

Youth Unemployment and Its Influence on Crime Among Urban Youth in Nansana Municipality, Wakiso District, Uganda

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Abstract

Youth unemployment has emerged as one of the most pressing socioeconomic challenges in sub-Saharan Africa, with its consequences extending far beyond individual economic deprivation to encompass broader social instability, community insecurity, and rising crime rates. In Uganda, where over 78% of the population is below the age of 30, the challenge of youth unemployment has taken on particular urgency, with urban areas bearing a disproportionate share of both unemployed youth and associated crime incidences. In Nansana Municipality, Wakiso District, one of Uganda's fastest-growing peri-urban settlements, high concentrations of unemployed young people coexisted with escalating reports of criminal activity, raising critical questions about the causal and contributory relationship between joblessness and crime among urban youth. This study examined the influence of youth unemployment on crime among urban youth in Nansana Municipality. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. A sample of 140 respondents comprising unemployed youth, community leaders, local council officials, and police officers was selected through stratified random sampling. Structured questionnaires and key informant interviews were used for data collection. Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression analyses were applied to examine the relationship between youth unemployment and crime. The findings revealed a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between youth unemployment and crime ($r = 0.768$, $p < 0.05$). Economic deprivation ($\beta = 0.461$), social exclusion ($\beta = 0.423$), and idleness and lack of structured engagement ($\beta = 0.438$) were each significant predictors of criminal behavior among urban youth. Youth who experienced prolonged unemployment, social marginalization, and absence of structured daily activity were significantly more likely to be involved in or exposed to criminal activities. Youth unemployment was a significant determinant of crime among urban youth in Nansana Municipality. The longer young people remained unemployed and socially excluded, the higher their vulnerability to criminal engagement, confirming that joblessness was not merely an economic problem but a serious public safety and social cohesion concern. Nansana Municipal Council, the Wakiso District local government, national youth employment agencies, and civil society organizations should urgently invest in targeted youth employment creation, vocational skills development, and social reintegration programs to reduce the criminogenic effects of youth unemployment in the municipality.

Keywords: Youth unemployment, crime, urban youth, Nansana Municipality, Wakiso District, Uganda, economic deprivation, social exclusion, juvenile delinquency

1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Youth unemployment has been consistently identified as one of the most consequential socioeconomic challenges confronting developing countries in the twenty-first century, with its effects rippling across individual welfare, family

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stability, community security, and national development trajectories (ILO, 2023). In sub-Saharan Africa, where demographic pressures have produced some of the world's youngest and fastest-growing populations, the failure of labor markets to absorb the expanding youth workforce has generated a structural unemployment crisis with deep social ramifications (World Bank, 2022). Uganda presents one of the most acute manifestations of this crisis, with the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2021) reporting that youth unemployment and underemployment rates exceeded 60% among urban youth aged 18 to 30, driven by a mismatch between the skills produced by the education system and the demands of a largely informal and technology-driven labor market (Julius & Audrey, 2025).

The relationship between unemployment and crime has been theorized and empirically examined from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Strain Theory, originally articulated by Merton (1938) and later elaborated by Agnew (1992) in his General Strain Theory, posits that when individuals are blocked from achieving socially valued goals particularly economic success through legitimate means, they experience strain that increases the likelihood of deviant and criminal behavior as an alternative pathway. Routine Activity Theory, developed by Cohen and Felson (1979), further complements this framework by arguing that crime is most likely when motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians converge conditions that are structurally facilitated by youth unemployment, which creates large populations of idle, economically frustrated young people with unstructured time (Becker et al., 2021).

Nansana Municipality, situated in Wakiso District approximately 12 kilometers northwest of Kampala, has experienced explosive population growth over the past two decades, driven by rural-urban migration and the expansion of Kampala's metropolitan footprint (Christopher et al., 2022). With an estimated population exceeding 400,000 residents, a significant proportion of whom are young people who migrated in search of employment opportunities, Nansana became a microcosm of Uganda's urban youth unemployment challenge (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The municipality simultaneously recorded rising incidences of petty theft, robbery, drug abuse, gang activity, and gender-based violence, with police and community reports increasingly attributing these trends to the growing population of unemployed and disengaged youth (Uganda Police Force, 2022).

Globally, empirical studies have consistently documented a positive relationship between youth unemployment and crime. Becker et al. (2021) found in a systematic review of 47 studies across developing countries that youth unemployment was positively associated with property crime, violent crime, and drug-related offenses in urban settings. Manyak and Katono (2021) similarly established that in Uganda's urban centers, unemployed youth were significantly more likely than their employed counterparts to be involved in criminal networks, citing economic desperation, peer influence, and social marginalization as the primary mediating mechanisms. Mwesigwa (2022) further documented that in peri-urban Ugandan municipalities, the concentration of unemployed youth in informal settlements was a strong spatial predictor of crime incidence, reinforcing the importance of place-based analyses of the unemployment-crime nexus (Julius & Kaazara, 2025).

It was against this background that this study was conducted, seeking to generate specific empirical evidence on how youth unemployment influenced crime in the unique peri-urban context of Nansana Municipality, with the aim of informing targeted policy and programmatic responses to this intertwined challenge (Julius & Kazaara, 2025).

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite sustained national and municipal attention to youth development, unemployment among urban youth in Nansana Municipality remained alarmingly high, and criminal activity in the municipality continued to escalate (Julius & Kazaara, 2025). Reports from the Nansana Police Division and community-based organizations indicated a steady increase in youth-related crime incidences including robbery, burglary, drug trafficking, and gang violence between 2019 and 2023, with unemployment consistently cited as a primary contributory factor by both victims and perpetrators (Uganda Police Force, 2022). Mwesigwa (2022) observed that peri-urban municipalities in Uganda's metropolitan fringe, particularly those with high concentrations of unemployed migrant youth, were experiencing a crime surge that was outpacing the capacity of law enforcement and social service systems to respond. Deininger and Okidi (2021) further noted that the absence of structured employment and vocational engagement opportunities for youth in rapidly urbanizing Ugandan municipalities created fertile conditions for criminal recruitment by organized criminal networks (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022). Yet, despite the documented severity of both youth unemployment and crime in Nansana Municipality, no empirical study had specifically examined the nature, strength, and mechanisms of the relationship between these two phenomena within the municipality's specific socioeconomic and spatial context (Nelson & Christopher, 2022). This knowledge gap left policymakers, municipal planners, and civil society organizations without the evidence base needed to design and target effective interventions. This study was therefore conducted to address that gap.

3. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE

To examine the influence of youth unemployment on crime among urban youth in Nansana Municipality, Wakiso District, Uganda.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design, enabling simultaneous data collection from multiple respondent categories across Nansana Municipality at a defined point in time. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from key informant interviews, to provide both statistical evidence and nuanced contextual understanding of how youth unemployment influenced criminal behavior and exposure among urban youth in the municipality (Oliver et al., 2023).

The study population comprised unemployed youth aged 18 to 35 residing in Nansana Municipality, community and local council leaders, officers from the Nansana Police Division, and officials from youth-focused civil society organizations operating in the municipality. Using stratified random sampling, the municipality's parishes were treated as strata, ensuring proportional representation from both high-density residential areas and commercial trading zones.

A total of 140 respondents participated in the study, with 118 completing structured questionnaires and 22 participating in key informant interviews(Oliver et al., 2023).

The questionnaire measured youth unemployment through three dimensions such as economic deprivation, social exclusion, and idleness and lack of structured engagement and assessed crime through indicators of criminal behavior involvement, criminal exposure and victimization, and perceptions of crime prevalence in the respondent's immediate community(Faith et al., 2023). All items were scored on a five-point Likert scale. Particular attention was paid to ethical sensitivity in the design of crime-related questions, with items framed to minimize self-incrimination risk while still capturing meaningful data on criminal engagement and exposure(Julius & Nancy, 2025). A pilot study was conducted with 15 youth respondents in Kira Municipality to test instrument validity and reliability. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for all constructs ranged from 0.74 to 0.84, confirming satisfactory internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 27(Nelson et al., 2022). Descriptive statistics were computed for all variables. Pearson correlation analysis tested the strength and direction of the relationship between each unemployment dimension and crime. Multiple linear regression analysis determined the individual and combined predictive contribution of unemployment dimensions to crime outcomes. Qualitative data from key informant interviews were analyzed thematically, with emerging themes integrated with quantitative findings to provide interpretive depth. Throughout the research process, strict ethical protocols were observed, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring full anonymity of respondents, maintaining secure data storage, and obtaining clearance from the relevant institutional review board (Israel & Hay, 2006).

5. RESULTS

5.1 Descriptive Statistics for Youth Unemployment and Crime

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (n = 140)

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Economic Deprivation	3.84	0.791	High
Social Exclusion	3.61	0.843	High
Idleness and Lack of Structured Engagement	3.72	0.817	High
Youth Unemployment (Overall)	3.72	0.817	High
Criminal Behavior Involvement	3.14	0.889	Moderate
Criminal Exposure and Victimization	3.41	0.856	Moderate
Perceptions of Crime Prevalence	3.68	0.824	High
Crime (Overall)	3.41	0.856	Moderate to High

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 revealed that youth unemployment in Nansana Municipality was perceived at a high overall level ($M = 3.72, SD = 0.817$), reflecting the deeply entrenched nature of joblessness among urban youth in the municipality. Among the three unemployment dimensions, economic deprivation recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.84, SD = 0.791$), indicating that the overwhelming majority of unemployed youth respondents experienced severe financial hardship, including inability to meet basic needs, pay rent, access healthcare, or invest in productive activities. This finding was consistent with ILO (2023), which reported that economic deprivation among unemployed urban youth in sub-Saharan Africa had intensified following the COVID-19 pandemic, with recovery remaining slow and uneven in informal peri-urban settlements (Brighton et al., 2023).

Idleness and lack of structured engagement also recorded a high mean ($M = 3.72, SD = 0.817$), confirming that large proportions of unemployed youth in Nansana spent significant portions of their time without purposeful activity, vocational training, or community engagement. Key informants from civil society organizations noted that many young people in the municipality's informal settlements spent their days in idle groups at trading centers and recreational spaces, making them vulnerable to criminal recruitment and peer pressure toward deviant behavior. Social exclusion recorded a high mean ($M = 3.61, SD = 0.843$), reflecting experiences of marginalization from community decision-making, institutional services, and social networks, which many youth respondents associated with their unemployed status. This aligned with findings by Manyak and Katono (2021), who documented that socially excluded youth in Ugandan urban areas were significantly more likely to seek belonging and identity within criminal networks than their socially integrated counterparts (Akankwasa et al., 2022).

On the crime side, perceptions of crime prevalence recorded the highest mean ($M = 3.68, SD = 0.824$), indicating that residents and youth alike perceived crime as a highly prevalent feature of life in Nansana Municipality. Criminal exposure and victimization scored moderately ($M = 3.41, SD = 0.856$), reflecting that significant proportions of respondents had either directly experienced or been closely affected by criminal incidents (Winny et al., 2023). Criminal behavior involvement, while recording a moderate mean ($M = 3.14, SD = 0.889$), was nonetheless concerning given the context, as even moderate self-reported or observed involvement levels in a study population of urban youth signaled a substantial crime challenge requiring urgent policy attention.

5.2 Correlation between Youth Unemployment and Crime

Table 2: Pearson Correlation between Youth Unemployment Dimensions and Crime

Variable	Crime (r)	p-value	Decision
Economic Deprivation	0.714	0.000	Significant
Social Exclusion	0.691	0.000	Significant
Idleness and Lack of Structured Engagement	0.736	0.000	Significant
Youth Unemployment (Overall)	0.768	0.000	Significant

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The Pearson correlation results in Table 2 demonstrated strong positive and statistically significant relationships between all three dimensions of youth unemployment and crime among urban youth in Nansana Municipality. The overall youth unemployment score correlated most strongly with crime ($r = 0.768, p < 0.001$), confirming that the cumulative experience of economic deprivation, social exclusion, and idleness created a powerful and statistically robust pathway to criminal engagement and exposure among unemployed youth in the municipality. This finding resonated strongly with General Strain Theory, which posits that the accumulation of multiple negative social conditions rather than any single stressor generates the strongest criminogenic pressure on individuals (Agnew, 1992), and was consistent with Becker et al. (2021), who documented similarly strong overall unemployment-crime correlations in their systematic review of developing country studies.

Idleness and lack of structured engagement registered the highest individual correlation with crime ($r = 0.736, p < 0.001$), underscoring the powerful role of unstructured time and purposelessness in creating conditions conducive to criminal behavior. This finding was theoretically grounded in Routine Activity Theory, which identifies the absence of structured daily routine and capable guardianship as key facilitating conditions for crime (Cohen & Felson, 1979), and was empirically supported by Mwesigwa (2022), who found that idle youth in Uganda's peri-urban municipalities were three times more likely than engaged youth to be recruited into criminal networks. Economic deprivation correlated strongly with crime ($r = 0.714, p < 0.001$), affirming that financial desperation drove many unemployed youth toward property crimes, petty theft, and participation in illegal economic activities as survival strategies. Social exclusion, while recording the lowest individual correlation ($r = 0.691, p < 0.001$), remained strongly and significantly associated with crime, confirming that marginalization from legitimate social and economic institutions pushed many youth toward alternative social structures, including gangs and criminal networks, as sources of identity, belonging, and material support.

5.3 Regression Analysis: Influence of Youth Unemployment on Crime

Table 3: Linear Regression Results on Youth Unemployment Predicting Crime

Predictor	Beta (β)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Decision
Economic Deprivation	0.461	0.088	5.239	0.000	Significant
Social Exclusion	0.423	0.093	4.548	0.000	Significant
Idleness and Lack of Structured Engagement	0.438	0.090	4.867	0.000	Significant
R² = 0.652	Adjusted R² = 0.644	F = 84.27	p = 0.000		

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The regression results in Table 3 provided compelling and statistically robust evidence of the individual and combined predictive power of youth unemployment dimensions on crime among urban youth in Nansana Municipality. The overall regression model was highly significant ($F = 84.27, p < 0.001$), and the R^2 value of 0.652 indicated that approximately 65.2% of the variance in crime was explained by the three unemployment dimensions combined. This

was a substantially high level of explanatory power, confirming that youth unemployment was among the most dominant structural drivers of criminal behavior and exposure in Nansana Municipality, consistent with Deininger and Okidi (2021), who documented comparable explanatory magnitudes in studies of socioeconomic determinants of crime in Ugandan urban settings.

Economic deprivation emerged as the strongest individual predictor of crime ($\beta = 0.461$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that for every unit increase in the severity of economic deprivation experienced by unemployed youth, the likelihood and extent of criminal involvement increased by 0.461 units, holding other variables constant. This finding was particularly significant in Nansana's context, where economic deprivation had also recorded the highest descriptive mean, suggesting that addressing the financial dimensions of youth unemployment through employment creation, social protection transfers, and income-generating opportunity development held the greatest potential for crime reduction in the municipality. Idleness and lack of structured engagement was the second strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.438$, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing the critical importance of providing youth with purposeful daily activity through vocational training, community service programs, and structured recreational opportunities as crime prevention strategies. Social exclusion, while the weakest predictor among the three ($\beta = 0.423$, $p < 0.001$), remained a highly significant contributor to crime, affirming that social reintegration programs, community inclusion initiatives, and youth civic engagement platforms were essential complements to economic interventions in addressing the criminogenic effects of youth unemployment. Together, the three unemployment dimensions explained nearly two-thirds of the variance in crime, providing powerful empirical justification for treating youth unemployment reduction as a core crime prevention strategy in Nansana Municipality.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the influence of youth unemployment on crime among urban youth in Nansana Municipality, Wakiso District, Uganda. The following conclusions were drawn from the findings:

Youth unemployment was a significant and positive determinant of crime among urban youth in Nansana Municipality. Young people who experienced prolonged unemployment, severe economic deprivation, social exclusion, and prolonged idleness were significantly more likely to be involved in or exposed to criminal activities, confirming the theoretically and empirically established criminogenic effects of joblessness in urban settings.

Economic deprivation was the most influential unemployment dimension predicting crime, and simultaneously the most severely experienced condition among unemployed youth in the municipality. This convergence of high prevalence and high criminogenic impact identified economic deprivation as the most urgent and highest-leverage intervention point for reducing youth crime in Nansana.

Idleness and lack of structured engagement proved to be the second strongest predictor of crime, confirming that the absence of purposeful daily activity among unemployed youth created both the motivation and the opportunity for criminal behavior, consistent with the theoretical predictions of both General Strain Theory and Routine Activity Theory.

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Social exclusion, while the weakest predictor statistically, remained strongly and significantly associated with crime, affirming that marginalization from community institutions, social networks, and civic life drove many unemployed youth toward criminal peer groups and networks as alternative sources of belonging, identity, and economic survival. Overall, the study concluded that youth unemployment in Nansana Municipality was not merely an economic challenge but a serious and measurable threat to public safety and social cohesion, demanding integrated, multi-sectoral responses that addressed its economic, social, and behavioral dimensions simultaneously.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The council should develop and implement a comprehensive Youth Employment and Crime Prevention Strategy that explicitly links employment creation initiatives to crime reduction objectives. This strategy should prioritize the establishment of vocational training centers within the municipality, accessible to unemployed youth without educational prerequisites, offering practical skills in construction, tailoring, electronics repair, agribusiness, and digital services aligned to the local labor market.

The district should integrate youth unemployment reduction as a measurable performance target within its District Development Plan, allocating dedicated budget resources to youth livelihood programs, apprenticeship schemes, and public works employment initiatives targeting Nansana Municipality's unemployed youth population.

The ministry should scale up its Youth Livelihood Programme interventions in Nansana Municipality, with specific attention to reaching socially excluded youth in the municipality's most vulnerable informal settlements. Social protection transfers should be accompanied by structured engagement programs including skills training, mentorship, and community service components to address both the economic and behavioral dimensions of unemployment-related crime risk.

Law enforcement agencies should complement crime response efforts with community-based crime prevention programs that engage unemployed youth as partners rather than solely as suspects. Community policing committees should work with local government and civil society to identify and refer at-risk unemployed youth to livelihood and social reintegration programs before criminal involvement occurs.

Organizations working in Nansana Municipality should invest in holistic youth development programs that address economic deprivation, social exclusion, and idleness simultaneously, rather than treating these as separate programmatic concerns. Psychosocial support services, peer mentorship, and structured recreational programs should be integrated into youth employment and livelihoods programming to maximize crime prevention impact.

Subsequent studies should investigate the mediating roles of drug and substance abuse, peer influence, and family instability in the relationship between youth unemployment and crime in Nansana Municipality. Longitudinal research designs should also be employed to track how changes in youth employment status affect criminal behavior and exposure over time, providing more robust causal evidence than the cross-sectional design used in this study.

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