

# UNEMPLOYMENT AND CRIME IN NIGERIA: A REVIEW OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

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## Abstract

Unemployment and the rise of precarious employment have become defining features of contemporary labour markets, posing profound challenges for social stability and economic security. In Nigeria, these conditions are increasingly linked to the surge in criminal activities, as individuals deprived of stable and meaningful work are often compelled to resort to illicit means of survival. This paper therefore examined the relationship between unemployment, precarious employment and criminal behaviour in Nigeria, with specific objectives to investigate how unemployment drives crime, analyse how precarious employment contributes to criminality, and evaluate the policy implications of addressing both challenges simultaneously. Anchored on Strain Theory and Precariat Theory, the paper provided a theoretical foundation for understanding how blocked opportunities, insecurity and vulnerability associated with unstable work culminate in deviant behaviour. The paper adopted a systemic review methodology, drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, international labour statistics and recent empirical studies published between 2013 and 2024. The revealed that both unemployment and precarious employment significantly heighten crime rates, particularly among youths, by fostering frustration, economic insecurity and social exclusion. It further established that while unemployment remains a visible driver of crime, precarious work equally fuels criminal behaviour by denying individuals long-term stability and dignity. The paper concluded that crime reduction in Nigeria cannot be achieved by job creation alone but requires the promotion of decent, secure and sustainable work

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opportunities. The paper therefore recommended among others targeted labour reforms, youth empowerment initiatives, strengthened social protection, and integrated unemployment-crime policies as essential pathways to address the dual challenges effectively.

## **Introduction**

Unemployment and precarious work have become central concerns in contemporary debates about social stability, economic inclusion and crime. Globally, the decade following the 2008 financial crisis and the upheavals of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that labour market volatility undermines livelihoods, heightens financial insecurity and strains social protection systems (International Labour Organization, 2022). Empirical reviews and epidemiological studies of precarious employment indicate that insecure contracts, intermittent hours and low pay erode psychological wellbeing and constrain legitimate income-generating options, thereby increasing vulnerability to coping strategies that include illicit activity (Mai, 2023; Wu et al., 2022). These findings underscore that the relationship between labour market status and criminal behaviour is not merely a short-term economic phenomenon but one mediated by household survival strategies, social exclusion and the erosion of social norms when conventional pathways to stable work are blocked (Wu et al., 2022).

At the regional level, sub-Saharan Africa exhibits a distinctive combination of high labour force participation and a preponderance of informal, precarious livelihoods. While headline unemployment rates in some countries may appear moderate, underemployment, time-related underemployment and widespread informal self-employment are pervasive, leaving many households one economic shock away from desperation (World Bank, 2025). The African youth cohort, disproportionately affected by both joblessness and precarious contracts, faces constrained prospects for stable wage employment, with consequences for social cohesion and security. International agencies note that where the formal sector cannot absorb a large and growing youth population, frustration and the incentive structures that encourage petty and organised crime intensify, particularly in urban settings with limited social services (International Labour Organization, 2022; UNODC, 2021–2023).

Nigeria sits at the intersection of these global and regional pressures. As Africa's most populous country, Nigeria's labour market experiences are critical for regional stability. Official labour surveys and independent analyses show a labour market characterised by high informality, considerable underemployment and volatility in unemployment statistics following changes to

survey methodology and the economic shocks of recent years (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Reuters, 2024). Although some official series report lower headline unemployment rates after methodological revisions, deeper indicators, including underemployment, the share of workers in precarious and informal activities, and the elevated unemployment rates among youth and urban residents, point to persistent labour market fragility (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Criminological and econometric research within Nigeria has repeatedly linked unemployment metrics to rises in multiple categories of crime. Time-series and cointegration studies demonstrate statistical associations between unemployment (and related macroeconomic stressors) and increases in violent offences, robbery and property crime across several decades (Guza, 2019; Ojo, 2021). These studies suggest that rises in unemployment are followed by measurable increases in recorded crime, even after controlling for other structural factors, thereby providing empirical support for theoretical propositions that economic strain elevates incentives for criminal behaviour. At the same time, scholarship on corruption and economic crime highlights how structural governance deficits and patronage networks can compound these dynamics: when formal institutions fail to offer predictable livelihoods or equitable access to opportunities, illicit activities may appear as viable alternatives for income or upward mobility (Agbibo, 2013; Ojo, 2021).

A more recent strand of literature focuses explicitly on precarious employment rather than unemployment alone, arguing that insecure, intermittent and poorly remunerated work can produce the same types of economic pressures that push individuals towards criminal coping strategies. Studies of precarious work show associations with deteriorating mental health, weaker attachment to conventional institutions and an erosion of the informal networks that typically provide buffers in times of need—conditions that raise the probability of engagement in petty crime or participation in organised illicit economies (Mai, 2023; Wu et al., 2022). In the Nigerian context, where a large share of the workforce occupies precarious positions in the informal sector, these mechanisms merited special attention and hence, this paper sought to explain criminal behaviour beyond simple measures of joblessness to critically examine the relationship between unemployment, precarious employment and criminal behaviour in Nigeria.

## Statement of the Problem

Across the globe, unemployment and precarious employment have become defining socio-economic challenges with profound implications for social stability. The International Labour Organization (2022) notes that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated already fragile labour markets, leading to a rise in insecure contracts, intermittent hours and low pay, particularly among young people. Such employment conditions reduce access to stable livelihoods and foster vulnerabilities that often push individuals into illegitimate income-generating activities. The erosion of predictable work opportunities has therefore been linked to increases in both petty and organised crime, as the line between economic survival and criminal engagement becomes blurred.

In sub-Saharan Africa, where unemployment rates appear moderate on the surface, the real crisis lies in the pervasive underemployment and informal sector dominance. The World Bank (2025) highlights that millions of young Africans are trapped in vulnerable jobs, with limited prospects for upward mobility. In contexts where formal sector jobs are scarce and social protection is weak, frustration over economic exclusion has been shown to heighten crime, particularly in urban centres where population growth outpaces job creation. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023) similarly warns that labour market stress in the region has aggravated both violent crime and participation in illicit economies such as trafficking, internet fraud and armed banditry.

Nigeria, Africa's largest economy and most populous nation, exemplifies these pressing issues. For instance, despite periodic revisions to employment measurement, the National Bureau of Statistics (2024) reported that 12.9% of the labour force was unemployed in Q1 of 2024, while underemployment and informality remain pervasive. Reuters (2024) further noted that reforms in 2023–2024, including the removal of fuel subsidies and currency liberalisation, worsened household economic conditions, pushing many workers into precarious activities. With about 70% of the labour force engaged in the informal economy, characterised by low wages and unstable hours, the risks of criminal coping strategies increase significantly. Evidence from Ojo (2021) confirms that unemployment in Nigeria is positively associated with rising robbery, assault and property crimes, while Guza (2019) found that unemployment shocks trigger measurable increases in violent offences. These findings demonstrate a persistent linkage between labour market fragility and crime.

However, existing studies in Nigeria largely emphasise unemployment as a statistical driver of crime, paying limited attention to precarious employment, a condition that goes beyond outright joblessness to include insecure, unstable and poorly remunerated work. While international literature shows that precarious employment has negative effects on wellbeing and may predispose individuals to illicit activities (Mai, 2023; Wu et al., 2022), there is still insufficient exploration of this relationship in Nigeria. Most Nigerian studies stop at unemployment figures, leaving a gap in understanding how precarious forms of employment also fuel criminal behaviour in a society where informality dominates the labour market.

Therefore, the problem this paper addressed was the limited scholarly attention to the broader spectrum of labour market insecurity in Nigeria. By focusing not only on unemployment but also on precarious employment as factors linked to crime, this paper sought to fill a critical gap in the literature. It provides a nuanced understanding of how precarious livelihoods in Nigeria contribute to criminal behaviour, thereby offering evidence that can inform more holistic policy responses targeting both unemployment reduction and the creation of secure, decent work opportunities.

### **Aim and Objectives**

The primary aim of this paper was to critically examine the relationship between unemployment, precarious employment and criminal behaviour in Nigeria, with a focus on the following specific objectives:

- i. To examine the prevalence of unemployment and precarious employment in Nigerian labour market.
- ii. To analyse how precarious employment conditions contribute to criminal behaviour in Nigeria.
- iii. To evaluate the effectiveness of existing unemployment and crime reduction strategies in Nigeria in addressing the dual challenges of unemployment and precarious work.

### **Methodology**

The methodology adopted for this paper was a systematic literature review approach, which synthesized existing scholarly works, empirical studies, government publications, and international labour reports relevant to unemployment, precarious employment, and criminal behaviour in Nigeria. The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, dissertations,

credible policy documents, and reports published between 2013 and 2024 to ensure both recency and reliability of sources. The selection was guided by relevance to the study objectives, with databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and official repositories of the International Labour Organisation and National Bureau of Statistics serving as key sources. Data were qualitatively analysed through thematic organisation, allowing the study to juxtapose scholarly arguments and empirical findings while aligning them with Strain Theory and Precariat Theory to provide interpretive depth. This methodological approach was considered appropriate as it enabled a critical exploration of the linkages between unemployment, precarious employment and crime without the limitations of primary fieldwork, while also identifying existing gaps in the literature that the paper sought to address.

## **Literature Review**

The systematic review of relevant and related literature were done following the aim and objectives of the paper under the following subheadings:

### **Conceptual Review**

The key concepts in this paper were reviewed as follows:

#### **Unemployment**

Unemployment has been widely conceptualised as a condition in which individuals who are able and willing to work cannot find suitable employment within the labour market. The International Labour Organization (2022) defines unemployment in statistical terms as comprising individuals of working age who are without work, available for work, and actively seeking employment. In the Nigerian context, the National Bureau of Statistics (2024) further applies this definition to measure both open unemployment and underemployment, acknowledging that joblessness extends beyond the complete absence of work to include situations of inadequate or insufficient employment. Ojo (2021) emphasises that unemployment is not only an economic indicator but also a social problem with far-reaching implications for poverty, insecurity and crime. For the purpose of this paper, unemployment was adopted as the condition in which individuals of working age, despite being available and capable, are unable to obtain gainful and decent employment, thereby facing heightened vulnerability to socio-economic risks including criminal tendencies.

## **Precarious Employment**

Precarious employment has emerged in recent literature as a critical concept describing unstable, insecure, and poorly remunerated work arrangements. Standing (2011) popularised the notion of the “precariat” as a new class of workers trapped in insecure contracts, lacking long-term job security and adequate social protection. More recently, Wu et al. (2022) describe precarious employment as work characterised by low wages, limited autonomy, job insecurity, and the absence of employment rights, highlighting its adverse impact on health and wellbeing. Mai (2023) further underscores that precarious work undermines social inclusion and pushes individuals into survival strategies that can include informal or illicit activities. In this paper, precarious employment was adopted as a condition of labour marked by insecurity, instability, and poor remuneration that erodes livelihood security and increases the likelihood of involvement in illegitimate economic activities.

## **Crime**

Crime, as a foundational concept in criminology, has been defined in legal, sociological, and criminological terms. From a legal standpoint, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023) considers crime as acts or omissions that violate established laws and are punishable by the state. Clinard and Meier (2016) provide a sociological perspective by describing crime as behaviour that violates formalised social norms enacted into law. Within the Nigerian context, Agbibo (2013) stresses that crime encompasses not only violent and property offences but also economic and corruption-related crimes that threaten governance and development. For the purpose of this study, crime was seen as any act or omission that contravenes the laws of Nigeria and is subject to sanction, including both violent and non-violent offences that undermine social order and security.

## **Criminal Behaviour**

Criminal behaviour is conceptually linked to crime but focuses more directly on the conduct of individuals. Akers and Sellers (2013) define it as conduct in violation of criminal law, including acts ranging from minor infractions to serious felonies. Contemporary research stresses its socio-economic underpinnings, with Ojo (2021) arguing that unemployment and adverse economic conditions are significant predictors of criminal behaviour in Nigeria. Wu et al. (2022) extend this by showing how precarious employment undermines psychological wellbeing and may



predispose individuals to illegal coping strategies. For this paper, criminal behaviour was seen as individual or group conduct that violates criminal law, influenced by economic, social, and structural conditions, particularly those rooted in unemployment and precarious employment.

### **The Relationship Between Unemployment, Precarious Employment and Criminal Behaviour in Nigeria**

Scholarly and policy literature increasingly treats labour market failure as a central structural determinant of criminal behaviour, and Nigeria provides a highly illustrative case. Econometric analyses of Nigerian time-series data show that increases in unemployment are associated with statistically significant rises in a range of offences, including robbery, assault and other forms of violent crime, even after attempts to control for other macroeconomic factors (Guza, 2019; Ojo, 2021). These studies use cointegration and ARDL methods to demonstrate both short-run and long-run linkages between labour market shocks and recorded crime, suggesting that economic strain produces measurable behavioural responses at population level (Guza, 2019; Ojo, 2021). At the same time, international research on precarious employment demonstrates that job insecurity, intermittent hours and inadequate earnings produce psychological stress, reduce attachment to conventional institutions and increase reliance on survival strategies that may be criminalised in law (Mai, 2023; Wu et al., 2022). The implication is clear: unemployment measured as zero employment and precarious employment measured as insecure, low-quality work are not alternative explanations but complementary pathways through which economic exclusion raises the probability of criminal engagement (Mai, 2023; Wu et al., 2022).

Beyond statistical association, qualitative and case-based work points to specific mechanisms linking precarious work and crime in Nigeria. The growth of organised and semi-organised economic crimes, notably internet-related fraud (the so-called “Yahoo” economy), advanced fee fraud, and complex money-laundering chains is commonly described in policy reports as driven in part by the absence of decent, reliable livelihoods for many young people in urban centres (UNODC, 2023). UNODC’s threat assessment portrays organised fraud, kidnapping for ransom and banditry as crimes that have adapted to exploit gaps in economic opportunity and weak governance, with groups recruiting among the unemployed and those in precarious informal occupations (UNODC, 2023).

Empirical accounts of cyber fraud in Nigeria also document apprenticeship models, where young people with limited formal employment prospects join networks that provide training, social



protection of a sort, and quick financial rewards illustrating how precarious economic circumstances can be transformed into organised criminal livelihoods (Le Monde; UNODC). These field patterns complement econometric findings by showing how latent demand for income and the pull of criminal networks intersect in contexts of labour market scarcity and insecurity.

Important nuances must be emphasised as follows:

Firstly, the relationship between labour market status and criminal behaviour is mediated by age, location and social capital: youth are disproportionately implicated in both precarious employment and many forms of criminality, urban hotspots concentrate opportunities for both informal work and certain crimes, and weak family or community support reduces alternatives to illicit coping strategies (Guza, 2019; Mai, 2023).

Secondly, not all precarious workers become criminal; protective factors such as strong social networks, access to even modest forms of steady income, or pathways into civic institutions can reduce propensity to offend (Wu et al., 2022).

Thirdly institutional factors such as corrupt state actors, weak policing capacity and inadequate social protection amplify the effect of economic drivers by lowering the expected cost of criminal involvement or by narrowing legitimate opportunities (Agbiboa, 2013; UNODC, 2023). Together, the evidence supports a model in which unemployment and precarious employment raise the pool of persons vulnerable to criminal behaviour, while governance and social supports shape whether vulnerability translates into offence.

For policy and research, the synthesis of evidence from Nigeria suggests two priorities. Empirically, crime-reduction strategies will be incomplete if they focus only on policing and incarceration while ignoring the quality of employment available to the population; evidence indicates that improving job quality and reducing precarity can mitigate drivers of crime (Mai, 2023; Wu et al., 2022). Analytically, future studies must unpack heterogeneity within “unemployment” by differentiating open joblessness from underemployment and precariousness, an approach that can better explain why some economic downturns produce crime spikes while others do not. In short, unemployment and precarious employment operate jointly to shape criminal behaviour in Nigeria; interventions therefore need to combine labour market reforms,

targeted social protection and strengthened governance to address the root economic incentives that drive offending.

### **Prevalence of Unemployment and Precarious Employment in the Nigerian Labour Market**

Recent official labour statistics and independent analyses paint a picture of persistently low-quality employment in Nigeria despite headline improvements in some indicators. The National Bureau of Statistics' Nigeria Labour Force Survey (NLFS) series for 2024 reports a headline unemployment rate of 5.3% in Q1 2024, falling to 4.3% in Q2 2024 under the revised methodology; yet these headline figures mask deeper deficiencies in employment quality, because the measurement threshold now counts as “employed” persons working as little as one hour per week, which reduces comparability with earlier series and arguably undercounts labour market vulnerability (NBS, 2024).

Complementary indicators from the same NLFS show that underemployment and time-related underemployment remain sizeable with combined metrics (LU2) around the mid-teens percentage points and that labour force participation and employment-to-population ratios have declined compared with previous quarters (NBS, 2024). These mixed signals indicate that though headline unemployment may appear low, a substantial share of the working population experiences inadequate and unstable work.

Much more striking is the overwhelming predominance of informal and precarious work in Nigeria's economy. Multiple NBS releases and independent policy analyses estimate that more than nine in ten workers operate in some form of informal employment: NBS Q1–Q2 2024 reports informal employment rates exceeding 92–93% of total employment, and policy briefs stress that this persistently high informality rate is a key driver of precarious livelihoods (NBS, 2024).

The World Bank and ILO literature on informality emphasise that informal employment typically entails low earnings, absence of social protections, irregular hours and little legal protection the core elements of precarious work (ILO; World Bank). In practical terms for Nigeria, this means that even those counted as employed frequently lack predictable income streams, decent wages and mechanisms for coping with shocks such as conditions that leave them economically vulnerable.

Youth unemployment and youth underemployment are recognised as severe problems: while official youth unemployment figures fluctuate with methodology changes, sector studies and labour market observers stress that a majority of young people are either in unstable informal work or are marginally attached to the labour market, increasing their propensity to accept precarious arrangements or to seek alternative, sometimes illicit, income sources (Oluwaleye, 2021). Several case studies of urban centres such as Lagos, Port Harcourt and Aba document the concentration of precarious micro-entrepreneurial activity, street vending and casual labour among young people i.e activities that are highly sensitive to economic shocks and therefore prime candidates for substitution by criminal or semi-criminal activities when incomes fall.

Finally, the rapid expansion of cyber-enabled fraud and other organised economic offences in recent years is best understood against the backdrop of this labour market profile. UNODC's organized crime threat assessment for Nigeria highlights how organised fraud syndicates have recruited from urban youth populations who face poor labour prospects, and data compiled by investigative reporting and law-enforcement agencies document large numbers of arrests and convictions for internet fraud, sextortion and related offences in recent years (UNODC, 2023).

Although attribution of cybercrime to unemployment is not straightforward, the concentration of offenders among young men with tertiary education but limited formal opportunities is a recurring empirical pattern that aligns with the high prevalence of precarious or low-quality employment (Le Monde; UNODC). In essence, the statistical and case evidence implies that Nigeria's labour market is dominated by precarious employment conditions that expand the pool of economically vulnerable persons and create fertile ground for certain types of criminality.

### **Analysis of how Precarious Employment Conditions Contribute to Criminal Behaviour in Nigeria**

A growing body of theory and empirical work clarifies the causal pathways by which precarious employment raises the likelihood of criminal behaviour, mechanisms that find strong empirical resonance in Nigeria. First, precarious work reduces legitimate income and savings, thereby raising the relative expected payoff of illicit options. Economic-rational choice models therefore predict higher propensities to offend under precarious conditions because the opportunity cost of crime – loss of legal income is lower while immediate monetary gains from fraud, theft or extortion become more salient (Guza, 2019; Ojo, 2021).

In Nigeria, where many urban youth rely on casual trading, gig work or intermittent labour that yields irregular cash flows, the marginal attractiveness of quick, illegal revenues, whether through petty theft, kidnapping-for-ransom syndicates, or online fraud, rises substantially. Field reports of cybercrime networks recruiting university students or casual workers into fraud houses illustrate this mechanism in concrete terms: recruiters offer training, income sharing and an alternative social identity to those facing precarious job futures.

Also, precarious employment undermines psychosocial resources and normative constraints that normally discourage offending. The epidemiological literature on precarious work documents associations with deteriorating mental health, increased stress and the erosion of social capital (Mai, 2023; Wu et al., 2022). Psychological distress and a sense of hopelessness about legitimate upward mobility weaken the informal social controls like family oversight, community expectations, future-oriented planning, that otherwise deter people from criminal acts. In Nigeria, qualitative studies of offenders frequently record narratives of desperation, social shame and the perceived absence of fair opportunity as rationales for taking illegal options, supporting the proposition that precarious work shapes not only material incentives but also cognitive and moral predispositions to offend (Mai, 2023).

On the other hand, precariousness can reconfigure social networks and recruitment channels, making criminal groups both accessible and attractive. In many Nigerian cities, criminal networks use existing informal labour market structures such as apprenticeships, roommate houses and social media groups to identify and induct recruits. The “apprenticeship” model reported in cyberfraud and other organised schemes offers not just training but short-term cash flows and a sense of belonging, compensating for the social protection deficits that precarious employment fails to provide (UNODC; investigative reporting). This recruitment mechanism turns labour market precarity into a recruitment pool for organised crime, thereby perpetuating cycles of criminal involvement that are hard to break with conventional punitive responses.

Furthermore, macro-structural and governance factors interact with precarious employment to either mitigate or amplify criminogenic pressures. Where social protection systems are weak and law-enforcement responses are inconsistent or corrupt, the perceived risk of detection and punishment falls, raising the net expected utility of criminal engagement. Conversely, targeted labour market programmes that reduce precarity have the potential to interrupt pathways to crime.

Evidence from policy experiments outside Nigeria suggests that secure, predictable income support and decent job creation reduce petty crime rates; applying these lessons to Nigeria would require programmes designed for informal workers, youth entrepreneurship with safeguards against exploitative precarity, and measures to regulate platforms and supply chains that generate precarious gig work (Mai, 2023). In sum, precarious employment contributes to criminal behaviour in Nigeria through interlinked economic, psychosocial and social-organisational pathways that are further shaped by governance contexts.

### **The Effectiveness of Existing Unemployment and Crime Reduction Strategies in Nigeria in Addressing the Dual Challenges of Unemployment and Precarious Employment**

Assessment of policy responses in Nigeria reveals a persistent mismatch between crime-reduction strategies and the labour market realities that drive many offences. Traditional responses to crime have emphasised policing, prosecutions and, increasingly, counter-terrorism and special operations against organised groups; while these remain necessary, they do not address the supply of vulnerable persons produced by precarious labour markets (UNODC, 2023).

The National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Labour and various job-creation initiatives (including conditional cash transfers, small business support schemes and training programmes) have been implemented with varying scope, but independent evaluations and commentary underscore shortcomings in scale, targeting and sustainability. For example, many youth employment interventions provide short-term stipends or training without creating pathways to stable, decent jobs, a gap that leaves beneficiaries susceptible to re-entering precarious informal work or being recruited into illicit activities after programme completion. In this sense, current employment strategies often address symptoms rather than the structural quality of work in Nigeria.

When policy instruments have sought to combine livelihoods support with crime prevention, results are mixed and under-evaluated. Pilot programmes that integrate vocational training with community policing or restorative justice show promise in targeted localities, but national-level scaling is constrained by funding, weak monitoring and bureaucratic fragmentation. In addition, anti-fraud and cybercrime enforcement has produced high-profile arrests and prosecutions, yet UNODC's analyses indicate that enforcement alone has limited deterrent power unless accompanied by measures that reduce the labour market supply of prospective offenders and cut

off the financial incentives that sustain organised networks (UNODC, 2023). The rapid technological sophistication of fraud networks has often outpaced state capacity, and without parallel investments in youth employment, digital skills for legitimate markets, and financial inclusion, enforcement can simply displace or decentralise illegal activity rather than eliminate it.

A further problem is the narrow focus of many employment policies on formal-sector job creation, which neglects the reality that over 90% of Nigerian workers are in informal employment. Policy design that assumes transitions into formal wage jobs will be the primary route out of precarious work therefore risks misallocating resources. Instead, evidence suggests that policies oriented to raising the quality of informal work through social protection for informal workers, extension of labour rights, portable benefits, and regulation of platform-based gig work — may be more realistic and effective short term tools for reducing precarity and, by extension, the economic drivers of crime (ILO, 2023). Programmes that couple decent work promotion with community-level crime prevention can, in principle, reduce both vulnerability and criminal recruitment if they are sufficiently resourced and grounded in local labour realities.

In conclusion, while Nigeria has a range of policies and enforcement mechanisms aimed at reducing unemployment and criminality, current efforts insufficiently confront the central problem identified in the earlier sections: the prevalence of precarious employment and its role as a driver of crime. Strengthening policy effectiveness will require three complementary shifts: firstly, re-orienting employment policy to improve the quality, predictability and protections of work in the informal sector; secondly, aligning crime prevention strategies with labour market interventions that reduce the economic incentives for criminal recruitment; and thirdly, investing in monitoring and evaluation to generate the granular evidence needed to scale proven pilot programmes. Without these adjustments, policing and short-term employment interventions risk treating symptoms while leaving the structural causes of crime largely intact.

## **Empirical Reviews**

Garba et al., (2019) examined violent crime and unemployment in their paper titled *Violent Crime and Unemployment in Nigeria: An ARDL Bound Test Cointegration*, focusing on national-level time-series data for Nigeria. Grounded in macroeconomic and socio-economic theories of crime that link labour market stress to offending, the study employed an econometric time-series design using ARDL bounds testing to explore both short-run and long-run

relationships; it drew on secondary data from the National Bureau of Statistics and crime records, applying unit-root tests, cointegration procedures and error-correction modelling for analysis. The major finding was a statistically significant positive association between unemployment shocks and violent crime rates, with evidence that unemployment increases tend to be followed by rises in robbery and assault, and a long-run equilibrium relationship was reported; the authors concluded that labour market instability is an important predictor of violent crime in Nigeria.

However, its strong econometric approach offers credible macro-level evidence but it is limited in unpacking labour market heterogeneity for example the differential roles of underemployment and precarious informal work and it does not trace individual-level mechanisms linking insecure jobs to offending. Consequently the present paper addressed that gap by explicitly distinguished precarious employment from open unemployment and by investigating the micro-level pathways through which precarious work contributes to criminal behaviour in Nigeria.

Ojo (2021) carried out an empirical study titled *Unemployment and Crime Rate Nexus: An Empirical Evidence from Nigeria* that covered the period 1990–2020 and used Nigeria as its area of study, situating the analysis within strain and economic rational-choice frameworks which posit that economic deprivation increases incentives for crime. The research adopted an econometric, longitudinal design using secondary macro-data from the National Bureau of Statistics and police/crime series, employing regression techniques and time-series diagnostics to test hypotheses about unemployment's impact on overall crime rates. Key findings indicated a robust positive relationship between rising unemployment and overall crime incidence, with particular sensitivity among property-related offences, and the author concluded that policy responses need to prioritise employment generation to mitigate crime.

Albeit, while Ojo's work confirms the unemployment–crime nexus at national scale and is valuable for policy dialogue, it treats employment largely as a dichotomy (employed/unemployed) and therefore overlooked the quality dimension of work; this paper filled that lacuna by focusing on precarious employment as a distinct, measurable phenomenon and by exploring how insecure, informal and low-paid work interacts with unemployment to influence criminal behaviour in Nigeria.

Dawodu (2022) investigated precarious work and temporary employment in selected banks in Lagos State in a paper that examined the prevalence and consequences of precarious



arrangements within the Nigerian banking sector, drawing on labour process theory to explain how managerial practices and contract flexibility produce insecurity. The study used a cross-sectional field design with primary data collection involving structured questionnaires and interviews of bank employees in Lagos; analysis combined descriptive statistics with inferential techniques (chi-square tests and regression) to assess relationships between contract type, conditions of service and worker outcomes. The major findings showed that temporary and contract-based staff experienced lower benefits, weaker job security and higher perceived economic vulnerability compared with permanent staff, and the paper concluded that precarious arrangements were widespread even within formal-sector organisations and had negative implications for worker wellbeing.

However, the banking-sector case study is illuminating but sector-specific, limiting generalisability to the informal-dominated mass of Nigerian employment; the present paper addressed this gap by examining precarious employment across formal and informal contexts and linking such conditions more directly to criminal behaviour outcomes.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) examined Organized Crime In Nigeria: A Threat Assessment (NOCTA), an evidence-focused national threat assessment that covers drug trafficking, kidnapping, cyber-enabled fraud and other organised offences across Nigerian regions and uses criminological frameworks emphasising supply, demand and opportunity structures for crime. The NOCTA combined quantitative law-enforcement statistics, case investigations, interviews with practitioners and open-source reporting in a mixed-methods empirical design, applying spatial and trend analyses alongside thematic coding of qualitative data to map organised crime modalities and recruitment dynamics. Major findings pointed to the growing involvement of urban youth often with limited formal employment prospects or precarious livelihoods in cyberfraud networks, kidnap-for-ransom groups and other organised criminal formations, and the NOCTA concluded that organised crime in Nigeria is adaptive, diversified and linked to socio-economic vulnerabilities.

Although, the study offers rich operational insights and documents recruitment pathways, but it is primarily oriented to security responses and does not systematically quantify the causal contribution of precarious employment to individual offending; this paper therefore complement NOCTA's findings by empirically interrogating how precarious employment, distinct from

unemployment per se operates as a driver of criminal behaviour and by proposing labour-market informed prevention strategies.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This paper was hinged on two theoretical foundations, namely:

Strain Theory and Precariat Theory

### **Strain Theory**

Robert K. Merton in 1938 propounded the Strain Theory within criminology, building on Émile Durkheim's earlier work on anomie. The central assumption of the theory is that crime emerges when there is a disjunction between culturally approved goals and the legitimate means available to achieve them. In societies where success is measured in terms of material wealth, individuals who are unable to secure stable and legitimate livelihoods often turn to illegitimate opportunities to realise those goals. One of the strengths of this theory is its enduring explanatory power in linking structural inequality, deprivation and unemployment to criminal behaviour.

Its relevance to the present paper lies in its explanation on how unemployment and precarious employment in Nigeria create a strain on individuals who, despite aspirations for economic security, find themselves excluded from stable and meaningful work opportunities, thereby increasing the likelihood of engaging in theft, fraud or violence as alternative strategies. The theory can be applied directly to show that the failure of the Nigerian labour market to provide secure employment channels forces many, particularly the youth, into crime as a coping mechanism. However, a weakness of Merton's theory is that it tends to generalise and does not sufficiently account for why some individuals under strain resort to crime while others adopt non-criminal coping mechanisms, leaving the role of individual agency and resilience underexplored.

### **Precariat Theory**

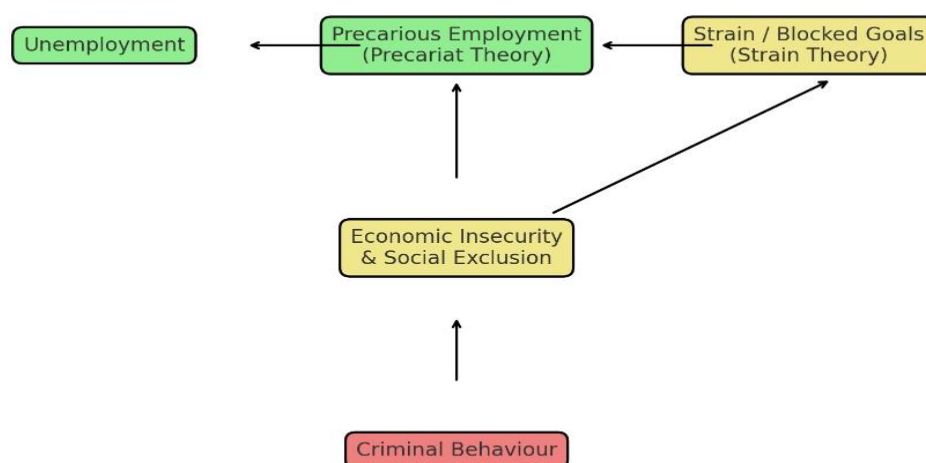
Guy Standing in 2011 advanced the concept of the Precariat within industrial sociology, situating it as a new class theory for contemporary labour markets. The key assumption is that globalisation and neoliberal labour reforms have generated a class of workers trapped in precarious employment characterised by insecurity, instability, low pay and lack of social protection. This theory highlights that the precariat is distinct from both traditional working

classes and stable middle classes, as its members face chronic economic vulnerability and social exclusion.

Its strength lies in explaining how the rise of precarious employment undermines not only income stability but also social identity, citizenship rights and overall wellbeing, making it highly relevant for examining Nigeria's labour market where informal and insecure jobs dominate. Applying to this paper, Standing's theory helps to show that the growth of casualisation and informal work in Nigeria is not just an economic issue but also a structural driver of behaviours that may include resorting to criminal activities for survival. It captures how workers in insecure positions may perceive legitimate employment as offering no clear pathway out of poverty, thereby turning to illegitimate activities such as cybercrime, kidnapping or smuggling.

Nonetheless, a weakness of the theory is that it is more descriptive than predictive and sometimes too broad, making it difficult to empirically measure the boundaries of the "precariat" class in diverse national contexts such as Nigeria where informality is historically entrenched.

#### **Conceptual Framework: Unemployment, Precarious Employment and Criminal Behaviour**



#### **Conceptual Framework**

**Source:** Arokoyo and Yunusa, (2025)

The conceptual framework in the diagram above illustrates how unemployment and precarious employment serve as the independent variables driving conditions that lead to criminal

behaviour in Nigeria. Drawing on Precariat Theory, precarious employment is depicted as insecure and unstable work that fosters vulnerability, while Strain Theory explains how both unemployment and precarious work generate blocked opportunities and frustration.

These conditions manifest through mediating variables such as strain, economic insecurity and social exclusion, which together increase the likelihood of individuals engaging in crime as a coping mechanism. The arrows show a causal flow, beginning with labour market insecurity, channelling through psychological and socio-economic strain, and culminating in criminal behaviour as the dependent variable. This framework highlights that crime is not merely a product of outright joblessness but also of precarious and unstable employment conditions that characterise much of Nigeria's labour market.

## **Discussions**

This paper examined the relationship between unemployment, precarious employment and criminal behaviour in Nigeria, and confirmed that unemployment continues to be a critical driver of crime in Nigeria, reinforcing long-established scholarly claims that economic deprivation is strongly linked to criminal outcomes.

Following the submission of Ojo (2021), the paper established a positive relationship between unemployment and overall crime rates, noting that property crimes in particular rise sharply during periods of economic downturn. This position was supported by Guza et al., (2019) who found that unemployment shocks were followed by increases in violent crimes such as robbery and assault, showing a consistent trend across time-series data. These findings converge with the evidence presented in this paper, which demonstrates that joblessness is not merely an economic issue but a strong predictor of criminal behaviour in Nigerian society. This alignment suggests that the structural inability of the Nigerian labour market to absorb its growing youth population remains one of the most significant risk factors for insecurity.

Beyond unemployment, this paper extends the discussion to precarious employment, an area that has been underexplored in Nigerian scholarship despite its growing relevance in global debates. Standing's (2011) concept of the precariat underscores that insecure, low-paid and unstable jobs can produce vulnerabilities as severe as outright unemployment. Inline with the submission of Wu et al. (2022), this paper showed that precarious employment undermines wellbeing and increases the likelihood of illegal coping strategies, while Mai (2023) argued that such conditions

erode social inclusion and citizenship rights. In Nigeria, this paper confirmed the presence of precarious employment even within the formal banking sector, showing that temporary workers faced weaker job security and lower benefits as opined by Dawodu (2022). This paper posited by demonstrating that precarious work in Nigeria, particularly within the informal economy that dominates the labour market, is closely tied to frustration, economic insecurity and eventual drift into criminal activities. This highlights that crime is not only a product of unemployment but also of poor-quality work that offers little stability or future prospects.

The analysis of this paper further shows that crime in Nigeria must be understood within the broader socio-economic context of strain, exclusion and the search for survival. The UNODC (2023) in its national threat assessment documented how young Nigerians with limited job prospects or insecure livelihoods are increasingly drawn into cybercrime, kidnapping and fraud networks. This aligns with the current revelations that economic insecurity, whether caused by unemployment or precarious work, mediates the pathway into criminal behaviour. By juxtaposing these findings with earlier works, the paper demonstrates that both outright joblessness and precarious forms of employment create structural pressures that channel individuals into illegitimate activities. Thus, the relationship between work insecurity and crime is not linear but shaped by the interplay of labour market instability, social exclusion and the absence of effective social protection.

Furthermore, the theoretical perspectives reviewed provide strong support for the findings of this paper. For instance, Merton's Strain Theory (1938) is clearly reflected in the way unemployment and precarious employment generate blocked opportunities for achieving socially valued goals through legitimate means, pushing individuals towards crime as an alternative pathway. This explains why some unemployed or underemployed Nigerians resort to fraud, robbery or kidnapping when their economic aspirations are persistently frustrated. Likewise, Standing's Precariat Theory (2011) directly supports the findings that precarious employment is a structural driver of crime. By framing insecure, casual and informal jobs as conditions that produce a vulnerable class, the theory helps explain how precarious workers who lack economic stability and social protections are more prone to engaging in illegal activities to survive. In sum, these theories strengthen the argument that both unemployment and precarious employment fuel criminal behaviour in Nigeria by creating conditions of strain, insecurity and exclusion.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examined the relationship between unemployment, precarious employment and criminal behaviour in Nigeria, highlighting how structural weaknesses in the labour market translate into heightened insecurity. It can be concluded arising from the foregoing that unemployment remains a major driver of crime, but equally important is the rise of precarious employment, which subjects workers to instability, low wages, and lack of social protections.

Such conditions exacerbate economic insecurity, foster frustration, and create fertile ground for criminal behaviour. Supported by Strain Theory and Precariat Theory, the paper underscores that crime in Nigeria is not only the outcome of outright joblessness but also of the poor quality of employment available to a large share of the population. The analysis therefore emphasizes that sustainable crime reduction cannot be achieved by job creation alone but must be tied to the creation of decent, stable, and secure employment opportunities.

## **Recommendations**

Arising from the above, the paper put forward the following recommendations;

- i. The Nigerian government at all levels should prioritise the creation of decent and sustainable jobs rather than short-term or casual work opportunities, by strengthening industrial policies, supporting manufacturing, and investing in youth-oriented skills development programmes that align with global labour demands.
- ii. There is a need for labour market reforms to curb precarious employment, especially in the informal sector where the majority of Nigerians work. This can be achieved through strict regulation of contract employment, enforcement of minimum wage laws, and expansion of social protection schemes to cover temporary and informal workers.
- iii. Crime prevention strategies in Nigeria should be broadened to incorporate economic empowerment initiatives, such as targeted entrepreneurship support, microcredit schemes, and vocational training for unemployed and underemployed youths, to reduce the allure of illicit activities as survival mechanisms.
- iv. The Nigerian government at all levels, civil society, and private sector must collaborate in implementing integrated unemployment and crime reduction policies that address both joblessness and precarious work simultaneously. This requires evidence-based policymaking, stronger institutions to enforce labour rights, and continuous monitoring of

employment quality alongside unemployment rates to ensure that the root causes of criminal behaviour are effectively tackled.

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