

## SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND AND THE PREVALENCE OF OUT-OF- SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA

INIYE IRENE WODI Ph.D.<sup>1</sup> & HANNAH FENESAI FEMOWEI<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Counselling and Educational Psychology

<sup>2</sup>Department of Arts Education, Niger Delta University

Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State

iniyewodi@gmail.com

### Abstract

This research examines the socio-economic background and the prevalence of out-of-school children in Nigeria. With one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children globally, Nigeria faces a critical challenge that hampers its development. Nigeria is home to a significant number of out-of-school children, a situation that poses a severe challenge to the nation's development and social stability. The root of this issue could be deeply embedded in the socio-economic background of families, which plays a crucial role in determining whether children have the opportunity to attend school. Hence the concept of socio-economic background, concept of out of school children, factors of socio-economic background, current statistics of out-of-school children in Nigeria, socio-economic background affecting out-of school children, the long-term consequences of being out of school and strategies for improving school attendance among out of school children were discussed. It was therefore recommended that the government should expand social welfare programs and provide financial assistance to low-income families to alleviate the costs of schooling. This could include subsidies for school fees, uniforms, and learning materials, making education more accessible to disadvantaged children among others.

**Keywords:** Socioeconomic background, socioeconomic factors, out- of -school-children

### Introduction

In Nigeria, a significant number of children are out of school, a situation that poses a serious challenge to the country's development. This issue is particularly alarming, as Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children in the world. One of the factors responsible for this is the socio-economic background of families (World Bank, 2020). Social economic factors refer to the social and economic conditions in which a family lives, including their income, education level, and the type of work the parents do. These factors can greatly influence whether or not a child goes to school. Socio-economic background refers to the combination of economic and social factors that influence an individual's or a family's status in society (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). These factors include income level, educational attainment of parents, occupation, and access to basic services such as healthcare, housing, and education.

The socio-economic background of a family includes how much money they earn, the parents' level of education, their jobs, and the overall living conditions (United Nations Children's Fund, 2023). In Nigeria, there are big differences in socio-economic backgrounds between families in urban areas and those in rural areas. For example, families in rural areas often have lower incomes and less access to good schools. These families may struggle to pay school fees or buy books and uniforms, making it difficult for their children to attend school regularly. Studies have shown that children from low-income families are significantly more likely to be out of school than their peers from wealthier

households, indicating a strong correlation between socio-economic status and educational access (UNICEF, 2023).

Out-of-school children are those who should be in school but are not. This includes children who have never been to school and those who have dropped out (Niyi et al 2022). In Nigeria, the reasons why children are out of school vary. Some children are needed at home to help with chores or to work and earn money. In some areas, especially in the northern part of the country, cultural practices such as early marriage also keep children, particularly girls, out of school. Furthermore, ongoing violence and insecurity, especially in the Northeast, have forced many schools to close, leaving children without a place to learn. Children from poorer families are more likely to be out of school. This is because families with limited financial resources often have to make difficult decisions about how to spend their money, and education may not be the top priority (Niyi et al, 2022). In rural areas, where poverty is more widespread, schools are often far away, poorly equipped, and expensive to attend. As a result, many children are kept out of school to work in farms or markets to help their families survive. Research shows that children whose parents have low levels of education are also at a higher risk of not attending school (UNICEF, 2023).

In addition to economic factors, there are also cultural and regional differences that affect school attendance. In the northern regions of Nigeria, for instance, cultural practices sometimes discourage formal education, especially for girls. This leads to a higher number of out-of-school children in these areas. According to recent reports, despite efforts by the Nigerian government to increase school enrollment, the number of out-of-school children remains very high. National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) 2022) reports that programs like the Universal Basic Education (UBE) initiative aim to make education more accessible, but challenges persist, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas. The COVID-19 pandemic has also worsened the situation, as many families have faced increased financial difficulties, leading to more children dropping out of school. Moving forward, there is a need for stronger policies that address the root causes of why children are not in school, particularly focusing on the economic barriers that prevent children from getting an education.

### **Concept of Socio-Economic Background**

Socio-economic background refers to the combination of economic and social factors that characterize an individual's or family's position in society. In the Nigerian context, this includes household income, the level of education attained by parents, and the nature of their employment. These factors significantly influence access to resources such as quality education, healthcare, and housing (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). According to UNICEF (2023) socio-economic background is a critical determinant of a child's access to education and their academic outcomes. Socio-economic background in Nigeria is also used as an indicator of social inequality, reflecting disparities in income, education, and living conditions among different population groups. These disparities are often more pronounced in rural areas, where poverty levels are higher and access to essential services is limited. Socio-economic background, therefore, plays a key role in perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality across generations (World Bank Nigeria, 2022).

### **Concept of Out-of-School Children**

According to the United Nations, "out-of-school children" are those aged 6-11 who have not yet enrolled in formal education, excluding pre-primary levels. These children are of school age but are not attending school due to failures by both parents and the government to ensure they have access to quality education. In a broader sense, out-of-school children include those aged 1 to 12 who are not participating in any functional educational system and may be found wandering the streets (Ojelade et al. 2019). The term "out-of-school children" specifically refers to those who are missing out on

schooling because of various systemic and individual shortcomings.

Out-of-school children despite being of school age, are not attending school due to systemic failures in the education system. This can include issues such as inadequate school infrastructure, poor teacher quality, and lack of educational resources. The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) (2023) highlights that these failures contribute to educational exclusion and hinder children's ability to receive a basic education. Out-of-school children are not receiving formal education due to socio-economic barriers like poverty, child labor, and cultural practices that prioritize work or marriage over education. According to the World Bank (2022), addressing the socio-economic factors that prevent children from attending school is crucial for improving educational access and achieving equitable education.

### **Factors of Socio-Economic Background**

Socio-economic background is the social and economic circumstances that influence an individual's or group's access to resources, opportunities, and overall quality of life. It is shaped by various interrelated factors that determine an individual's position within society. These factors include income, education, occupation, social class, geographical location, healthcare access, social capital, government policies, and discrimination. Each of these factors plays a crucial role in shaping socio-economic status (SES) and determining opportunities for upward mobility. Blanden and Machin (2013) consider the following aspects of Socio-economic background.

1. *Income level:* Income is one of the most important factors in determining socio-economic status. Families with higher incomes can afford better housing, education, healthcare, and other necessities. This financial stability helps them lead a more comfortable life and provides better opportunities for their children. On the other hand, families with low incomes often struggle to meet basic needs, which can limit their access to quality education and healthcare, making it harder for them to improve their socio-economic status. According to the World Bank (2020), about 40% of Nigerians, which is over 83 million people live below the national poverty line of ₦137,430 annually. The average monthly household income is ₦103,204, with rural poverty rates significantly higher than urban (52% vs. 18%).
2. *Education:* Education is another crucial factor that affects socio-economic background. People with higher levels of education usually have better job opportunities and earn more money, which helps them achieve a higher socio-economic status. Education also influences a person's ability to make informed decisions and navigate life's challenges. Unfortunately, not everyone has the same access to quality education. Children from low-income families or those living in rural areas may attend underfunded schools, which can limit their chances of success in the future. In Nigeria, Educational disparities mirror income inequality, the Country's adult literacy rate is 62.02%, while children's attendance of primary schools is at 65.8%, School attendance even drops sharply at higher levels (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). These challenges are worse in northern regions, where insecurity and poverty limit access to education.
3. *Occupation:* The kind of job a person has is closely related to their income and education. Occupations that require higher education, such as professional or managerial roles, generally offer better pay, job security, and benefits. On the other hand, jobs that require less education, like unskilled labor, often pay less and may not offer stable employment. This difference in job quality can greatly influence a person's socio-economic status and their ability to improve their life circumstances. Occupationally, many Nigerians work in the informal sector or agriculture, particularly in rural areas. The country's unemployment rate stands at 33.3%, with youth disproportionately affected (NBS, 2021).

4. **Social Class and Mobility:** A person's social class, which is often inherited from their family, plays a significant role in shaping their socio-economic background. Families with higher socio-economic status can provide their children with more opportunities, such as better education and networks of influential contacts. Social mobility, or the ability to move up or down the socio-economic ladder, depends on various factors, including education, job opportunities, and economic policies. High social mobility allows individuals to improve their socio-economic status, while low mobility can keep people stuck in poverty across generations.
5. **Geographical Location:** The place where a person lives can greatly affect their socio-economic background. People living in urban areas usually have better access to education, healthcare, and job opportunities compared to those in rural areas. Additionally, regions with strong economies offer more opportunities for employment and wealth creation, while economically disadvantaged areas may struggle with high unemployment and poverty rates.
6. **Healthcare Access:** Access to healthcare is essential for maintaining good health, which is closely linked to socio-economic status. People with access to quality healthcare are more likely to be healthy and able to work, which helps them achieve economic stability. In contrast, those without healthcare coverage may face serious health issues that prevent them from working and can lead to financial hardship.
7. **Social and Cultural Capital:** Social and cultural capital refers to the networks, connections, and cultural values that influence a person's socio-economic status. People with strong social networks can access job opportunities, information, and support that help them succeed. Cultural values, such as the importance placed on education or hard work, also play a role in shaping socio-economic outcomes.
8. **Government Policies and Economic Environment:** Government policies, such as taxation, welfare programs, and economic regulations, can either help reduce socio-economic inequalities or make them worse. For instance, in Nigeria, progressive tax systems and social safety nets can support lower-income individuals, helping them improve their socio-economic status. On the other hand, economic instability, such as high unemployment or inflation, can make it harder for people to achieve economic security.

### **Current Statistics of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria**

Nigeria faces one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children globally. As of 2023, approximately 10.5 million children in Nigeria are not enrolled in school. This figure includes children of both primary and secondary school ages and underscores a major challenge in the educational sector (UNICEF, 2023). This large number highlights systemic issues that prevent many children from accessing formal education. There is a significant gender disparity in the rates of out-of-school children. Girls, in particular, face greater challenges in accessing education compared to boys. According to UNESCO, girls in Nigeria are disproportionately affected by educational exclusion due to factors such as socio-cultural norms, early marriage, and gender-based violence. These barriers contribute to higher dropout rates and lower enrollment figures for girls.

The distribution of out-of-school children varies significantly across Nigeria. The northeastern region of Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children, largely due to ongoing conflict, extreme poverty, and inadequate educational infrastructure. The National Bureau of Statistics (2023) reports that these northern regions face greater challenges in providing education compared to other parts of the country. Conflict and displacement have severely impacted education in Nigeria. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA 2023) estimates that millions of children in conflict-affected areas, particularly in the northeast, are out of school due to the destruction

of educational facilities and displacement of families.

### **Socio-Economic Background affecting Out-of- School Children**

#### *Poverty impacts school attendance*

Poverty significantly affects school attendance, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, where economic hardship often forces children to prioritize work over education. Poverty restricts access to necessary educational resources such as uniforms, books, and transportation, which are essential for regular school attendance. Poverty in Nigeria is widespread and deeply rooted. As at 2023, about 62.9% of Nigerians over 133 million people are considered multidimensionally poor, lacking access to education, healthcare, and basic amenities (NBS, 2023). Poverty is more severe in rural areas and the northern regions, while urban and southern areas fare better.

#### *Parental education impact children's schooling*

Parental education plays a crucial role in children's schooling, significantly influencing their academic performance, motivation, and long-term educational outcomes. Parents with higher levels of education are more likely to value and support their children's academic endeavors. This support often manifests in various forms, such as helping with homework, fostering a positive attitude toward education, and providing resources that enhance learning. Research indicates that children whose parents have higher educational attainment tend to perform better academically and have higher school attendance rates (Davis-Kean, 2020). Moreover, educated parents are typically more equipped to navigate the school system, advocate for their children's educational needs, and create a home environment conducive for learning. They are also more likely to engage in activities that promote cognitive development, such as reading to their children and encouraging educational activities outside of school. This involvement is linked to higher levels of academic achievement and a greater likelihood of pursuing higher education (Hill & Tyson, 2009). According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2019), only about 30% of Nigerian adults have completed secondary education, and even fewer have attained post-secondary qualifications. This means a large proportion of Nigerian children grow up in households where parents may not have the educational background to fully support their academic development.

### **Cultural practices and economic constraints impact school children**

Cultural practices and economic constraints deeply affect school children, shaping their educational experiences and opportunities. It plays a significant role in influencing children's education. In many cultures, traditional gender roles can limit educational opportunities, particularly for girls. For instance, in some communities, girls are expected to handle household responsibilities or marry at a young age, which can lead to higher dropout rates and lower school attendance among girls. Cultural norms and beliefs about education also impact how families prioritize schooling.

Economic constraints are another critical factor affecting children's education. Families with limited financial resources often struggle to afford the costs associated with schooling, such as uniforms, books, and transportation. This financial strain can lead to children missing school or dropping out altogether. Additionally, in impoverished families, children may be required to work to contribute to the family income, which further reduces their time and energy for attending school. Economic hardships can also lead to poorer living conditions, affecting children's health and their ability to focus on their studies.

### **Regional and Cultural Influences impact school children**

Regional and cultural influences have a profound impact on school children, shaping their educational opportunities, experiences, and outcomes. These factors can vary widely, depending on the location and cultural context, leading to differences in access to education, quality of schooling, and student

engagement. UNESCO (2020) reports that geographical location plays a crucial role in determining the quality and accessibility of education for children. In many countries, there is a significant disparity between urban and rural areas in terms of educational resources.

In addition to the urban-rural divide, regional disparities within a country can also influence educational outcomes. Regions affected by conflict, political instability, or natural disasters may experience disruptions in schooling, leading to prolonged periods of educational interruption for children. Cultural norms and practices deeply affect how education is perceived and valued within a community. In some cultures, traditional beliefs and practices may prioritize certain types of education over others. For instance, there may be a preference for religious or vocational education rather than formal academic schooling, particularly in communities where formal education is viewed as less relevant to daily life or future employment (World Bank 2022).

### **Long-Term Consequences of being Out-of-School**

The long-term consequences of being out of school are profound, affecting individuals, communities, and entire societies. When children miss out on education, they face a range of challenges that can have lasting impacts on their lives and well-being.

#### *1. Limited economic opportunities*

**Reduced earning potential:** One of the most significant consequences of being out of school is the loss of potential income. Education is strongly linked to earning capacity, and individuals without formal education often struggle to secure well-paying jobs. This lack of education can trap them in low-wage, unstable employment, perpetuating a cycle of poverty. According to the World Bank (2021), each additional year of schooling increases an individual's earnings by an average of 10%, highlighting the economic impact of missed education.

#### *2. Social exclusion and inequality*

**Marginalization:** Being out of school can lead to social exclusion, as education is a key pathway to social integration. Individuals who do not complete their education may find it difficult to participate fully in society, leading to a sense of alienation and marginalization. This can be particularly severe in communities where educational attainment is a key determinant of social status and opportunity. The UNESCO (2020) report on global education emphasizes that lack of education often reinforces existing inequalities, particularly among marginalized groups.

#### *3. Health outcomes*

**Health risks:** Education is closely linked to health outcomes. Individuals with lower levels of education are more likely to experience poor health and have shorter life expectancies. This is partly because education equips individuals with knowledge about health practices and access to better healthcare. Additionally, those without education are less likely to have jobs that provide health insurance or other benefits. A study by the WHO (2019) found that education is one of the strongest predictors of life expectancy, with higher educational levels associated with better health and longer lives.

#### *4. Increased vulnerability to exploitation*

**Child labor and exploitation:** Children who are out of school are at a higher risk of being exploited, including being forced into child labor, early marriage, or other forms of exploitation. Without the protection and structure that schooling provides, these children are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022), children who are not in school are more likely to enter the workforce prematurely, often in hazardous conditions, which can have lifelong consequences for their health and well-being.

## **Strategies for improving School Attendance among out-of-School Children**

Improving school attendance among out-of-school children requires targeted strategies that address the root causes of absenteeism and create supportive environments that encourage enrollment and regular participation in education. Here are several effective strategies:

### *1. Community engagement and awareness campaigns*

One of the key strategies for improving school attendance is to engage communities and raise awareness about the importance of education. According to UNESCO (2021) this involves working with local leaders, parents, and community organizations to promote the value of schooling and dispel myths or cultural practices that may discourage attendance, especially for girls. Community engagement programs that involve parents and local leaders can help change attitudes toward education and encourage families to prioritize school attendance.

### *2. Financial support and incentives*

Many children stay out of school due to financial constraints. Providing financial support to families, such as scholarships, cash transfers, or school fee waivers, can help reduce the economic barriers that prevent children from attending school. In addition, offering incentives such as free meals, uniforms, or transportation can also encourage regular attendance. Research by the World Bank (2022) shows that conditional cash transfer programs, where families receive financial assistance if their children attend school, have been effective in increasing attendance rates, particularly in low-income communities.

### *3. Flexible and alternative education programs*

To accommodate the diverse needs of out-of-school children, especially those who may need to work or care for family members, flexible education programs should be developed. A study by UNICEF (2020) highlights that flexible education programs include part-time schooling, evening classes, or non-formal education programs that allow children to learn at their own pace. Alternative education models, such as mobile schools or community-based learning centers, can also reach children in remote or marginalized communities.

### *4. Safe and inclusive school environments*

Ensuring that schools are safe, inclusive, and welcoming is crucial for improving attendance. This includes implementing anti-bullying policies, providing adequate facilities, and creating an environment where all children feel valued and supported. Schools should also be accessible to children with disabilities, offering the necessary accommodations and support services. Inclusive education practices that address the needs of all students, regardless of their background or abilities, can help reduce dropout rates and encourage consistent attendance.

## **Conclusion**

The problem of out-of-school children in Nigeria is closely tied to the socio-economic conditions of families. Factors like low income, lack of education, and poor access to basic services make it difficult for many children, especially those in rural areas, to attend school. These challenges create a cycle of poverty that is hard to break and hold back the progress of the country. Solving this issue is essential not just for the well-being of individual children but also for the development of Nigeria as a whole.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

1. The government should expand social welfare programs and provide financial assistance to low-income families to alleviate the costs of schooling. This could include subsidies for school fees, uniforms, and learning materials, making education more accessible to disadvantaged children.
2. There is a need to improve the infrastructure of schools in rural areas by building more schools, providing adequate teaching materials, and ensuring that these schools are staffed with qualified teachers.
3. Initiatives that emphasize the importance of education, especially for girls, should be intensified. These campaigns should target communities where cultural practices limit school attendance and encourage parents to prioritize education.
4. Programs aimed at changing cultural perceptions about education, particularly for girls, should be promoted. Engaging community leaders and influencers in these areas can help shift norms and encourage higher enrollment and retention rates in schools.

## References

- Blanden, J., & Machin, S. (2013). Educational inequality and the expansion of UK higher education. *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, 60(5), 597–617.
- Davis-Kean, P. E. (2020). The influence of parent education and family income on child achievement: The indirect role of parental expectations and the home environment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 19(2), 294–304.
- Hill, N. E., & Tyson, D. F. (2009). Parental involvement in middle school: A meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, 45(3), 740–763.
- International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). (2023). *Inclusive education and out-of-school children: Policy implications for low-income countries*. <https://www.iied.org/>
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2022). *Child labour: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward*. <https://www.ilo.org/global/publications>
- Jeynes, W. H. (2016). *Parental involvement and academic success*. Routledge.
- National Bureau of Statistics. (2019). *Nigeria Living Standards Survey 2018–2019*. Abuja: NBS.
- National Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Labour Force Statistics: Unemployment and Underemployment Report (Q4 2020)*. Abuja: NBS.
- National Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *Education Statistics Report*. Abuja: NBS.
- National Bureau of Statistics. (2023). *Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Report*. Abuja: NBS.
- Niyi, O. A., Ibrahim, A., & Okafor, J. C. (2022). Socioeconomic determinants of out-of-school children in Nigeria. *Journal of African Educational Studies*, 8(1), 45–60.
- Ojelade, O. A., Odugbesan, J. A., & Odetunde, O. O. (2019). Out-of-school children and inclusive education in Nigeria: Issues and policy options. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 64, 21–28.
- UNESCO. (2020). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and education – All means all*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://www.unesco.org/reports>
- UNESCO. (2021). *Enhancing education participation through community engagement*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- UNESCO. (2023). *Global Education Monitoring Report: Gender and education in Nigeria*. Paris: UNESCO.
- United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). (2020). *Education: Alternative learning and access strategies*. <https://www.unicef.org>
- United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). (2023). *Education: Out-of-school children in Nigeria*. <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education>
- United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). (2024). UNICEF warns of increase in out-of-school children in Nigeria. *Vanguard*. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2024/05/nigerias-out-of-school-children-now-18-3m-unicef-2/>

- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2023). *Nigeria Humanitarian Response Plan*. <https://www.unocha.org/nigeria>
- Wagmiller, R. L., & Adelman, R. M. (2020). *Childhood and intergenerational poverty: The long-term consequences of growing up poor*. National Center for Children in Poverty. <https://www.nccp.org/>
- World Bank. (2020). *Poverty and inequality in Nigeria: Executive summary*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/lsm/brief/nigeria>
- World Bank. (2021). *The economic case for education: How education boosts income and economic growth*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. <https://www.worldbank.org>
- World Bank. (2022). *Addressing barriers to education in Nigeria: Socioeconomic factors and solutions*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nigeria/publication/education>
- World Health Organization (WHO). (2019). *The solid facts: Education and health*. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe. <https://www.euro.who.int>