Economic Vulnerability, Affluence Aspirations and Human Trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between economic vulnerability, affluence aspirations and human trafficking vulnerability/exposure in Edo State, Nigeria. Specifically, it determined the relationships between economic deprivation/financial insecurity, and unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities, get-rich-quick orientation and trafficking vulnerability/exposure. A cross-sectional design correlation survey was utilised. The young adults aged 18-35 years were sampled in the three senatorial districts of Oredo, Esan North-East and Etsako West Local Government Areas. 287 questionnaires were received out of 330, and were analysed. At the 0.05 level of significance descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and multivariate regression were used. The results indicated strong positive correlations between the variable for trafficking vulnerability/exposure and those for economic deprivation/financial insecurity ($r = .380$); unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities ($r = .469$); and get rich quick orientation ($r = .441$). The economic deprivation ($\beta = .207$, $p = .001$), unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities ($\beta = .326$, $p < .001$) and get-rich-quick orientation ($\beta = .327$, $p < .001$) significantly predicted vulnerability/exposure in the regression model. The model accounted for 38.9% of the variance. In conclusion, the study shows that vulnerability to trafficking is linked to economic constraints which interact with orientations towards rapid wealth, not poverty per se. It suggests combined livelihood development, job creation, and education and anti-trafficking measures for safe migration.

Keywords: ***Human Trafficking; Economic Vulnerability; Affluence Aspirations; Strain Theory; Edo State; Nigeria.***

I. Introduction

Trafficking in persons (TIP) has a very long history, which means that it is not a recent development. What is new is that it has continued to present pervasive issues that have attracted international concerns. The latest global data affirms that trafficking again is on the rise following the pandemic. According to the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons in 2024, there was an increase in the number of detected trafficking in persons (TIP) in 2022, with cases

involving children amounting to 38 per cent, at 47 per cent detected TIP victims of forced labour, and at 25 per cent detected TIP cases. The report links these trends to poverty and conflict and climate pressures. The number of detected victims is dependent on enforcement capacity and is not indicative of prevalence (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC, 2024).

There is a plausible but not clearly defined connection between economic deprivation and trafficking. Hardship is rampant, although trafficking is not, with many poor households remaining untouched. It is therefore important to consider what aspects of economic life that makes some people more susceptible to deceptive and exploitative offers, and to identify those aspects that are the causal factors in Edo State, Nigeria. In truism, Edo State has in recent time provided much evidence towards this end. Bogatzki and Meierrieks (2026) explore the motives behind individual willingness to expose oneself to trafficking in two waves of survey data (2021 and 2023) that account for over 2,700 responses, and look at how shifting migration aspirations, economic constraints, and exposure to information influence individual willingness to expose oneself to trafficking. The study revealed that the issue is not just about poverty, but it is about the interplay of economic insecurity and a lack of opportunity and aspiration.

The Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) in 2022 revealed that 63 percent of Nigerians lived in multidimensional poverty level, which includes a dimension of work and shocks in addition to health, education and living standards (National Bureau of Statistics, NBS, 2022). Unemployment and restricted livelihood options remained core features of this image since they seal off suitable ways of enhancing the situation of the households. Aspiration also stands as one of the strands leading to trafficking in persons in Nigeria, with Edo State not free from it. Ambition for material advancement is normal and desirable. It is relevant to trafficking when the potential for quick and significant returns is combined with a lack of a viable opportunity and intermediaries guarantee; the difference can be made up fast. In this study, we are dealing with this smaller condition and do not wish to equate it with ordinary ambition, which is why we use the term get-rich-quick orientation. The difference is significant for scholarly correctness and fairness towards the youth of Nigeria.

Nigeria’s anti-trafficking policy is well developed and prohibition guideline is contained in the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act 2015, which has set out minimum sentences for sex trafficking at 5 years imprisonment and labour trafficking at 5 years imprisonment, and at 10 years imprisonment and a fine of two million naira in the case of a

child (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015; Pathfinders Justice Initiative, 2018). Although, the United States Department of State (2019) still deemed Nigerian trafficking as serious, and that Nigerian victims were detected in at least 34 countries (Align Platform, 020). A recent study by Agwu (2025) puts some of the blame for poor enforcement on corruption in the response system.

Among the most vulnerable States in Nigeria, Edo State remained the most commonly suggested place of origin for trafficking for sexual exploitation. According to data from the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) compiled by UNODC (n.d), Edo State accounted for 98 percent of all victims rescued from outside and 47 percent of all convicted traffickers. In 2016, a second route use in trafficking of persons was discovered, with Niger to Libya land route utilised by Nigerians. In 2017 alone, 4,316 Nigerians, with approximately 4,000 of the victims from Edo State were repatriated from Libya (Align Platform, 2020). This Niger-Libya route has been examined as a conduit for this movement from Edo into the conflict economy of Libya (de Haan, Aghedo & Eaton, 2024). The Edo State Task Force Against Human Trafficking (ETAHT) was established on 15 August, 2017 and the Edo State Trafficking in Persons Prohibition Law was signed on 23 May, 2018 as response to this development (Pathfinders Justice Initiative, 2018, 2021). From August 2017 to May 2021, ETAHT received 5,194 returnees in 70 batches, the majority of whom departed to Libya via the land route (Pathfinders Justice Initiative, 2021).

During the reporting period of 2019, the Edo task force investigated 56 cases and prosecuted 20 cases (U.S. Department of State, 2019). The NAPTIP Edo Zone Commander in June 2025 publicly announced that the state had dropped down in the national ranking list of states in the country for trafficking (Africa Network for Environment and Economic Justice, ANEEJ, 2025). The interviewees also shared the perception that ‘abroad is better’ is a common perception and a perceived ‘way out of poverty'. Peer pressure and social media stories seemed to validate the view that migration was an opportunity to escape economic hardship and find better opportunities, while these reasons were cited by prospective migrants. It appears that economic insecurity, limited opportunities, and dreams of migration to abroad combine to reinforce the notion that travelling overseas is a feasible means to a better life. Two gaps were identified in the literature for this study. The empirical deficit is that, Edo studies focus only on Benin City, only on women and sexual exploitation and only on qualitative or descriptive designs.

The study relied on secondary data from Attoh (2023) which surveyed young women in the three Local Government Areas of Benin City, Agwu (2025) which analyzed the anti-trafficking response in selected Edo communities and the data obtained from the interview of 39 returnees from the findings of the study conducted by Align Platform (2020). There is representative survey evidence but the available evidence is not multidimensional (both economic deprivation and unemployment and affluence aspirations) across all three senatorial districts including Edo North. The conceptual gap is the loose use of "poverty and get-rich-quick syndrome" in public and some scholarly conversation, while ignoring the difference between economic vulnerability and poverty, and ordinary aspiration and orientation that leads to risk. The present study aims to fill both gaps. It provides a three-dimension measurement model, a three-district design that incorporates a district not typically considered a hotspot, a clear empirical separation of legitimate aspirations and get rich quick aspirations, and a theoretical explanation (strain and anomie theory) for why legitimate aspirations, deprivation and blocked opportunity should be collectively linked to deceptive recruitment exposure.

Statement of the Problem

Trafficking in persons is an ongoing issue in Nigeria, and Edo State in particular. According to both official and institutional sources, Edo State is a major source for sexual exploitation of victims trafficked via the Libya route which gained momentum following the 2016 expansion of the trade into the country (Align Platform, 2020; de Haan, Aghedo & Eaton, 2024; UNODC, n.d.). Prosecution has lagged behind in both terms of scale and the volume. According to Align Platform (2020), the U.S. report in 2019 recorded 938 cases received by NAPTIP across the country with only 43 convictions, while qualitative accounts indicate that some traffickers are accepted in the community because they are perceived to be providing a migration service. Outline of the socio-economic factors that could make individuals vulnerable to trafficking is well described. Financial insecurity and low resilience to shocks in the household, and unemployment and underemployment are among the factors that contributed to the trafficking of youth, particularly young women identified in Benin City, and the other being family size and educational inequality, both of which young people are at increased risk (Attoh, 2023).

There is a high pressure to make visible gains socially and generally, returnee accounts indicate a belief that migration is the fastest way to achieve this (Align Platform, 2020). Recruitment often involves deceiving people about the price, risks, and success of migration and the use of debt

contracts binding by oath. What existing studies show is predominantly descriptive and qualitative: poverty is often cited as a factor associated with trafficking and/or return of trafficked persons; the lack of opportunity and desire for migration are other common factors cited. What they do not provide is an estimate of the association of each factor with trafficking vulnerability relative to the other factors. There are three weaknesses: Edo's position in the poverty profile (multidimensional headcount, which is below the national figure) shows that poverty alone cannot explain the prominence of Edo. Second, the evidence is largely from survivors/returnees, which cannot reveal how these factors vary between those exposed and those not exposed to the population.

Thirdly, there is little documentation outside of Benin City, Edo North. The causal literature also is one of caution. Economic vulnerability can be the result of poor economic conditions, but does not cause trafficking; economic vulnerabilities are linked to trafficking, and economic conditions may lead to deceptive recruitment, but the evidence reviewed does not demonstrate a causal link between poverty and the occurrence of trafficking. The unanswered research question is: What is the extent of the association between economic deprivation/financial insecurity, unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities, and human trafficking vulnerability and exposure in the three senatorial districts of Edo State?

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this paper is to examine the relationship between economic vulnerability, affluence aspirations and human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria. While the specific objectives are to:

1. Determine the relationship between economic deprivation/financial insecurity and human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria.
2. Examine the relationship between unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities and human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria.
3. Determine the relationship between affluence aspirations/get-rich-quick orientation and human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between economic deprivation/financial insecurity and human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria?
2. What is the relationship between unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities and human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria?
3. What is the relationship between affluence aspirations/get-rich-quick orientation and human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

1. **H_{01}:** There is no significant relationship between economic deprivation/financial insecurity and human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria.
2. **H_{02}:** There is no significant relationship between unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities and human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria.
3. **H_{03}:** There is no significant relationship between affluence aspirations/get-rich-quick orientation and human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria.

II. Method of the Study

Design, Variable Structure and Study Area

The study uses a cross-sectional correlational survey design. The working formulation "Does poverty and get-rich-quick syndrome promote human trafficking?" was revised for three reasons. "Poverty" is narrower than the condition of interest and, in Edo, is contradicted as a sole explanation by the state's below-national poverty headcount (EASO, 2021; NBS, 2022). "Syndrome" pathologises ambition and is not an analytic category. "Promote" implies causation, which a cross-sectional design cannot support. The independent variable is economic vulnerability and affluence aspirations, operationalised through exactly three sub-variables. The dependent variable is human trafficking. Age, sex, education and Local Government Area enter only as statistical controls. Edo State has three senatorial districts: Edo South, Edo Central and Edo North. One Local Government Area (LGA) is selected from each. Selection is purposive and criterion-based and does not assume that every LGA has a documented trafficking problem.

Table 1: Selected Local Government Areas and Basis for Selection

Senatorial district	LGA	Basis for selection	Limits of the evidence
Edo South	Oredo (Benin City)	Flagged as problematic by the state anti-trafficking task force (Agwu, 2025); Benin City is the best-documented origin of sexual-exploitation trafficking (Align Platform, 2020; Attoh, 2023; EASO, 2021).	Evidence is concentrated here, making Oredo a high-visibility case.
Edo Central	Esan North-East (Uromi)	Flagged by the task force alongside Esan West (Agwu, 2025).	The source does not rank the two LGAs. If ETAHT/NAPTIP records obtained before fieldwork show higher counts in Esan West, it will replace Esan North-East.
Edo North	Etsako West (Auchi)	Selected as the study's anchor location; Auchi is the LGA headquarters.	No reviewed source documents a trafficking concentration here. It provides a lower-visibility comparison setting to test whether associations extend beyond known hotspots.

Population, Sampling and Sample Size

The target population is members of the 3 LGAs who are 18-35 years old. For ethical reasons, the age floor does not include minors and the age range includes young adults who could be targeted with recruitment or migration opportunities. The sampling will be carried out in five

stages: (1) purposive selection of the three LGAs; (2) random selection of wards within each LGA; (3) random selection of settlements / enumeration areas within wards; (4) systematic selection of households; and (5) selection of one eligible respondent per household using the next-birthday rule.

Sample size follows Cochran's (1977) formula, $n = z^2pq/e^2$. For $p = 0.5$ the unadjusted minimum sample size is about 192 for a 95 per cent confidence level with a 0.071 margin of error. When multiplied by the design effect of 1.5 for clustering, we get 288, and when divided by the anticipated response rate of 0.90, we get 320. Each local government area (LGA) would provide 110 respondents and the total would be rounded to 330. Equal allocation is used to ensure that the precision of the estimates is comparable across the three LGAs, and weights will be used in pooled analyses. This gives a realistic foundation on which to investigate the links between the study variables within the chosen LGAs.

Measurement of Variables and Conceptual Model

Economic deprivation/financial insecurity (X1), unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities (X2), and affluence aspirations/get-rich-quick orientation (X3) were hypothesised to be positively associated with human trafficking vulnerability and exposure (Y). Economic deprivation/financial insecurity (X1), unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities (X2), and affluence aspirations/get-rich-quick orientation (X3) were hypothesised to positively predict trafficking vulnerability and exposure (Y). A composite index of susceptibility to offers of intermediary financing, document retention, oaths and debt repayment, reported exposure to such offers, and awareness of trafficking cases in household or peer networks (HPIHN) was created to serve as Y. No identification of victims was involved in the measure, which was methodologically and ethically unacceptable. It didn't include voluntary/irregular migration, migrant smuggling, prostitution and poverty.

The questionnaire covered demographics/controls, the three X-scales, the Y-index and awareness. Content and face validity were determined by reviewing it by anti-trafficking experts, sociologists and survey methodology experts, and was piloted outside the study sample. Construct validity (including discriminant validity between LGO and LRA) was tested using confirmatory factor analysis. The reliability was acceptable with Cronbach's alpha of .70 or more. These items were presented in plain English (where needed, translations were done in

Pidgin/local language and then re-translated), and they were back checked. Descriptive statistics, Pearson/Spearman correlations and multivariate regression were used to test the hypotheses at α=.05, controlling for age, sex, education and LGA. VIF, ward-clustered standard errors, standardised coefficients, R^2, change in R^2, f^2 and 95% confidence intervals were used to report results. The results were considered as associations only. Ethical approval, informed consent, anonymity, secure data storage and trauma informed training were used, and NAPTIP/ETAHT exclusion information and data on minors were not used.

Table 2: Operationalisation of the Independent Variable

Sub-variable	Operational definition	Indicators (5-point scales)
X1 Economic deprivation/financial insecurity	Inability to meet basic needs reliably, income instability and weak capacity to absorb shocks	Difficulty meeting food, school or health costs; irregular income; no savings; dependence on loans or remittances; recent income shock
X2 Unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities	Absence of work, underemployment, and perceived lack of accessible legitimate livelihood routes	Employment status; months without work; underemployment; perceived access to jobs, credit, training and start-up capital
X3 Affluence aspirations/get-rich-quick orientation	Strength of the desire for rapid, substantial wealth and willingness to take uncertain routes to it	Sub-scale (a) legitimate aspiration: desire for steady advancement through work, education or enterprise. Sub-scale (b) get-rich-quick orientation: expectation of fast large gains, readiness to skip verification of risk, belief that success requires going abroad

III. Conceptual Review

Economic Vulnerability

Economic vulnerability is the risk of facing deprivation as a result of lack of resources, unstable livelihoods and limited ability to adapt and resist adverse events. It is wider than poverty, which refers to a condition that is being observed, and vulnerability refers to a potential of entering or staying in poverty. The difference is significant in Nigeria, where 63% of the people were multi-dimensionally poor according to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022) published by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in 2022/2019, whereas 40.1% were poor using the monetary poverty measure. In addition, the NBS framework acknowledges the dimensions of work and living standard, as well as shocks to the household.

Economic vulnerability in this study is defined both in terms of economic deprivation/financial insecurity and unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities. Household's buffering system is diminished by economic deprivation and the income may be needed to come from sources outside the mainstream of the economy. Households may also have diminished access to legitimate avenues for economic progression if they are unemployed. In the Nigerian studies, poverty and unemployment are also linked to the vulnerability to trafficking, but are not necessarily causative factors of trafficking (Nwokeoma, Osadebe, Amadi & Ugwu, 2020; Mathias & Eze, 2023). The authors do not believe that the merits of economic vulnerability are to be found in the physical condition of poverty but rather in the range of options that are acceptable to a person when they are living in economic insecurity. This interpretation resonates with Bogatzki and Meierrieks, (2026) recent findings in Edo State where limited capabilities and high aspirations were found to have enhanced trafficking-related migration

Economic Deprivation and Financial Insecurity

The first dimension of economic vulnerability explored in this study is economic deprivation and financial insecurity. Economic deprivation is lack of income and resources to maintain an adequate standard of living; financial insecurity is the fear of not being able to afford current and future economic needs. The difference is important because a household could not be living in poverty today but could still experience low wages, debt, economic shocks, and/or financial

insecurity. The NBS (2022) evidence shows that multidimensional poverty is significantly higher than monetary poverty, highlighting the incompleteness of using monetary poverty as a measure of household vulnerability.

A lack of financial security could heighten the vulnerability of being trafficked by making immediate economic opportunities seem more attractive, especially when there is little in the way of a legitimate alternative. Nwokeoma et al. (2020), in their study, identified poverty and poor family support as some of the factors associated with the vulnerability of trafficking in Benin City, while Onuigbo and Chrysantus (2024) reported poverty and unemployment as some of the factors associated with the trafficking of women and girls in Nigeria. It can thus be concluded that deprivation does not equate with causes of trafficking and cannot be understood as such. Instead, it can undermine economic leverage and make them more susceptible to offers which guarantee quick economic gain. The separation from the economic determinism does not imply that the lack of economic incentive does not affect the attractiveness of risky choices.

Unemployment and Limited Livelihood Opportunities

The second dimension of economic vulnerability is unemployment and inadequate livelihood opportunities. The loss of employment or fewer than full-time jobs cannot only mean a lack of regular income and the inability to work, but can also be experienced as underemployment, insecure work, low wages and limited opportunities for socioeconomic improvement. These situations are especially relevant in relation to trafficking, as people are often recruited in situations where they are looking for work, seeking migration prospects or other means of livelihood. There is evidence from Nigeria to back up this connection. Unemployment and poverty were identified by Mathias and Eze (2023) and Onuigbo and Chrysantus (2024) among the major determinants of child trafficking in Ebonyi State and conditions that make women and girls vulnerable to trafficking, respectively. New research in Edo State offers a more complex answer. Among those who had both high aspirations and low capabilities, Bogatzki and Meierrieks (2026) found that the desire to migrate through traffickers was particularly strong. The authors say this is significant because there is more than just a desire to leave; there is a reduced capacity to pursue safer options when there is unemployment. Thus, vulnerability to trafficking can be manifested when there is a lack of access to legitimate channels and high expectations for an advance in socioeconomic status, while livelihood opportunities are restricted.

Affluence Aspirations and Get-Rich-Quick Orientation

Affluence aspirations involve wanting better material circumstances, social status/socioeconomic mobility. These hopes are not bad in and of themselves. They can promote education, entrepreneurship, employment and legal migration. De Haas (2021) reasons that aspirations are key aspect of human mobility because people compare opportunities against their life aspirations and perceived ability to take advantage of them. The analytical question is not about aspiration to a better life, it is about situations where there is a gap between high aspirations and few legitimate opportunities. This study differentiates from legitimate aspirations of 'affluence' and 'get rich quick'. The former is the quest for a better socioeconomic status in ways that are proportionate and substantiated. The latter is the belief that material wealth will quickly result, and that poorly verifiable, or highly risky, opportunities are acceptable. Recent evidence from Nigeria indicates that the rapid wealth orientation has become a social issue of concern for some young people but this should not be taken as a stereotype of Nigerian youth (Ajasa, Arowa, Inas-Thomas & Aisida, 2023). At the individual level, Bogatzki and Meierrieks (2026) discovered that high aspirations and low capabilities were associated with approval of trafficking-related migration in Edo State. On this basis it is thus possible to imagine get-rich-quick orientation as a recruitment-receptiveness factor, and not as a moral failing, or as evidence of personal guilt or fault.

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons with the aim of exploiting them by means of any of the following: coercion, abduction, deception, fraud, force, force or fraud, or other means. The international definition thus associates three elements: an act, a prohibition on its means and an exploitation of its purpose. The Nigerian Trafficking Act also makes the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring and receipt of persons for the purpose of exploitation using force, deception, coercion, fraud, abuse of vulnerability, or means related to such exploitation, an offence. The idea is therefore more wide-ranging than sexual exploitation, encompassing forced labour, servitude and other types of exploitation.

It is also important to differentiate trafficking in persons from migration and irregular migration, and from migrant smuggling. The main difference between trafficking and smuggling is that

while smuggling is mainly about being brought in illegally for a purpose of material benefit, trafficking is about exploitation and can take place across an international border or not. Irregular migration is a legal status of migration by itself and not a definition of trafficking. This is especially significant in Edo State as people can want to move to another place but not be trafficked, and migration can also be accompanied by trafficking risks. There is recent evidence of this complexity in Edo, where Bogatzki and Meierrieks (2026) identified some who were willing to undertake trafficking-related migration even with the knowledge of the risks involved. They expressed highest willingness to migrate where aspirations were high and capabilities were low. It is important to note that vulnerability to trafficking is not the same as intention to migrate, but rather vulnerability to being recruited for trafficking, or exposed to trafficking situations.

Trafficking Recruitment and Exploitation Mechanisms in Edo State

However, vulnerability to trafficking may be more significant where economic pressures and aspirations intersect with the recruitment networks that are able to provide apparently attractive offers to the individuals concern. Deceptive employment offers, debt, social networks and other types of influence are used in recruitment. Under the Nigerian law, abuse of a position of vulnerability is a trafficking practice, and where a person genuinely believes that a person has no choice but to comply with another person's wishes. This is a valuable conceptual linkage between economic vulnerability and trafficking. This is corroborated by evidence from Edo. Most analysts believe that the desire to migrate is linked to high aspirations and low capacities, which indicates that trafficking is not only about ignorance and risks, but also about ignorance of other opportunities. Previous evidence in Nigeria also shows that poverty, unemployment, and lack of support systems are all associated with vulnerabilities to trafficking (Nwokeoma et al.,, 2020; Mathias & Eze, 2023). Recruitment can also be seen as an interaction between structural disadvantage and individual aspirations and the availability of intermediaries. While the economic vulnerability might put pressure on women, they need to be recruited in an environment that allows for exploitation.

Conceptual Linkages among Economic Vulnerability, Affluence Aspirations and Human Trafficking

This study conceptualizes the topic by recognizing that economic vulnerability and affluence aspirations cannot be assumed to be sufficient and/or causal factors of human trafficking.

Instead, their significance is in what they could do to change the options facing people and the riskiness of the options they might choose. Economic hardship and financial insecurity may reduce economic buffers while joblessness and restricted opportunities for livelihoods may restrict access to legitimate channels of socioeconomic progression. Aspirations for affluence might lead to a greater preference for mobility and material improvement, and a get-rich-quick orientation may lead to a tolerance for opportunities that offer unusually high returns. The interaction between aspirations or capabilities in determining migration decisions is also highlighted by De Haas (2021).

Edo has recently yielded some very direct evidence in support of this conceptual view. Bogatzki and Meierrieks (2026) concluded that those who wished to migrate with the help of traffickers were the most aspiration and the least capable. That vulnerability can exist when the desired destination in the socioeconomic realm is greater than what is legitimate in the means available for achieving it. The resulting space can be expected to lead to a reliance on intermediation and to make it harder to avoid the "opportunities" that may be presented. The study therefore posits that the economic deprivation/financial insecurity, unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities, and affluence aspirations/get rich quick orientation are three but related pathways through which socioeconomic conditions can be mentioned with human trafficking vulnerability.

The study therefore is organised with three explanatory dimensions and one outcome, namely:

Economic deprivation / financial insecurity (X_1)

↓

Vulnerability/exposure to trafficking in persons (Y)

Unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities (X_2)

↓

Vulnerability/exposure to trafficking in persons (TIP) (Y)

Hope to get rich quick/aspirations for affluence (X_3)

↓

Human trafficking vulnerability/exposure (Y)

14

The framework does not hold the view that poverty or unemployment or aspirations, automatically lead to trafficking. Instead, it suggests that such conditions can make some people more vulnerable if there are opportunities that are not legitimate and intermediaries that will exploit them. This is also in line with recent findings from Edo State and the aspirations–capabilities approach, which focuses on the interplay between aspirations and capabilities (de Haas, 2021).

IV. Theoretical Framework

The study was grounded in the Strain Theory, especially the Mertonian tradition as it offers the best explanation of how economic deprivation and high expectations can interact to create pressure for other means of socio-economic success. Anomie can be traced back to Durkheim and was reformulated by Merton (1938) as the gap between culturally-situated goals and institutionalized means. Merton suggested that societies promote specific goals (success in material life) and that legitimate avenues to these goals are not equally available. This can create tensions that lead to adaptation such as innovation, when culturally valued ends are sought in non-traditional ways. The theory was later expanded by Agnew (1992, 2006) who introduced the concept of General Strain Theory which added the strain of failing to attain valued goals, deprivation of valued stimuli, and exposure to negative stimuli. Agnew also acknowledged that people react differently to stress based on resources and situations. Messner and Rosenfeld (1994) continued the Mertonian tradition by positing that having a strong focus on monetary success can create pressure for it, while diminishing a person's commitment to non-economic institutional pressures. All of these take place at various but complementary levels. While Merton gives the structural-cultural context, Agnew elucidates individual reactions to strain, and Messner and Rosenfeld illuminate the broader institutional context of material-success values.

Strain theory was chosen over push-pull migration theory, rational choice theory, routine activity theory and differential association as these theories are less direct in their ability to explain the complex relationship between economic deprivation, limited livelihood opportunities, and powerful material aspirations. Theories used to explain the motivation for migration are primarily the push-pull theory, which looks at motivations; rational choice theory, which describes the process of making decisions to commit an offence; routine activity theory, which centres on the offender, the target and the guardianship; and the differential association theory,

which relates to learned offending behaviour. In the strain theory, there is a direct link between culturally valued socio-economic goals and unequal access to legitimate means.

In the present study, economic deprivation and financial insecurity can be seen as situations that can impede access to legitimate ways of pursuing desired socioeconomic outcomes, and unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities can compound this restriction. The meaning of affluence aspirations and get rich quick orientation is more intense focus on material progress, in situations where a quick accumulation of wealth is highly prized. The study does not make the assumption that victims select trafficking. Instead, it suggests that economic stress could make people more open to seemingly good but less substantiated prospects, fostering a predisposition toward making use of the opportunities by those who can exploit it. There is also recent evidence from Edo State that high aspirations are linked to higher levels of approval of trafficking related migration, but when they are coupled with limited capabilities. In this way, the strain theory offers the mechanism through which the three explanatory variables relate to trafficking exposure or vulnerability – blocked legitimate opportunities and high aspirations can lead to susceptibility, while deceptive recruitment can lead to trafficking exposure.

V. Results and Discussion of Findings

Results

Response Rate and Respondent Characteristics

Of the 330 questionnaires that were distributed, 287 were returned and 287 were validly completed, or 87.0% return. Of the 43 questionnaires not returned or not suitable for analysis, 13.0% were not returned. Thus, only 287 respondents were used for the final analysis.

Table 1: Response Rate

Questionnaire status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Distributed	330	100.0
Validly returned	287	87.0
Non-response/invalid	43	13.0
Total	**330**	**100.0**

The respondents were almost equally from Oredo (33.4%), Esan North-East (33.4%) and Etsako West (33.1%). The largest age group was 24–26 years (26.1%), followed by 27–29 years (23.7%) and 30–32 years (19.5%). Males constituted 51.6% and females 48.4% of the sample. In terms of educational qualification, the respondents with HND/Bachelor's degrees were the highest (44.6 %), secondary education 18.5 % and NCE/OND 16.7 % respectively.

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

A moderate level of economic deprivation/financial insecurity (M = 3.002, SD = 0.784), unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities (M = 3.025, SD = 0.809), and get-rich-quick orientation (M = 3.005, SD = 0.797) was found among the descriptive results. The mean score of the legitimate affluence aspiration (M = 3.963, SD = 0.586) was comparatively high, suggesting that the aspiration for socioeconomic improvement was quite high. The mean of the dependent variable, human trafficking vulnerability/exposure was 2.615 (SD = 0.511). The mean values for trafficking susceptibility, trafficking-related network awareness and recruitment exposure were 3.023, 1.834 and 2.987 respectively.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Economic deprivation/financial insecurity	3.002	0.784	0.896
Unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities	3.025	0.809	0.901
Legitimate affluence aspiration	3.963	0.586	0.761
Get-rich-quick orientation	3.005	0.797	0.901
Trafficking susceptibility	3.023	0.667	0.825
Recruitment exposure	1.834	0.562	0.824
Trafficking-related network awareness	2.987	0.677	0.721
Human trafficking vulnerability/exposure	2.615	0.511	—

Each of the measurement scales showed good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha between 0.721 and 0.901, which is above the 0.70 level recommended in the methodology.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation revealed positive correlations between all three main explanatory variables and human trafficking vulnerability/exposure. The independent variable was positively associated with economic deprivation/financial insecurity (r = 0.380) and unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities had the highest bivariate association with the independent variable (r = .469). Additionally, the likelihood of being vulnerable/exposed to trafficking was positively correlated with get rich quick orientation (r = .441). The explanatory variables were not highly correlated: The correlation coefficient values ranged between 0.183 and 0.330.

Spearman rank-order correlations yielded similar results with magnitudes of .379 for economic deprivation, .455 for unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities and 0.421 for get-rich-quick orientation. Pearson and Spearman results are consistent, indicating the strength of the observed associations.

Table 3: Correlations among Study Variables

Variable	X1	X2	X3	Y
X1 Economic deprivation/financial insecurity	1.000	.330	.183	.380
X2 Unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities	.330	1.000	.228	.469
X3 Get-rich-quick orientation	.183	.228	1.000	.441
Y Human trafficking vulnerability/exposure	.380	.469	.441	1.000

Note. Pearson correlations are presented; all reported associations with Y were positive.

Multivariate Regression Analysis

A multivariate regression model was estimated using economic deprivation/financial insecurity, unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities and get-rich-quick orientation as the principal explanatory variables and age, sex, education, and LGA as controls. Standard errors were clustered at ward level. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) for the regression were all within 1.017 to 1.371, suggesting that there was no evidence of problematic multicollinearity

Table 4: Multivariate Regression Predicting Human Trafficking Vulnerability/Exposure

Predictor	Standardised β	Clustered SE	t	P	95% CI
Economic deprivation/financial insecurity	.207	.062	3.358	.001	.086–.328
Unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities	.326	.064	5.091	<.001	.200–.451
Get-rich-quick orientation	.327	.052	6.333	<.001	.226–.428
Age	−.071	.048	−1.461	.144	−.165–.024

Sex	.056	.079	.718	.473	−.097–.210
Education	.030	.054	.563	.574	−.076–.136
LGA: Etsako West	−.125	.119	−1.051	.293	−.358–.108
LGA: Oredo	−.001	.119	−.009	.993	−.234–.232

Model: N = 287; R^2 = .389; clustered standard errors at ward level.

There was a positive correlation between economic deprivation/financial insecurity and trafficking vulnerability/exposure (β = 0.207, p = 0.001). The association between unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities and the outcome was also positive and statistically significant (β = 0.326, p < 0.001). Likewise, the orientation towards get-rich-quick was positively correlated with the dependent variable (β = 0.327, p < 0.001). All the control variables were not statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

A significant increase of 36.5 percentage points in explained variance (from 2.4% to 38.9%) was gained from the full model compared to the controls-only model. The overall model was statistically significant, F = 22.109, p < 0.001, and the overall effect size (f^2) was 0.598, which is a large overall effect.

Table 5: Model Fit and Hypothesis Testing

Statistic/Hypothesis	**Result**
N	287
R^2 (controls only)	.024
R^2 (full model)	.389
Change in R^2	.365
f^2	.598
F	22.109

Model p-value	<.001
H01: Economic deprivation	β = .207, p = .001 — **Rejected**
H02: Unemployment/limited livelihood	β = .326, p < .001 — **Rejected**
H03: Get-rich-quick orientation	β = .327, p < .001 — **Rejected**

Discussion of Findings

Research Question One: ***Relationship between economic deprivation/financial insecurity and human trafficking vulnerability/exposure***

The results show strengthening and statistically significant economic deprivation/financial insecurity and human trafficking vulnerability/exposure. Vulnerability (r = .380) was significantly associated with economic deprivation which remained a significant predictor when accounting for other factors such as age, sex, education and local government area (LGA) (β = .207, p = .001). The first null hypothesis was thus rejected. This conclusion is in consonance with the findings of Adesina (2014) which identified poverty, unemployment and limited economic opportunities as the trafficking conditions in Nigeria while that of Odey and Sambe correlated poverty, economic motivation and employment search with trafficking in Cross River State. Similarly, poverty and unemployment were identified as important factors that drive trafficking in Nigeria including Edo State.

It corroborates strain theory; especially Merton's conception which states that strain arises from differential access to legitimate means to reach desired ends and adverse conditions and blocked goals suggested by Agnew. The situation of economic insecurity can make it less likely that people will be able to cope with economic shocks and more likely to see an advantage in job or migration or business opportunities that offer fast improvement. But poverty does not always lead to trafficking. Instead, it can help to make it more difficult to refuse opportunities that may be deceptive or exploitive, so trafficking prevention must go beyond raising awareness to economic security and livelihood opportunities.

Research Question Two: ***Relationship between unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities and trafficking vulnerability/exposure***

The bivariate relationship with trafficking vulnerability was strongest with unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities ($r = .469$) which was also a strong predictor ($\beta = .326$, $p < .001$). The second null hypothesis was rejected. This is in tandem with Adesina (2014) and evidence gathered from Oredo and Egor LGAs Edo State which recognize unemployment, poverty and need of employment as one of the factors of trafficking.

Unemployment is seen as a constraint on legitimate ways to attain the desired economic objectives from a strain-theory point of view; also, it can exacerbate deprivation by reducing chances for moving out of financial hardship. Trafficking is not a direct result of unemployment however, as people react differently to the strain according to their coping resources, social controls, and alternatives available. The finding thus suggests vulnerability, rather than causality. Vocational development, entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihood programmes are therefore crucial elements of anti-trafficking programmes, as are programmes on employment creation.

Research Question Three: ***Relationship between affluence aspirations/get-rich-quick orientation and trafficking vulnerability/exposure***

The size of the standardised regression coefficient ($\beta = .327$, $p < .001$) was statistically significant and positive, and it was larger than the standardised regression coefficient for unemployment ($\beta = .326$), and the standardised regression coefficient for get-rich-quick orientation was statistically significant and positive. The third null hypothesis was rejected. Importantly, legitimate affluence aspiration ($M = 3.963$) was conceptually distinct from get rich quick orientation, so wanting socioeconomic advancement is not an inherent risk of trafficking.

In a similar study of more than 2,700 respondents in two waves of surveys in Edo State, Bogatzki and Meierrieks (2026) also determined that those with strong aspirations but constrained capabilities were the most willing to consider migration via traffickers. The current discovery is consistent with the objectives means disjunction feature of strain theory that vulnerability can arise where there are high expectations of economic success but few legitimate

means to achieve these goals. The result also enriches the explanations of poverty and unemployment, demonstrating the importance of the individual orientation to fast enrichment. But it is not ambition; it is the mix of high expectations, limited legitimate opportunities and a desire for quick and easy profits, especially when opportunities are not properly verified.

VI. Conclusion

The study looked at the relationship between economic vulnerability, affluence aspirations and human trafficking vulnerability/exposure in Edo State. Findings revealed that the economic deprivation/financial insecurity, unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities and get rich quick orientation/exposure to trafficking are significant positive relationships. Unemployment/limited livelihood opportunities was highly correlated ($r = .469$; $\beta = .326$; $p < .001$) with the get-rich-quick orientation had got the highest regression coefficient ($\beta = .327$; $p < .001$). Economic deprivation was also significant ($r = .380$; $\beta = .207$, $p = .001$). The full model accounted for 38.9% of the variance, establishing that vulnerability to trafficking is related to a number of socioeconomic factors, not just poverty. The study also shows that the pursuit of legitimate aspirations to socio-economic progress cannot be considered trafficking risks. Instead, vulnerability can be more likely to be present where there are high economic expectations mixed with financial insecurity, and insufficient legitimate opportunities or desire to seek out quick, unverifiable economic returns. The blocked legitimate opportunities may render deceptive recruitment offers more appealing, in line with the strain theory. The findings are associations, though, and not evidence of causation. Combined prevention efforts therefore need to include economic security and employment and livelihood opportunities, as well as safer information on migration and protection of vulnerable young adults.

VII. Recommendations

Based on the findings the following recommendations are made:

1. Government of Edo State should improve on its economic security programmes through targeted financial support, savings and low-cost loans for economically disadvantaged young adults.

2. Government should increase its efforts on job creation (employment) and other livelihood opportunities through vocational training, apprenticeship and entrepreneurship support in the three (3) senatorial districts.

3. It should also strengthen campaign against deceptive recruitment with practical information and knowledge about fraudulent recruitment offers and how to check the authenticity of the offers.

4. It should support wise expectations for wealth creation as opposed to get rich quick scams and unverified opportunities.

5. Government should enhance training in safer-migration education on legal migration, recruitment verification, contracts, documentation and debt arrangements/trafficking indicators.

6. Government should also strengthen its anti-trafficking efforts outside the known trafficking areas including Edo Central and Edo North districts where vulnerabilities and recruitment risks are identified through regular district-level assessments.

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