



## *RESEARCH ARTICLE*

### **POLITICAL THUGGERY AND SUSTAINABLE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the complex relationship between political thuggery and sustainable youth development in Nigeria, focusing on how political violence undermines efforts to empower young people socioeconomically, politically, and educationally. Political thuggery—defined as the recruitment and use of youth by political actors to intimidate opponents, manipulate elections, or enforce party loyalty—has become a persistent feature of Nigeria’s political landscape. This paper adopts mixed methodology; qualitative and quantitative approach, drawing on existing literature, policy documents, and interviews with youth leaders, political analysts, and civil society organizations, totaling 500 respondents. The findings reveal that political thuggery not only endangers the lives and future prospects of youth involved, but also erodes democratic values, fosters a culture of impunity, and diverts attention and resources away from sustainable development initiatives. The study argues that unless decisive measures are taken to address youth unemployment, political exclusion, and weak institutional frameworks, the cycle of violence and underdevelopment will persist. Recommendations include policy reforms focused on youth empowerment, civic education, electoral integrity, and the enforcement of laws against political violence. The research concludes that dismantling the structures that perpetuate political thuggery is essential for achieving meaningful and sustainable youth development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Political thuggery, youth, sustainable development, electoral integrity

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## 1.0. INTRODUCTION

In the Nigeria of today, the youths population is a significant demographic and they represent a substantial portion of the country's population. This demographic dividend presents both opportunities and challenges. While some key aspects of the demographic benefits include having the largest youth population in Africa, the youths contributing to economic growth, development and innovation, it is regrettable that the large population of the youth is faced with challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and limited opportunities which can lead to social unrest and vulnerability to exploitation. This is why many are vulnerable to political thuggery, hence, undermining sustainable development (Ahamefula, 2023).

According to Nnadi and Olemeforo (2019), Political thuggery in Nigeria has evolved from a sporadic electoral nuisance to a pervasive socio-political crisis with profound implications for national development. Since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999, political violence, often perpetrated by youths mobilized by political elites, has become institutionalized, undermining democratic processes and eroding public trust in governance. Youth involvement in political thuggery is driven by multifaceted factors, including economic deprivation, lack of education, and limited employment opportunities. Many young Nigerians, particularly in impoverished regions, are coerced or incentivized to engage in electoral violence as a means of livelihood, often under the influence of illicit substances. This exploitation not only jeopardizes their safety but also stunts their personal and professional growth, perpetuating a cycle of underdevelopment.

The implications of political thuggery extend beyond immediate electoral disturbances. Research from Adesina and Olubunmi (2020) indicates a direct correlation between political violence and broader societal insecurity, including increased rates of kidnapping, armed robbery, and terrorism. These security challenges further deter investment, disrupt education, and exacerbate poverty, thereby hindering sustainable development efforts. Despite the grim realities, the Nigerian youth demographic also represents a potent force for positive transformation. Movements such as #NotTooYoungToRun have successfully advocated for constitutional amendments, reducing the age threshold for political office eligibility, thereby fostering greater youth participation in governance. Moreover, initiatives focused on skill acquisition and entrepreneurship has empowered young individuals, redirecting their energies from destructive activities to productive endeavors (Uwakwe, 2021).

Political thuggery is imperative for the realization of sustainable youth development in Nigeria. This necessitates a multifaceted approach encompassing stringent legal frameworks, comprehensive educational reforms, and robust civic engagement programs. With the transformation of the youths from instruments of violence into agents of development, Nigeria can pave the way for a more secure, prosperous, and democratic future. Though this exercise is claimed to be ongoing by the Nigerian government, the veracity of this claim is



yet to be ascertained. It is on the basis of this background that this study intends to investigate political thuggery and sustainable youth development in Nigeria.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

Despite Nigeria's strategic demographic advancement and high proportion (over 60 percent) of youth in its population, the potential of this critical segment remains grossly underutilized and systematically undermined by recurring patterns of political violence. One of the most pervasive and deeply entrenched manifestations of this violence is political thuggery—the mobilization and manipulation of youths by political elites to engage in acts of intimidation, electoral violence, and other forms of political disruption. Political thuggery not only exposes young individuals to cycles of violence and criminality, but also diverts their energies from productive civic engagement, educational attainment, and economic empowerment, thereby eroding the foundation for sustainable youth development.

Recent literature has addressed aspects of electoral violence and youth marginalization in governance, yet there remains a significant gap in understanding the complex, cyclical relationship between political thuggery and the long-term developmental prospects of Nigerian youth. The normalization of political thuggery perpetuates a culture of impunity, weakens democratic institutions, and fosters socio-political instability—all of which are antithetical to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those relating to quality education, decent work, and peace, justice, and strong institutions. This study seeks to critically examine how the persistent instrumentalization of youth for political thuggery compromises their personal development, undermines national stability, and stalls inclusive growth, thereby posing a serious threat to Nigeria's developmental trajectory. For these reasons, some paramount questions have been established like; what are the underlying socio-political and economic factors that drive youth involvement in political thuggery in Nigeria? 2. What role do political elites and party structures play in the recruitment and mobilization of youths for thuggery? And which policy interventions and grassroots initiatives can be effective in curbing political thuggery and promoting sustainable youth development in Nigeria?

### **1.2. Objectives of the Study**

This study focuses on the following specific objectives.

1. To investigate the socio-economic and political determinants of youth involvement in political thuggery in Nigeria.
2. To examine the roles of political actors and institutions in perpetuating or mitigating youth exploitation through political violence.



3. To evaluate existing policy frameworks and community-based initiatives aimed at discouraging youth participation in political thuggery and fostering sustainable development.

## **2.0. CONCEPTUALIZATION AND THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### **2.1. Conceptualization**

#### **Politics**

Politics is a multifaceted concept that has evolved across historical periods, ideological spectrums, and academic disciplines. At its core, politics refers to the processes and activities associated with the governance of a society, particularly the negotiation of power and the allocation of resources. Contemporary scholarship reflects a dynamic understanding of politics, emphasizing not only formal institutions and statecraft but also informal practices and everyday interactions.

According to Harold Lasswell (1936) “Politics is who gets what, when, and how.” Lasswell's definition focuses on the distribution of power and resources, emphasizing politics as a process of decision-making and allocation in society. For David Easton in his book "The Political System" (1953), he defined “Politics as the authoritative allocation of values for a society.” Easton's systems theory defines politics as the systematic distribution of societal values, emphasizing authority and legitimacy in the political process. According to Max Weber (1919) “Politics is a striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state.” Weber presents politics as fundamentally about power, focusing on conflict, authority, and leadership within both domestic and international contexts.

One foundational approach views politics as the activity through which people make, preserve, and amend the general rules under which they live (Heywood, 2019). This normative dimension is particularly central to political theory, which often focuses on justice, legitimacy, and authority. In this sense, politics is inseparable from the structures of government, law, and civic participation. In contrast, other scholars emphasize the conflictual and agonistic nature of politics. Mouffe (2018) argues that politics is inherently about contestation between different social groups, ideologies, and interests. From this perspective, politics involves not only consensus-building but also the management of dissent and the negotiation of pluralism in democratic societies. This aligns with what Lefort (2017) described as the "permanent openness" of the political sphere, a domain characterized by the constant renegotiation of meaning and power.

Moreover, politics is not restricted to the state or formal institutions. Recent political sociology highlights how power relations operate across various levels of society, including workplaces, families, and cultural spaces (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). This broadened scope



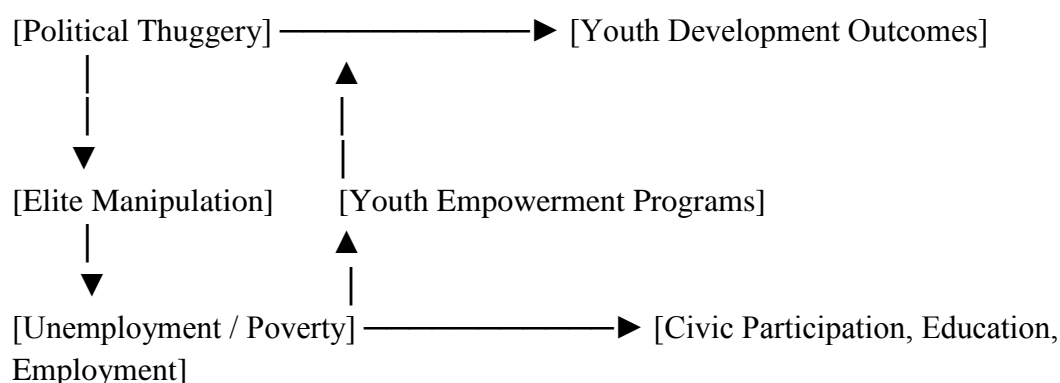
reflects a shift from state-centric to society-centric perspectives, which consider how power is exercised and resisted in everyday life. In international relations, the meaning of politics also encompasses issues of sovereignty, global governance, and power asymmetries between states and non-state actors. According to Brown, Ainley, and Bellamy (2019), politics in the global realm is shaped by both normative concerns—such as human rights and international law—and realist considerations of power and interest. Importantly, feminist and postcolonial scholars have expanded the definition of politics to include the personal and the private. As Enloe (2017) famously noted, "the personal is political"—a recognition that seemingly apolitical domains, such as domestic labor or cultural representation, are deeply entangled with political dynamics.

In conclusion, the meaning of politics is neither static nor singular. It spans governance, power, conflict, and identity across multiple scales. Whether viewed as the art of government, the practice of contestation, or the everyday negotiation of power, politics remains a central feature of human social life. Contemporary scholarship continues to broaden and deepen our understanding of politics, reflecting the complex and changing nature of political life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Political Thuggery

Political thuggery, often characterized by the use of violence, coercion, and intimidation to influence political outcomes, remains a pressing issue in many developing democracies. It undermines democratic institutions, deters political participation, and perpetuates cycles of violence and authoritarianism. Recent scholarship explores the structural, socio-economic, and institutional factors that enable political thuggery and its impact on governance and electoral integrity. Political thuggery is generally understood as the use or threat of violence, often orchestrated by political actors through hired youth, to achieve electoral or political ends (Ikelegbe, 2006).

### Diagrammatic explanations of the concept of political thuggery



**Source:** Authors' compilation (2025).



In the Nigerian context, thuggery involves organized gangs, often armed, used to intimidate opponents, rig elections, or suppresses dissent. Studies have linked this phenomenon to weak political institutions, corruption, and the personalization of political power (Omotola, 2010).

- Arrows indicate the direction of influence.
- Political thuggery directly affects youth development outcomes negatively.
- Moderators like elite manipulation and poverty exacerbate this.
- Interventions (youth empowerment programs, civic education) can mitigate the negative effects.

Political thuggery can be broadly defined as the mobilization of violence or threats by political actors to gain advantage, suppress opposition, or manipulate electoral processes (Ibeanu et al., 2016). It is frequently associated with "godfatherism" and clientelistic politics, where political elites recruit and sponsor gangs or "area boys" to maintain political dominance (Adeleke, 2020). In many cases, such groups operate with impunity due to weak law enforcement or the complicity of state actors.

Structural poverty, unemployment, and lack of political education contribute significantly to the proliferation of political thuggery. Youths, particularly in marginalized urban and rural areas, are often recruited into thuggery due to limited economic opportunities and a desire for political relevance (Omilusi, 2017). According to Uadiale and Imhonopi (2020), these youths are weaponized during elections but abandoned post-election, perpetuating a cycle of violence and disenfranchisement. Additionally, weak democratic institutions and a lack of accountability mechanisms allow political violence to flourish. Electoral commissions, security agencies, and the judiciary often lack the autonomy or will to curb electoral violence effectively. As argued by Bamidele (2019), institutional weakness creates an enabling environment for political elites to manipulate the electoral process through intimidation and physical coercion.

Political thuggery, often referred to as "Sara-Suka" in northern Nigeria, has become a pervasive issue in the country's democratic processes. This phenomenon involves the use of violence and intimidation by individuals, often youths, to influence electoral outcomes and suppress opposition. The prevalence of political thuggery poses significant challenges to democratic consolidation, electoral integrity, and societal stability.

The elite theory offers a pertinent lens through which to understand political thuggery. This theory posits that a small group of elites holds power and influence over the majority, often manipulating societal structures to maintain their dominance. In the context of Nigerian politics, elites may exploit vulnerable youths as thugs to perpetuate their control, undermining democratic principles and institutions.



## **Origin of Political Thuggery in Nigeria**

The origin of political thuggery in Nigeria can be traced to the country's colonial and post-independence political history, shaped by power struggles, weak institutions, and a culture of impunity. During the Colonial Legacy and Early Political Rivalries, there was Indirect Rule and Ethnic Fragmentation under British colonial rule. Nigeria was governed through indirect rule, which entrenched ethnic divisions and competition among regions (North, East, and West). This laid the groundwork for identity-based politics. During this period, Pre-Independence Political Parties as nationalist movements gained momentum in the 1940s and 1950s; parties like the NCNC, AG, and NPC emerged. These parties were often regionally and ethnically based, intensifying rivalry and setting the stage for violent political competition.

### **First Republic and Use of Political Violence (1960–1966)**

The 1964 federal elections and the 1965 Western Region elections were marred by fraud and violence. Politicians began recruiting local gangs and thugs to intimidate opponents and suppress voters. "Operation Wetie" in the Western Region: A notable early instance of political thuggery was the violent protest in the West during the 1965 elections, where political opponents were attacked, and properties were burned.

Again, military interventions and erosion of institutions (1966–1979) also promoted thuggery in the Nigerian political system. The military coups that began in 1966 were partially triggered by the breakdown of law and order caused by political violence. More so, although the military suspended democratic processes, they did not build strong democratic institutions, allowing a return to old patterns when civilian rule resumed.

### **Second and Third Republics: Thuggery Becomes Institutionalized (1979–1993)**

During the Second Republic (1979–1983), political violence became more organized, with politicians sponsoring cults, gangs, and militant groups to secure electoral victories. Thugs were used to snatch ballot boxes, disrupt rallies, and attack opponents, practices that were further embedded during the aborted Third Republic.

### **Return to Democracy in 1999 and the Rise of Armed Political Gangs**

The return to civilian rule in 1999 saw the resurgence and normalization of political thuggery, now more sophisticated and dangerous. Cult groups and militants in regions like the Niger Delta, and informal gangs like the "Area Boys" in Lagos or "Sara Suka" in the North, were co-opted into political campaigns. Politicians often armed and funded these groups during elections, only to lose control over them later, leading to broader insecurity and criminality.



Conclusively, Political thuggery in Nigeria originated from a combination of colonial manipulation, ethnic politics, and weak state institutions, and has evolved through decades of military and civilian rule. It is both a symptom and cause of the country's democratic fragility, and addressing it requires systemic reforms including strengthening law enforcement, electoral reforms, political accountability, and youth empowerment.

## Sustainable Youth Development

Sustainable youth development is a multifaceted approach that integrates the empowerment, education, and active participation of young people in societal processes. This paradigm aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). This discussion critically examines the concept of sustainable youth development, drawing on scholarly perspectives and empirical studies post-2014.

Sustainable youth development transcends mere economic empowerment; it encompasses the holistic development of young individuals, fostering their capabilities to contribute meaningfully to society. According to the UNDP Youth Strategy (2014), empowering youth involves providing them with the tools, opportunities, and platforms to participate in economic, social, and political spheres, thereby ensuring their active role in sustainable development processes. Key factors that promote sustainable youth development are examined below;

### Education as a Catalyst

Quality education is pivotal in equipping youth with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate and contribute to sustainable development. A study by Ekpiken and Ukabio (2015) highlighted the significance of higher education institutions in Cross River State, Nigeria, in fostering youth empowerment. They argued that when youths are empowered through education, they are better positioned to contribute to the sustainable development of their communities.

Moreover, the Young Persons' Plan for the Planet (YPPP) Program, implemented in Australia and Mauritius, demonstrated that strategic planning-based experiential learning significantly enhanced adolescents' understanding and engagement with the SDGs. The program led to notable improvements in students' attitudes towards sustainability, underscoring the importance of education in fostering a generation committed to sustainable development.



### Economic Empowerment and Employment

Youth unemployment remains a critical challenge, particularly in developing regions. Iduseri et al. (2018) conducted a study in Abuja, Nigeria, revealing that factors such as low levels of education, lack of employable skills, and poor policies contribute significantly to youth unemployment. The study emphasized the need for initiatives aligned with SDG 8, such as skills acquisition programs and entrepreneurial support, to mitigate unemployment and promote economic development.

Similarly, Orogbu et al. (2021) examined the role of entrepreneurship in Southeast Nigeria, finding a strong positive relationship between youth empowerment and innovativeness. Their research suggested that fostering entrepreneurial skills among youth is a viable pathway to sustainable development, as it not only addresses unemployment but also stimulates economic growth.

### Civic Engagement and Participation

Active participation in governance and decision-making processes is essential for sustainable development. The Nigeria Youth SDGs Network, launched in 2017, exemplifies youth-led initiatives aimed at localizing the SDGs. By focusing on education, employment, and civic participation, the network empowers young Nigerians to engage actively in sustainable development efforts, thereby contributing to the realization of the SDGs .

Conclusively, Sustainable youth development is integral to achieving the SDGs and ensuring a prosperous future. By prioritizing education, economic empowerment, and active participation, societies can harness the potential of their youth to drive sustainable development. However, addressing the challenges that impede youth development requires concerted efforts from governments, educational institutions, and civil society organizations to create an enabling environment for youth to thrive and contribute meaningfully to societal progress.

### Impact of political thuggery on Sustainable Youth Development in Nigeria

Political thuggery undermines key aspects of sustainable youth development—education, civic participation, and employment. Youths involved in violent political activities are more likely to drop out of school, be incarcerated, or suffer long-term psychological trauma (Adebayo, 2013). Furthermore, the normalization of violence disincentivizes merit-based opportunities and fosters a culture of impunity. Political elites often act as the primary sponsors of political violence. Research by Human Rights Watch (2007) notes that during elections, youth are recruited, armed, and later abandoned, leading to a cycle of violence and



criminality. Political parties lack institutional accountability mechanisms, and party financing is opaque, enabling patronage networks to thrive (Agbaje & Adejumbi, 2006).

Political thuggery has emerged as a critical impediment to sustainable youth development in Nigeria. It refers to the recruitment and use of young people for violent political activities, including election-related violence, intimidation, and disruption of political processes. This practice undermines democratic participation, security, and the developmental potential of youth.

Numerous studies have identified the adverse consequences of political thuggery on youth empowerment. For instance, Omilusi (2015) argues that political thuggery perpetuates a cycle of poverty and criminality among youth, as political elites exploit their socio-economic vulnerability for personal gain. Instead of engaging in productive ventures, many youths are lured into thuggery with promises of financial rewards, leading to a distorted sense of civic responsibility (Ajayi, 2019). Furthermore, political violence diminishes the prospects for education and employment among Nigerian youths. According to Olanrewaju and Akinbobola (2017), the climate of insecurity associated with political thuggery discourages investment in youth development programs and often leads to displacement, trauma, or death of involved individuals. These factors collectively contribute to social instability and hinder Nigeria's progress toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth) and Goal 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions). Additionally, political thuggery erodes the political engagement and agency of Nigerian youths. Instead of becoming change agents, many young people are co-opted into undemocratic practices, thus entrenching a culture of violence and impunity (Okafor & Aniche, 2020). This undermines democratic consolidation and deprives youths of meaningful participation in governance.

Political thuggery has profound implications for democratic development. It erodes public trust in political institutions and the electoral process, discourages political participation, and often leads to the emergence of leaders who lack legitimacy (Eze, 2018). Furthermore, it reinforces authoritarian tendencies, as political actors resort to coercion rather than persuasion to gain and retain power. In the long term, political thuggery can institutionalize violence as a legitimate means of political engagement, undermining peace and stability. In Nigeria, for instance, the persistent use of thugs in elections has contributed to recurring post-election violence and deepened ethno-political divisions (Akinola, 2021).

Political thuggery has detrimental effects on Nigeria's democratic processes. These impacts include;

- **Voter Suppression and Electoral Fraud:** Thugs intimidate voters and engage in ballot box snatching, leading to voter apathy and compromised election outcomes.



- **Erosion of Public Trust:** The prevalence of violence and electoral malpractices diminishes public confidence in democratic institutions and processes.
- **Increased Insecurity:** The activities of political thugs often escalate into broader insecurity, contributing to crimes such as kidnapping, armed robbery, and ritual killings.

Thuggery remains a significant challenge to Nigeria's democratic consolidation. Addressing the root causes, including unemployment, substance abuse, and weak governance, is essential for mitigating this issue. Through comprehensive reforms and societal engagement, Nigeria can work towards a more peaceful and democratic political environment.

In conclusion, political thuggery poses a serious threat to sustainable youth development in Nigeria. Addressing this menace requires multi-faceted strategies, including political education, youth empowerment initiatives, and stringent enforcement of electoral laws to deter political actors from engaging in such practices.

### **Factors Contributing to Thuggery in the Nigerian political system**

Political thuggery remains a significant challenge to democratic consolidation, particularly in fragile states. It is deeply embedded in socio-economic deprivation and political opportunism. Addressing it requires a multi-faceted approach involving institutional reform, economic development, and political accountability. Without such efforts, political thuggery will continue to pose a threat to peace, justice, and democracy. Several factors contribute to the prevalence of political thuggery in Nigeria:

1. **Youth Marginalization in Politics:** Lack of opportunities in governance and party structures.
2. **Economic Disempowerment:** Limited access to jobs, skills training, and capital.
3. **Poor Civic Awareness:** Weak understanding of rights and responsibilities; ineffective community policing.
4. **Youth Unemployment and Poverty:** High levels of unemployment and poverty make youths susceptible to manipulation by politicians who offer financial incentives in exchange for violent services during elections. Studies indicate that economic hardship is a significant driver of youth involvement in political violence.
5. **Substance Abuse:** Substance abuse among youths, including the use of local drugs, has been linked to increased aggression and susceptibility to manipulation for violent political activities.



6. Weak Governance and Corruption: Ineffective governance and corruption within law enforcement agencies hinder the prosecution of offenders, allowing thuggery to persist unchecked.
7. Political Culture and Party Practices: The absence of internal democracy within political parties and the prevalence of a "do or die" mentality among politicians encourage the use of thugs to achieve electoral success.
8. Weak Rule of Law: Lack of prosecution and accountability emboldens thugs and their sponsors.
9. Youth Unemployment: Idle and impoverished youths are easily recruited with promises of money or influence.
10. Godfatherism: Political godfathers use thugs to control electoral outcomes and ensure loyalty.
11. Poor Electoral Integrity: Weak electoral processes make violence a tool for achieving political ends.

### **Policy prospects of political thuggery in Nigeria political system**

Efforts to address political thuggery include youth empowerment programs, electoral reforms, and community policing. However, implementation remains weak due to corruption and lack of political will. Programs like the Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWIN) have seen mixed success due to issues of sustainability and access (World Bank, 2015). Scholars suggest several strategies to mitigate political thuggery. These include electoral reforms, strengthening democratic institutions, and creating economic opportunities for vulnerable populations. Civic education and youth empowerment programs are also critical in addressing the root causes of political thuggery (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2016). Additionally, holding sponsors of political violence accountable through legal and institutional means is essential for deterrence.

### **2.2. Theoretical Framework**

#### **Relative Deprivation Theory by Gurr, (1970) and the Clientelism Theory by James C. Scott (1970s)**

The study is grounded in Relative Deprivation Theory (Gurr, 1970). The theory posits that when individuals perceive a gap between expected and actual socio-economic conditions, they may resort to violence. Relative Deprivation Theory is a concept developed by political scientist Ted Robert Gurr in his influential 1970 book, *“Why Men Rebel”*. The theory seeks to explain why individuals or groups may engage in political violence or rebellion.



In simple terms, Relative deprivation refers to the perceived discrepancy between what people believe they deserve and what they actually experience. It's not about absolute poverty or hardship, but rather the perception of being deprived relative to expectations or others' situations. The Relative deprivation is the perceived discrepancy between value expectations and value capabilities. "Core idea of the theory includes; "Value expectations" - what people believe they are entitled to (e.g., rights, income, status) and "Value capabilities" - what they are actually able to achieve or receive. According to Gurr, the greater the gap between expectations and capabilities, the greater the intensity of frustration and when this frustration is widespread and intense, it can lead to collective violence, including protests, riots, insurgency, or revolution.

Relative Deprivation Theory helps explain why people who aren't the "worst off" may still revolt, especially when they feel their expected life conditions are unjustly denied. It's a psychological and sociopolitical lens on the roots of violence.

The Relative Deprivation Theory is relevant to this study because it explains how individuals or groups who perceive themselves as unfairly disadvantaged compared to others who may develop feelings of frustration, resentment, and injustice. In the context of political thuggery in Nigeria, this theory helps explain why many youths become involved in violent political activities. Many Nigerian youths feel economically marginalized, politically excluded, and socially disadvantaged compared to political elites or their peers who benefit from corrupt systems. This sense of deprivation can drive them to engage in political thuggery—often recruited by politicians as tools for violence—in hopes of gaining financial or social rewards. Thus, the theory is relevant because it sheds light on the underlying psychological and socio-economic factors that push youths toward political violence, hindering sustainable youth development in Nigeria.

Clientelism Theory explains how political actors exchange material benefits for political support, often through informal networks including thugs. Clientelism refers to a system of exchange where political support is provided in return for material benefits. In this relationship, "Patrons" (politicians or elites) provide resources such as money, jobs, or protection, while "clients" (often marginalized individuals or groups, including youth) offer political support, loyalty, or services — which can include engaging in violence or intimidation on behalf of the patron. It's a reciprocal, but unequal, relationship. James C. Scott (1970s) Clientelism theory included the following;

- Vote-buying: Patrons offer goods or money in exchange for votes.
- Political machines: Large-scale, organized clientelist systems, often tied to a political party.
- Ethnic or communal clientelism: Loyalty is based on identity groups rather than individuals.



Clientelism theory equally shows high relevance in explaining this study on "political thuggery and sustainable youth development in nigeria" because it helps to explain the underlying political and socio-economic relationships that fuel political thuggery, especially among the youth. Its implications on Sustainable Youth Development are that it limits youth empowerment, as loyalty to patrons is rewarded more than competence or innovation. It increases insecurity, which disrupts education and economic activities and Perpetuates poverty, because political thuggery does not offer sustainable income or growth paths.

Clientelism theory provides a powerful lens to understand how and why political thuggery persists in Nigeria. It shows that without structural reforms — such as reducing youth unemployment, strengthening institutions, and promoting transparent governance — sustainable youth development will remain elusive.

### **3.0. METHODOLOGY**

A mixed-methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques was employed. The use of surveys, interviews, and focus groups provided a robust data set capturing both statistical trends and personal experiences. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena and ensures the validity and reliability of the findings. The quantitative component involved a structured questionnaire administered to a stratified sample of 500 youths aged 18-35 across three geopolitical zones in Nigeria: South-West, South-East, and North-Central. The questionnaire assessed experiences of political violence, access to developmental opportunities and perceptions of political stability.

Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 30 key informants including youth leaders, political analysts, and community elders. These interviews provided nuanced insights into the mechanisms through which political thuggery affects youth developmental outcomes.

### **4.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

#### **4.1. Presentation of Results**

Descriptive statistics indicated that 68% of respondents had witnessed or been directly affected by political thuggery within their communities. The most commonly reported forms included intimidation (45%), physical violence (32%), and disruption of economic activities (28%). Correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between exposure to political thuggery and youth development indices ( $r = -0.56$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that increased political violence correlates with reduced access to education, employment, and healthcare services among youth populations.



Multiple regression analysis further showed that political thuggery significantly predicts youth unemployment rates ( $\beta = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and school dropout rates ( $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), controlling for socio-economic status and geographic location. These findings substantiate the hypothesis that political violence undermines sustainable youth development by limiting opportunities and fostering insecurity.

### Qualitative Insights

Thematic analysis of interviews illuminated several key mechanisms:

1. **Fear and Insecurity:** Youth respondents expressed that the threat of violence discourages participation in civic activities and disrupts schooling, leading to educational discontinuity.
2. **Economic Disruption:** Political thuggery often results in the closure of markets and businesses, limiting employment opportunities for young people.
3. **Political Disenfranchisement:** Youths involved or targeted in political violence often become disillusioned with governance structures, reducing their motivation to engage positively in developmental programs.

The empirical data unequivocally support the proposition that political thuggery constitutes a significant barrier to sustainable youth development in Nigeria. The negative correlation and predictive power of political violence on key developmental indices indicate that political instability exacerbates youth marginalization, impeding Nigeria's broader socio-economic progress.

Conclusively, empirical evidence from this study confirms that political thuggery in Nigeria critically undermines sustainable youth development by fostering insecurity, economic disruption, and political disengagement. Addressing this challenge requires integrated policy responses that enhance political accountability, promote youth inclusion in governance, and strengthen security measures to protect young citizens. Only through mitigating political violence can Nigeria realize the full potential of its youth demographic for sustainable national development.

## 4.2. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this research underscore the profound and multifaceted impact of political thuggery on sustainable youth development in Nigeria. Political thuggery, characterized by the use of violence, intimidation, and unlawful tactics to influence political outcomes, has emerged as a significant impediment to the holistic growth and empowerment of Nigerian youth.



Firstly, the data reveals that political thuggery creates an atmosphere of insecurity and fear among young people, thereby curtailing their active participation in democratic processes. This suppression of political engagement undermines the development of a politically aware and responsible youth population, which is essential for sustainable development. Youth who are either victims or witnesses of political violence tend to develop apathy or distrust towards governance structures, weakening the foundation for future leadership and civic responsibility.

Moreover, the findings indicate that political thuggery diverts the attention and resources of the youth away from productive activities such as education, entrepreneurship, and community development. Many youths get co-opted into violent political gang, which not only expose them to legal risks and physical harm but also limits their potential to contribute positively to society. This misdirection results in a loss of human capital that could otherwise fuel Nigeria's socio-economic growth.

The research also highlights how political thuggery exacerbates existing socio-economic inequalities and disenfranchisement among Nigerian youth. The manipulation and exploitation of vulnerable young populations by political actors reinforce cycles of poverty and marginalization. Consequently, youth development programs become ineffective or underfunded as political instability deters investments and disrupts policy implementation. Additionally, the study points to the psychological and social consequences of political thuggery on young people. Exposure to violence fosters feelings of alienation, hopelessness, and trauma, which hinder youths' capacity for innovation, collaboration, and community building. These emotional and social barriers further challenge efforts to achieve sustainable development goals centered on youth empowerment.

On a positive note, the findings also suggest that combating political thuggery through robust legal frameworks, youth education on Civic rights, and the promotion of peaceful political engagement could create a more enabling environment for youth development. Strengthening democratic institutions and youth-inclusive governance mechanisms emerged as critical pathways to mitigate the adverse effects of political thuggery. The findings affirm that political thuggery significantly hampers sustainable youth development in Nigeria by breeding insecurity, diverting youth energy from constructive endeavors, entrenching inequality, and inflicting psychological harm. Addressing this challenge requires a comprehensive approach involving political reforms, youth empowerment initiatives, and community-based peace building efforts to harness the demographic dividend and secure a stable, prosperous future for Nigerian youth.



## **5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1. Conclusion**

The pervasive phenomenon of political thuggery in Nigeria presents a significant impediment to sustainable youth development. Political thuggery in Nigeria is not just a security issue—it is a failure of political, economic, and social inclusion. Sustainable youth development must be central to any strategy addressing political violence. With coordinated efforts from government, civil society, and the private sector, Nigeria can transform its youth population from liabilities to leaders. This research has critically examined the intersection between political violence, youth marginalization, and governance dysfunction, highlighting how systemic exploitation of young people by political elites perpetuates cycles of violence, unemployment, and disenfranchisement. Political thuggery not only endangers the democratic process but also undermines the capacity of youth to act as agents of positive social change. Nigeria has one of the largest youth populations in the world, yet high unemployment, exclusion from governance, and weak civic institutions make many young people vulnerable to recruitment as political thugs. Political actors exploit this vulnerability, especially during elections, fueling cycles of violence and underdevelopment

Despite various policy interventions and youth empowerment programs, the persistence of structural inequalities, weak law enforcement mechanisms, and lack of political will continue to fuel youth vulnerability to recruitment into violent political activities. Rather than serving as tools of democratic engagement, many Nigerian youths are co-opted into partisan conflicts that threaten their physical, economic, and psychological well-being.

### **5.2. Recommendations**

To address this complex challenge, a multi-dimensional approach is necessary—one that involves institutional reforms, robust civic education, inclusive economic opportunities, and genuine youth participation in governance. Creating enabling environments where youths can thrive, innovate, and contribute meaningfully to national development must become a central objective of Nigeria's democratic and development agenda. Without dismantling the socio-political structures that sustain political thuggery, efforts at sustainable youth development will remain ineffective and superficial.

Government should institutionalize youth political empowerment through Electoral Reform and Inclusion Programs (ERIP). The youth marginalization in politics has led many to become tools of violence for political elites (i.e., political thuggery), due to lack of opportunity, voice, and economic alternatives. Therefore, government should enforce legislative quotas or incentives for youth political participation (e.g., 20–30% youth representation at local and national party levels). They should also expand platforms like the “Not Too Young to Run Act” with training, mentorship, and funding for youth candidates and ban the recruitment of under-35s in campaign security or vigilante roles during elections,



with strict electoral commission monitoring. This will help to builds political consciousness and democratic values among youth, reduces their vulnerability to political manipulation and Enhances youth confidence in the system, discouraging violence.

Government should ensure to strengthen vocational and entrepreneurial development as a deterrent to thuggery. High youth unemployment and poverty push many into political thuggery for survival or quick gain. To reduce youth involvement, government should Scale up Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) with real job placement pipelines, establish Youth Enterprise Development Zones (YEDZ) in high-risk areas with tax incentives for startups that hire young people and Fund youth cooperatives and tech hubs through the Bank of Industry or private-public partnerships. This will help to equips youth with skills and alternative livelihoods, Promotes innovation and economic resilience and Create community role models who can lead youth away from political violence.

Government should launch a Community-Led Civic Education and Security Sector Reform. Many youths lack civic understanding, and local security forces often fail to prevent or address political violence objectively. To ameliorate this, there is need to Launch grassroots civic education programs through local CSOs, schools, mosques/churches, and social media, focusing on democracy, nonviolence, and rights, Reform police-community relations with youth engagement units trained to mediate political tensions and create “Youth Peace Committees” during elections to monitor, report, and de-escalate potential violence. This will help to builds a culture of accountability and peace, reduces trust gap between youth and state institutions and empowers communities to resist political manipulation and thuggery.

Ultimately, curbing political thuggery is not solely a matter of security or law enforcement—it is a developmental imperative. Empowering the youth through education, employment, and political inclusion is essential not only for Nigeria’s stability but also for realizing its long-term developmental aspirations.

### **Competing Interest**

The authors have declared that no conflicting interest exist in this manuscript.

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