

Causes of High Out-of-School Children in Northern Nigeria and Its Implications for Present and Future: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study investigates the causes contributing to the high number of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Northern Nigeria and explores the present and future implications of this persistent challenge. Drawing on stakeholder perspectives from government officials, community leaders, and parents, the research highlights key causes such as poverty, insecurity, cultural beliefs, gender disparity, and policy gaps. Using a qualitative methodology, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews in Borno, Niger, and Kano States and analysed through thematic content analysis. The study found that while stakeholders generally agree on the critical barriers to education, their perspectives vary in terms of priority and proposed solutions. The findings underscore the need for a collaborative, culturally responsive, and multi-sectoral approach to effectively address the out-of-school crisis in the region. Recommendations include increasing education funding, expanding school feeding programs, integrating Islamic and Western education, enhancing community sensitisation, and improving gender-sensitive support mechanisms.

Keywords: Out-of-School Children, Education Funding, Socio-Economic Factors, Northern Nigeria.

Introduction

Out-of-school children (OOSC) are defined as children aged 5–17 who are not enrolled in formal education institutions. In Nigeria, the issue of OOSC is a critical challenge, with an alarming 10.5 million children, accounting for approximately 15% of the global total, not attending school, one of the highest rates worldwide. Of these, an estimated 7.6 million are girls, with the majority concentrated in the northern states. For instance, Kano State alone has approximately 989,234 children out of school (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2023).

This persistent crisis not only undermines Nigeria's national development goals but also violates the fundamental right to education. The phenomenon of OOSC in Northern Nigeria is deeply rooted in a complex array of historical, cultural, socio-economic, and political factors. The region faces a combination of poverty, insecurity, religious conservatism, and inadequate educational infrastructure—issues that collectively hinder school attendance, particularly among girls. The situation is compounded by the disruption of educational

systems due to armed conflicts and the prevalence of traditional educational practices, such as the Almajiri system, which often operates outside formal education structures.

Addressing the issue of OOSC requires a nuanced understanding of these interconnected challenges from multiple stakeholder perspectives. By identifying the underlying causes and examining the roles of parents, communities, local governments, and educational authorities, this study aims to inform the design of inclusive and sustainable educational interventions that address the unique needs of the region and contribute to improving school attendance.

Statement of the Problem

Despite multiple government and international interventions, the number of out-of-school children in Northern Nigeria remains alarmingly high. Contributing factors are multifaceted, ranging from poverty, insecurity, and cultural beliefs to inadequate infrastructure and weak policy implementation. While policies like the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act (2004) aim to provide free and compulsory education for all Nigerian children, actual implementation has not significantly reduced the OOSC rate in Northern Nigeria. Many children continue to lack access to functional schools, qualified teachers, and learning materials. Furthermore, the misalignment between Western education and traditional belief systems, particularly the Almajiri model, contributes to low enrolment and high dropout rates. There is a need for empirical studies that integrate government, community, and parental perspectives to understand the root causes and long-term implications of the OOSC crisis.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the impartial causes of the high number of out-of-school children in Northern Nigeria.
2. To examine the current strategies, programs, and stakeholder initiatives aimed at addressing the out-of-school children (OOSC) crisis in Northern Nigeria.
3. To investigate the present and future implications of the out-of-school children crisis in the region.

Research Questions

1. What are the main impartial causes of the high number of out-of-school children in Northern Nigeria?
2. What efforts have been implemented by the government, NGOs, and community stakeholders to reduce the number of out-of-school children in Northern Nigeria, and how effective are these interventions?
3. What are the present and future implications of having a large population of out-of-school children in the region?

Review of Related Literature

Causes of the High Number of Out-of-School Children

A range of factors contributes to Nigeria's high out-of-school children (OOSC) population, especially in the northern region. According to UNICEF (2023) and UNESCO (2023), socio-economic deprivation and widespread insecurity, particularly insurgency and banditry in Borno, Yobe, and Zamfara States, remain primary barriers to school attendance. Parents are often reluctant to invest in education due to fears for their children's safety (Olanrewaju, Omotoso, & Alabi, 2021; Uba & Ibrahim, 2022).

Cultural practices, including early marriage and the relegation of girls to domestic roles, lead to disproportionately high dropout rates among girls (Akinyele, 2021). Systemic challenges as corruption, weak policy implementation, and poor data use in education planning, further exacerbate the issue (Mustapha, 2020; Okonkwo, 2022). Many children engage in street trading, farming, or household labour to support family income, deprioritising education (UNESCO, 2022).

Inadequate school infrastructure, teacher shortages, and lack of learning materials particularly affect rural and conflict-impacted areas (UBEC, 2020; Adeoye & Olaniyan, 2019). Deeply rooted patriarchal norms and widespread adult illiteracy discourage formal education, especially when perceived as incompatible with local traditions (Aliyu & Abubakar, 2018). Natural disasters like the 2022 floods in Jigawa, which destroyed over 115 schools and affected more than 92,000 children, further disrupt learning (Mustapha, 2020).

Remedial Efforts and Interventions

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004 guarantees free and compulsory education for children aged 6–15, but its implementation has been hindered by weak infrastructure and governance (FME, 2018; Uwaifo, 2020). Complementary initiatives such as the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) have achieved modest success in boosting enrolment in states like Kano, Katsina, and Jigawa (World Bank, 2020).

The Almajiri integration policy, which aims to combine Islamic and Western education, has seen limited success due to poor facility maintenance and weak community engagement (Baba & Abubakar, 2019). Donor-funded initiatives like EiE, LEARN, and PEACE have established Accelerated Learning Centres (ALCs), focusing on re-engaging OOSC, especially girls, and building teacher capacity. Over 1.5 million girls have returned to school in northern states through such programs (UNICEF, 2023).

Conditional Cash Transfers in Borno and Yobe have improved school attendance by incentivising parents whose children maintain at least 70% attendance (Israel & Napoleon, 2025). Religious and community leaders have also played a crucial role in promoting school enrolment, especially for girls (Hamid & Aisha, 2021). School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs), when functional, enhance accountability and community ownership (GPE, 2022).

Current Implications

Dropping out of school negatively affects students' self-esteem, health, and ability to acquire life skills (Ogunode, Jegede & Ajape, 2021). Dropouts are more prone to risky behaviours, such as substance abuse, early pregnancy, and criminal activity, and are more likely to rely on public assistance (Gregory, 2020; Belfield & Levin, 2007).

Northern states lag behind national educational averages. For instance, Kano reports just 9.6% reading proficiency and 11.2% numeracy, while Jigawa records only 2% and less than 1%, compared to national averages of 26% and 25%, respectively (FME, 2022). Long-term effects include labour shortages in key sectors and increased reliance on humanitarian support (Ressa & Andrews, 2022; Israel & Napoleon, 2025).

Future Implications

Out-of-school youth face limited employment prospects and poor life outcomes. Without basic education, they struggle to meet the demands of a technologically advanced society and are more likely to suffer adverse health and economic conditions (Jacob, Chinwuba & Ayoko, 2022).

Persistently low educational attainment undermines national development, GDP growth, and regional equity (Ndanusa, Abayomi & Harada, 2021). It also fosters vulnerability to extremist ideologies, escalating insecurity (Raliyat, Umma & Aisha, 2022). Nigeria risks failing to meet SDG 4—Quality Education for All. As UNICEF (2023) notes, only one in four Nigerian children aged 7–14 can read and understand a simple sentence or solve basic arithmetic problems.

Research Gap

Despite numerous government policies and international interventions to reduce out-of-school children (OOSC) in Northern Nigeria, the issue persists, especially in conflict-affected and rural areas. Most existing studies rely on quantitative data and overlook the lived experiences of local stakeholders like parents, community leaders, and frontline officials. They often generalise the causes of school dropout without addressing the unique socio-cultural, economic, gender, and security-related factors specific to the region. Additionally, limited attention has been given to the roles of traditional leadership and community-led efforts in shaping access to education.

This study fills that gap using a qualitative, stakeholder-centred approach that captures firsthand perspectives across Northern states. By bridging top-down policy and bottom-up lived realities, the study offers practical, culturally grounded recommendations for improving education access in Northern Nigeria.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative, phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of stakeholders involved in the issue of out-of-school children (OOSC) in

Northern Nigeria. The design allowed for in-depth, contextual insights into the causes, consequences, and responses to the problem.

The population included parents of OOSC, community leaders, and education officials such as Executive Chairmen of State Basic Education Boards and Local Government Education Secretaries. Through purposive sampling, 72 participants were selected from six affected states (Borno, Bauchi, Kano, Zamfara, Niger, and Kogi) based on their direct experience and relevance to the study's focus.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide, developed in alignment with the study's objectives. The tool was validated by experts and piloted with a small sample to refine clarity and flow. Interviews were conducted in Hausa and English, recorded, and transcribed. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, was used to analyse the data. Key themes such as poverty, insecurity, and cultural beliefs were identified, defined, and illustrated using direct quotations from participants to ensure credibility and transparency.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria were followed, and the study's trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility was established through data triangulation (parents, community leaders, SUBEB chairmen), member checking, prolonged field engagement, and the use of direct participant quotations. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail, engaging in peer debriefing, and documenting all research procedures and decisions. Confirmability was addressed using multiple reviews of transcripts and themes, and secure, organised data storage to ensure findings are shaped by participants rather than researcher bias. Transferability was promoted through rich, detailed descriptions of the research context, enabling others to judge the applicability of findings to similar conflict-affected or culturally similar settings.

Thematic saturation was achieved by the final stages of data analysis, indicating a robust capture of recurring patterns and insights. Ethical standards were rigorously upheld through the use of informed consent, confidentiality measures, and official approvals from relevant educational authorities in the participating states.

Summary of Findings

Thematic analysis of interview data from parents, government officials, and community leaders across Northern Nigeria reveals the multifaceted causes, existing interventions, and both present and future implications of the high rate of out-of-school children. Each key finding is supported by direct quotations from the respondents.

Table 1:

Data Theming Matrix Showing Coding Process and Theme Development

Raw Data (Quotes)	Open Codes	Axial Codes (Categories)	Themes	Minority Views
"Some children must work to support the family through street hawking or farm labour."	Child labour, Family income, Economic burden	Economic survival over education	Poverty as a driver of out-of-school children	One parent said, <i>"Even if education was fully free, some of us prefer our children to work."</i>
"Due to Boko Haram attacks and kidnappings, many schools have shut down. Parents are afraid to send their children, especially girls."	Insecurity, Fear, School closures	Conflict-induced dropout	Insecurity and school attendance	A community leader said, <i>"Some families returned from IDP camps but still don't trust the security in schools."</i>
"Some parents never went to school themselves. They don't see the value in formal education."	Parental illiteracy, Devaluation of education	Intergenerational education gap	Low parental awareness and literacy	One parent stated, <i>"I didn't go to school and I'm doing okay. So my child will learn a trade."</i>
"Yes, girls are more likely to stay at home. Some are married off early."	Gender bias, Early marriage	Cultural norms affecting girls' schooling	Gender-based educational exclusion	A minority of fathers argued, <i>"It's not bad if a girl is married early; at least she's protected."</i>
"We encourage parents during Friday prayers and community meetings to send their children to school."	Religious leader advocacy, Sensitisation	Community support for education	Role of community and religious leaders in education	Some leaders still said, <i>"Islamic education alone is enough for our children."</i>
"Government efforts like free education sound good, but there are hidden costs."	Hidden school costs, Policy gap	Policy implementation barrier	Challenges in education policy implementation	A few parents claimed, <i>"We pay for exams and uniforms even in free schools. It's worse than before."</i>
"These children are roaming the streets... involved in drugs, gangs, or begging."	Street exposure, Delinquency	Social consequences of school dropout	Social risks of out-of-school children	A chairman noted, <i>"Many of them are being used by politicians during elections."</i>
"If we continue this way, we'll have a generation without skills or jobs."	Unemployment, Future instability	National development risk	Long-term implications for national development	One government official said, <i>"This will hurt our economy more than we think."</i>

A data theming table shows the link between raw data, open codes, axial codes, and final themes. Most dominant themes were poverty, insecurity, gender inequality, and implementation gaps. Minority views highlight resistance or skepticism toward formal education, especially where economic or cultural values differ from national education priorities.

Results and Discussions

Causes of Out-of-School Children in Northern Nigeria

Findings reveal that poverty is the leading cause of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Northern Nigeria. Many families cannot afford basic education costs, pushing children into street hawking or farm labour. This aligns with Akpan & Iwu (2020) and UNICEF (2023), who stress that financial hardship undermines school attendance. Suggested solutions include school feeding and conditional cash transfers.

Insecurity, driven by Boko Haram and banditry, has displaced families and closed schools. Respondents cited fear of attacks as a deterrent, particularly for girls. This is consistent with Save the Children (2022) and UNESCO (2023), which advocate for safer learning environments.

Other contributing factors include poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, and weak policy implementation. Parents expressed frustration with broken promises under initiatives like UBE and NHGSFP, reflecting Adamu et al. (2024)'s findings on governance challenges.

Policy Responses and Remediation Efforts

Stakeholders reported mixed results from existing policies. While the UBE Act (2004) provides a legal framework for basic education, its implementation remains weak due to insecurity, funding delays, and poor monitoring (FME, 2018; Uwaifo, 2020).

The NHGSFP was praised for improving attendance, though coverage remains limited (World Bank, 2020). Newer initiatives such as Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) and digital attendance systems show promise in select areas. Parents welcomed cash incentives and NGO support for increasing enrolment—confirming findings by Save the Children (2021) and Ayoko (2022).

Community and religious leaders have promoted education through advocacy and cultural dialogue but noted exclusion from policy design. Their role is vital, as emphasized by Hamid & Aisha (2021) and UNESCO (2020). Reform efforts in Almajiri education were also acknowledged but criticized for past implementation gaps (Baba & Abubakar, 2019).

Present and Future Implications

Respondents highlighted current risks: child streetism, gang involvement, drug use, and political manipulation. These trends, supported by Uba & Ibrahim (2022) and UNESCO (2023), reflect how the OOSC crisis contributes to regional insecurity.

The economic implications are also dire. Stakeholders linked OOSC to youth unemployment, skill shortages, and low productivity—issues identified in Okonkwo (2022).

and ActionAid (2021). Community leaders described youth as “restless” and “disengaged,” indicating the social cost of educational neglect.

Long-Term Outlook

Looking ahead, participants warned of a generation lacking education, skills, and opportunity—fostering crime, poverty, and instability. These concerns mirror UNESCO (2020) and GPE (2022), which argue that education is central to sustainable development. Government officials emphasized the need for strategic investment in education, echoing DFID (2022) and Baba & Abubakar (2019). Community voices stressed that without urgent reform, rural areas will face deepened inequality and civic exclusion (Hamid & Aisha, 2021).

Summary and Conclusions

This study set out to explore the causes, consequences, and potential interventions for addressing the growing challenge of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Northern Nigeria through the lived experiences of parents, community leaders, and government officials. Drawing from rich qualitative data, the study achieved the following:

Identified the Root Causes of Out-of-School Children: The study revealed that poverty, insecurity, cultural norms, gender discrimination, and weak policy implementation are the primary drivers of school exclusion. Many parents cannot afford the hidden costs of education, while insecurity due to insurgency and communal violence discourages school attendance, especially for girls.

Examined the Implications of the OOSC Crisis: The findings highlighted that the high number of OOSC contributes to rising youth vulnerability, social unrest, poverty, and a lack of skilled labour. It threatens the long-term socio-economic development and security of the region, as idle and uneducated youth are at greater risk of exploitation, crime, and early marriage.

Explored Existing Interventions and Policy Responses: Despite government policies like the Universal Basic Education (UBE), school feeding programs, and conditional cash transfers, participants noted poor implementation, mismanagement, and insufficient community involvement as major barriers. NGOs and religious leaders were found to play a critical complementary role in supporting access to education.

Captured Community-Driven and Stakeholder-Informed Solutions: The study found that traditional and religious leaders, when engaged properly, can positively influence parental attitudes and promote school enrolment. Integrating formal education with religious instruction, addressing gender bias, and supporting grassroots-level monitoring are essential strategies to reduce school exclusion.

In conclusion, addressing the issue of out-of-school children in Northern Nigeria requires a multi-sectoral, culturally sensitive, and community-driven approach. Solutions must be tailored to local realities and supported by effective policy implementation, stronger community-government collaboration, and continuous advocacy. By amplifying

stakeholder voices, this study provides evidence-based insights that can inform more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable educational reforms.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

- i. **Strengthen Poverty-Responsive Educational Interventions:** Expand school feeding programs, provide learning materials, and implement targeted conditional cash transfers for vulnerable households.
- ii. **Promote Inclusive and Gender-Equitable Access to Education:** Implement gender-sensitive policies, scholarships, dignity kits, and enforce child protection laws to reduce early marriage and boost girls' school participation.
- iii. **Enhance Community Engagement and Ownership in Education:** Strengthen community-based school governance and support school management committees for improved accountability and attendance tracking.
- iv. **Improve School Safety and Security in Conflict-Affected Areas:** Implement Safe School measures, including fencing, security personnel, and trauma-informed support services for learners.
- v. **Partner with Religious and Traditional Leaders to Promote Formal Education:** Use religious platforms, sermons, and Qur'anic schools to integrate positive messaging on the importance of formal education.
- vi. **Strengthen Policy Implementation, Monitoring, and Transparency:** Enhance digital tracking of education funds, deploy qualified teachers to underserved areas, and ensure routine public reporting on program performance.

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