



## ANALYSIS OF THE PREVALENCE OF YOUTH RESTIVENESS IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*The study critically examines the prevalence and determinants of youth restiveness in Nigeria through a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed. Anchored in relative deprivation, conflict and social disorganisation theories, the study addresses two principal research questions: the extent to which youth restiveness manifests across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, and the underlying structural, political and socio-economic drivers of this phenomenon. Employing rigorous database searches, supplemented by snowball sampling, the review synthesises empirical evidence on diverse expressions of youth unrest from banditry and insurgency in the North to urban cultism in the South-West and resource-centred militancy in the Niger Delta. The findings reveal that historical legacies of uneven development, systemic corruption, political exclusion and widespread unemployment interact to generate region-specific forms of restiveness. Theoretically, the paper demonstrates how perceived disparities between expectations and capabilities, institutional failures and community breakdown coalesce to precipitate youth agitation. It concludes that Nigerian youth restiveness is an entrenched, multifaceted phenomenon requiring context-sensitive, integrated interventions. On the premise of its findings, the study proffered recommendations including targeted economic empowerment, political inclusion mechanisms, equitable resource-sharing reforms and community-centred security strategies.*

**Keywords:** Youth Restiveness; Relative Deprivation; Conflict; Regional Variation.

### 1. Introduction

Youth restiveness in Nigeria is a critical issue that has attracted considerable attention from scholars, policymakers, and society at large. Defined as sustained protestation embarked upon to enforce desired outcome from a constituted authority by an organised body of youths (Okeke & Nwali, 2021), youth restiveness encompasses a range of disruptive behaviours, including ethnic militia activities, kidnapping, cultism, armed robbery, and other social vices. This phenomenon poses a significant threat to national security and constitutes a formidable barrier to sustainable development. Given that Nigeria's youth population accounts for over 60% of its total populace (United Nations Population Fund, 2023), understanding the dynamics of youth restiveness is imperative for fostering a stable and prosperous society.

Historically, youth restiveness in Nigeria has been closely linked to the nation's socio-political and economic challenges. The 1990s marked the rise of ethnic militias, such as the Oodua People's Congress in the South West and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra in the South East, driven by regional grievances and demands for self-determination (Babawale, 2001). In the early 2000s, the Niger-Delta region experienced a surge in militant activities, with groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta employing violence to protest environmental degradation and economic marginalization (Obi, 2010). More recently, the 2020 EndSARS protests, spearheaded by Nigerian youth, highlighted widespread discontent with police brutality and governance failures, reinforcing the enduring significance of youth restiveness in contemporary Nigeria (Akinyetun, 2021). These historical and modern instances underscore the persistent nature of

the issue and the urgent need to examine its prevalence and determinants comprehensively.

The prevalence of youth restiveness varies across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, with each characterised by distinct challenges that fuel youth agitation. For example, the South-South zone, particularly the Niger-Delta region, has been a focal point for youth militancy, largely due to environmental degradation and economic exclusion stemming from oil exploration (Etekpe *et al.*, 2020). Conversely, the North-East contends with the legacy of insurgency and displacement, which have left many young people disillusioned and susceptible to restiveness (Akpokighe & Ojo, 2020). Despite extensive research on certain regions, comparative data across all zones remain limited, necessitating a detailed analysis to inform targeted interventions.

The determinants of youth restiveness in Nigeria are complex and multifaceted, spanning structural, political, and socio-economic dimensions. Structurally, the absence of inclusive governance and equitable resource allocation has engendered a sense of alienation among young people (Nwagbara, 2008). Politically, pervasive corruption and leadership failures to address youth needs have intensified feelings of disenfranchisement (Okeke & Nwali, 2021). Socio-economically, high unemployment rates (25.7% as of Q4 2020; National Bureau of Statistics, 2021), widespread poverty (40.1% of the population below the poverty line; National Bureau of Statistics, 2020), and restricted access to quality education have created conditions conducive to restiveness. These interconnected factors demand a holistic approach, drawing on theoretical frameworks such as relative deprivation theory (Gurr, 1970; Anasi, 2010) and conflict theory, which illuminate how perceived inequalities and social injustices precipitate collective unrest. It is thus against this backdrop that this paper sought to analyse the prevalence of youth restiveness across.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- i. To what extent is youth restiveness prevalent across different geopolitical zones in Nigeria?

- ii. What are the underlying structural, political, and socio-economic determinants of youth restiveness in Nigeria?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Conceptual Review**

#### **Youth Restiveness**

A rigorous analysis of youth restiveness begins with a clear delineation of its key terms and variables. The concept of "youth" in Nigeria is institutionally defined by the National Youth Policy (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2019) as individuals aged 15 to 29 years. This age range aligns with international standards, such as those of the United Nations, yet diverges from broader African definitions that may extend to 35 years (African Union, 2006). Adopting the 15-29 range ensures consistency with national policy and facilitates comparability across studies, though variations in scholarly definitions warrant caution when interpreting findings. Given that Nigeria's youth population constitutes over 60% of its total populace (United Nations Population Fund, 2023), youth restiveness represents a pivotal phenomenon with profound implications for the nation's stability, security, and sustainable development. Defined as a multifaceted expression of collective agitation and resistance among individuals aged 15 to 29, youth restiveness encompasses a broad spectrum of behaviours, ranging from peaceful demonstrations to violent insurgencies, driven by perceived inequities and unfulfilled socio-economic and political aspirations (Okeke & Nwali, 2021).

Youth restiveness is theoretically anchored in relative deprivation theory (Gurr, 1970), which posits that collective discontent emerges from the dissonance between individuals' expectations and their lived realities. In the Nigerian context, this discrepancy is particularly acute among youth, who face systemic barriers such as high unemployment, poverty, and political exclusion (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). These conditions foster grievances that manifest in diverse forms of restive behaviour, varying in intensity and expression across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. For instance, environmental degradation and economic marginalization in the South-South have fuelled militancy (Obi, 2014), while governance failures in urban centres like Lagos have

sparked mass protests such as the EndSARS movement (Okeke & Nwali, 2021).

Complementing this framework, social restiveness, a broader construct of which youth restiveness is a subset, denotes a collective state of agitation within a community, arising from perceived injustices, marginalization, or unmet aspirations (Okafor, 2017). Catalysed by economic disparities, governance failures, identity-based exclusion, or environmental stressors, social restiveness serves as both a symptom of structural dysfunction and a driver of societal dynamics, with the potential to either destabilize or spur reform (Obasi, 2008; Obi, 2014).

### **Manifestations and contextual variations of youth restiveness**

The expressions of youth restiveness in Nigeria are notably diverse, reflecting the country's complex socio-historical and regional landscapes. In the North-East, poverty and political instability have drawn youth into violent extremism, exemplified by the Boko Haram insurgency (Akpokighe & Ojo, 2020). In contrast, the South-West witness's urban youth engaging in cultism and protests against police brutality (Okeke & Nwali, 2021). Meanwhile, the South South's militia activities underscore resistance to environmental and economic marginalization (Obi, 2014). This contextual contingency highlight that youth restiveness is not a monolithic phenomenon but a dynamic response to localized structural, political, and socio-economic variables. Observable manifestations, such as protest frequency, crime rates involving youth, or participation in ethnic militias, provide measurable indicators of restiveness. However, equally significant are its latent forms, such as simmering tensions or disengagement from societal norms, which erode trust and social cohesion (Agbor & Taiwo, 2018). These underlying currents of discontent are critical, as they may presage more overt unrest if left unaddressed.

### **Dialectical role and societal implications of youth restiveness**

Youth restiveness occupies a dual role within Nigeria's social fabric. As a symptom, it mirrors deep-seated structural dysfunctions, including weak governance institutions, systemic corruption, and socio-economic inequalities (Nwagbara, 2008).

Simultaneously, it acts as a catalyst, compelling authorities to confront these grievances and potentially driving progressive reform (Obasi, 2008). This dialectical tension underscores its complexity: while posing threats to national stability, it also signals an urgent need for systemic change. The stakes are particularly high given the demographic weight of Nigeria's youth, whose collective actions will shape the country's future trajectory.

## **2.2 Empirical Review**

Empirical research on youth restiveness in Nigeria offers valuable insights into its prevalence and determinants, though comprehensive comparative studies across all geopolitical zones remain limited. Empirical literature reveals significant regional variations, with each zone exhibiting unique patterns of youth agitation driven by context-specific factors. In the South-South, the Niger Delta has been a focal point of youth militancy since the early 2000s, propelled by environmental degradation and economic exclusion linked to oil exploration (Obi, 2010). Groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) have employed violent tactics, including pipeline vandalism and kidnapping, to demand resource control and development (Etekpe *et al.*, 2020). These actions highlight a high prevalence of restiveness in the region, rooted in grievances over resource mismanagement.

In contrast, the North East has grappled with youth involvement in the Boko Haram insurgency, which escalated in the 2010s. Studies attribute this to socio-economic deprivation, including unemployment and lack of education, compounded by political instability and religious radicalisation (Akpokighe & Ojo, 2020). The United Nations Development Programme (2018) notes that the region's youth, disillusioned by displacement and poverty, are particularly vulnerable to recruitment into extremist groups, suggesting a distinct form of restiveness tied to security crises. Meanwhile, the North West faces rising incidents of banditry and kidnapping, often involving young males, driven by poverty and the collapse of traditional livelihoods such as pastoralism (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

The South-East has witnessed youth restiveness through movements like the Movement for the

Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), which emerged in the late 1990s to advocate for Igbo self-determination (Babawale, 2001). This agitation reflects historical grievances stemming from the Nigerian Civil War and perceived political marginalisation. In the South West, urban centres like Lagos have seen youth engagement in cultism and the 2020 EndSARS protests, which erupted as a nationwide movement against police brutality and governance failures (Akinyetun, 2021; Okeke & Nwali, 2021). The North Central zone, though less studied, experiences intercommunal clashes involving youth, often linked to land disputes and ethnic tensions (Etekpe *et al.*, 2020).

Quantifying the prevalence of youth restiveness across these zones poses a methodological challenge due to inconsistent data. Crime statistics provide a proxy, with the National Bureau of Statistics (2021) reporting elevated rates of kidnapping in the South-South and North-West, and armed robbery in urban areas of the South-West. However, these figures do not fully capture non-violent forms of restiveness, such as protests, nor do they consistently disaggregate by age or region. This gap underscores the need for more systematic, zone-specific research to address the first research question comprehensively.

Turning to the determinants, socio-economic factors emerge as a dominant theme across studies. Nigeria's youth unemployment rate reached 53.4% in 2020, with regional disparities exacerbating restiveness in zones like the South-South and North-East (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021; World Bank, 2020). Poverty, affecting over 40% of the population, further compounds economic distress, particularly among youth who lack viable livelihoods (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Education, a critical socio-economic variable, is unevenly distributed, with the North-East lagging in literacy rates, correlating with higher incidences of restiveness (United Nations Development Programme, 2018).

Political determinants also feature prominently. Corruption, as evidenced by Nigeria's low ranking on the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2021), undermines public trust and fuels youth discontent. Adejumbi (2004) argues that the exclusion of youth from political processes, coupled

with policy failures, fosters a sense of disenfranchisement that manifests as restiveness. Structurally, weak governance institutions and historical inequalities, such as those in the Niger Delta, create conditions ripe for youth agitation (Nwagbara, 2008). These findings suggest that restiveness is not merely a reaction to immediate triggers but a symptom of deep-seated systemic issues.

Critically, existing studies often focus on specific regions or incidents, such as the Niger Delta militancy or the EndSARS protests, leaving a fragmented picture of national trends. Methodologically, many rely on qualitative analyses or secondary data, with few employing robust quantitative approaches to measure prevalence or causality. This limitation highlights a research gap that this seminar paper seeks to address through a more integrated and comparative lens.

### 2.3 Theoretical Framework

Theoretical perspectives provide a lens through which to interpret the prevalence and determinants of youth restiveness in Nigeria. Relative deprivation theory, advanced by Gurr (1970), posits that collective unrest arises when individuals perceive a discrepancy between their expectations and actual conditions. In Nigeria, this theory is particularly salient in oil-rich regions like the South-South, where youth witness vast national wealth juxtaposed against local poverty and environmental ruin (Anasi, 2010). The resulting frustration drives restive behaviours as a means of redress, aligning with the socio-economic and political determinants identified in empirical studies.

Conflict theory, drawing from Marxist principles, offers another explanatory framework. Dahrendorf (1959) contends that societal structures inherently perpetuate inequalities, leading to conflict between dominant and subordinate groups. In Nigeria, the concentration of power and resources among political elites, coupled with systemic corruption, positions youth as a marginalised class whose restiveness challenges the status quo (Nwagbara, 2008). This perspective illuminates the structural and political roots of youth agitation, framing it as a response to institutional failures rather than mere delinquency.

Complementing these, social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942) explores how the breakdown of community structures fosters deviant behaviour. In

regions like the North East, where insurgency has disrupted social institutions such as education and family networks, youth are left without the social controls that mitigate restiveness (Akpokighe & Ojo, 2020). This theory underscores the interplay between structural decay and socio-economic deprivation, offering a micro-level explanation for regional variations in prevalence.

Integrating these theories provides a multidimensional understanding of youth restiveness. Relative deprivation theory highlights the psychological drivers of discontent, conflict theory addresses systemic inequalities, and social disorganization theory accounts for community-level dynamics. Together, they suggest that restiveness is neither random nor isolated but a predictable outcome of Nigeria's socio-political and economic landscape. This framework not only anchors the empirical findings but also guides the seminar paper's analysis, enabling a synthesis of prevalence and causality that is both theoretically grounded and practically relevant.

### **3. Methodology**

The methodology adopted for the study is a systematic literature review (SLR). This approach is ideally suited for synthesizing existing scholarly research to address the study's research questions: (i) to what extent is youth restiveness prevalent across different geopolitical zones in Nigeria? (ii) what are the underlying structural, political, and socio-economic determinants of youth restiveness in Nigeria? The SLR methodology provides a structured, transparent, and replicable framework for identifying, appraising, and interpreting relevant academic literature, ensuring a robust and critical synthesis of empirical evidence.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The research design is a qualitative systematic literature review, emphasizing the collection, evaluation, and synthesis of peer-reviewed studies pertinent to irregular migration and its socio-economic ramifications. This design was particularly appropriate for investigating the extent to which the prevalence of youth restiveness across geopolitical zones in Nigeria differs and how its manifestation vary across socio-economic, ethnic, and political contexts, as well as the the underlying structural, political, and socio-economic determinants of youth restiveness in

Nigeria, vis-à-vis how these factors interact across regional and demographic lines. By focusing on qualitative insights from empirical studies, the review captured both the breadth of findings and the depth of their implications, offering a comprehensive perspective on the subject.

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

Data were gathered through a meticulous search of academic databases, including JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search employed a combination of keywords, tailored to reflect the study's focus. To ensure relevance and contemporaneity, the search was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports published between 2000 and 2023. A snowballing technique was also utilized, whereby reference lists of initially selected studies were examined to identify additional relevant sources. Inclusion criteria were rigorously defined to identify studies that: (i) quantified the prevalence of youth restiveness across Nigeria's geopolitical zones; (ii) analysed variations in its manifestations relative to socio-economic, ethnic, and political contexts; (iii) empirically substantiated structural, political, and socio-economic determinants of youth restiveness; and (iv) examined interactions among these determinants across regional and demographic strata. Methodologically, exclusion criteria systematically eliminated purely theoretical frameworks and studies lacking empirical grounding, thereby ensuring the review's fidelity to data-driven insights.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

The systematic review reveals that youth restiveness in Nigeria is pervasive and multifaceted, affecting virtually every region of the country. Multiple studies concur that youth-driven unrest has intensified since the return to democracy, manifesting in diverse forms from violent protest to organized crime (Nsidibe *et al.*, 2017; Zambwa, 2022). Akpokighe and Ejovi (2020) argue that the phenomenon threatens Nigeria's peace and development, noting how widespread unemployment and infrastructure deficits render youth disillusioned and prone to agitation (Nsidibe *et al.*, 2017). In almost all states, youths have "sacrificed their conscience on the altar of materialism", voicing grievances through demonstrations, property

destruction and violence (Zambwa, 2022). This pan-Nigerian character is echoed by Nsidibe *et al.* (2017), who observed that orchestrated youth restiveness “has been on the increase in almost all communities in Nigeria, most especially in [the] recent past”. Taken together, the literature suggests that no single region is immune from youth discontent, but that its prevalence and expression differ markedly across Nigeria’s six geopolitical zones.

#### **4.1 Regional patterns of youth restiveness**

The character of youth restiveness varies sharply between Nigeria’s North and South. In the North-West, an upsurge of armed banditry – led largely by young men – has devastated communities, as studies document. UN research notes that bandit violence is now “rampant” in the North-West, severely disrupting local security and economic life (UNIDIR, 2024). Analysts attribute the rise of bandit gangs to deep structural causes: chronic poverty, illiteracy and rural exclusion have made many youths susceptible to recruitment. For example, one investigation finds that North-West states rank among the poorest in Nigeria and lag on basic governance indicators (like schooling and infrastructure), so that “population growth, poor governance, and higher incidence of poverty have... rendered many unemployed youths vulnerable to recruitment by bandits” (Ojewale, 2024). Bandit groups explicitly exploit this vulnerability – offering small payments (as little as ₦5,000) to lure jobless youth into their ranks (Ojewale, 2024). In short, the North-West faces a distinctly violent expression of youth restiveness, fuelled by socio-economic despair and weak state presence.

The North-East likewise experiences an acute form of unrest, though with a different coloration. Boko Haram insurgency has engulfed the region for over a decade, with many young people drawn into jihadist and militant networks. While religion and ideology play a large role in North-East conflicts, observers note that underlying factors overlap with those in the North-West: extreme rural poverty, youth unemployment and perceived government neglect. Although direct survey data are scarce for insurgent motivations, analogous reasoning suggests that northern youths, faced with underdevelopment and deprivation, have been recruited by both jihadist groups and criminal gangs.

(For instance, Fulani herder militias crossing into North-West/North-Central also draw on youthful recruits driven by economic hardship.) Thus, northern zones are characterized by armed restiveness – banditry, terrorist insurgency and ethno-religious militias – with youth participation driven as much by socio-economic desperation as by ideology.

Youth restiveness in North Central Nigeria is shaped by a distinctive convergence of intercommunal tensions, contestations over land and identity, and the historical erosion of state authority in the region’s rural and peri-urban zones. Unlike the overt ideological insurgency characterising the North-East or the resource-control militancy of the Niger Delta, restiveness in the North Central zone often assumes a communal and ethno-territorial complexion, embedded in agrarian conflicts between farming communities and nomadic pastoralists. Studies such as Etekpe *et al.* (2020) have underscored how these clashes—particularly in states like Benue, Plateau and Nasarawa—have intensified over the past two decades, fuelled by climate-induced scarcity, demographic pressures, and a deteriorating system of traditional conflict mediation. The displacement of customary authority structures and the failure of formal security institutions to provide adequate protection have created vacuums of governance, thereby enabling the emergence of armed youth vigilantes and ethnically aligned militias. These groups, often under the pretext of self-defence, engage in retaliatory violence, forceful displacement, and criminal extortion, thereby entrenching a cycle of communal restiveness (Nwagbara, 2008; Zambwa, 2022).

This form of youth restiveness is further exacerbated by the region’s exposure to both northern and southern ideological currents rendering it a transitional conflict theatre where northern jihadist influences, southern political agitation, and local ethnic grievances converge. The theoretical utility of social disorganisation theory becomes particularly evident here, as the breakdown of normative social controls and the fragmentation of communal cohesion are directly correlated with the radicalisation of youth (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Akpokighe & Ojo, 2020). Moreover, relative deprivation theory explains how

perceived exclusion from land rights, political representation, and socio-economic benefits deepens inter-group suspicion, making youth restiveness in North Central Nigeria both a response to tangible material grievances and a projection of deeper ethno-political anxieties. It is this interplay of identity, marginalisation, and institutional weakness that renders the region's youth restiveness uniquely volatile and deserving of focused scholarly and policy attention.

In contrast, the South-West shows a different pattern. While the zone has seen political violence and crime, its youth restiveness is largely urban and gang-related. Scholarly accounts of Lagos State describe a notorious subculture of street "cultism" – gangs like the Awawa Boys and One-Million Boys – that perpetrate violence in cities (Boge, 2024). These groups are less an outgrowth of ideological struggle than of social dislocation in megacities. Lagos youth involvement in cult gangs reflects competition for turf and economic opportunity in an informal urban economy (Boge, 2024). In effect, youth restiveness in the South-West tends to assume criminalized forms (kidnapping, cult gang violence, political thuggery), linked to urban inequality and youth idleness.

The South-East has recently witnessed yet another variation. Rising insecurity and violent crime – often by unknown gunmen – have plagued states like Anambra and Abia. Some analysts attribute this to a burgeoning "youth bulge" coupled with frustration: research on the South-East links spikes in attacks on police and kidnapping to the region's large unemployed youth population (Elej *et al.*, 2024). These young insurgents lack the clear resource-grievance motive of the Niger Delta but share anger over perceived marginalisation and lack of opportunity. Thus, in the South-East, youth restiveness manifests as sporadic assaults on state targets and kidnapping-for-ransom, reflecting both ethnic-political grievances and the mimicry of tactics from the Niger Delta.

Finally, the South-South (Niger Delta) has long been the epi-centre of youth militancy. Here restiveness has taken a defined form: guerrilla warfare, kidnapping of oil workers and sabotage of pipelines. The Niger Delta produces the vast bulk of Nigeria's oil wealth

(approaching 95% of foreign-exchange earnings) but remains severely underdeveloped (Emeka, 2023). Empirical studies consistently identify this disparity as a core structural driver. Chukwuemeka and Aghara (2010), for example, show that youths in the Delta are "dissatisfied" by the limited economic development of their region and the environmental damage caused by oil spillage (Chukwuemeka & Aghara, 2010). Gbeneakor (2025) similarly notes that despite daily output of over two million barrels from the Delta, youths lack employment, quality education, hence they keep wallowing in abject poverty. Local researchers emphasize that this region's youth restiveness is essentially a transactional protest: with so much wealth flowing out, Delta youths have learned to "make noise and take up arms" to claim a share (Gbeneakor, 2025). In effect, the South-South's experience reflects a classic resource-mobilization frame: systemic resource extraction without equitable distribution produces organized youth agitation.

Thus, regionally, the literature paints a comparative map: the North struggles with bandits and insurgents arising from rural deprivation (Ojewale, 2024; Zambwa, 2022), the South-West with urban criminal youth subcultures (Boge, 2024), the South-East with ad hoc violent militancy tied to demographic pressure (Eleje *et al.*, 2024), and the South-South with sustained militant insurgency over resource grievances (Chukwuemeka & Aghara, 2010; Emeka, 2023). Each zone's youth restiveness reflects the intersection of local context (e.g. oil fields in the Delta, crowded cities in the South-West) with broader socio-economic conditions.

#### **4.2 Socio-economic, ethnic and political contexts of youth restiveness**

Across all regions, the reviewed studies converge on several common antecedents: poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion. Analysts uniformly highlight that Nigeria's youth face staggering joblessness. Zambwa (2022) explicitly links youth restiveness to "high rate of unemployment" and unequal resource distribution. In the Niger Delta and elsewhere, authors emphasize that a declining oil-dependent economy, crumbling infrastructure and a failed education system leave youths with little hope. Gbeneakor (2025) chronicles how Delta youth "lack employment, [and] quality

education”, trapped in “abject poverty” despite the region’s oil wealth. Similar accounts arise in northern zones, where families dependent on farming or herding find no alternatives as land pressures rise. The poverty–youth restiveness link is nearly axiomatic in the literature: one study notes that as “youth unemployment and suffering” dominate the Delta, the youths resort to kidnapping and militancy to survive (Gbeneakor, 2025).

Economic hardship thus provides a base context, but regional nuances appear through ethnic and political lenses. In the multi-ethnic North, for instance, Fulani herders and Hausa communities often vie over shrinking farmland, pulling youths into clashes. Zambwa (2022) explicitly mentions ethnic/regional militias – “Fulani herders, Boko Haram and the Niger Delta boys” – as key actors in Nigeria’s youth crisis. This suggests that ethnic identity compounds the disaffection: northern Muslim youth may be drawn to Islamist insurgency, while some Niger Delta agitators organize along Ijaw identity lines. In the South-East, where Igbo identity feels politically marginalized, youth cults and unknown vigilantes are sometimes seen as expressions of communal resentment. Ezemenaka (2021) finds that “cultism and ethnic factors” are major causes of youth violence in Nigeria, underscoring that communal identities shape how socio-economic grievances turn violent.

Political context also plays a crucial role. Many studies criticize governance failures and youth exclusion from power. Youths repeatedly voice that they are “discriminated” against by a system dominated by older elites. Zambwa (2022) points to “bad governance, discrimination and marginalization” as spurs to youth unrest. In the Delta, researchers show how local people feel entirely excluded from politics: decades of giving oil revenue to Abuja without local returns “substantiate the region having the highest rate of unemployment” and foster deep resentment (Emeka, 2023). Observers note that commissions like the Niger Delta Development Commission are perceived as puppet extensions of the ruling party, further cementing youths’ sense of marginalisation (Emeka, 2023). Thus, political alienation interlocks with economics: youths that perceive the state as illegitimate or unresponsive often turn to protest or militancy.

In sum, the literature identifies a configuration of socio-economic distress and political-ethnic grievance. Poorly educated, jobless youths in Nigeria’s weakest states feel deprived relative to their expectations and relative to other groups. They perceive an inequitable social contract – for example, deriving from the historical growth of oil wealth – that is not being honoured (Emeka, 2023; Gbeneakor, 2025). Under such conditions, deviant collective action becomes likely. As Ezemenaka (2021) explains via relative deprivation theory, when youths’ “value expectations” of employment, participation and prosperity diverge from their actual “value capabilities,” unrest ensues. The rise of youth violence can thus be seen as a response to unfulfilled aspirations, where the combination of economic exclusion and identity-based disenfranchisement makes rebellion appear legitimate or necessary.

### **4.3 Underlying structural determinants and interactions of youth restiveness**

Beneath the proximate factors lie deeper structural drivers that various studies emphasize. A central theme is Nigeria’s uneven development: the historical legacy of a resource-extracting economy has produced stark regional imbalances. As Joab-Peterside (2006) and others document, the Niger Delta alone generates the lion’s share of Nigeria’s wealth but has been kept underdeveloped (e.g. the Delta produces roughly half of GDP and 80–95% of revenue yet lacks basic services) (Emeka, 2023). This disparity embodies a national structural injustice that repeatedly fuels Delta youth militancy. By contrast, northern Nigeria has remained predominantly agrarian and peripheral in political investment; its communities have seen few schools or industries, creating a structural poverty trap. In other words, macroeconomic and historical factors (like the oil economy and federal allocation formula) have structured distinct expectations across regions. Youths internalize these structural contexts: Niger Delta youths demand a share of oil wealth, while northern youths languish under structural underinvestment and climate shocks. Interacting with economics is the political structure. Nigeria’s patronage politics often excludes the young. In election seasons, politicians may even recruit disaffected youths as thugs, promising pay or contracts, then abandon them. Gbeneakor (2025) notes

that many youths “felt betrayed” after being armed and used by political actors; abandoned in turn, they escalate into criminality. Thus, political structures that rely on youth as disposable foot soldiers sow the seeds of lasting resentment. Similarly, ethnic minorities (Ijaws, Hausas, etc.) experience systemic marginalization in the national structure. The resultant sense of injustice – a structural grievance – motivates youth movements. One study concludes that structural deprivation itself “becomes a grievance directed against those seen as responsible,” whether the federal government or rival ethnic groups (Ezemenaka, 2021).

Moreover, cultural factors and social networks moderate these structural influences. The literature highlights the role of informal channels: village patronage, mosques, churches and ethnic solidarity networks can recruit or dissuade youth participation. In Niger Delta communities, militant leaders like Asari-Dokubo mobilized youths through kinship ties and shared sense of Ijaw nationalism (Joab-Peterside, 2006). In northern villages, Fulani bandits often recruit among extended families and clans. Meanwhile, in urban South-West, street cultism often emerges from neighbourhoods or schools, with peer groupings turning delinquent. These social factors interact with structural drivers by shaping who organizes unrest and how it spreads. In practice, one must see youth restiveness as the outcome of a systemic web: structural inequalities create a pool of discontented youth, while local social structures determine whether that discontent finds peaceful outlets or violent expression.

From the thematic synthesis, a critical picture emerges. Many authors discuss youth restiveness through theories of social strain and conflict: Mertonian strain theory underlies the idea that blocked economic opportunities spur deviance (Elegbeleye, 2005; Ojewale, 2024), while conflict theory explains inter-group tensions over scarce resources (Gbeneakor, 2025; Emeka, 2023). Relative deprivation theory explicitly frames youth violence as a response to perceived disparity between expectations and reality (Ezemenaka, 2021). The empirical literature generally supports these views. For instance, Akpokighe and Ejovi (2020) invoke conflict theory to interpret youth violence as competition over limited resources. Ezemenaka (2021) found that effective institutions and

education correlate with lower violence, suggesting that when channels for legitimate advancement fail, youth resort to unrest. However, some scholars note that deprivation alone cannot fully predict youth restiveness – political agency and cultural ideology also matter. For example, the fact that unemployment is high everywhere in Nigeria, yet violence hotspots concentrate in certain regions, implies that strain interacts with regional political factors to produce conflict. Thus, the literature cautions against simplistic monocausal explanations; rather, youth unrest must be understood as a product of intersecting grievances and opportunities.

#### **4.4 Summary of Findings**

The systematic review undertaken in this paper affirms that youth restiveness is both pervasive across Nigeria’s six geopolitical zones and profoundly variegated in its manifestations. In response to the first research question, empirical evidence reveals that no region is immune: the North-West contends with proliferating banditry driven by rural deprivation; the North-East remains engulfed by Boko Haram insurgency underpinned by socio-economic desperation and ideological currents; the South-West witnesses urban cultism and politically-oriented violence among disaffected youth; the South-East grapples with episodic kidnappings and assaults reflecting demographic pressure and political marginalisation; and the South-South endures sustained militancy centred on resource-control grievances in the Niger Delta.

Concerning the second research question, the review identifies a confluence of structural, political and socio-economic determinants. Structurally, historical inequalities arising from an extractive oil economy and uneven federal allocations have generated entrenched regional disparities. Politically, systemic corruption and the exclusion of youth from decision-making processes amplify feelings of betrayal, while socio-economically, rampant unemployment, pervasive poverty and inadequate educational opportunities constitute the principal catalysts of restive behaviour. Theoretical anchoring in relative deprivation, conflict and social disorganisation frameworks illuminates how perceived disparities between expectations and lived realities, institutionalised inequalities and

community breakdowns interact to precipitate collective youth unrest. In sum, the findings underscore that youth restiveness in Nigeria is neither random nor monolithic but a predictable outcome of intersecting grievances and opportunity structures, demanding nuanced, context-sensitive analyses.

## 5. Implications of Findings and Conclusion

The comparative findings have important implications. First, they underscore that policy responses must be context-sensitive. Broadly improving youth employment is necessary but insufficient if not coupled with political inclusion and equitable development. For instance, strategies that target only job creation might miss the deeper sense of betrayal felt by oil-region youths or the identities that mobilize northern bandits. Indeed, Ezemenaka (2021) concludes that addressing youth restiveness demands both economic support and measures to reduce marginalisation such as better educational access and fair governance to close the expectation-capability gap. In the Niger Delta, research suggests reviewing the revenue-sharing formula and involving communities in development projects to undercut the transactional militancy (Gbeneakor, 2025, Emeka 2023). In the North-West, improving rural infrastructure and poverty reduction could shrink the pool of bandit recruits, as studies associate banditry with “climate-driven crop losses and lack of public services” (Ojewale, 2024; UNIDIR, 2024).

Second, the literature implies the need for integrated security and development strategies. Heavy-handed military responses alone risk exacerbating grievances. Instead, a mix of policing against violent groups and civil programs such as youth vocational training and de-radicalization have been recommended. Moreover, governance reforms that reduce corruption in youth programs would help rebuild trust. The wide range of regional trends also suggests learning across zones: for example, community policing innovations in the South-West might inform North strategies, and vice versa.

Finally, the empirical review highlights gaps for further study. While the preponderance of evidence links poverty and exclusion to unrest, more granular fieldwork is needed to untangle how identity narratives

and local politics mediate these links. Quantitative data on the prevalence of restiveness by state and demographic would also strengthen comparative claims. Nonetheless, the existing literature offers a coherent picture: Nigerian youth restiveness is entrenched, regionally variegated and driven by entrenched structural inequalities. Confronting it will require sustained, multidimensional efforts that address the root socio-economic injustices and political failures laid bare in this review (Ezemenaka, 2021, Ojewale, 2024).

### 5.1 Recommendations

In light of its overarching findings, the following policy and practice recommendations proffered:

- i. first, economic interventions must extend beyond generic job-creation programmes to include targeted vocational training, microfinance initiatives and infrastructure development in underserved regions, thereby addressing the root socio-economic deprivations that fuel recruitment into violent and criminal networks;
- ii. secondly, governance reforms are imperative: mechanisms to enhance youth participation in political processes, such as youth quotas in local councils and inclusive development committees, will mitigate feelings of exclusion and betrayal;
- iii. thirdly, resource-sharing frameworks should be recalibrated to ensure equitable distribution of oil revenue in the Niger Delta and to invest in rural education and healthcare across the North, thereby redressing structural injustices;
- iv. in like manner, security responses must integrate community policing with deradicalisation and psychosocial support programmes, avoiding reliance on coercion alone;
- v. Finally, inter-regional knowledge exchange, leveraging successful community-based security models from one zone to inform interventions in others, can foster innovative, locally-legitimised approaches to youth engagement and conflict prevention.

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