

STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE AND ECONOMIC DISPARITIES AS PRECURSORS FOR VIOLENT CRIME IN GHANA

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of structural injustice and economic disparities on violent crime in Ghana. The population for this study comprised all inmates in Ghana prisons who committed violent crimes in the Greater Accra Region. Per the heinous nature of the crimes, almost all these convicts are incarcerated at either a maximum or medium prison facility, hence the study's focus on inmates at Nsawam Medium Security Prison and Ankaful Maximum Security Prison. Employing a mixed-method explanatory design, the research integrates quantitative regression analysis with qualitative thematic analysis to explore systemic drivers of violent behavior. Drawing on Social disorganization theory, Frustration-aggression hypothesis, and Structural violence theory, the study examines structural and economic factors, including income inequality, systemic or structural exclusion, and socio-political marginalization, as predictors of violent crime. The study used a sample size of 400 respondents, selected through multi-stage sampling techniques from a target population of 4,050 convicted violent offenders; and 80 significant individuals (parents/guardians, well wishers, and prison officers). The findings reveal that structural injustice ($\beta = 0.404$, $p = 0.016$) and economic disparities ($\beta = 0.509$, $p = 0.001$) significantly predict violent crime. The qualitative analysis corroborates these results, highlighting narratives of systemic neglect, relative deprivation, and socio-economic hardship. The study underscores the importance of addressing structural and economic inequalities through policy reforms, rehabilitative interventions, and community-based support systems to mitigate violent crime and promote social equity. These findings contribute to criminological discourse by providing evidence-based strategies for reducing systemic disparities and fostering safer societies.

Keywords: Economic disparities, Frustration-aggression hypothesis, Social disorganization theory, Structural violence theory, structural injustice, and violent crime

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Introduction

Violent crime remains a pervasive and complex global issue with far-reaching social, economic, and psychological consequences. Although its manifestations vary across societies, its root causes are often deeply entrenched in structural and economic inequalities. A classical piece by Shaw and McKay (2010) established a foundational relationship between community characteristics and juvenile crime in Chicago, highlighting how socio-environmental factors shape criminal behaviour. Since then, thousands of studies across various disciplines have examined the mechanisms linking community dynamics to individual behaviour, particularly regarding violence. These studies reveal that while violence affects individuals across all demographics, certain groups are disproportionately impacted due to inequities based on their social categorization such gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic location (Baker et al, 2024; Krivo, Peterson, & Kuhl, 2009). Despite significant advances in this area, critical questions remain about the intersection of structural injustice and economic disparities in shaping violent crime.

Historically, the dominant explanations for violent crime have focused on individual deviance, psychological pathologies, or biological predispositions (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). While these perspectives offer valuable insights, they often fail to account for the broader systemic and structural factors that underpin environments where violent behaviours emerge. Increasingly, scholars and policymakers are turning their attention to structural injustice and economic disparities as central determinants of violent crime. Structural injustice, characterized by institutionalized systems of inequality and oppression, systematically excludes marginalized populations from access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes (Hui, Rennick-Egglestone, Franklin, Walcott, Llewellyn-Beardsley, Ng, ... & Slade, (2021). Economic disparities, on the other hand, reflect unequal wealth distribution and limited social mobility, which amplify social tensions, feelings of exclusion, and resource-driven conflicts. These inequalities arise from factors such as globalisation, labour market trends, along with political and social influences like taxation policies and access to quality education (Wang, 2024). When unequal economic conditions align with socio-political divisions, they can escalate from mere disparities to drivers of conflict, potentially causing social unrest and discouraging investment (Kanbur, 2007). Competition between groups for resource control may lead to economic exclusion, where the dominant group secures a significant portion of resources to attract opposing members, strengthening its political influence, but also increasing conflict risks (Bhattacharya et al., 2011). Together, these interconnected phenomena create conditions that normalize violence and perpetuate cycles of inequality and crime.

Structural and systemic injustices emerge through interconnected processes that sustain inequalities across different areas of society. Haslanger (2023) contends that social frameworks and practices shape individual agency and identity, frequently resulting in the inadvertent continuation of unjust systems. These inequalities erode social cohesion and breed mistrust and resentment within affected communities, undermining societal stability (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Similarly, economic disparities foster acute deprivation and frustration, which often translate into violence (Džuverović, 2013). The frustration-aggression hypothesis suggests that individuals experiencing economic strain and blocked opportunities may resort to violence and crime as means of expressing their frustrations or overcoming systemic barriers (Berkowitz, 1989). Empirical evidence supports this hypothesis, revealing strong correlations between income

inequality and violent crime rates, particularly in urban areas with stark socio-economic divides (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011).

Extensive research consistently reveals a significant positive link between income inequality and violent crime rates worldwide. Numerous studies have shown that greater economic disparity correlates with higher incidences of homicides, robberies, and other violent crimes (World Bank, 2011; Coccia, 2018; Wilkinson, 2004; Fajnzylber et al., 2002; Hsieh & Pugh, 1993). These phenomena are often intertwined; for instance, discriminatory economic policies and exclusionary urban planning practices frequently confine marginalized populations to under-resourced neighbourhoods with limited access to quality education, stable employment, and social infrastructure. Within such environments, violence can become an adaptive response to resource scarcity and systemic marginalization (Sharkey, 2018).

Despite the robust body of research on violent crime, critical gaps persist. First, many studies examine structural injustice and economic disparities in isolation, overlooking their interplay and compounded effects. Structural injustice often exacerbates economic disparities, creating a feedback loop that perpetuates inequality and fuels violence. Second, much of the existing literature is centered on high-income countries, with limited attention to low- and middle-income contexts where the institutional capacity to address systemic inequalities is weak, and socioeconomic disparities are deeply entrenched. Third, research often neglects the lived experiences of communities most affected by these conditions, thereby failing to capture the mechanisms through which systemic inequalities contribute to violent crime.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a comprehensive analysis of how structural injustice and economic disparities interact to shape violent crime. Drawing on insights from sociology, economics, criminology, and public policy, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the systemic drivers of violent crime across diverse socio-economic contexts. By examining the intersection of these factors, this research aims to inform evidence-based interventions that target the root causes of violence and crime, offering actionable recommendations for reducing systemic inequities. Ultimately, the study underscores the necessity of addressing structural and economic inequalities as a prerequisite for building safer, more equitable societies with minimal crime incidence.

Theoretical perspective

The current study is underpinned by three theories, namely, social disorganization theory, structural violence theory, and frustration-aggression hypothesis.

Social Disorganization Theory

Social Disorganization Theory, originally proposed by Shaw and McKay (1942), examines how structural characteristics of neighbourhoods influence crime and deviance. It suggests that poverty, residential mobility, ethnic heterogeneity, and weak social institutions contribute to the breakdown of social cohesion, which, in turn, fosters crime. These structural factors disrupt the ability of communities to maintain informal social control, creating an environment where criminal behaviours flourish. For example, neighbourhoods plagued by economic deprivation often lack the resources to support strong social networks or community engagement, thereby increasing the likelihood of violent crime (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997).

Poverty is a key driver of social disorganization, as it limits access to educational and employment opportunities, while high residential mobility disrupts community ties and reduces trust among neighbours (Bursik & Grasmick, 2002). Ethnic heterogeneity can also hinder collective action, as linguistic and cultural differences complicate communication and collaboration among community members (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Furthermore, weak institutions, such as poorly resourced schools or ineffective law enforcement, exacerbate the breakdown of social cohesion, making it harder to combat crime.

Empirical evidence supports these claims. For instance, Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997) introduced the concept of collective efficacy, which highlights the importance of mutual trust and shared expectations in reducing crime. Their study in Chicago demonstrated that neighbourhoods with higher collective efficacy experienced significantly lower rates of violent crime, even when controlling for poverty and other structural disadvantages. This theory is critical in understanding how structural injustice and economic disparities create environments that foster violent crime, underscoring the need for systemic interventions to rebuild social cohesion and collective efficacy.

Structural Violence Theory

Structural Violence Theory, introduced by Johan Galtung (1969), examines how systemic inequalities embedded within social, political, and economic systems harm individuals by restricting their access to resources, opportunities, and basic rights. Unlike direct violence, which is physical and visible, structural violence operates through institutions and policies that perpetuate harm over time. This theory highlights the insidious nature of systemic oppression, which often goes unnoticed but has far-reaching consequences for marginalized populations (Farmer, 2004).

Structural violence manifests in various forms, such as institutional discrimination, discriminatory policies, and economic exclusion. For example, unequal access to quality education systematically disadvantage certain groups, confining them to poverty-stricken neighbourhoods with limited opportunities for upward mobility (Sharkey, 2018). These structural barriers not only perpetuate inequality, but also create environments where violence and crime become normalized as a means of resolving conflicts or addressing grievances. Additionally, the chronic stress and deprivation caused by structural violence can lead to mental health issues, further increasing the likelihood of violent behaviour and crime (Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac, & Keshavjee 2016).

Structural Violence Theory therefore becomes useful in explaining the intersectionality between structural injustice and economic disparities as precursors for violent behaviour and crime. By highlighting the systemic drivers of violence and crime, this theory calls for a shift from individual blame to a focus on addressing institutional and systemic inequities. It underscores the importance of tackling structural barriers as part of a comprehensive strategy to reduce violent crime and promote social justice.

Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis

The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis, first proposed by Dollard et al. (1939), argues that aggression arises as a psychological response to frustration, which occurs when individuals are blocked from achieving their goals. This theory is particularly relevant in the context of structural injustice and economic disparities, as systemic barriers often prevent marginalized groups from

accessing resources, opportunities, and upward mobility. When individuals perceive these barriers as unjust, their frustration intensifies, potentially leading to aggressive or violent behaviour and crime (Berkowitz, 1989).

Economic deprivation and income inequality are significant sources of frustration, especially when individuals compare their circumstances to others in society. For instance, relative deprivation—the perception of being worse off than others—has been linked to increased rates of violent crime (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011). This is particularly evident in urban areas where stark socio-economic contrasts are visible, further amplifying feelings of resentment and alienation. Moreover, when individuals feel powerless to change their circumstances through legitimate means, aggression may be displaced onto others within their community, leading to interpersonal violence and crime (Agnew, 1992).

Empirical studies support the hypothesis that systemic barriers contribute to violent behaviour. For example, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) found a strong correlation between income inequality and violent crime rates across various countries, suggesting that frustration stemming from perceived inequities drives aggression. Similarly, studies in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods have shown that individuals experiencing chronic unemployment and poverty are more likely to engage in violent acts as a means of expressing their frustration or securing resources (Blau & Blau, 1982). The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis therefore provides a psychological framework for understanding how systemic inequalities translate into violent crime, emphasizing the need to address the root causes of frustration through targeted social and economic policies.

Empirical review

Research by Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) has demonstrated that societies with higher levels of inequality tend to experience higher levels of violence, as those who are marginalized and excluded from economic and social opportunities are more likely to engage in crime. The perception of injustice, particularly in terms of access to resources and opportunities, exacerbates feelings of frustration and aggression, ultimately leading to violent behaviour. As noted by Amoah-ahinful (2021), structural inequalities in Ghana's education, employment, and justice systems disproportionately affect marginalized communities, driving higher levels of crime in these areas. This mirrors the perceptions expressed by inmates in this study, who attribute their violent criminal behaviours to the lack of fair opportunities and the structural barriers they faced throughout their lives.

In a study conducted by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2018), economic instability was identified as a significant predictor of violent behavior, especially in urban settings where wealth is highly concentrated in small elite groups. Hill and Lloyd (2025), similarly noted that societies marked by stark economic inequalities often see higher rates of violence as marginalized groups resort to crime as a form of rebellion against systemic marginalization. The above observation echoes the assertion in social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 2010), which argues that poor communities lacking stable employment and education opportunities are breeding grounds for criminal activity. Without a support system or means to achieve legitimate success, many individuals turn to violence as a means of survival.

Wirdze (2024) empirically demonstrated that higher levels of income inequality are significantly associated with increased crime rates, particularly violent crimes such as homicides

and robberies. The findings suggest that socio-economic disparities intensify feelings of relative deprivation among lower-income individuals, which may drive them toward criminal activities as a response to frustration, economic necessity, or a perceived attempt to restore equity. Additionally, Wirdze (2024) finding revealed that neighborhoods characterized by high-income inequality often experience significant social disorganization, which undermines social cohesion and weakens community oversight mechanisms that typically deter criminal behaviour. The study further revealed that limited access to quality education, employment opportunities, and social services exacerbates this condition, leaving marginalized populations with fewer legitimate avenues to improve their socio-economic status.

Furthermore, Itskovich and Factor (2023) empirically argue that economic inequality alienates individuals from societal institutions and values, fostering a sense of detachment that often manifests in resistance to these structures, including engagement in criminal behaviour. Scholars have posited that economic inequality inherently involves elements of discrimination (Lu & Wang, 2013). At the individual level, perceiving one's material resources as insufficient compared to others can foster feelings of alienation and social detachment (Hicks & Hicks, 2014; Kelly, 2000). Ulmer et al. (2012) found that structural disadvantages, particularly poverty and the prevalence of female-headed households in some cultures, are strongly correlated with ethnic disparities in homicide and violent crime rates.

Methods

Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-method explanatory research design. The design allows for the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data to explain or elaborate on the study's phenomenon for in-depth understanding (Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005). It allowed evidence from one source to be extended to another or challenged from another source. For example, the findings from the interview with inmates and significant individuals (parents/guardians, well-wishers, and prison officers) were used to further support the explanations that were generated from the structured interviews with the inmates. It was therefore appropriate to use a mixed-method explanatory research design which allows the combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection.

Population and sampling technique and size

The population for this study comprised all inmates in Ghana prisons who committed violent crimes in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Due to the possibility of inmate transfers across prisons, the study covered all 47 prisons in Ghana to ensure a comprehensive assessment of inmates with diverse backgrounds. The target population specifically included 4,050 convicted violent criminals in Nsawam Medium Security Prison and Ankaful Maximum Security Prison, along with significant individuals such as parents/guardians, well-wishers, and prison officers. The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula, yielding a required sample of 364 respondents. In order to account for non-responses and outliers, 10% was added, making a total sample of 400. A multistage sampling technique was employed. Purposive sampling was first used to select the Nsawam and Ankaful prisons because the two prisons housed convicts of violent crimes in the country, including both males and females, and their diverse categories of inmates

(lifers, remands, trials, recidivists). Stratified sampling technique was then used to group the inmates based on crime types (rape, sexual assault, murder, defilement, armed robbery). This was followed by simple random sampling using the lottery method to select 400 inmates. Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select key informants made up of 15 prison officers, 15 parents/guardians and well wishers, and 10 cell or block leaders from each prison for richer qualitative insights. This brought the total sample size to 480 comprised of 400 inmates and 80 significant individuals – parents/guardians, well-wishers, and prison officers.

Instruments for Data Collection

This study utilises both structured and semi-structured interview guides for the data collection. The structured interview guide was used for the quantitative data, providing a standardized set of questions to measure the variables influencing violent crime behaviour, ensuring uniformity and minimizing interviewer bias (Wilson, 2014). Structured interviews were chosen over surveys due to their ability to engage respondents more effectively, which is essential for sensitive topics like violent crime. They also allowed for more efficient data collection while maintaining reliability through standardized closed-ended questions (Singer & Couper, 2017). Meanwhile, the semi-structured interview guide was used in the qualitative phase to gain deeper contextual insights into the factors influencing violent crime behaviour. Boyce and Neale (2006) emphasized that semi-structured interviews offer richer information than quantitative methods alone, allowing participants to share detailed insights on issues being studied, especially on sensitive topics. This flexibility enabled the researcher to explore complex sociological determinants more thoroughly, bridging gaps in the numerical data and providing clarity. Additionally, semi-structured interviews balanced structure and flexibility, making them suitable for in-depth exploration of the participants' views while complementing the structured data with more detailed insights. This dual approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the sociological factors driving violent crime behaviour in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana.

Data collection procedures

Data collection involved the use of both structured and semi-structured interview guides as the primary tools. Employing multiple data sources ensured trustworthiness, validity, and a comprehensive understanding of the determinants of violent criminal behaviour in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. In order to ensure thorough documentation, a journal and a recording device were used to capture conversations with inmates and key informants during the data collection process. The researcher, along with five well-trained research assistants, personally administered the instruments. Initial visits were made to familiarize with the respondents and build rapport before administering the structured interview guide. The semi-structured interviews were conducted afterwards to gather further qualitative insights once the quantitative data had been analyzed. Consent was sought from the heads of the Ankaful and Nsawam prisons, and the study's purpose was thoroughly explained to all respondents. The entire data collection process spanned approximately four months, ensuring a detailed and ethically sound data-gathering process.

Data analysis

All quantitative data collected were analyzed using SPSS software version 26.0. Multiple regression analysis was applied to the quantitative data. For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was utilized. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated into English for analysis.

Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Cape Coast Institutional Review Board before fieldwork commenced. Informed consent was sought from all respondents, with a consent statement included at the beginning of the questionnaire and reiterated at the time of administration. For the interviews, consent was obtained before each session, and key informants provided written consent through a letter. Participants were assured that their rights would be protected, and anonymity was maintained by assigning numerical codes to questionnaires and interviews. Pseudonyms were used for key informants to further safeguard privacy. Respondents were assured that their data would be confidentially kept and used solely for academic purposes.

Results and Discussions

Influence of Structural Injustice on Violent Crime

The regression analysis in Table 1 below reveals that structural injustice is the only significant predictor of violent crime. The positive and significant coefficient ($\beta = 0.404$, $p = 0.016$) indicates that higher levels of structural injustice correspond with increased violent crime rates. This finding supports structural violence theoretical perspective, which emphasizes that systemic inequalities and unfair treatment within societal structures can contribute to criminal behaviour.

Table 1: Explanatory variables for the Multiple regression Model (Structural Injustice)

Variables	Coefficients		
	β	Std. Error	Sig.
(Constant)	2.038	0.312	0.000
Sex=male	-0.117	0.248	0.639
Age=18 to 25	-0.027	0.258	0.916
Age=34 to 41	-0.127	0.204	0.533
Age=42 to 49	0.193	0.226	0.394
Age=50 and above	-0.201	0.316	0.526
Educational_Level=JHS leaver	0.100	0.223	0.654
Educational_Level=SHS leaver	-0.149	0.234	0.525
Educational_Level=Diploma holder	0.663	0.492	0.178
Educational_Level=HND holder	1.062	0.752	0.159
Educational_Level=Degree holder	0.107	0.353	0.761
Educational_Level=No formal education	0.134	0.263	0.611
Educational_Level=Other	0.541	0.522	0.300
Religion=Islam	0.277	0.197	0.161
Religion=Traditional	0.190	0.417	0.649
Religion=No religion	1.542	1.040	0.139
Structural_injustice_6b=yes	0.404	0.167	0.016

Source: Field Data, 2024

The significant positive relationship between structural injustice and violent crime ($\beta = 0.404$, $p = 0.016$) corroborates previous studies. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) argue that systemic inequalities in resource distribution led to feelings of resentment and frustration among disadvantaged groups, increasing the likelihood of violent behaviour. Similarly, Messner and Rosenfeld (2007) discuss how structural constraints within societal institutions, such as the legal and education systems, can marginalize certain populations, leaving them vulnerable to criminal influences.

This result also resonates with the Structural Violence Theory, introduced by Johan Galtung (1969), which examines how systemic inequalities embedded within social, political, and economic systems harm individuals by restricting their access to resources, opportunities, and basic rights. Unlike direct violence, which is physical and visible, structural violence operates through institutions and policies that perpetuate harm over time. This theory highlights the insidious nature of systemic oppression, which often goes unnoticed, but has far-reaching consequences for marginalized populations (Farmer, 2004). The theory further posits that societal structures that prioritize material success and economic goals over social and moral values foster environments where crime becomes a rational response to systemic disadvantage.

Inmates interviewed expressed feelings of marginalization and exclusion, which led them to adopt violent behaviours as a response to structural barriers they faced. One inmate [Male, 32] "Hoho" explained:

"I come from a place where no one cares about you if you don't have money or connections. It's like the system is set up to fail people like us."

This sentiment reveals the deep sense of injustice felt by those from marginalized backgrounds and how this can translate into violent actions. The Frustration-aggression hypothesis also supports this finding, as individuals who perceive unfair treatment or unequal access to resources are more likely to engage in behaviours that challenge the status quo, including violent crimes.

The qualitative thematic analysis conducted supports the quantitative findings. Interviewees consistently emphasized the role that perceptions of structural injustice played in shaping violent criminal behaviours. A prison officer [Male, 42], “Vovo” noted:

"Many of these inmates feel like they've been wronged by the system. They think they've never had a fair chance at anything in life whether it's education, work, or even justice. That frustration builds up and they lash out violently."

This observation highlights how structural inequalities in Ghanaian society, including unequal access to education and legal protection, can foster resentment and lead individuals to commit violent crimes. Less than half of the parents and guardians of inmates also provided similar reflections, with one guardian [female, 52] “Gogo” stating:

"We couldn't afford to send him to school, and the jobs available were not paying much. When you are poor, it's hard to stay out of trouble."

These narratives reflect the tenets of all the theories - social disorganization, structural violence, and frustration-aggression hypothesis - that underpinned the study because individuals who perceive a gap between their circumstances and the opportunities available to them relative to others in society are more likely to engage in deviant behaviour, including violent crime. Cell and block leaders interviewed also pointed out how inmates often feel abandoned by the system and the state:

"A lot of the guys in here believe the government and the system don't care about people like them. They feel cornered, and when you feel like you have nothing to lose, it's easy to turn to violence."

This analysis further confirms that the perception of injustice plays a significant role in the psychological motivation for criminal behaviour. The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature that links structural inequalities with criminal behaviour. Research by Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) has demonstrated that societies with higher levels of inequality tend to experience higher levels of violence, as those who are marginalized and excluded from economic and social opportunities are more likely to engage in crime. The perception of injustice, particularly in terms of access to resources and opportunities, exacerbates feelings of frustration and aggression, ultimately leading to violent behaviour.

In the Ghanaian context, the legacy of colonialism and the uneven distribution of wealth has created deep-rooted social and economic disparities, particularly in urban centers like the Greater Accra Region. As noted by Amoah-ahinful (2021), structural inequalities in Ghana's education, employment, and justice systems disproportionately affect marginalized communities, driving higher levels of crime in these areas. This mirrors the perceptions expressed by inmates in this study, who attribute their violent criminal behaviours to the lack of fair opportunities and the structural barriers they faced throughout their lives. This is in line with the social disorganization and structural violence theories.

Influence of Economic Disparities on Violent Crime

The analysis investigates whether economic disparities influence inmates to commit violent crimes at 1%, 5% and 10% significant levels. Table 2 below provides key regression coefficients. The positive coefficient ($\beta = 0.509$) indicates that inmates who perceive economic disparities as a problem are likely to have committed more violent crimes than those who do not. The result is therefore statistically significant ($p = .001$), meaning that economic disparity is a significant predictor of violent crime.

Table 2: Explanatory variables for the Multiple regression Model (Economic Disparities)

Variables	Coefficients		
	β	Std. Error	P-Value
(Constant)	1.937	0.314	0.000
Sex=male	-0.150	0.247	0.543
Age=18 to 25	-0.058	0.256	0.821
Age=34 to 41	-0.153	0.203	0.451
Age=42 to 49	0.143	0.225	0.526
Age=50 and above	-0.165	0.314	0.601
Educational_Level=JHS leaver	0.096	0.222	0.667
Educational_Level=SHS leaver	-0.130	0.233	0.578
Educational_Level=Diploma holder	0.596	0.488	0.223
Educational_Level=HND holder	1.253	0.744	0.093
Educational_Level=Degree holder	0.051	0.350	0.884
Educational_Level=No formal education	0.169	0.262	0.519
Educational_Level=Other	0.395	0.518	0.447
Religion=Islam	0.247	0.196	0.209
Religion=Traditional	0.208	0.414	0.616
Religion=No religion	1.440	1.031	0.164
economic disparities 5b=yes	0.509	0.155	0.001

Significance level: 10%, 5%, 1%

Adjusted R-Squared: 0.414

Standard Error of the Estimate: 1.049

Durbin-Watson value: 1.599

Field Data, 2024.

Economic disparities have long been recognized as a driving factor for violent crime, aligning with the structural violence theory, which postulates that individuals who experience structural violence are deprived of socioeconomic goals and means of achieving reasonable economic well-being. Such individuals may turn to deviant behaviours, including violence and crime to achieve financial or social status. In conformity, the frustration-aggression theory, first proposed by Dollard et al. (1939), argues that aggression arises as a psychological response to frustration, which occurs when individuals are blocked from achieving their goals. This theory is particularly relevant in the context of structural injustice and economic disparities, as systemic barriers often prevent marginalized groups from accessing resources, opportunities, and upward mobility. Economic deprivation and income inequality are therefore significant sources of

frustration, especially when individuals compare their circumstances to others in society. The data from this study reinforce this theory, as the statistically significant impact of economic disparities highlights that inmates who perceive inequity in wealth distribution are more likely to commit multiple violent crimes.

One inmate [female, 40] “Cici” shared:

“Growing up, I saw how people around me had more cars and were living a good life, and we had nothing. You don’t sit and watch while others get rich. I had to do something.”

This narrative reflects how perceived economic inequality contributes to the adoption of violent means to obtain financial gain, as theorized in criminological research.

The qualitative thematic analysis conducted provides additional insights into the role of economic disparities in shaping violent criminal behaviours. Several participants emphasized how the lack of economic opportunities pushed individuals toward crime. “Xixi” [Male, 37], a block leader explained:

“Most of the young men here didn’t have much choice. Poverty makes people desperate, and when you have no way out, you take what you can, however you can.”

Prison officer “Popo” [Female, 54] corroborated these sentiments, noting that most inmates had histories of financial struggles:

“You’ll find that many of the inmates come from poor backgrounds. They didn’t have the means to survive, so they turned to crime as a way of life.”

These qualitative findings highlight how economic deprivation contributes not only to initial criminal behavior but also to repeated violent acts. Guardians of inmates also expressed their frustrations, with one mother “Lolo” [Female, 45] noting:

“It’s hard to see your child go down this path, but what choice did they have? No job, no opportunities. It’s like they were set up to fail.”

This commentary echoes the assertion in social disorganization theory (Shaw and McKay, 1942), which argues that poor communities lacking stable employment and education opportunities are breeding grounds for criminal activity. Without a support system or means to achieve legitimate success, many individuals turn to violence as a means of survival.

Research in both developed and developing countries supports the idea that economic disparities lead to higher crime rates, particularly violent crimes. In a study conducted by DeKeseredy et al. (2021), economic instability was identified as a significant predictor of violent behaviour, especially in urban settings where wealth is highly concentrated in small elite groups. Hill and Lloyd (2025), similarly noted that societies marked by stark economic inequalities often see higher rates of violence as marginalized groups resort to crime as a form of rebellion against systemic marginalization. In the context of Ghana, these findings are particularly relevant given the nation’s wealth disparities and unequal distribution of resources across the country.

The Convergence of Structural Injustice and Economic Disparities on Violent Crime

The findings of this study reveal significant relationships between structural injustice, economic disparities, and violent crime, shedding light on the systemic and economic underpinnings of criminal behaviour.

The influence of structural injustice on violent crime is evident in the systemic inequalities embedded within social, economic, and political institutions. Consistent with Structural Violence Theory (Galtung, 1969), marginalized groups are often excluded from accessing resources, education, and economic opportunities, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. These structural barriers foster resentment and frustration, which manifest as violent behaviours. This study aligns with Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009) assertion that systemic inequalities exacerbate feelings of exclusion, intensifying aggression among disadvantaged groups. Participants in this study frequently referenced the perception of systemic neglect in line with the tenets of the structural violence theory, which posits that individuals are likely to resort to violence and crime when confronted with structural violence. Moreover, the study findings resonate with Ulmer et al. (2012) who found that structural disadvantages, particularly poverty, strongly correlated with social categorical disparities in homicide and violent crime rates.

Similarly, economic disparities emerged as a significant driver of violent crime. Both the structural violence theory and the frustration-aggression hypothesis illustrate how economic hardship creates frustration, particularly when individuals feel blocked from achieving their goals. This frustration can escalate into aggression and criminal activity, especially in societies with stark income inequalities and underdeveloped institutional support system. Support system, in general, is significantly bruised in a society experiencing social disorganization leaving individuals to their fate. In the Ghanaian context, as highlighted by Amoah-ahinful (2021), wealth disparities and unequal access to economic opportunities drive frustration and alienation, often culminating in criminal acts. Wirdze (2024) empirically demonstrated that higher levels of income inequality are significantly associated with increased crime rates, particularly violent crimes such as homicides and robberies.

These findings underscore the synergy between structural and economic factors in shaping violent crime. While structural injustice creates systemic barriers that marginalize populations, economic disparities amplify frustration and deprivation, further pushing individuals toward deviant behaviours. The qualitative data highlights the lived experiences of inmates who attribute their actions to systemic neglect and poverty, aligning with all the principles of the social disorganization, the structural violence, and the frustration-aggression theories. The convergence of these deprivations creates a vicious cycle of exclusion and violence, particularly in contexts like Ghana, where institutional support systems are underdeveloped.

Conclusion

It is evident from the study that structural injustice and economic disparities are strong predictors of violent crime behavior in Ghana. Addressing violent crime, therefore, requires a dual approach that tackles both structural and economic inequalities. Policies aimed at averting structural violence alongside efforts to reduce income disparities, are essential for mitigating the root causes of violent crime. This study has contributed to the growing body of empirical evidence linking structural injustice and economic inequality to violent crime, reinforcing the need for systemic reforms to break the cycles of disadvantage and structural violence.

Recommendations

In order to address the findings of this study effectively, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The government should implement comprehensive policies aimed at reducing inequalities in education, employment, and the justice system. Special attention should be given to addressing disparities in resource distribution across regions and communities.
2. Targeted investments in underdeveloped regions should focus on creating job opportunities, improving access to quality education, and enhancing infrastructure to promote economic growth and social inclusion.
3. Correctional facilities should adopt a rehabilitative approach by providing vocational skills training, education, and psychological counseling to inmates, equipping them with the tools needed to rebuild their lives post-incarceration.
4. Grassroots organizations and local authorities should collaborate to develop programs that provide support for at-risk youth, such as after-school activities, mentorship, and skills training.
5. Initiatives aimed at promoting social cohesion and addressing stigmas associated with marginalized groups should be launched to foster a more inclusive society.

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