

Assessing the Relationships between Low Education and Abhorrent Behavior: The Case of At-Risk Youth Population in Liberia

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Abstract— The lack of or little intervention by the Government of Liberia (GoL) and its international partners in the At-risk youth situation in Liberia has exacerbated the rate of crime and other abhorrent behaviors in Liberia. National and international actors are baffled by little interest in rehabilitating the At-risk youth population considered a recipe for future instability and a threat to sustained peace in Liberia in particular and the West African region in general. The purpose of this mixed methodology study was to examine the relationship between low levels of education and abhorrent behavior. Qualitative and quantitative data, via semi-structured questionnaires and interviews, were collected from 321 participants within 10 counties in Liberia. The results of the standard linear regression analysis indicated the full model was statistically significant at $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.99$. The implication for positive social change is that the transformation of the youths into useful citizens via educational pursuit will minimize future threats to national and individual security and foster the way to peace and national development.

Keywords— Low Education, Abhorrent Behavior, Criminal Activities, At-Risk Youth Population.

I. INTRODUCTION

The term At-risk youths has been defined by different disciplines (psychologists, economists, medical practitioners, social workers, international organizations, and educators, among others) in varying ways and manners. For example, LeCroy and Anthony (2017) defined At-risk youths as the range of circumstances that place a core of young group at greater vulnerability to deviant behaviours such as substance abuse, school failure, juvenile delinquency, mental health disorders, depression, and anxiety, among others. Psychologists, international organizations, social workers, etc. classified At-risk youths as those who suffer trauma and/or emotional and adjustment problems over the years while economists and the business community have labelled At-risk youth as those that lack the requisite literacy and numeracy skills for employment and even succeed at places of employment if employed (McWhirter et al., 2017).

In Liberia, the Ministry of Youth and Sports (2014) placed At-risk youths into five categories namely: (a) youths who have dropped out of school and training institutions, (b) youths living in slums, city streets, high-risk and impoverished communities, (c) youths without opportunity to attend formal education, (d) single parent youth, and (e) physically challenged youths. However, many of the At-risk youths in Liberia are participants (including child soldiers) in the 14-year-long conflict in

Liberia. The International Labour Organization (2010) asserted that thousands of youths, with 10-30% female, took up arms during the civil conflict in Liberia voluntarily or involuntarily. The taking up of arms was presumed as a source of opportunity for the acquisition of wealth and power. However, at the end of the conflict, followed by the Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement (DDRR), most of the ex-combatants found themselves in similar or even lesser situations with a lack of opportunities for work or sourcing of income (UNDP, 2006). Given the lack of opportunities for employment and income, most of these ex-combatants began engaging in deviant and other abhorrent behaviour which have a devastating effect on the communities at large.

At-risk youths, sometimes referred to as disadvantaged youth, is a global problem that should seek the problem of national leaders, For example, in the United States, many federal and national foundations are providing a variety of publications on an array of at-risk youth issues including treatment and opportunities for funding (Winston et al., 2017). Edward and Rodak (2016) cited factors contributing to At-risk youth situations as living below the poverty line leading to the acquisition of little or no education. At-risk youth situation in Liberia is at an alarming rate in Liberia. Williams (2021) identified more than 47,000 At-risk youths in the 15 counties of Liberia. There are reports of more than 100,000 At-risk

youths in all of the 15 sub-division of the country. The At-risk youth situation in Liberia is further exacerbated by a very low level of education given the highest degree of poverty. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report ranked Liberia 175 out of 189 with an HDR value of 0.48 (UNDP 2020). This metric is 12% less than the average HDR of sub-Saharan Africa at 0.547. The expected year of school at 4.8 is 1 point below the average of sub-Saharan Africa at 5.8 (UNDP 2020).

Over the years, there has been a semblance of intervention by the government and other international organizations. Prominent among those interventions are the following:

- DDRR Phase I (2003-2004): Intervention to disarm, demobilize, rehabilitate, and reintegrate;
- DDRR Phase II (2008-2010): Intervention focused on providing skills training for 7000 ex-combatants;
- Reintegration and Employing High-Risk Youth in Liberia (2009-2011): Intervention to develop legal and sustainable livelihood for ex-combatants;
- Liberia Youth Employment Skills (YES – 2010-2013): Provision of technical vocational and education training (TVET);
- Liberia Youth Employment Program (LYEP- 2010 – 2013): Creating temporary jobs for the youth population;
- Youth Employment Project (YEP – 2013-2016): Temporary employment for 2,500 youths;
- Youth Opportunity Project (YOP – 2015-2022): Expand access to income opportunities for vulnerable youths in Liberia; and
- Youth Entrepreneurship and Employment Project (YEPP – 2016-2022): the creation of integrated and sustainable systems linking the education/vocational institutions with the market.

Despite these interventions, there remains an alarming rate of criminal activities and other abhorrent behaviour by the At-risks youth. The at-risk youth population in Liberia is getting more loosely organized and well-coordinated in raining havoc on Liberian society. For example, At-risk youths have formed "criminal barracks" where there are "General, Commanding Officers, etc". The "barracks" are where stolen items are taken in demand for ransom for retrieval. The leadership normally intervenes on behalf of At Risks youths when they are in trouble. The At-risk youths take commands from their leaders. Their organization is sometimes

referred to as an underground government and functions like a normal government with command structures.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The design and analyses of this research will be guided by these questions:

1. What is the relationship low education and criminal behaviour?
2. What are the factors contributing to abhorrent behaviours?

III. HYPOTHESES

- H_0 : There is no statistically significant relationship between low education and criminal behavior
- H_{11} : There is a statistically significant relationship between low education and criminal behavior

III. METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

The researcher adopted a mixed methodology approach for the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative results. The mixed methodology is relevant for this research because the data collected were both non-numeric (perceptive) and numeric (based on actual figures from enumeration). The assessment allowed for a future follow-up of some cohort of respondents that were randomly selected from a representative sample of the fifteen counties. Multi-level and mixed selection methods including purposive and stratified approaches were adopted for the selected counties and respondents. The purpose of these different levels and approaches to data collection was to gather high-level qualitative and quantitative data for the assessment.

During the data collection process, data were extracted from multiple sources including quantitative (desk review and other secondary sources) and qualitative approaches (key information interviews, focus group discussion, and participatory interviews). The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling for extracting relevant data that suit the purpose of the assignment. The purposive sampling targeted relevant stakeholders involved in managing the At-risk youths and the At-risk youth themselves. representative samples were selected from five regions as highlighted below: Region 1 – Montserrado; Region 2 – one county from amongst River Gee, Sinoe, Grand Gedeh, Grand Kru, and Maryland; Region 3 – one county from amongst Lofa, Nimba, and Bong; Region 4 – one county from amongst Margibi, Bassa and Rivercess; and Region 5 – one county from amongst Cape Mount, Bomi

and Gbarpolu. The selection of specific counties from regions 2 to 5 was based on the level of urbanization, population, culture, and trading activities.

Focus Group Discussions (FGD), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and participatory interviews were applied during the data collection process to collect qualitative data. Qualitative data are non-numeric data acquired through pre-defined Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice (KAP) survey questionnaires, semi-structured focus group discussions, facilitation guides open-ended,

and questionnaires. The qualitative methods included key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory interviews to gather perceptions, attitudes, and the rationale of choices and practices. Creative participatory techniques were embedded in the discussions to measure some of the indicators. For example, the pairwise ranking was used to understand preferences on how to access information about support and programs. Figure 1 displayed the number of persons interviewed by sex.

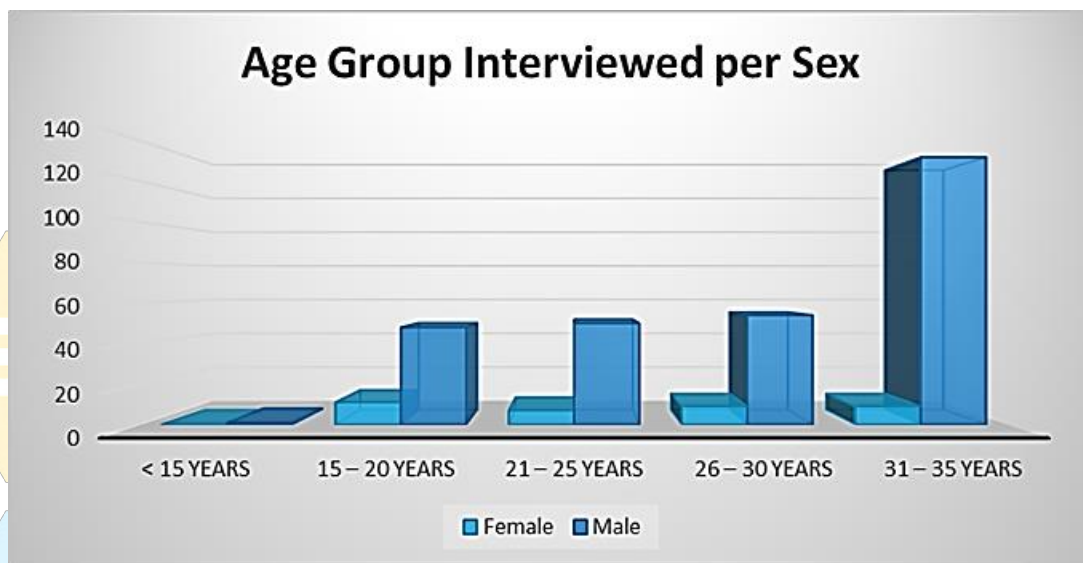


Fig. 1: Age Group Interviewed by Sex

According to the above data, most of the At-risk youth are between the ages of 31-35 which constitutes 44% of the total interviewed.

Quantitative data was based on secondary data and interviews with relevant personnel, government sources, and civil society organizations. Information was collected from relevant security agencies, civil society organizations, and the Government of Liberia (GoL) information on At-risk Youth and the At-risk Youth themselves. The researcher used voice recorders and handwritten notes by a notetaker working with a facilitator. Interviews via data recorders were transcribed and organized via thematic analysis.

Survey Design and Framework

The researcher designed data collection tools and also develop an electronic platform for data collection using tablets and ODK Collect (v1.28.4) entry and analysis. The ODK Collect (v1.28.4) which is an open-source Android application that replaces the paper-

based data collection tool will have inbuilt quality assurance features including GPS coordinates collection, auto-flag suspicious interviews based on duration, straight-lining or any custom business rules, and complete quality control operations. The second stage of selection involved the systemic sampling of clusters. "barracks" or centers and households at which youths could be found.

Instrument design was informed by survey objectives and information from the review of secondary literature including government and key stakeholders' reports. Tools were developed to collect information by selected counties/districts, sex, education level, and existing interventions/responses at cluster levels, centers, and disaggregated by urban and rural clusters. To ensure that the pre-defined KAP survey questionnaire, semi-structured focus group discussion, facilitation guide, and data collection manual can effectively produce good quality quantitative and qualitative data.

Training of Supervisors and Enumerators

The researcher worked with a team of experienced and qualified supervisors, enumerators, and both qualitative and quantitative researchers.

The team was selected after undergoing a vigorous and rigorous selection process. The team traveled with noise masks, hand sanitizer, disinfectants, and a thermometer to conduct routine COVID-19 prevention and symptom check.

During face-to-face training, facilities were equipped with COVID-19-compliant materials and protocols specifically masks, sanitizers as well as social distancing, and frequent hand washing at a time interval.

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IV RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Overview

A total of 47,917 comprising 8,223 females (17%) and 39,694 males (83%) of At-risk Youth were enumerated from the 15 counties in Liberia. Enumeration data were obtained from secondary sources including desk reviews and key informant interviews especially Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS) county coordinators, youth leaders, community members, Liberia National Police (LNP), Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), and other Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The majority of those interviewed and assessed intimated that up to 100,000 At-risk youth exists in the country. A summary of data is elaborated in Table 1.

Table 1: Total At-risk Youth Population per County

Total At-risk Youth Population per County					
No.	County	Female	Male	Total	
1	Nimba	712	1,242	1,954	
2	Grand Gedeh	256	664	920	
3	Margibi	1,705	2,309	4,014	
4	Gbarpolu	239	461	700	
5	Grand Bassa	153	586	712	
6	Bong	220	1,646	1,866	
7	River Gee	19	266	285	
8	Bomi	31	222	253	
9	Lofa	39	282	321	
10	River Cess	808	1,009	1,817	
11	Montserrado	3,319	28,550	31,869	
12	Maryland	60	282	342	
13	Grand Kru	375	1,138	1,513	
14	Grand Cape Mount	90	579	669	
15	Sinoe	197	458	655	
	TOTAL	8,223	39,694	47,890	
	TOTAL %	17%	83%	100%	

Descriptive Statistics

Demographics of those enumerated included:

- Age group: Below 15 (0%), 15-20 (18%), 21-25 (18%), 26-30 ((20%) and 31-35 (44%).
- Education: Elem (13%), Jr. High (32%), Senior High (36%), College (13%) and None (6%)
- Living Status: Self (49%), Friends (12%), Guardian (18%), Parents (18%) and Others (2%)

- Means of Survival: Petty Jobs (61%), Car Loading/Washing (9%), and Others (30%)
- Risky Behaviour: Addiction (10%), Criminal Activity (11%), Drug Use (58%), Substance Use (20%), and Others (2%)

Sexual Practice: Sex without Condoms (52%), Occasional use of Condoms (27%), and Not Sure (21%) 58% of the youths are in Junior and Senior High Schools, while 49% live by themselves in various

locations. Most of the At-risk Youth (61% are involved in petty trades including Pen Pen riding, KerKer riding, car loading, selling of different items, among others.

The majority (78%) are involved in the use of drug or substance abuse while the majority (52%) are involved in risky sexual behaviour. Figure 2 displayed the overall statistics of At-risk youths by age group, marital status, educational levels, living standards, means of survival, and sexual practices.

Table 2: At-risk youth's summary statistics.

AT-RISK YOUTH SUMMARY STATISTICS						
Category	Sub_Category	Female	Male	Total	% Female	% Male
Age Group	Below 15	0	1	1	0%	100%
	15-20	11	48	59	19%	81%
	21-25	7	50	57	12%	88%
	26-30	9	54	63	14%	86%
	31-35	9	132	141	11%	89%
	Total		36	285	321	
Marital Status	Single	22	173	195	11%	89%
	Single with Kids	12	105	117	10%	90%
	Married	0	4	4	0%	100%
	Divorced	2	2	4	50%	50%
	Others	0	1	1	0%	100%
	Total		36	285	321	15%
Educational Level	No Education	3	18	21	14%	86%
	Elementary (1-6)	5	36	41	12%	88%
	Junior High (7-9)	18	85	103	17%	83%
	High School (10-12)	8	106	114	7%	93%
	Community College (2 Years.)	0	9	9	0%	100%
	College (4 years)	0	15	15	0%	100%
	Vocational Education	2	8	10	20%	80%
	Trade School	0	8	8	0%	100%
Total		36	285	321	5%	95%
Living Status	Self	21	190	211	10%	90%
	Friend	2	9	11	18%	82%
	Guardian	7	26	33	21%	79%
	Parents	6	59	65	9%	91%
	Other	0	1	1	0%	100%
	Total		36	285	321	12%
Means of Survival	Petty Jobs	14	183	197	7%	93%
	Car loading or washing	0	28	28	0%	100%
	Others	22	74	96	23%	77%
	Total		36	285	321	11%
Risky Behavior	Addiction	9	22	31	29%	71%
	Criminal Activity	6	29	35	17%	83%
	Drug Use	16	170	186	9%	91%
	Substance Abuse	5	59	64	8%	92%
	Other	0	5	5	0%	100%

	Total	36	285	321	8%	92%
Sexual Practice	Sex without Condoms	18	148	166	11%	89%
	Occasion use of Condoms	11	77	88	13%	88%
	Not Sure	7	60	67	10%	90%
	Total	36	285	321	11%	89%

Inferential Statistics

Inferential statistics using SPSS showed a positive relationship between those will No education and those involved in Criminal activities at R=0.995. A further

analyses showed self-read and those involved in criminal activities at R=0.899, and those living with guardians and those involved in criminal activities at R=0.592. Table 3 displayed the model summary.

Table 3: Correlation between Youths with No Education and Involvement in Criminal Activities

Model Summary					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
1	.995a	.990	.989	12.37071	
a. Predictors: (Constant), College					

V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings

In light of the results and discussions below are the following findings:

- A total of 47,917 comprising 8,223 females (17%) and 39,694 males (83%) At-risk youths were enumerated from the 15 counties in Liberia;
- Data analysis showed that 67% (approximately 32,000) of the At-risk youths live in Montserrado (urban area), while 33% (approximately 17,000) live in the urban area;
- 36% of At-risks youths obtained a high school education while only 13% attended college;
- 78% of At-risks youths are involved in the use of drugs or substance abuse while the majority (52%) are involved in risky sexual behaviour.
- There exists a medium correlation between the county population and the At-risk Youth population per county at R=0.57;
- There exists a medium correlation between those with some levels of education (elementary, junior, senior, and college) and those involved in criminal activities with a Pearson correlation value of R=.428; and
- There exists a high positive relationship between those will No education and those involved in criminal activities at R2=0.990

CONCLUSION

In light of the challenges posed by the At-risk youth population in Liberia, and given the correlation between low levels of education and At-risks youth involvement in criminal or abhorrent behaviour, the need for further

assistance to reintegrate these youths cannot be over-emphasized. The Government of Liberia and the international community will need to gather the resources for different levels of interventions to transform these youths from their current states to become valuable citizens of their communities. This approach is also feasible for other post-conflict countries that are struggling with At-risk or disadvantaged youth. The continuous neglect by national and international actors is a recipe for disaster and is exemplified by the current wave of criminal activities, drug and substance abuse, and other forms of abhorrent behaviours.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the findings and conclusion, the researcher hereby recommends the following:

- Scheduling of a National Conference on At-risk youths in Liberia to bring together mainly "barrack" heads, commanding officers, and other indirect stakeholders to brainstorm on key risk and protector factors that would help minimize some of the key issues associated with At-risk youth in Liberia;
- Increase budget support to MoYS that would target youth employment, your empowerment, and other issues relating to youth, especially the At-risk youth;
- Government should increase consultations with donors and other national and international partners on valuable interventions that would help to minimize the security threats posed by At-risk youths in Liberia.
- National and international organizations involved in youth employment, empowerment, and development including UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP,

ILO, World Bank, AfDB, etc. should include an allocated percentage of their strategic program documents (Country Program Document, National Strategy, etc.) for At-risk youth in Liberia with focus on drug and alcohol rehabilitation, counselling centers, TVET, livelihood programs, access to credits, agriculture, safe homes, juvenile justice, pre-trial detention, among others.

- Development of a pilot project or program for rehabilitating At-risk Youths with a focus on containment, drug abuse eradication, and treatment;
- Development of a successor project or program that focuses on the reintegration of At-risk Youths with a focus on skills and various hands-on training including auto mechanic, electricity, carpentry, mason, plumbing, welding, driving (vehicle and motorbikes), soap making, tailoring, hairdressing, catering, auto-electricity, and computer literacy;
- Development of a successor reintegration program that would provide initial capital or opportunities for At-risk youths to implement skills and various hands-on training; and
- As part of the re-integration activities, ensure that At-risk youth are involved in Government projects and other types of casual labour.
- For the majority of the At-risk youths living in petty trading, the Government should design a small loan scheme for At-risk youths to upgrade their petty trading business.
- Any future interventions will have to be designed around the construction or renovation of safe homes and recruiting individuals that will participate to provide limited parental guidance.

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