

Explaining Youth Criminal Tendencies Through Social Learning Theory: A Behavioural Risk Analysis

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100900075>

Received: 13 September 2026; Accepted: 18 September 2026; Published: 30 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Youth criminal tendencies constitute a persistent social and public safety concern, particularly in Nigeria, where youth involvement in violent crime, cybercrime, and cult-related activity has drawn sustained scholarly and policy attention. While structural explanations such as poverty and unemployment remain widely emphasized, comparatively less attention has been paid to the behavioural mechanisms through which criminal tendencies are learned, reinforced, and sustained among young people. This paper undertakes a narrative, thematic review of Nigerian and international literature to examine youth criminal tendencies through the lens of Social Learning Theory (SLT), conceptualizing criminal behaviour as a probabilistic behavioural risk shaped by social interaction and reinforcement rather than as a deterministic outcome. Sources were identified through a structured search of academic databases and official statistical publications, screened against explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, and analysed thematically following established procedures for qualitative synthesis. Four interacting learning contexts were identified across the reviewed literature – peer association, family supervision, community conditions, and digital exposure – operating through the mechanisms of differential association, modelling, reinforcement, and cognitive internalization, and compounded by structural stressors such as poverty and unemployment. An integrative conceptual model is proposed to represent these interactions. The review distinguishes between empirical findings reported in the studies examined, theoretical interpretation drawn from Social Learning Theory, and the authors' own argument, and gives explicit attention to gender, regional, cultural, and developmental variation in how learning processes operate. Consistent with the theoretical literature, the paper emphasizes that social learning processes increase the probability of criminal involvement without rendering such involvement inevitable, and recommends early, preventive, and context-sensitive interventions that strengthen pro-social modelling within families, schools, and communities.

Keywords: Youth criminal tendencies, Social Learning Theory, behavioural risk, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Youth criminal tendencies constitute a persistent social and public safety concern in Nigeria, with serious implications for individual development, community stability, and national security. Youth involvement in crimes such as armed robbery, cultism, cyber fraud, drug trafficking, kidnapping, and political violence has drawn sustained attention from scholars, policymakers, and law enforcement agencies (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2019). These forms of criminality undermine social cohesion, disrupt educational and occupational trajectories, and expose young people to long-term risks of incarceration, victimization, and psychological maladjustment (Ojo, 2020a; Okeshola & Mudiare, 2018).

The scale of the problem is documented in recent official data. The National Bureau of Statistics' Crime Experience and Security Perception Survey recorded an estimated 51.89 million crime incidents across Nigerian households between May 2023 and April 2024, with the North-West and North-Central regions reporting the highest incidence and rural households more affected than urban ones (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2024). On cybercrime specifically – a form of offending closely associated with youth involvement – Nigeria was ranked fifth globally on the first World Cybercrime Index, an expert-survey-

based academic ranking of national cybercrime hubs (Bruce et al., 2024). The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission has separately reported losses exceeding US\$500 million to cybercrime in a single year (EFCC, as reported in Daily Trust, 2024, October 22), and internet fraud dominated the agency's own 2024 arrest statistics, accounting for 2,588 of the cases recorded that year (Moses-Ashike, 2025). These figures describe the scale of crime and cyber-fraud recorded nationally; they are reported here as context for the scale of the problem rather than as a precise measure of change in youth offending specifically, since Nigeria does not publish a single, continuous, age-disaggregated youth-crime time series. [Authors should confirm and, where possible, substitute or supplement with the most current NBS/EFCC releases and any age-disaggregated data available to them at the time of submission.]

Explanations of youth crime in Nigeria have traditionally emphasized structural and socioeconomic conditions, including poverty, unemployment, income inequality, urban congestion, weak governance, and limited access to education (Adebayo, 2018). Recent reporting reinforces the scale of these structural pressures: national estimates put youth unemployment at over 50 percent, with tens of millions of young Nigerians affected (Plan International Nigeria & ActionAid Nigeria, 2025). While these factors provide important background conditions, they do not, on their own, explain why many youths exposed to similar adverse circumstances refrain from criminal behaviour while others engage persistently in crime. Empirical studies in Nigeria increasingly suggest that structural strain alone is insufficient to account for youth criminal involvement without considering the social and behavioural mechanisms through which criminal tendencies are acquired and sustained (Alemika, 2015; Rotimi, 2021).

Recent Nigerian criminological research has therefore shifted attention toward psychosocial and behavioural explanations that emphasize socialization processes, peer influence, and learned behaviour. From this perspective, youth criminal tendencies are not merely reactions to deprivation but are shaped through ongoing interaction with social environments that model, reinforce, and normalize deviant behaviour (Okunola & Ojo, 2020). This approach is consistent with evidence that criminal behaviour among Nigerian youths is often embedded in peer networks, informal street groups, cult associations, and digitally mediated communities in which criminal norms are transmitted and rewarded (Tade & Aliyu, 2021).

Social Learning Theory (SLT) offers a framework for interpreting these processes within the Nigerian context. The theory holds that behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, differential association, and reinforcement within social relationships (Akers, 1998; Bandura, 1977). Several Nigerian studies report that association with delinquent peers is among the strongest correlates of youth criminal behaviour, particularly in urban centres such as Lagos, Ibadan, Benin City, Port Harcourt, and Abuja (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2019; Okeshola, 2020). On the interpretation offered by this theoretical tradition, repeated interaction with peers engaged in crime is associated with the acquisition of criminal techniques and rationalizations that redefine offending as acceptable, though the strength and direction of this association vary across the underlying studies and are not uniform across all contexts.

Family environments are also implicated in the literature on youth criminal tendencies in Nigeria. Several empirical studies report associations between weak parental supervision, economic strain, family instability, and exposure to domestic violence on one hand, and delinquent behaviour among youths on the other (Akinwale, 2016; Adebayo et al., 2023). Prolonged parental absence linked to migration, informal employment, or economic hardship is reported to reduce monitoring, which several studies interpret as creating conditions favourable to peer-driven socialization into criminal activities.

Community and neighbourhood contexts are described in the literature as compounding these social learning processes. Nigerian neighbourhoods characterized by high crime concentration, weak informal social control, and limited youth engagement opportunities are reported to function as environments in which criminal behaviour is normalized (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2019). The NBS (2024) survey cited above lends some support to this pattern at a descriptive level, given the regional variation it documents in reported crime experience.

The expansion of digital technology has introduced additional dimensions to social learning and youth crime in Nigeria. Cybercrime, popularly referred to as “yahoo-yahoo,” has become a prominent avenue of youth criminal involvement, particularly among educated but underemployed youths (Tade & Aliyu, 2021), a pattern broadly consistent with the ranking, loss, and arrest figures reported above (Bruce et al., 2024; Moses-Ashike, 2025). Several studies report that online platforms function as spaces in which criminal skills are taught, techniques shared, and successes publicized, which these studies interpret as reinforcing deviant behaviour through peer validation and material reward (Tade, 2022; Yar, 2020).

Despite the relevance of Social Learning Theory to these dynamics, much of the Nigerian literature examines social learning variables in isolation – peer pressure, or family background, for instance – without integrating them into a single behavioural risk framework. This fragmentation, in our assessment, limits understanding of how multiple learning contexts interact with structural strain to sustain criminal tendencies among youths (Adebayo, 2018; Okeshola, 2020). We argue that a more integrated behavioural risk analysis is needed to explain how exposure, reinforcement, and normalization accumulate over time; the integrative conceptual model developed later in this paper is offered as one response to that gap.

Understanding youth criminal tendencies through a social learning lens carries implications for crime prevention and policy in Nigeria. Existing evidence suggests that punitive responses alone – aggressive policing and incarceration – have had limited success in reducing youth crime and may, on the interpretation offered by several of the studies reviewed, inadvertently reinforce criminal identities through further exposure to deviant peers (Alemika, 2015). By contrast, interventions that target learning environments – family-based supervision, school engagement, peer mentorship, and community youth programs – are reported to hold greater potential for disrupting criminal socialization (Ojo, 2020b).

Against this background, the present study explains youth criminal tendencies in Nigeria through Social Learning Theory by conceptualizing criminal behaviour as a socially transmitted and reinforced behavioural risk rather than a predetermined outcome. Using a structured thematic review of Nigerian empirical studies, theoretical literature, and official statistics, the study synthesizes existing evidence to identify the social learning pathways linking social environments to youth criminal involvement, proposes an integrative conceptual model of how these pathways interact, and gives explicit attention to gender, regional, cultural, and developmental variation that has received comparatively little treatment in the existing Nigerian literature.

The paper is organised into seven further sections. Section two sets out the methodology used to identify, screen, and analyse the literature. Section three presents conceptual clarifications of youth, youth criminal tendencies, social learning, and behavioural risk. Section four reviews the empirical and theoretical literature on the psychosocial and social learning factors associated with youth criminal tendencies in Nigeria. Section five sets out Social Learning Theory as a behavioural risk framework and presents the integrative conceptual model, followed in section six by a discussion of the theory’s critiques and limitations. Section seven examines gender, regional, cultural, and developmental differences. The paper then discusses implications for prevention and intervention before concluding with recommendations and directions for future research.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a narrative, thematic review rather than a systematic review or a primary empirical study; it does not report new fieldwork or original data collection. It synthesizes secondary sources – peer-reviewed empirical studies, theoretical literature, policy documents, and official statistical reports – on youth criminal tendencies in Nigeria, interpreted through Social Learning Theory. The steps below describe the search, screening, and analytic procedure that the authors are asked to confirm and complete with their own records before submission; bracketed items indicate figures that should be verified or supplied by the authors rather than estimated by an editor.

Search Strategy and Databases

Literature was searched in five sources: Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, African Journals Online (AJOL), and PsycINFO (via EBSCOhost), supplemented by the websites of relevant Nigerian and international agencies (National Bureau of Statistics; Economic and Financial Crimes Commission; Nigeria Police Force) for official statistics. The search covered publications from 2010 to 2025. This 15-year window was chosen to capture the body of Nigerian criminological literature that has emerged since Akers' (2009, and earlier 1998) consolidation of social learning theory within criminology, while remaining current enough to reflect recent developments such as the growth of cybercrime. Foundational theoretical works published before this window (e.g., Bandura, 1977, 1986; Akers, 1998; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Thornberry et al., 2003) were retained irrespective of publication date because of their conceptual centrality to the paper's framework and its critique.

Search Terms

Search terms combined concepts relating to the population (youth), the outcome (criminal/delinquent behaviour), the geographic scope (Nigeria), and the theoretical framework (social learning theory and its constituent mechanisms), joined with Boolean operators and truncation. Because target-language spelling conventions vary between Nigerian/British English and the predominantly American-English indexing of some databases, each string was run twice – once with British spellings (behaviour, criminalisation, socialisation, modelling) and once with American spellings (behaviour, criminalization, socialization, modelling) – except where the database's own spelling-variant matching made this unnecessary. The final strings used were:

Database-Specific Search Strings

Google Scholar: (“youth” OR “youths” OR “adolescent*”) AND (“crime” OR “criminal tendenc*” OR “criminality” OR “delinquenc*” OR “cybercrime” OR “cyber-crime” OR “cultism”) AND (“Nigeria”) AND (“social learning theory” OR “differential association” OR “peer influence” OR “peer pressure” OR “behavioural risk” OR “behavioural risk”)

Scopus (TITLE-ABS-KEY): TITLE-ABS-KEY ((“youth*” OR “adolescent*”) AND (“crime” OR “criminal tendenc*” OR “delinquenc*” OR “cybercrime” OR “cyber-crime” OR “cultism”) AND (“Nigeria*”) AND (“social learning theory” OR “differential association” OR “peer influence” OR “peer pressure” OR “family supervision” OR “behavioural risk” OR “behavioural risk”))

Web of Science (Topic search, TS=): TS=((“youth*” OR “adolescent*”) AND (“crime” OR “criminal tendenc*” OR “delinquenc*” OR “cybercrime” OR “cyber-crime” OR “cultism”) AND (“Nigeria*”) AND (“social learning theory” OR “differential association” OR “peer influence” OR “peer pressure” OR “behavioural risk” OR “behavioural risk”))

PsycINFO (EBSCOhost, TI/AB fields): (TI (“youth*” OR “adolescent*”) OR AB (“youth*” OR “adolescent*”)) AND (TI (“crime” OR “criminal tendenc*” OR “delinquenc*” OR “cybercrime” OR “cultism”) OR AB (“crime” OR “criminal tendenc*” OR “delinquenc*” OR “cybercrime” OR “cultism”)) AND (TI “Nigeria*” OR AB “Nigeria*”) AND (TI (“social learning theory” OR “differential association” OR “peer influence” OR “behavioural risk” OR “behavioural risk”) OR AB (“social learning theory” OR “differential association” OR “peer influence” OR “behavioural risk” OR “behavioural risk”))

African Journals Online (AJOL, basic keyword search – no Boolean/field-tag support): Run as five separate keyword searches: “youth crime Nigeria social learning theory”; “youth delinquency Nigeria peer influence”; “cybercrime Nigeria youth”; “cultism Nigeria youth”; “family supervision delinquency Nigeria”.

‘Screening Process and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Records identified through the searches described above were screened in two stages. Title and abstract

screening removed duplicates and clearly irrelevant records (for example, studies concerning adult offending only, or studies from outside the Nigerian/West African context with no comparative relevance). Full-text screening was then applied to the remaining records against the following criteria.

Inclusion criteria:

- Published in a peer-reviewed journal, an edited academic volume, or an official government/statistical report;
- Substantively addresses youth crime, delinquency, or antisocial behaviour in Nigeria, or addresses Social Learning Theory in a manner directly applicable to the Nigerian context;
- Reports empirical data (quantitative or qualitative) or develops theoretical/conceptual argument relevant to the review's themes;
- Published in English.

Exclusion criteria:

- Non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces, blog posts, or unmoderated media commentary;
- Studies focused exclusively on adult offending with no youth-relevant findings;
- Duplicate reports of the same dataset or study where a fuller version was already included;
- Sources that could not be retrieved in full text.

Thematic Analysis Procedure

Included sources were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to reflexive thematic analysis, adapted for a literature-based (rather than interview-based) corpus. This involved (i) familiarization with the corpus through repeated reading; (ii) open coding of recurring psychosocial and social-learning factors reported across sources; (iii) grouping of codes into candidate themes (e.g., peer association, family supervision, community conditions, digital exposure, structural stress); (iv) reviewing candidate themes against the coded extracts and the corpus as a whole for coherence and distinctiveness; and (v) defining and naming the final themes, which structure sections four and five of this paper and inform the integrative conceptual model in section five. Two of the authors independently coded a subset of sources and reconciled differences through discussion to support analytic consistency.

Distinguishing Findings, Interpretation, and Argument

Because this is a review rather than a primary study, the paper is careful throughout to distinguish three kinds of claim: empirical findings reported by the original studies (signposted with language such as "studies report" or "empirical studies indicate"); theoretical interpretation offered by Social Learning Theory or by the cited authors themselves (signposted with language such as "on this interpretation" or "the theory holds that"); and the present authors' own argument or synthesis (signposted explicitly as "we argue" or "in our assessment"). Readers should treat unmarked general statements about "youth crime in Nigeria" as syntheses of the cited literature rather than as this paper's own new empirical findings, since no new data were collected for this study.

Limitations of the Review Method

As a narrative rather than a systematic review, this study does not report a formal risk-of-bias assessment of included studies, and the search – however structured – remains narrower than a full systematic review would require. Much of the Nigerian empirical literature cited relies on cross-sectional, self-report designs,

which limits causal inference and is discussed further in the critique of Social Learning Theory in section six. These limitations mean that the conceptual model proposed in section five should be read as an organising synthesis of the reviewed literature rather than as a tested causal model.

Conceptual Clarifications

This section clarifies the core concepts underpinning the study in order to ensure conceptual precision and analytical coherence, and to reduce the repetition that affected the previous draft. It conceptualizes youth, youth criminal tendencies, social learning, and behavioural risk as they are used in this paper.

Youths

From a legal perspective, “youth” in Nigeria is defined variably across statutes and policies. The National Youth Policy classifies youth as individuals aged 15–35 years, reflecting Nigeria’s demographic and socioeconomic realities (NBS, 2024), a definition that is primarily administrative and programmatic. Sociologically, by contrast, youth is understood as a socially constructed, transitional life stage – a prolonged phase of identity formation, economic dependence, and social vulnerability shaped by unemployment, delayed marriage, extended education, and limited access to stable livelihoods (Okunola & Ojo, 2020). In the Nigerian context, the transition from adolescence to full adulthood is often prolonged by extended educational pathways, high youth unemployment, and delayed access to stable income and housing, producing what scholars describe as an “extended youthhood” in which individuals remain socially and economically dependent well into early adulthood (Adebayo, 2018; Okunola & Ojo, 2020). This extended period is associated, in the literature reviewed, with heightened exposure to peer influence and alternative forms of socialization, as many Nigerian youths are embedded in contexts marked by poverty, weak institutional support, and limited legitimate opportunities for upward mobility (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2019). In this study, youth is therefore treated not merely as an age category but as a socially situated developmental phase in which exposure to criminogenic environments can shape behavioural orientations – a framing that underscores the relevance of examining youth criminal tendencies through a social learning lens, since observation, imitation, and reinforcement are particularly salient during this stage of life.

Youth Criminal Tendencies

Youth criminal tendencies are conceptualized in this paper as behavioural dispositions – rather than isolated or incidental acts – that incline young people toward recurrent engagement in behaviours that violate legal and social norms, including violent crime, property crime, substance-related offenses, cybercrime, cult-related activity, and other antisocial conduct (Alemika, 2015; Okeshola & Mudiare, 2018). In the Nigerian context, these tendencies are best understood as patterned orientations shaped by socialization processes, environmental exposure, and reinforcement over time, rather than as fixed individual traits (Adebayo, 2018; Ojo, 2020a). This paper therefore conceptualizes youth criminal tendencies as socially learned behavioural risks emerging within the extended and vulnerable developmental phase described above, which is why Social Learning Theory is treated as a particularly relevant explanatory framework.

Social Learning

Social learning refers to the process through which individuals acquire behaviours, attitudes, and norms through observation, imitation, and interaction within social environments (Akers, 1998; Bandura, 1977). In Nigerian criminological research, social learning is closely linked to peer influence, family dynamics, community norms, and digital interactions that shape youths’ behavioural orientations (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2019; Tade & Aliyu, 2021). On this account, criminal behaviour is learned through differential association, modelling, reinforcement, and normalization: sustained interaction with delinquent peers and exposure to deviant role models is reported to facilitate the acquisition of criminal techniques and justifications, particularly where such behaviours are socially rewarded or perceived as effective means of

achieving economic or social goals. Digital platforms are reported to intensify these processes by providing continuous access to deviant norms and peer validation (Tade, 2022).

Behavioural Risk

Behavioural risk, as used in this paper, refers to the increased probability of criminal involvement associated with sustained exposure to environments that model and reinforce deviant behaviour. This is an important point of emphasis for the paper as a whole: behavioural risk does not imply inevitability. It reflects a probabilistic vulnerability shaped by cumulative social learning experiences rather than a deterministic pathway from exposure to offending (Okunola & Ojo, 2020). Youths exposed to multiple reinforcing contexts – delinquent peers, weak parental supervision, criminogenic communities, and unregulated digital spaces – face a heightened likelihood, not a certainty, of developing criminal tendencies; the same literature that documents these associations also documents youths in similar circumstances who do not offend, which is one reason this paper avoids deterministic language throughout (see also section six).

Together, these conceptual clarifications provide a foundation for applying Social Learning Theory as a behavioural risk framework for explaining youth criminal tendencies in Nigeria, and for maintaining analytical consistency across the remainder of the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews empirical and theoretical literature on youth criminal tendencies in Nigeria, organised around the themes generated through the thematic analysis described in section two: peer influence, family dynamics, community context, digital socialization, and the psychosocial correlates that connect them. Consistent with the distinction set out in section two, findings are reported as they were reported in the original studies, with theoretical interpretation and the present authors' own synthesis flagged explicitly.

Key Psychosocial and Social Learning Factors Reported in the Literature

- 1. Identity Crisis and Search for Belonging:** Several studies report that youthhood in Nigeria is marked by identity formation and a strong need for social acceptance, and that where legitimate avenues for achievement and recognition are limited, some youths seek belonging and status through deviant peer groups, cult associations, or criminal networks (Adebayo, 2018; Okunola & Ojo, 2020).
- 2. Frustration and Relative Deprivation:** Nigerian studies report associations between high unemployment, underemployment, socioeconomic inequality, and youths' sense of frustration and perceived injustice, interpreting blocked aspirations as a factor that weakens commitment to conventional norms (Ojo, 2020a; Okeshola & Mudiare, 2018). This is consistent with the scale of youth unemployment reported nationally (Plan International Nigeria & ActionAid Nigeria, 2025).
- 3. Low Self-Control and Impulsivity:** Psychosocial vulnerabilities such as impulsivity and poor emotional regulation have been linked in Nigerian studies to youth delinquency, particularly where these co-occur with weak supervision and peer pressure (Akinwale, 2016).
- 4. Emotional Distress and Marginalization:** Experiences of social exclusion, stigma, and chronic stress are reported to weaken psychological attachment to conventional society and to be associated with heightened susceptibility to antisocial behaviour, especially among urban and disadvantaged youths (Adebayo, 2018).
- 5. Delinquent Peer Association:** Association with delinquent peers is reported as one of the strongest correlates of youth crime in the Nigerian literature. Peer groups are described as primary sites of criminal learning, in which techniques, justifications, and identities are transmitted (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2019; Okeshola, 2020).

6. **Weak Parental Supervision and Family Instability:** Family environments characterized by poor monitoring, economic stress, parental absence, or exposure to deviant role models are reported to increase youths' vulnerability to criminal socialization through observation and imitation (Akinwale, 2016; Adebayo et al., 2023).
7. **Criminogenic Community Environment:** Communities marked by high crime concentration, weak informal social control, and limited effective policing are reported to normalize deviant behaviour and reduce the perceived risk of offending among youths (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2019), a pattern broadly consistent with the regional variation documented in the NBS (2024) household survey.
8. **Digital and Media Socialization:** Online platforms have emerged as significant sites of criminal socialization in the literature, particularly in relation to cybercrime; Nigerian studies report that digital communities facilitate skill acquisition, peer validation, and the normalization of deviance among youths (Tade & Aliyu, 2021; Tade, 2022).

Table 1. Summary of Psychosocial and Social Learning Factors Reported in the Reviewed Literature

S/N	Category	Factor	Reported Association	Social Learning Mechanism
1	Psychosocial	Identity crisis and search for belonging	Deviant groups reported as an alternative source of belonging/status when legitimate pathways are limited	Differential association; modelling
2	Psychosocial	Frustration and relative deprivation	Socioeconomic strain and blocked aspirations reported as weakening commitment to conventional norms	Definitions favourable to crime; reinforcement
3	Psychosocial	Low self-control and impulsivity	Poor emotional regulation reported as associated with risk-taking and susceptibility to antisocial behaviour	Reinforcement; imitation
4	Psychosocial	Emotional distress and marginalization	Chronic stress, exclusion, and stigma reported as heightening receptivity to deviant norms	Normalization; reinforcement
5	Socialization-related	Delinquent peer association	Peer groups reported to transmit criminal techniques, justifications, and identities	Differential association; modelling
6	Socialization-related	Weak parental supervision and family instability	Poor monitoring and exposure to deviant role models reported as facilitating learning of antisocial behaviour	Modelling; reinforcement
7	Socialization-related	Criminogenic community environment	High-crime neighbourhoods reported to normalize deviance and reduce perceived risk of offending	Normalization; differential association
8	Socialization-related	Digital and media socialization	Online platforms reported to reinforce deviant behaviour via imitation, peer validation, and skill-sharing	Modelling; reinforcement; normalization

Social Learning Theory as a Behavioural Risk Framework

Social Learning Theory (SLT) provides one of the most influential frameworks for understanding how maladaptive and deviant behaviours emerge, persist, and spread within social systems. Originally articulated by Bandura (1977, 1986) and later extended within criminological traditions by Akers (1998, 2009), the theory holds that behaviour is shaped through social interaction, observation, and reinforcement rather than being solely the product of individual disposition or structural constraint. Applied as a behavioural risk framework, Social Learning Theory offers an account of how exposure to criminogenic or antisocial behavioural models is associated with an increased probability – not a certainty – that individuals, particularly youth, will adopt similar behaviours.

At its core, Social Learning Theory frames behavioural risk as socially transmitted rather than biologically predetermined or purely a matter of individual rational choice. On this account, risk arises where individuals are embedded in environments in which deviant behaviours are modelled, rewarded, normalized, or left unpunished. This framing is offered by the theory's proponents as relevant to youth crime, substance use, aggression, cybercrime, and other forms of antisocial behaviour; whether it applies with equal force across all of these domains and contexts is itself contested, and is discussed in the critique that follows in section six.

Social Learning Theory identifies four interrelated mechanisms through which behavioural risk is theorized to be acquired: differential association, observational learning (modelling), reinforcement, and cognitive internalization.

Differential association: refers to the extent and intensity of interaction with individuals or groups who engage in or endorse deviant behaviour. Akers (1998) theorizes that individuals are more likely to engage in antisocial conduct when they associate frequently with peers, family members, or community actors who model such behaviours and define them as acceptable. Several of the Nigerian studies reviewed report that youth in high-crime neighbourhoods, or with weak social control around them, are disproportionately exposed to such models (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2019), though as noted in section six, the direction of this association – whether exposure produces delinquency or delinquent youths select such peers – is contested in the wider literature.

Observational learning: a central contribution of Bandura (1977), theorizes that individuals acquire new behaviours by watching others, even without direct reinforcement to themselves. On this account, youth may learn criminal techniques or deceptive practices by observing peers, older siblings, or online influencers, such that risk behaviour does not require personal trial-and-error but can be adopted vicariously.

Reinforcement processes: are theorized to consolidate learned behaviours: where deviant actions are rewarded through peer approval, financial gain, status, or avoidance of punishment, the theory predicts they are more likely to be repeated, while weak or inconsistent sanctions are theorized to reduce the deterrent effect of formal and informal social controls. Akers and Jensen (2011) argue that reinforcement patterns within peer networks help explain why some youth persist in crime while others desist under similar structural conditions – though, again, this is a theoretical interpretation rather than a settled empirical finding (see section six).

Cognitive internalization: involves the development of beliefs and rationalizations that support deviant behaviour. Through repeated exposure and reinforcement, the theory holds that individuals adopt definitions favourable to law violation – for example, justifying theft as survival, or cybercrime as victimless – transforming external risk into more stable, self-regulating behavioural patterns (Bandura, 1986).

An Integrative Conceptual Model

The Nigerian literature reviewed in section four has tended to examine peer, family, community, and digital influences separately (Adebayo, 2018; Okeshola, 2020), which, in our assessment, has limited understanding

of how these contexts interact with one another and with structural stress to sustain youth criminal tendencies. Figure 1 sets out an integrative conceptual model – the authors’ own synthesis, not a finding reported by any single cited study – that represents this interaction. In the model, structural stress (poverty, unemployment, inequality, and weak institutions) forms a distal condition that shapes exposure to four proximal learning contexts: peer association, family supervision, community conditions, and digital exposure. These four contexts are theorized to operate through the shared mechanisms of modelling, reinforcement, and cognitive internalization identified in Social Learning Theory, which in turn are associated with an increase – rather than a determination – of behavioural risk. A feedback loop is included because reinforcement that follows an initial act of deviance (peer approval, material gain, or avoided sanction) can itself strengthen the learning mechanisms that produced it, a dynamic several of the reviewed studies describe as sustaining, rather than merely initiating, criminal involvement (Akers & Jensen, 2011). Finally, the whole model is shown as moderated by gender, region, culture, and developmental stage, reflecting the variation discussed in section seven: the same exposure does not translate into the same level of risk for every young person, which is precisely why the paper avoids deterministic language when describing these pathways.

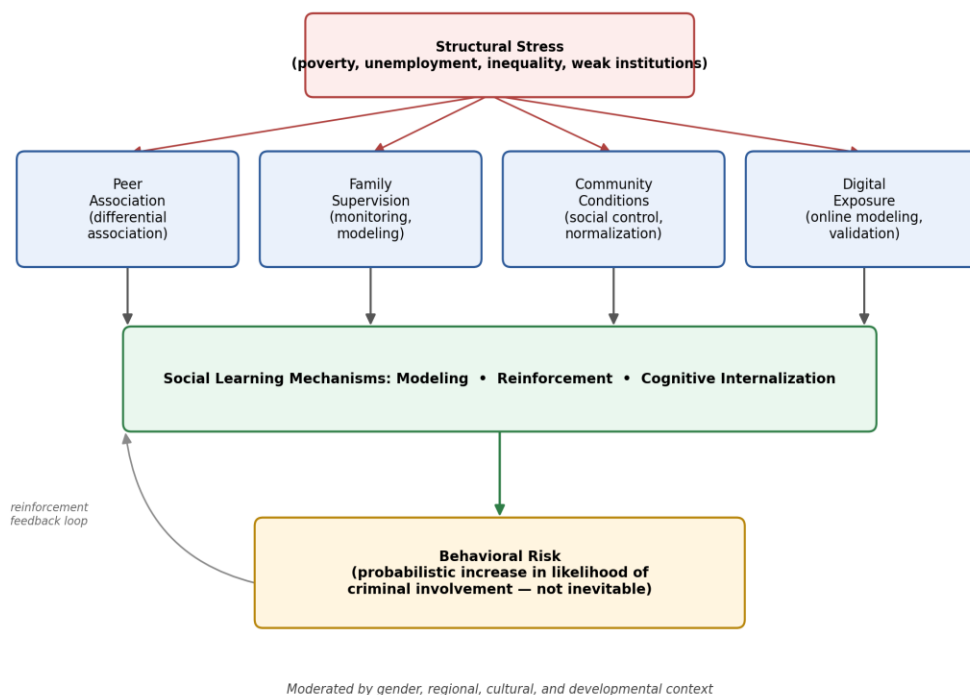


Figure 1. An integrative conceptual model of social learning pathways to youth criminal tendencies

Critiques and Limitations of Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory (SLT), despite its wide acceptance and empirical utility in psychology and criminology, has attracted sustained criticism concerning its conceptual scope, explanatory depth, and methodological robustness; this section reports those critiques as they appear in the wider (largely non-Nigerian) theoretical literature, distinct from the Nigeria-specific empirical findings reviewed in section four.

One major critique is that the theory tends toward social determinism by placing considerable emphasis on environmental exposure, peer association, and reinforcement while, critics argue, underplaying individual agency and self-regulatory capacity. Critics argue that individuals actively interpret, resist, or reinterpret observed behaviours rather than being passive recipients of social influence, and empirical evidence cited by these critics shows that many individuals exposed to deviant peers or criminogenic environments do not engage in antisocial behaviour – evidence that, in our reading, further supports treating social learning as a

probabilistic risk factor rather than a deterministic cause (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Wikström et al., 2012).

Closely related is the problem of causal ordering. Social Learning Theory assumes that association with deviant peers precedes and contributes to deviant behaviour; longitudinal research, however, indicates that this relationship is often reciprocal, with individuals who already display antisocial tendencies actively selecting deviant peers rather than being shaped primarily by them. Thornberry et al. (2003) report that peer association and delinquency mutually reinforce one another over time, which complicates any claim of one-directional causality. Proponents of SLT acknowledge such reciprocal effects, but critics argue that the theory offers a limited account of the origins of the initial deviant tendencies that precede these learning processes.

A further limitation concerns the theory's insufficient integration of biological and temperamental factors. Research in behavioural genetics, developmental psychology, and neuroscience reports that traits such as impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, and deficits in executive functioning have biological and heritable components that influence behavioural risk (Beaver et al., 2009; Raine, 2013). SLT does not explicitly deny biological influences, but critics argue that it lacks a clear framework for incorporating them, risking an overestimation of social processes relative to biopsychological predispositions.

Methodological concerns further constrain the theory's explanatory power. Core constructs such as differential association and reinforcement are commonly measured using self-report instruments that rely on individuals' own perceptions of peer behaviour, which are vulnerable to recall bias, social desirability effects, and shared method variance (Pratt et al., 2010). Reinforcement and punishment are frequently inferred rather than directly observed, which complicates efforts to establish precise causal mechanisms and, in our assessment, is a further reason for caution in treating the associations reported in section four as evidence of a fixed causal pathway.

Social Learning Theory has also been criticized for limited engagement with structural and power dynamics. Although it recognizes social context, it often treats macro-level factors such as poverty, inequality, and institutional failure as background conditions rather than central drivers of deviant behaviour. Structural and critical criminologists argue that this risks individualizing social problems and obscuring how systemic inequalities shape learning environments and behavioural options (Messner et al., 2019), a critique with particular salience in contexts such as Nigeria and other Global South societies where structural deprivation and weak institutional control are pronounced (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2015).

Finally, Social Learning Theory has been criticized for offering a limited account of behavioural change and desistance. While it explains how deviant behaviours are acquired and maintained, it provides less theoretical clarity on how individuals disengage from crime over the life course; research on desistance instead emphasizes identity transformation and social bonds formed through employment and family life – processes that extend beyond immediate reinforcement contingencies (Sampson & Laub, 2005). As such, SLT may be more effective in explaining the onset and continuation of deviance than long-term behavioural change.

Overall, these critiques suggest that Social Learning Theory, while influential and empirically supported, is incomplete as a standalone explanation of behaviour. Its limitations point to the value of integrative approaches that combine social learning processes with insights from self-control theory, strain theory, life-course criminology, and biosocial models. In our assessment, rather than undermining its relevance, these critiques help refine the theory's scope and reinforce the case, made throughout this paper, for describing social learning as a factor that increases the probability of youth criminal involvement without making it inevitable.

Gender, Regional, Cultural, and Developmental Differences

The Nigerian literature reviewed in section four has generally analysed peer, family, community, and digital

influences as though they operate uniformly across young people. Consistent with the critique in section six that early formulations of Social Learning Theory were developed largely from male-dominated samples (Heimer & De Coster, 1999), this section brings together what the wider literature says about how gender, region, culture, and developmental stage moderate the pathways summarized in Figure 1, and is offered as an explicit response to the editorial observation that these dimensions warranted greater attention.

Gender

Feminist criminologists argue that women's and girls' pathways into offending are often shaped by relational dynamics, victimization histories, and power asymmetries that extend beyond peer reinforcement mechanisms as conventionally modelled in SLT (Heimer & De Coster, 1999). Much of the Nigerian empirical literature cited in section four does not disaggregate findings by sex, which, in our assessment, is a significant gap: the mechanisms of differential association and modelling identified in Figure 1 may operate through different peer and family structures for young women than for young men, particularly given documented gender differences in exposure to street-level peer networks versus intimate-partner and household contexts. We treat this as an area requiring further primary research (see section on future research) rather than a settled empirical finding.

Regional Variation

Official data point to meaningful regional variation in reported crime experience within Nigeria: the NBS (2024) Crime Experience and Security Perception Survey recorded the highest incidence in the North-West (14.4 million incidents) and North-Central (8.8 million incidents) zones, with the South-East reporting the lowest (6.18 million incidents), and rural households more affected overall than urban ones. This regional pattern is consistent with the proposition in Figure 1 that community conditions and structural stress vary geographically, and suggests that the weighting of peer, family, community, and digital pathways in the model is unlikely to be uniform across Nigeria's regions. The empirical literature reviewed in section four is disproportionately drawn from southern urban centres (Lagos, Ibadan, Benin City, Port Harcourt) and comparatively thin on the northern zones where the NBS data indicate the highest crime experience, which we flag as a further gap rather than a finding this paper can resolve.

Cultural Context

Social Learning Theory was developed primarily within Western cultural contexts, and Oppong (2019) raises concerns about the cross-cultural applicability of psychological constructs – including measures of peer influence and reinforcement – developed outside Africa. Cultural norms around family authority, communal supervision of children (sometimes described in Nigerian sociological literature as extended-family or “village” oversight), and religious institutions may shape which behaviours are modelled, reinforced, or sanctioned in ways that differ from the assumptions embedded in SLT's original formulation. We are not aware of Nigerian studies that have systematically tested whether the theory's mechanisms operate differently across Nigeria's major cultural and religious groupings, and note this as an open question rather than resolving it here.

Developmental Stage

Because “youth” in the Nigerian policy and sociological sense spans roughly ages 15 to 35 (NBS, 2024; Okunola & Ojo, 2020), the population to which this review's arguments apply is developmentally heterogeneous, ranging from early adolescents still under direct parental supervision to young adults in the labour market. The relative weight of the four learning contexts in Figure 1 is unlikely to be constant across this range: family supervision is likely to be most proximally influential in early-to-middle adolescence, while peer, community, and digital/economic pressures associated with the “extended youthhood” described in section three (Adebayo, 2018) are likely to become more salient as individuals move into their twenties and thirties without stable employment. The literature reviewed for this paper rarely disaggregates by developmental stage within the 15–35 band, and we recommend that future Nigerian studies do so explicitly.

Taken together, these four dimensions do not overturn the pathways summarized in Figure 1, but they qualify how those pathways should be interpreted: the strength and form of peer, family, community, and digital influence on behavioural risk is moderated by who a young person is and where they are situated, which is a further reason the paper treats behavioural risk as probabilistic rather than as a fixed or uniform outcome of exposure.

Implications for Prevention and Intervention

Viewing Social Learning Theory as a behavioural risk framework carries implications for the design of prevention and intervention strategies, while keeping in view the probabilistic – not deterministic – nature of the pathways described in Figure 1. Because deviant behaviours are theorized to be acquired through association, observation, and reinforcement, strategies should prioritize reducing exposure to criminogenic peer networks while increasing contact with pro-social role models. Schools, families, and communities are well placed to reshape peer influence and provide positive behavioural models.

Interventions should also emphasize consistent reinforcement of lawful and adaptive behaviours, alongside fair and predictable sanctions for deviance; where pro-social actions are rewarded and antisocial behaviours are credibly discouraged, learning processes are more likely to be redirected toward conformity. Addressing cognitive definitions that justify deviance is equally important: cognitive-behavioural and moral-education programs can help challenge such beliefs and offer alternative, socially acceptable interpretations of behaviour. Family-based programs are important given the influence of early socialization on later behavioural outcomes; strengthening parental supervision, support, and consistent discipline is associated, in the literature reviewed, with reduced reliance on deviant peer reinforcement. Given the regional and gender variation discussed in section seven, prevention efforts are likely to be more effective where they are tailored to local conditions – for example, to the higher reported crime incidence in the North-West and North-Central zones (NBS, 2024) – rather than applied uniformly nationwide. In contemporary contexts, prevention efforts must also extend to digital spaces, where online modelling and reinforcement can normalize risky and criminal behaviours. Overall, Social Learning Theory suggests that durable behaviour change is more likely to come from re-socialization than from punishment alone; restructuring social networks, reinforcement patterns, and internalized beliefs may help reduce behavioural risk and support desistance, particularly among youth, though none of these interventions should be expected to eliminate risk entirely given the multiple, interacting pathways described in this paper.

CONCLUSION

This paper undertook a thematic review of the Nigerian and international literature on youth criminal tendencies, interpreted through Social Learning Theory as a behavioural risk framework. Drawing on the studies examined, the review's central synthesis is that criminal behaviour among Nigerian youth is not merely an individual choice but is associated with socially learned processes – differential association, observation, reinforcement, and cognitive internalization – operating across peer, family, community, and digital contexts, and compounded by structural stress. Social Learning Theory offers a plausible account of why youths exposed to criminogenic peers, families, communities, and digital environments face a heightened likelihood of antisocial conduct, without that exposure determining any individual outcome.

The review also examined the theory's limitations, including its tendency toward social determinism if applied uncritically, ambiguity in causal direction, limited integration of biological and structural factors, and a comparatively weak account of desistance (section six), as well as the gender, regional, cultural, and developmental variation that qualifies how its mechanisms operate in the Nigerian context (section seven). Taken together, these findings suggest that Social Learning Theory remains a useful explanatory framework, but is most defensible when applied as one component of a broader, integrative approach to understanding youth criminal tendencies, and when its claims are stated in probabilistic rather than deterministic terms. In a context such as Nigeria, where peer influence, socioeconomic inequality, weak institutional control, and expanding digital spaces intersect – and where official data confirm both a substantial scale of household crime experience and severe youth unemployment (NBS, 2024; Plan International Nigeria & ActionAid

Nigeria, 2025) – the theory remains a relevant, if partial, lens for explaining how deviant behaviours are learned and sustained.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the study's focus on Social Learning Theory as a framework for understanding behavioural risk, the following practical recommendations are proposed.

- i. Prevention strategies should prioritize disrupting criminogenic learning environments by reducing sustained exposure to deviant peer networks. Schools, communities, and youth organisations should actively promote pro-social peer affiliations through structured group activities, mentorship programs, and supervised engagement.
- ii. Policymakers and practitioners should strengthen the presence of positive and culturally relevant role models. Because youth are more likely to model behaviour demonstrated by individuals they identify with, interventions should involve respected community leaders, educators, and mentors who demonstrate legitimate pathways to success.
- iii. Reinforcement structures should be reoriented to reward pro-social behaviour consistently while ensuring that sanctions for deviance are fair, predictable, and credible. Where enforcement is weak or inconsistent, deviant behaviour risks being inadvertently reinforced through impunity; strengthening institutional integrity is therefore important to effective social-learning-based interventions.
- iv. Family-focused interventions should be expanded. Parenting programs that enhance supervision, emotional support, and consistent discipline may reduce reliance on deviant peer reinforcement and strengthen early pro-social learning.
- v. Given the growing role of digital spaces documented in this review, targeted digital-literacy and online-behaviour interventions are needed to counteract the modelling and reinforcement of deviant behaviours on social media and online platforms.
- vi. Prevention design should account for the regional and gender variation discussed in section seven rather than assuming a single national profile of risk – for example, by weighting community-level interventions toward zones with higher reported crime incidence (NBS, 2024).

Directions for Future Research

Future research should adopt more integrative and methodologically robust approaches to advance the application of Social Learning Theory in the Nigerian context.

- Longitudinal studies are needed to clarify causal ordering between peer association and deviant behaviour, helping to distinguish socialization effects from peer-selection processes and thereby strengthening the empirical validity of social learning explanations.
- Research that explicitly integrates Social Learning Theory with complementary frameworks – self-control theory, strain theory, life-course theory, and biosocial models – would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how social learning interacts with individual traits, structural conditions, and developmental processes.
- Context-specific research remains particularly important in non-Western settings. Future studies should examine how cultural norms, socioeconomic inequality, and institutional factors shape learning processes in Nigerian and other African contexts, rather than assuming the universal applicability of Western-derived models.

- Sex-disaggregated and gender-sensitive analyses are needed to establish whether, and how, the social learning mechanisms summarized in Figure 1 operate differently for young women and young men in Nigeria, extending the discussion in section seven beyond a synthesis of the (largely non-Nigerian) gender critique of SLT.
- Regionally disaggregated studies – particularly in the North-West and North-Central zones, where NBS (2024) data indicate the highest reported crime incidence but where the empirical literature reviewed here is comparatively thin – would help establish whether the pathways in Figure 1 hold with the same strength outside the southern urban centres that dominate the current evidence base.
- Emerging digital environments warrant sustained scholarly attention. Future research should explore how online peer networks, virtual reinforcement, and algorithm-driven visibility influence the learning and diffusion of deviant behaviours, building on the cybercrime-related findings synthesized in this review.

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