

IMPACT OF BABY ABANDONMENT ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study investigated the impact of baby abandonment on child development in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The design adopted for the study was a mixed-methods research design. The population of the study consisted abandoned children (current and former) in orphanages, foster care systems, or juvenile centres. Social workers, caregivers, government officials, and psychologists. Young offenders (delinquents) in correctional facilities with histories of abandonment within Akwa Ibom State. The sample size of the study consisted of 150 abandoned children across orphanages, foster homes, and juvenile centres using stratified sampling technique. The instrument for data collection was a researcher made questionnaire titled: “Baby Abandonment and Child Development Questionnaire”, which was used to obtain data from respondents. The reliability of the instrument was found to be between .67-.83 using Cronbach Alpha statistics. The data obtained was analysed using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation. The findings of the study showed that the developmental challenges of baby abandonment have a significant impact on child development. There was a moderately low impact of socio-economic and cultural factors on baby abandonment. Also, there was a moderate to somewhat high impact, leaning toward positive but not strongly impactful. Based on the findings of the study it was recommended among others that Government agencies such as ministries of social development and child protection services, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in child welfare and development centres should strengthen child welfare interventions and be made responsible for child welfare.

Keywords: Baby abandonment, developmental challenges, socio-economic, cultural contexts, child development

Introduction

Infants thrive in environments marked by consistent care and affection (Perry et al., 2017). The absence of these foundational experiences, particularly from biological parents, can lead to various psychological and behavioural difficulties. According to Kim and Yu (2023), infant abandonment poses a serious challenge to human dignity, with common justifications including the desire to conceal childbirth or economic hardship. Adult survivors of infant abandonment experience emotional distress, struggle with personal emotional coping, and endure significant internal grief. However, they also demonstrate resilience and adaptability (Sherr, Roberts, & Croome, 2017). Frankel (2023) further notes that childhood emotional

abandonment can result in feelings of shame, self-blame, and an inclination to identify with the aggressor.

Infant abandonment is a crime that occurs frequently, often involving mothers in their teens or twenties. This can result from concealing childbirth or experiencing economic hardship (Kim & Yu, 2023). Baby abandonment refers to infants or foetuses being left in unsafe locations such as gutters, rubbish dumps, railway tracks, and bushes (Singh, 2022). Onyido and Akpan (2018) assert that child abandonment results in physical, behavioural, and psychological consequences for both the child and society. Regardless of the reasons, be it desperation, societal shame, or financial difficulties, abandoning an infant can lead to significant psychological problems and attachment disorders, which initiate a complex and challenging life journey for the child (Popescu, 2017). Kostenko (2014) opined these abandoned babies are typically between 0 and 3 years old. Kim and Yu (2023) emphasize that infant abandonment poses a serious threat to the dignity of human life, with common justifications being the concealment of childbirth and economic struggles. The formation of infant attachment is closely linked to the quality of care provided during infancy. Sensitive caregiving is crucial for the development of brain structures (Perry, Blair, & Sullivan, 2017). Ignoring the developmental perspective can have tragic consequences, as infancy represents a critical period of rapid brain growth, establishing foundational neural connections that significantly influence future learning and behaviour.

Education is identified as a vital tool to mitigate these effects. Abandonment in early childhood disrupts the natural bonding process, creating a profound void that can lead to lasting challenges in emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, Thabane and Kasiram (2015) emphasize the importance of preventing child abandonment and protecting abandoned children for the wellbeing of both the children and the society at large. Community support in the fight of shaping behaviours, and fighting against child, trafficking, abandonment and baby factories, is very important in our society today. They help in identifying, and reporting to the police, trafficking networks, and baby factories and other illegal crimes always located in a community.

Eniola & Omoleye (2018) advocates effective monitoring of child charity organizations, prosecuting and punishing operators of baby making factories, and implementing international instruments on women's reproductive health rights can curb the scourge of baby making factories in Nigeria. Addressing the issue of baby abandonment requires a practical approach that examines root causes such as poverty, social stigma, and the lack of support for vulnerable mothers. Additionally, it is important to recognize that children raised in institutional care or foster systems often experience stigma, identity crises, and a pervasive sense of rejection. These challenges can hinder their ability to form healthy social connections and fully engage in society. The repercussions of abandonment extend beyond individual experiences, placing additional strain on societal structures, including child welfare systems, healthcare, and education. This paper aims to investigate the impact of baby abandonment on child development in Akwa Ibom State.

Statement of the Problem:

Despite the extensive recognition of baby abandonment as a critical social issue, its long-term developmental impacts on children remain underexplored and inadequately addressed. Sherr, & Hackman, (2002). Many abandoned children suffer from emotional instability, delayed physical growth, and limited access to quality education and healthcare. The inability of current child welfare systems to provide comprehensive support worsens these

challenges, perpetuating cycles of neglect and social marginalization. Additionally, the shame associated with abandonment creates isolation for both children and caregivers, adding to the complexity of the problem. And without targeted interventions that addresses the root causes of abandonment, prioritize the holistic development of these children, the cycle of negative outcomes is likely to continue, undermining the potential of future generations. Addressing the issue of baby abandonment and its associated impacts necessitates a multifaceted approach. A thorough examination of the root causes, including poverty, social stigma, and insufficient support for vulnerable mothers, enables policymakers and practitioners to devise interventions that not only mitigate the risk of abandonment but also foster the comprehensive development of affected children. This approach encompasses the enhancement of child welfare systems, the promotion of adoption and foster care solutions, and the cultivation of societal awareness aimed at reducing stigma and encouraging empathy.

Research Objectives

1. To conduct an examination of the physical, emotional, cognitive, and social developmental impacts of baby abandonment on the children who are affected
2. To identify the underlying causes of baby abandonment and evaluate the prevalence of these causes across diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts
3. To assess the effectiveness of existing child welfare systems and to propose evidence-based strategies aimed at supporting the comprehensive development of abandoned children

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of developmental challenges of baby abandonment on child development?
2. What is the impact of socio-economic and cultural factors associated with baby abandonment on Child development?
3. What is the impact of existing child welfare interventions of baby abandonment on child development?

Literature Review

Socioeconomic factors and child development in neglectful conditions.

Personal factors, such as mother's deprivation and childhood socialization, contribute to child abandonment, with factors such as poverty, unemployment, and social deviation also playing a role. Uasheva, et, al, (2016). The absence of family support and societal safety nets are factors that leaves many abandoned children economically vulnerable. Mace (2016), states that child safety is threatened by basic needs, maltreatment, abandonment, child labor, trafficking, disasters, and wars. Without caregivers, children may lack access to food, shelter, education, and healthcare. This deprivation increases their vulnerability to malnutrition, illness, and poor living conditions, according to Clarke, *et, al*, (2021).

Lack of education, a common consequence of abandonment, severely restricts future employment opportunities and contributes to a cycle of poverty. And to survive, abandoned children sometimes are forced into child Labor, begging, or exploitation. These conditions expose them to hazardous environments, and even child trafficking for sexual exploitation, which is a serious global issue that violates basic human rights, according to Nair (2015)

Many abandoned children end up in orphanages or foster systems, and some of these orphanages according to Moffa, et, al, (2019), has poor personal hygiene behaviours, inadequate water and sanitation infrastructure, and overcrowding being major concerns in institutional care settings for orphaned and abandoned children.

Psychological Factors and Child Development in Neglectful Conditions

Early psychosocial neglect leads to persistent deficits in social, cognitive, and emotional development, while foster care improves most domains of functioning for children in adversity. Nelson, Fox & Zeanah (2023). Onyido & Akpan (2018), stressed that abandonment in Nigeria leads to physical, behavioral, and psychological consequences, with society facing the bulk of these consequences. Study went further to recommend education as a vital tool that should be used as an instrument to minimize child abandonment in Nigeria.

Children abandoned without stable, loving relationships may have difficulty forming trusting bonds and secure attachments later in life. This may lead to Attachment disorders, which according to Zeanah, & Gleason, (2015), in early childhood include reactive attachment disorder and disinhibited social engagement disorder. Frankel, (2023), highlighted Chronic childhood emotional abandonment with the capacity to lead to self-blame, shame, and loss of agency, requiring therapists' patience, empathy, and understanding. The trauma of abandonment can cause difficulty in managing emotions, Depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation Tinajero, et, al, (2020). Depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation are common psychological consequences due to prolonged neglect and emotional deprivation. And trauma and stress, in this case, can lead to significant neurocognitive effects, such as impairments in verbal learning, speed of information processing, attention/working memory, and verbal memory. Scott, et, al, (2015)

Social Factors and Child Development in Neglectful Conditions

Abandoned children in Nigeria who are stigmatized as witches are vulnerable to statutory rape, sexual addiction, human trafficking, infections, pregnancy, and intergenerational abuse. Agazue, (2021). Abandoned children often experience stigma and discrimination, leading to isolation from peers and society. This isolation limits their ability to develop healthy social skills. Khoo, Mancinas, & Skoog, (2015). Alias, Mustafa, Aziz, & Hamzah, (2024), states that parental disengagement, peer pressure, unfavourable living conditions, and societal indifference contribute to youth involvement in criminal activities, while protective factors like family, schools, and society can help prevent recurrence. They struggle with unresolved anger and a need to survive, and turn to delinquency, drugs, or crime, increasing their chances of imprisonment as they grow up. But Secure parental attachment, according to Delgado, et, al, (2022) promotes the creation of quality peer relationships during adolescence, based on communication, support, intimacy, trust, and quality.

Baby Factories and Child Abandonment

Baby factories involve breeding, trafficking, and abuse of infants and their biological mothers, often resulting in physical, psychological, and sexual violence. Makinde, et, al, (2017). They are institutions where pregnant women and young teenage girls are impregnated and kept illegally until their babies are born, then sold for monetary gains. Ombelet, & Johnson, (2016). Children born into or trafficked through baby factories are also victims of neglect, trauma, and exploitation, as they often lack legal documentation, family ties, or any sense of belonging, which creates confusion leading to resentment, defiance, and anti-social

behaviours as they grow up. Babies from these factories may be sold into a corrupt environment, where delinquency becomes part of them, as they grow.

Interventions

Success Stories of Specialized Institutions: Some authors highlight the success of specialized institutions in Nigeria, such as Hope for the Abandoned Children Foundation and The Orphanage Welfare Foundation, which provide holistic care for abandoned children. Olowu (2020); Adegoke (2022); Olaniyi (2021) such institutions have made notable strides in providing both immediate and long-term care, including healthcare, education, and psychological support, leading to improved developmental outcomes for abandoned children. Olaniyi further argues that while the overall system may have gaps, these specialized institutions demonstrate the potential for significant positive impact when interventions are comprehensive and well-funded.

Theoretical Framework

These theories offer a framework for analysing the developmental and societal issues affecting abandoned children.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969)

Attachment theory plays a crucial role in understanding the role of early infant separations from mothers and their impact on a child's social emotional adaptation and cognitive growth. Salcuni, (2015). Ogle, & Cozza, (2023), states that Attachment theory suggests that young children develop beliefs and expectations about relationships based on the availability and responsiveness of early caregivers, influencing social information processing and emotion regulation. Attachment issues can show up as feeling emotionally unstable, having trouble building relationships, and dealing with behavioural problems as adults. This idea emphasizes how neglect during childhood can mess with a kid's ability to manage their emotions and interact with others.

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (Erikson, 1950)

Erikson's psychosocial development theory focuses on early child development and has influenced various disciplines, including self- and career counselling. Maree, (2021). Corradi, (2024) states that Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Theory is a comprehensive schema encompassing the life cycle from birth to death, defining important parameters of development that distinguish normative from pathologic. Neglect during formative years can leave children with deep-seated feelings of mistrust, insecurity, and anxiety. These developmental problems can have a domino effect, affecting later stages like developing independence, a sense of self, and the capacity for intimacy. These theoretical perspectives collectively offer a multidimensional framework for understanding the impact of baby abandonment on child development. They underscore the intricate relationships between early experiences, developmental needs, and overarching societal structures. This comprehensive lens facilitates an in-depth analysis of the challenges encountered by abandoned children and informs the design of targeted interventions.

Methodology

The study design was a mixed-methods research design was employed to analyse both numerical data and personal experiences, measure developmental outcomes and rates of

delinquency among abandoned children, and explore lived experiences, psychological impacts, and factors influencing child abandonment and delinquent behaviours. The population of the study consisted of abandoned children (current and former) in orphanages, foster care systems, or juvenile centers. Social workers, caregivers, government officials, and psychologists. Young offenders (delinquents) in correctional facilities with histories of abandonment within Akwa Ibom State. Purposive sampling Technique was used to select participants with relevant experiences (like children in foster care or juveniles with abandonment histories). 150 abandoned children across orphanages, foster homes, and juvenile centers were sampled using stratified sampling to ensure representation across age groups, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Researchers made questionnaire titled: "Baby Abandonment and Child Development Questionnaire" was used to obtain data from respondents. It consisted of 12-items on developmental challenges of baby abandonment on child development, 12-items on socio-economic and cultural factors associated with baby abandonment on Child development and 10-items on child welfare interventions of baby abandonment on child development with 4-point Likert scale of 1 (Not at all), 2 (Somewhat), 3 (To a great extent) and 4 (Almost completely) respectively. The reliability of the instrument was found to be between .67-. 83 determined using Cronbach Alpha statistics. This was adjourned reliable to be used for the study. The data obtained was analysed using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation. Any mean response of 2.50 and above was considered high while any mean response below 2.50 was considered low.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the impact of developmental challenges of baby abandonment on child development?

Table 1: Mean and Standard deviation of impact of developmental challenges of baby abandonment on child development

S/N.	Item statement	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	Baby abandonment affects a child's emotional stability	2.65	0.76	High
2.	Baby abandonment influences a child's ability to manage stress	2.85	0.69	High
3.	Baby abandonment impacts a child's self-esteem	2.85	0.69	High
4.	Baby abandonment influences a child's ability to form healthy relationships	2.85	0.70	High
5.	Baby abandonment impacts a child's social skills (e.g., communication, cooperation)	3.31	0.77	High
6.	Baby abandonment affects a child's ability to trust others	3.60	0.49	High
7.	Baby abandonment impacts a child's cognitive development (e.g., learning, problem-solving)	3.60	0.49	High
8.	Baby abandonment influences a child's memory and concentration	3.60	0.49	High
9.	Baby abandonment affects a child's language development	3.39	0.79	High
10.	Baby abandonment contributes to behavioural	3.40	0.80	High

	problems in children (e.g., aggression, anxiety)			
11.	Baby abandonment affects a child's impulsivity and self-control	3.08	0.68	High
12.	Baby abandonment influences a child's risk-taking behaviour	3.47	0.50	High
Grand Mean		3.22		

Table 1 shows that a grand mean of 3.22 indicates that respondents generally perceive the developmental challenges of baby abandonment to have a noticeable or significant impact on child development, assuming responses are skewed toward agreement or higher ratings. This implies that respondents perceive the developmental challenges associated with baby abandonment as having a moderately high impact on child development. It indicates a general agreement on the significant negative implications of abandonment for the affected children

Research Question 2: What is the impact of socio-economic and cultural factors associated with baby abandonment on Child development?

Table 2: Mean and Standard deviation of socio-economic and cultural factors associated with baby abandonment on Child development

S/N.	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	Poverty contributes to baby abandonment and impacts child development	2.34	0.48	Low
2.	Lack of access to education affects child development in cases of baby abandonment	2.34	0.47	Low
3.	Unemployment influences baby abandonment and impacts child development	2.34	0.47	Low
4.	Social isolation contributes to baby abandonment and affects child development	2.34	0.48	Low
5.	Lack of healthcare access impacts child development in cases of baby abandonment	2.42	0.49	Low
6.	Food insecurity affects child development in cases of baby abandonment?	2.50	0.50	High
7.	Traditional gender roles influence baby abandonment and affect child development	2.58	0.49	High
8.	Cultural attitudes toward adoption impact child development in cases of baby abandonment	2.67	0.47	High
9.	Community support for abandoned children influences child development	2.66	0.48	High
10.	Cultural values around family planning contribute to baby abandonment and impact child development	2.43	0.49	Low
11.	Community resources for abandoned children influence child development	2.36	0.48	Low
12.	Cultural norms around parenting style impact child development in cases of baby abandonment	2.29	0.45	Low
Grand Mean		2.44		

Table 2 shows a grand mean of 2.44 which indicates moderately low impact of socio-economic and cultural factors on baby abandonment. This may be due to other factors such as direct abandonment-related issues like neglect or trauma which are perceived as more impactful. It therefore implies that these factors may not play a dominant role in influencing child development outcomes in the context of abandonment.

Research Question 3: What is the impact of existing child welfare interventions of baby abandonment on child development?

Mean and Standard deviation of the impact of existing child welfare interventions of baby abandonment on child development

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	Child welfare interventions for baby abandonment are effective in promoting healthy child development	2.77	0.54	High
2.	Foster care services support the cognitive development of abandoned children	2.57	0.63	High
3.	Adoption programs promote emotional stability in abandoned children	2.57	0.63	High
4.	Availability of foster care services meets the demand for care	2.38	0.49	Low
5.	Adoption programs are well-publicized and understood by the community	2.50	0.65	High
6.	Quality of care provided by healthcare services supports the mental health of abandoned children	2.84	0.57	High
7.	Child welfare interventions for baby abandonment are sustainable in the long term	3.02	0.73	High
8.	Current funding for child welfare interventions is sufficient to meet the needs of abandoned children	3.16	0.60	High
9.	Child welfare interventions are cost-effective in promoting healthy child development	3.18	0.71	High
10.	Child welfare interventions are adaptable to changing community needs	3.05	0.74	High
Grand Mean		2.80		

Table 3 shows a grand mean of 2.80 which indicates a moderate to somewhat high impact, leaning toward positive but not strongly impactful. It reflects a perception that while existing child welfare interventions may have some impact, they are not perceived as significantly effective or impactful in supporting child development comprehensively. This implies that these interventions provide some benefits, and are not perceived as sufficiently effective in addressing the developmental needs of abandoned children.

Discussion of Findings

Findings of the study on the impact of developmental challenges of baby abandonment on child development showed the developmental challenges of baby abandonment have a significant impact on child development. This could be attributed to the fact that the

developmental challenges of baby abandonment can have a profound impact on child development, leading to emotional trauma, attachment issues, and cognitive delays. This is often due to the lack of early nurturing, institutional care, and uncertainty/insecurity that abandoned babies experience. As a result, these children may be at a higher risk of mental health issues, poor academic performance and difficulty forming healthy relationships. The findings of this study is in contrast with that of some Nigerian studies which suggest that community-based care and support can mitigate the negative effects of baby abandonment on child development (Onyido & Akpan (2018); Ogunyemi (2021); Olowu, 2020; Adegoke, 2022). Findings of the study on the impact of socio-economic and cultural factors associated with baby abandonment on Child development showed moderately low impact of socio-economic and cultural factors on baby abandonment, this suggests that while these factors are relevant, they may not be as significant in shaping abandonment-related outcomes as other more direct influences, such as neglect or trauma. The findings is in line with studies by Agazue, (2021); Khoo, Mancinas, and Skoog, (2015) who have pointed out that in many Nigerian communities, abandonment is more often associated with personal crises, such as the inability to provide proper care due to trauma or mental health issues, rather than purely economic or cultural pressures. The findings of this study is in contrast with Mustafa, Aziz and Hamzah, (2024) that socio-economic hardship, particularly in rural and urban poor areas in Nigeria, remains a major factor contributing to child abandonment.

Findings of the study on the impact of existing child welfare interventions of baby abandonment on child development showed a moderate to somewhat high impact, leaning toward positive but not strongly impactful. This suggests that while these interventions are perceived as beneficial to some extent, they are not seen as strongly effective in addressing the comprehensive developmental needs of abandoned children. This reflects a nuanced view of child welfare systems in Nigeria—while they provide some support, they may fall short in terms of their overall impact and effectiveness. The findings is supported by Ogunyemi (2021) emphasizes that while government interventions and NGO-led programs aimed at supporting abandoned or orphaned children do exist, these programs often face challenges such as inadequate funding, lack of resources, and weak implementation frameworks. Ogunyemi notes that these limitations prevent interventions from being fully effective, aligning with the finding of a moderate-to-somewhat-high impact. Interventions may help in some ways, but their overall influence on child development outcomes remains constrained. The findings of the study is in contrast with Ajayi and Adedeji (2021) on child welfare interventions which report shows it have improved significantly in recent years due to increasing government and NGO involvement in the sector. Ajayi and Adedeji emphasize that national and international partnerships have led to better-targeted programs for abandoned children, including education, healthcare, and rehabilitation. They argue that the perception of the lack of comprehensive support may stem from challenges in rural areas or specific regions, but overall, these interventions are making a meaningful difference.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the developmental challenges associated with baby abandonment have a noticeable and significant negative impact on child development, as perceived by respondents. However, socio-economic and cultural factors are perceived to have a moderately low impact, suggesting that other issues such as neglect or trauma may play a more dominant role in influencing developmental outcomes. Existing child welfare

interventions are perceived as moderately effective, indicating a need for enhanced strategies to better address the developmental needs of abandoned children.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that;

1. Government agencies such as ministries of social development and child protection services, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in child welfare and development centres should strengthen child welfare interventions and be made responsible for child welfare.
2. Healthcare professionals, social workers and mental health organizations should address neglect and trauma to implement trauma-informed care and provide specialized support for abandoned children.
3. Local government authorities, community leaders and civil society organizations should design and deliver community-based education and support programs aimed at preventing abandonment and supporting at-risk families.

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