms with relevant child-protection authorities.
5. **Increase community awareness:** Community leaders, parents and other stakeholders in Okporo and surrounding communities should be sensitized to the different forms and consequences of child abuse, particularly practices that may be perceived as acceptable discipline but constitute harmful treatment.
6. **Adopt a multidimensional intervention approach:** Since significant relationships were observed across high, average and low socio-economic groups, interventions should not focus exclusively on poor families. Child-protection programmes should also address parental stress, supervision, family relationships, parenting practices and access to social support.

Implications of the Findings

The findings have important implications for parents, schools, government agencies and child-protection stakeholders. For parents, the findings highlight the importance of providing adequate care and adopting non-violent approaches to discipline regardless of socio-economic position. For schools, the findings underscore the need for effective counselling and child-protection systems capable of identifying students experiencing abuse. For policymakers, the strong relationship observed between low socio-economic status and child abuse points to the importance of poverty-reduction and family-support interventions. More broadly, the significant relationships across the different socio-economic categories suggest that child abuse should be addressed as a multidimensional social problem rather than as an issue attributable solely to poverty.

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