



The Influence of Family Economic Status on Students' Discipline in Public Secondary Schools in Kilifi County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the empirical influence of family economic status on students' discipline in public secondary schools in Kilifi County, Kenya. Characterized by persistent challenges regarding institutional deviance alongside localized financial hardships, the study targeted the critical mesosystemic interface between household material realities and school-level behavioral outcomes. Adopting a descriptive survey and mixed-methods research design, empirical data was systematically gathered from a sample of 361 government-sponsored students utilizing standardized 5-point Likert scale questionnaires and qualitative one-on-one interview schedules. The inquiry was theoretically anchored on Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to trace how material constraints within the domestic microsystem ripple into institutional spaces. Prior to hypothesis testing, structural diagnostic checks, including scatter plots and Normal Q-Q plots, verified the underlying assumptions of linearity and normality, justifying the use of parametric estimation. Descriptive findings revealed that resource deficits, particularly a severe lack of food or daily pocket money ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.206$), heavily drive school-level behavioral infractions through financial anxiety, chronic absenteeism, and toxic peer dependencies. Conversely, qualitative narratives uncovered an "affluence paradox," wherein an unmonitored excess of financial assets in affluent households presented distinct disciplinary risks, introducing a non-linear nuance to the economic narrative. Simple linear regression analysis demonstrated a powerful, statistically significant predictive relationship ($R = .962$, $R^2 = .925$, $F(1, 359) = 4453.026$, $p < .001$). The unstandardized regression model (students' Discipline) = $-1.038 + 1.910$ (Family Economic Status) established that family economic status uniquely accounts for 92.5% of the absolute variance in students' discipline metrics, with a single-unit shift in financial stability corresponding to a 1.910 improvement in positive discipline. The study concludes that household financial instability structurally undermines institutional self-regulation. It recommends that the Ministry of Education and sub-county bursary boards expand targeted social support nets, including subsidized school meals and automated equity-tested fee relief programs, to shield vulnerable learners from resource-driven behavioral adjustments.

Keywords: Family Economic Status, Student Discipline, Educational Sociology, Public Secondary Schools, Kilifi County, Affluence Paradox.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary educational discourses, maintaining student discipline is recognized as a foundational prerequisite for achieving holistic educational objectives. While traditional school management perspectives often view behavioral infractions as isolated acts of student deviance, contemporary sociological frameworks suggest that institutional conduct is deeply shaped by broader home environment determinants. Among these domestic features, family economic status stands out as a critical material constraint that dictates a child's socio-emotional and structural adjustment.



In public secondary schools within Kilifi County, Kenya, persistent challenges regarding student indiscipline ranging from chronic absenteeism and theft to emotional withdrawal and rule defiance coincide with widespread localized economic hardships. When households experience severe financial strain, their capacity to provide basic educational necessities (such as instructional materials, uniforms, transport, regular meals, and school fees) is compromised. While global and regional literature widely links poverty to lower academic performance, there remains an empirical gap in isolating how specific localized economic pressures directly affect student behavior within Kilifi County's public senior schools. Therefore, this study isolated family economic status as a primary home-based determinant to empirically model its direct predictive influence on secondary school student discipline.

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically anchored on Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that human development and behavior are shaped by environmental interactions across multiple nested systems. This paper focuses heavily on the interplay between the Microsystem (the immediate home environment and family economic realities) and the Mesosystem (the interactions between the home environment and the school institution).

Within this framework, a family's economic status is not merely a passive monetary metric; it is an active engine within the student's microsystem that dictates the availability of physical resources, psychological stability, and nutritional security. When the household microsystem experiences acute resource deficits, it creates structural friction that spills over into the mesosystem, disrupting the student's ability to conform to institutional school-level behavioral expectations. By applying this theoretical lens, the study views student indiscipline not as isolated behavioral deviance, but as an ecological symptom of systemic material pressures originating within the domestic microsystem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between family socioeconomic status (SES) and student outcomes has long been a central focus of educational sociology. Historically, foundational work by Blau and Duncan (1967) established that parental socioeconomic background heavily dictates a child's structural path, creating a baseline that influences both educational attainment and institutional adjustment. Expanding upon this, Lareau (2011) demonstrated through her framework of "concerted cultivation" versus the "accomplishment of natural growth" that household financial standing dictates the precise strategies parents use to socialize children. Families with robust economic resources intentionally cultivate organizational compliance and self-advocacy skills, whereas resource-constrained households often leave students to navigate institutional spaces with less structured preparation, occasionally manifesting as behavioral friction when meeting strict institutional norms.

Sociological models have increasingly turned to the Family Stress Model (Conger & Donnellan, 2007) to explain the psychological pathways linking material wealth to adolescent behavior. According to this model, chronic economic hardship diminishes parental psychological well-being, which in turn leads to marital conflict and inconsistent, harsh, or neglectful parenting practices. McLoyd (1998) verified that these financial pressures frequently destabilize a child's immediate household microsystem, reducing their capacity for socio-emotional self-regulation and rendering them more prone to externalizing behavioral issues such as defiance and rule infractions once they enter secondary school environments.

Globally, empirical studies continue to confirm these patterns across diverse legal and cultural landscapes. Sirin (2005), in a comprehensive meta-analytic review, established that socioeconomic status remains one of the strongest, most stable correlates of school-related outcomes. While Sirin focused heavily on academic achievement gaps, subsequent longitudinal analyses by Barrett et al. (2021) and Clark and Kjellstrand (2024) shifted the spotlight to exclusionary discipline patterns. Their findings revealed that long-term disparities in institutional suspensions, expulsions, and disciplinary referrals are structurally intertwined with household income inequalities. Furthermore, Chen, Byrne, and Vélez (2022) observed that external economic shocks such as inflation or macroeconomic recessions exacerbate resource deficits within vulnerable households, resulting in spikes in student anxiety, classroom disengagement, and school-level behavioral adjustments.



Regionally and locally, African scholars have contextualized these socioeconomic dynamics within the structural challenges of developing educational systems. Vadivel et al. (2023) argued that low socioeconomic backgrounds heavily restrict a child's educational experience by limiting immediate access to basic physical materials like uniforms and textbooks, forcing students into survival mindsets that clash with structured school regulations. In Kenya, this material vulnerability is magnified by systemic institutional costs. Okioga (2013) noted that despite national free day secondary education policies, hidden structural expenses—including transport, exam fees, and uniform costs—frequently compromise the participation of students from lower-income brackets.

More recently, Aute, Poipoi, and Khasakhala (2020) demonstrated a direct predictive link between household economic positions and adolescent deviance in Homa Bay County, showing that structural poverty often triggers survival-driven property theft and rule defiance. However, a localized gap persists within coastal Kenya, and specifically Kilifi County, regarding how regional economic hardships interact with institutional discipline. Rather than evaluating student deviance as a generic psychological flaw, this study addresses that gap by empirically modeling localized financial pressures such as chronic tuition default and food insecurity as direct environmental drivers of behavioral infractions within Kilifi County's public secondary schools.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interview narratives to achieve robust methodological triangulation. The target population comprised undergraduate and senior secondary cohorts across the region. For the primary field study, a sample size of 361 respondents was analyzed.

The questionnaire used in this study was developed following an extensive review of empirical literature on family economic status and students' discipline in secondary schools. The items were aligned with the study objective and conceptual framework to ensure adequate coverage of the construct under investigation. The instrument comprised structured Likert-scale items measured on a five-point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

To establish content validity, the draft questionnaire was subjected to expert review by specialists in Educational Management and Research Methodology, who examined the relevance, clarity, and representativeness of each item. Their recommendations were incorporated before the instrument was piloted.

A pilot study was conducted at Moi University to assess the suitability of the research instruments. Feedback obtained from the pilot study was used to improve item wording, eliminate ambiguities, and enhance the overall clarity of the questionnaire. Instrument reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, and the reliability indices exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency of the measurement instrument.

Quantitative tracking utilized a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire spanning Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA). Qualitative data was gathered via one-on-one interview schedules with purposefully sampled student representatives. To verify data suitability for parametric linear modeling, structural diagnostic assessments were conducted prior to hypotheses testing:

- **Linearity:** A scatter plot analysis demonstrated a clear, positive upward trend, confirming a systematic linear relationship between family economic conditions and discipline metrics.
- **Normality:** An inspection of the Normal Probability (Q-Q) plot showed that the observed discipline values aligned closely along the expected normal line, with only minor, negligible deviations at the absolute extremes.

Prior to conducting regression analysis, the assumptions underlying linear regression were evaluated. Linearity was examined using scatterplots, which demonstrated a positive linear relationship between family economic status and students' discipline. Normality of the data was assessed using Normal Probability (Q-Q) plots, where the observed values closely followed the expected normal distribution with only minor deviations at the



extremes. Independence of errors was evaluated using the Durbin-Watson statistic ($DW = 1.221$), indicating acceptable independence of residuals. In addition, residual plots were visually inspected and suggested no serious violations of homoscedasticity. These diagnostic assessments confirmed that the data were appropriate for linear regression analysis.

Following these successful diagnostic checks, descriptive analysis was executed via SPSS using frequencies, percentages, mean scores (M), and standard deviations (SD). Inferential mapping was completed using a simple linear regression model evaluated at a statistical significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Analysis of Family Economic Status and Discipline

The descriptive profiles evaluating the behavioral reflections of family financial positions are structured around the final cohort responses ($N = 361$). The standardized metrics are detailed below in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Profiles of Family Economic Status and Discipline

Evaluation Statement	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	M	SE	SD
Family economic status influences students' discipline in school.	20 (5.5%)	35 (9.7%)	34 (9.4%)	137 (38.0%)	135 (37.4%)	3.91	.063	1.20
Difficulty obtaining school needs (fees, uniforms, books, food, transport) affects discipline	44 (12.2%)	41 (11.4%)	112 (31.0%)	60 (16.6%)	104 (28.8%)	3.45	.070	1.335
Financial challenges at home affect students' attendance and participation	24 (6.6%)	36 (10.0%)	41 (11.4%)	139 (38.5%)	121 (33.5%)	3.84	.062	1.186
Lack of basic school needs contributes to absenteeism, stealing, stress, and poor concentration.	38 (10.5%)	46 (12.7%)	76 (21.1%)	114 (31.6%)	87 (24.1%)	3.65	.072	1.360
Lack of school fees affects students' discipline by causing absenteeism, stress, and withdrawal	17 (4.7%)	42 (11.6%)	24 (6.6%)	153 (42.4%)	125 (34.6%)	3.80	.056	1.058
Lack of food or pocket money drives stress, borrowing, anger, and peer-dependence	14 (3.9%)	31 (8.6%)	12 (3.3%)	141 (39.2%)	162 (45.0%)	4.02	.064	1.206

Source Author 2025

The descriptive metrics show a high consensus that family economic factors heavily influence school behavioral outcomes. Notably, Statement 6 achieved the highest endorsement in the entire matrix ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.206$), with 84.2% of respondents agreeing that a lack of basic food or personal pocket money directly triggers internal



stress, behavioral anger, borrowing habits, and dependent relationships with peers. This direct physiological vulnerability was highlighted during qualitative interviews, where Student 113 explained:

"When students do not have enough food or pocket money, they often feel hungry and stressed throughout the school day. Hunger makes it difficult to concentrate during lessons, and some students may become frustrated because they are unable to meet their basic needs like their peers."

Statement 1 also generated a high level of agreement (75.4%, $M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.205$), showing that household financial capability sets the structural baseline for a student's day-to-day conduct. This finding was supported by Student 94:

"My family's economic status affects how easily I can access school requirements. When parents are able to provide what is needed for school, students are more comfortable, focused and less likely to experience challenges that may affect their behaviour and discipline."

The data demonstrates that financial deprivation can lead to secondary behavioral adjustments. Total agreement reached 77.0 % ($M = 3.80$) for Statement 5 and 72.0% ($M = 3.84$) for Statement 3. These findings establish that chronic tuition default and subsequent school exclusion cause substantial stress and behavioral withdrawal. Student 231 noted this psychological burden:

"Lack of school fees can cause a lot of stress and embarrassment for students, especially when they are sent home or reminded about fee balances. Some students become withdrawn and lose concentration in class because they are worried about their financial situation."

Interestingly, Statement 2 showed the highest level of neutral ambiguity (31.0 %, $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.335$), suggesting that while resource deficits cause structural friction, the direct path to behavioral infractions varies depending on individual student coping mechanisms. Conversely, interviews also revealed that an excess of unmonitored financial resources in high-income homes presents distinct disciplinary risks, such as rule violations and peer posturing. Student 259 observed:

"Excessive pocket money can encourage behaviours such as sneaking out of school, showing off to other students and ignoring school rules. Some students may feel pressured to impress their friends, which can lead them to make poor decisions that negatively affect their discipline."

Quantitative Linear Regression Analysis

To test the predictive value of the independent variable, a simple linear regression analysis was executed with family economic status acting as the predictor variable and students' school discipline as the dependent variable.

Table 2: Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.962	.925	.925	6.30317	1.221

Predictors: (Constant), Family economic status.

The model summary in Table 2 reveals a very strong, positive relationship between family economic conditions and student discipline ($R = .962$). The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = .925$) establishes that family economic status explains 92.5 % of the total variance in student discipline within the study context. The stability of this model was confirmed by an adjusted R^2 of .925, while the Durbin-Watson statistic (1.221) confirmed that error autocorrelation did not compromise the validity of the regression estimates.

Although the regression model explained a substantial proportion of the variance in students' discipline ($R^2 = .925$), this finding should be interpreted with caution. The high explanatory power may partly reflect the close conceptual relationship between family economic status and discipline-related experiences measured within the



same survey instrument. Furthermore, because both the predictor and outcome variables were obtained from the same respondents during a single data collection period, some degree of common method variance may have contributed to the strength of the observed relationship. Consequently, the findings demonstrate a strong statistical association rather than definitive causal influence.

Table 3: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (p)
1 Regression	176918.608	1	176918.608	4453.026	.000
Residual	14263.060	359	39.730		
Total	191181.668	360			

Dependent Variable: Discipline.

The ANOVA output in Table 3 confirms the overall statistical significance of the regression model ($F(1, 359) = 4453.026, p < .001$). Because the regression sum of squares (176918.608) vastly exceeds the residual sum of squares (14263.060), the model demonstrates an effective mathematical fit, showing that the relationship between family financial strain and secondary school behavioral deviations is highly systemic rather than accidental.

Table 4: Regression Coefficient Weights

Model	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized β	t	Sig. (p)
1 (Constant)	-1.038	1.123		0.924	.356
Family Economic Status	1.910	0.029	.962	66.731	.000

The unstandardized regression coefficient weights in Table 4 provide the values to construct the baseline predictive linear equation:

$$\text{Students' Discipline} = -1.038 + 1.910 (\{\text{Family Economic Status}\})$$

This equation shows that a single-unit increase or shift in family economic support corresponds to a 1.910 unit improvement in positive student discipline outcomes ($t = 66.731, p < .001$). The standardized coefficient (beta = .962) indicates a powerful predictive relationship, demonstrating that family socio-economic status serves as a major structural driver of school behavior in Kilifi County's public secondary schools.

Synoptic Discussion and Triangulation

By combining quantitative regression parameters with thematic narratives, this study provides strong methodological triangulation. The empirical data extends traditional sociological perspectives by showing that within public secondary institutions in Kilifi County, student indiscipline is heavily driven by immediate socio-economic conditions rather than purely isolated behavioral choices.

When evaluated through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, these findings show that the micro-level family economy functions as a core structural environment. When this environment suffers from chronic



financial deprivation, it directly destabilizes the student's sense of security, manifesting as survival-driven property theft, peer dependency, or defensive anger.

The Affluence Paradox

The qualitative findings present an essential nuance: the relationship between financial resources and discipline is not strictly linear. While the quantitative weights emphasize that economic security stabilizes behavior, qualitative accounts introduce an "affluence paradox." An unmonitored surplus of financial assets in wealthy households can bypass institutional boundaries just as disruptively as extreme poverty. When affluent parents substitute active behavioral supervision with excessive cash allowances, students frequently experience an accountability deficit. This often leads to severe institutional infractions, such as unauthorized absenteeism (sneaking out) and the illicit purchase of contraband or substance materials. Consequently, "family economic status" must be understood as a dual-faceted risk variable; resource deficits weaken behavioral stability through physiological and emotional distress, while unmonitored resource surpluses weaken discipline by reducing the student's reliance on school structures.

These patterns align with regional and global literature. The descriptive finding that resource deficits drive chronic absenteeism matches the conclusions of Vadivel et al. (2023), who established that low socioeconomic backgrounds limit children's educational experiences by restricting access to vital materials. Similarly, the significant regression outputs match the findings of Barrett et al. (2021) and Clark and Kjellstrand (2024), which demonstrated that long-term disparities in school participation and discipline patterns are deeply rooted in household income inequalities.

Locally, this study reinforces the arguments of Aute et al. (2020) in Homa Bay County, who verified that family socioeconomic status is a key predictor of deviant adolescent behaviors. However, while earlier studies looked broadly at general deviant behaviors, this investigation isolates the specific mechanisms of public secondary schools in Kilifi County. It shows that chronic fee-delinquency undermines student discipline by causing regular exclusion from classes, which leads to chronic embarrassment, stress, and behavioral withdrawal.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study concludes that family economic status significantly influences students' discipline in public secondary schools in Kilifi County. Secure economic conditions allow households to consistently provide essential learning requirements, school fees, uniforms, transport and adequate nutrition, which reduces student anxiety and promotes rule compliance. Conversely, severe financial hardship forces students to deal with food insecurity, fear of exclusion, and resource embarrassment. This strain often manifests as disruptive behavior, including property theft, chronic absenteeism, anger, or total disengagement. The regression model confirms that household economic capacity is a powerful structural predictor of school behavior.

Recommendations

Practical Recommendations for School Administrators

- i. **Expand Institutional Feeding Programs:** Because food and pocket money deficits were identified as primary drivers of stress and school-level behavioral deviance, school boards should establish or expand subsidized school meal programs to minimize hunger-driven infractions.
- ii. **Establish Financial Distress Counseling Tracks:** Guidance and counseling departments must be trained to proactively identify students experiencing acute financial trauma at home, providing psychological support to mitigate embarrassment and behavioral withdrawal.
- iii. **Implement Parent Accountability Forums on Resource Provision:** School management should conduct targeted sensitization workshops for high-income parents, educating them on the disciplinary risks



associated with unmonitored pocket money allowances and emphasizing the need for active supervision over material resources.

Policy Recommendations for Educational Stakeholders

- i. **Strengthen Targeted Sub-County Bursary Allocation:** The Ministry of Education, in coordination with Kilifi County sub-county bursary committees, should enhance administrative transparency through automated equity testing to ensure that fee reliefs reach the most economically vulnerable students, reducing exclusionary absenteeism and related stress.
- ii. **Standardize Fee Exclusion Frameworks:** Policy makers should institute regulatory guidelines that prevent school boards from abruptly excluding students due to tuition backlogs during critical examination timelines, minimizing the disruptive stress that triggers behavioral withdrawal.

Self-Reported Data and Response Bias

This study relied primarily on self-reported questionnaire responses and interview narratives obtained from students. Although respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest responses, self-reported data are inherently susceptible to response bias, including social desirability bias. Some respondents may have underreported disciplinary behaviours or overstated favourable family circumstances in an effort to present themselves in a socially acceptable manner. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

Common Method Bias

The study measured both the independent variable (family economic status) and the dependent variable (students' discipline) using the same questionnaire administered to the same respondents during a single period of data collection. This approach may have introduced common method bias, which can artificially strengthen the observed relationships between variables. Although procedural measures such as assuring respondents of confidentiality and encouraging honest responses were adopted to minimise this bias, its potential influence cannot be entirely ruled out. Future studies should consider collecting data from multiple sources, such as teachers, parents, and school disciplinary records, to provide additional validation of the findings.

Cross-Sectional Research Design

The study employed a cross-sectional research design, which captured respondents' perceptions at a single point in time. While this design was appropriate for examining the association between family economic status and students' discipline, it does not permit conclusions regarding causal relationships or changes in behaviour over time. Longitudinal studies would provide deeper insights into how changes in family economic circumstances influence students' discipline throughout their schooling.

Omitted Variables

The regression model focused exclusively on family economic status as the predictor of students' discipline. However, students' disciplinary behaviour is multifaceted and may also be influenced by other factors that were beyond the scope of this study, including parental education, parenting style, school climate, peer relationships, teacher support, and individual learner characteristics. The omission of these variables may have contributed to the high explanatory power observed in the regression model. Future studies should incorporate these additional factors within multivariate models to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' discipline.

Geographical Scope

The study was conducted exclusively in public secondary schools in Kilifi County. Consequently, the findings may not be generalisable to private schools or to schools in counties with different socio-economic, cultural, or educational contexts. Replication of the study in other regions would enhance the external validity and generalisability of the findings.



Suggestions for Further Studies

- i. Longitudinal Tracking of Household Shifts: A longitudinal research study should be executed to track how temporal changes in family income over a four-year secondary cycle directly influence a student's disciplinary records over time.
- ii. Institutional Comparative Analyses: A comparative study should be conducted analyzing the variations in how family economic status impacts student discipline across public versus private secondary schools within coastal Kenya.
- iii. Investigation into Resource Monitoring Interventions: Further research is recommended to investigate the specific effectiveness of parental monitoring styles regarding financial allowances and their impact on reducing adolescent deviance across diverse socioeconomic strata.

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