ORPHAN AND VUNERABLE CHILDREN NEGLECT IN CALABAR MUNICIPALITY AND ITS SECURITY IMPLICATION: SKOLOMBO EXPERIENCE.

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Orphan and Vulnerable children neglect in Calabar municipality and its security implication: Skolombo experience.

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Abstract

The study seeks to investigate the repercussions of neglecting orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in Calabar, here refers to *Skolombo*, and the associated threats to security. In order to achieve this purpose, two specific objectives and corresponding hypotheses were stated, and review of relevant literature was conducted, in line with the objectives. The research employed a survey design, utilizing questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument. Simple percentage calculations and Pearson moment correlation coefficient were employed as statistical tools for analysis. The study findings revealed that the failure of the government to take responsibility for rehabilitating OVCs poses significant threats to both security and socio-economic fabric of society. Additionally, the study condemned certain cultural beliefs propagated by "witch-doctors" or priests, as well as prophesies made by religious leaders, has harmful, as they contribute to persistence of OVCs issue.. To address these issues, the study proposes several recommendations ,among which include; responsible citizens should legally adopt OVCs or become foster parents, providing them with nurturing environments filled with love and care; the government should make substantial investments in the education of OVCs, both in formal and informal settings, to enable their independence and optimal functioning without relying on others. Accessible and free healthcare services should be provided to all orphans and vulnerable children, thus reducing the prevalence of common and severe diseases that contribute to unnecessary and avoidable deaths; skill acquisition centers should be established specifically for OVCs to combat idleness and redundancy, which have been linked to their involvement in criminal activities, with the aim of mitigating the negative consequences of OVC neglect and promoting their well-being.

Keywords: Orphans, Vulnerable children, religious beliefs, cultural practices, witch-craft, security.

Introduction

Vulnerable and orphan children represent a significant segment of the global population who are confronted with multifaceted challenges, ranging from socio-economic disparities to emotional and psychological traumas that can adversely affect these children's wellbeing and development (Solomon, 2020; Monika, etal 2015; UNICEF, 2021). These children are called street kids in the US and homeless children in western Europe, implying that, they both live on the street or move and sleep from one place to another such as uncompleted structures ,market, tunnels etc. Furthermore there are imperilled by difficulties of neglect, abuse and malnutrition- and are at a higher risk of experiencing conflict, disease and discrimination(Paul, Doku & Timothy, 2019);leaving lasting impacts on their physical, and cognitive well-being (Goldberg, Brodzinsky, Singer, & Crozier 2021). Consequently, there are forced to roam the streets unattended to in terms of nutrition, access to education, and become highly susceptible to infectious diseases, and increased likelihood of engaging in criminal

behaviours .According to Temitope & Jace(2019) Orphans and vulnerable children are placed in foster homes, group homes, or orphanages to offer them a stable and caring environment- but In Nigeria and most developing countries, OVCs are compelled to enter these institutions that are decrepit, squalid and dingy and inhabitable (Chinwe & Eghosa, 2021).

As observed by Nankie (2020),Orphan children, are those that have lost one or both parents, leaving them in a particularly precarious situation. In a similar vein Edna (2020) asserts that, the vulnerability of orphan children is compounded by the absence of parental care and support, making them more susceptible to exploitation, abuse and neglect. While acknowledging the ineptitude of government and other groups responsible for providing the needed services as empanelled by extant provisions, Kathryn, etal (2023) and Rebecca & Alex (2022) copiously posits, the loss of a parent is an undoubtedly traumatic experience that significantly impacts a child's development when they become an orphan. An orphan is termed as a child below 18 years who has lost either of their biological parents due to any cause, and this is increasingly prevalent in developing countries due to various adverse circumstances such as: natural disasters, war, and HIV/AIDS. Global estimates reveal that there are 153 million orphaned children, with 132 million residing in developing countries (UNICEF, 2020). Studies(DeLuca, 2019;Funmilayo,2023 ; Siri & Per,2022) highlight that the majority of orphans are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern and South-eastern Asia with the latter region having the largest number, reaching 61 million , and houses 237 million extremely poor children, a 71.1 per cent of the world's 333 million impoverished children.

All children need healthy relationships with their parents. These have essential long-lasting consequences for their health and wellbeing; but children affected by being neglected experience Compromised attachment relationships.Throughout human history, the primary responsibility for raising children has traditionally fallen on parents and, in Africa, the nuclear family takes the lead. Unfortunately, this vibrant tradition especially in Africa, which played a pivotal role in fostering strong family ties and maintaining social order vis-à-vis a mechanism for crime control, is jettisoned(Ayuk,etal 2020;Rebecca, 2020; Andrea,etal 2022).Reiterating this fact, Jeanne (2023), noted that a significant number of parents have failed in fulfilling this crucial role. According to Quora (2021), OVCs who turn to untoward behaviours do not have families to relate - and who are expected to be their closest allies, greatest sources of love and support. Too often, however, OVCs interactions are characterize with resentment, bickering and badgering. Rather, those OVC should know and be known by best, end up seeing them as adversaries, thieves, caused, never-do-well and strangers (Olatunji, 2021).

Family is where our first and strongest emotional memories are made, and that's where they keep appearing (Katie, etal 2020). And this is why emotional intelligence (EQ) succeeds where other efforts at family harmony fail(Jerry,2021).Emotional Intelligence (EQ) stands out as a significant influencer in the intricate web of family dynamics, exerting a profound influence on how individuals navigate relationships with various family members. This impact is

underscored in relationships with parents, children, siblings, in-laws, and extended family members (Cynthia etal,2021). By fostering emotional awareness, individuals acquire a heightened ability to manage their interactions, making them less susceptible to external manipulation driven by the emotions of others,which ofcourse OVCs lacks. This heightened emotional acuity allows individuals to assume responsibility for their own feelings, thereby diminishing the inclination to attribute crime.

Statement of problem

The current situation of OVCs in Nigeria has transcended its initial state of concern and has metamorphosed into real security threat. Orphaned and vulnerable children face acute deprivation, consistent discrimination, homelessness, poverty, stigmatization, derogatory name-calling, ridicule and trauma (Ngobese,2020). According to the 2018 Situation Assessment and Analysis on OVC in Nigeria report, these children are often seen in tattered clothes, with an unkempt appearance, and engaged in hawking instead of attending school (Mariano etal 2015;Kufa-Chakezha,etal 2021;Juliet,2023). They can be found in varying numbers and conditions in every state of Nigeria, residing in squalid and dingy environments (Dorathy etal, 2019). The OVCs lives in mechanic workshops, abandoned cars, makeshift shelters near church and mosque buildings and other unimaginably unhealthy places. Living in such circumstances exposes these children to various dangers. Many of them have been victims of ritual killings, while others are trafficked for prostitution. Additionally, a significant number of boys are recruited by armed cultists and criminal gangs known as "Skolombo."(UNODC,2022;US Department of State Report of person in trafficking,Nigeria,2023; Migration Data Portal, (2023) . However, in recent times, various contemporary factors such as urbanization, the growing preference for nuclear families, the increasing emphasis on mothers' employment, the adoption of Western ideologies promoting individualism, and the abandonment of communal living by African elites etc. have emerged contributing to the abandonment of children and have placed them in vulnerable situations (UNWOMEN, 2019;Evanson etal 2021; Department Of Social Development Republic of South ,2021;Bahira,2022).

Studies have alluded that, if parents and the government had genuinely fulfilled their responsibilities to provide proper care, such issues would not have escalated into social problems (Commun and justice ,2020; Department for Education,2023). According to Punch Newspaper report on OVC (2020), approximately 41% of Nigeria's population, which amounts to around 14 million children, can be classified as OVC. This indicates a significant disconnect in meeting the basic needs of both children and adults in Nigeria, particularly in Calabar. The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, in conjunction with USAID, states that there are 17.5 million OVC across Nigeria who face daily challenges related to health, emotional well-being, social support, material resources, and education (National

Population Commission, Federal Republic of Nigeria, and ICF International, in Justina,2023). Globally, in 2022, an estimated 13.9 million children ages 0-17 have lost one or both parents due to AIDS; an estimated 1.5 million children ages 0-14 are living with HIV and only 57 percent of these children are on life-saving HIV treatment. (Chima, 2019;Nankie,2020&Olatunji,2021; USAID (2023

These children are deprived of love and empathy, forced to shoulder responsibilities beyond their years, and, in some cases, suffer from diseases or face brutal murders. To survive, OVC resort to begging on the streets, sleeping in front of shops, and lingering around nightclubs, among other precarious circumstances. The devastating impact and meteoric rise of orphaned and vulnerable children continues to resonate in Nigeria and other developing nations of the world, can be attributed to misinformation propagated by traditional or native doctors, pastors who label these children as witches and wizards, and the government's failure to fulfil its constitutional obligations (Abdulkareem ,2023;Valentine,2018);and through various Constitutions and ratification of child-rights treaties, entered by Nigeria ,South Africa, Ghana etc., committed to realising children's rights to survive; be protected from harm, and develop to their full potential (NCCPP,2O19). This highlights the government's primary responsibility to protect and guarantee the social welfare and basic needs of all citizens, irrespective of their social background, gender, age and tribe.

The escalation of OVCs is, in part, attributed to the systemic failures within the governmental, familial and religious spheres. The resultant void has not only disrupted the collective fabric of humanity but has also given rise to a myriad of security challenges for the Nigerian populace. Recognizing the urgent need to address the plight of vulnerable and orphaned children, various entities, including governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have initiated comprehensive strategies. These initiatives encompass a spectrum of measures, ranging from the provision of fundamental healthcare and education to the implementation of child protection mechanisms (Yusra & Jeremy, 2023). Notably, organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and non-profits like Save the Children have played pivotal roles in advocating for the rights and well-being of these children. Despite the commendable efforts of advocacy groups, the neglect of children in Nigeria persists. Objectively as a response to this pressing concern, this research investigates the underlying factors that contribute to orphaned and vulnerable children in Nigeria, and consequences of governmental inaction. Furthermore, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights that can inform policy decisions and interventions aimed at safeguarding the rights and well-being of OVCs.

Who are the skolombo's?

In Calabar, Cross River, Nigeria, the term "Skolombo" is used to refer to abandoned street children or orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs). As stated by Akpan (2019), these children have been present for some time, initially harmless, but over time, they became associated with the term "Isakaba" in 2007 and 2008 when their behaviour turned menacing

and inclined towards criminal activities. Their origins can be traced back to situations of abandonment, often influenced by prophesies and pronouncements made by pastors and traditional priests who label them as witches, wizards and cursed children(Lydia,2019;Ogar,2023).Undoubtedly the phenomenon of witch-hunts in Sub-Saharan Africa is ancient, but the problem is reportedly "on the rise", due to charismatic preachers as well as "urbanization, poverty, conflict and fragmenting communities(WIKIPEDIA:The free onlineEncyclopedia;Helene etal 2021). These beliefs OVCs associate their existence with death and misfortune, leading some parents to evict them from their homes for fear of incurring calamities. Consequently, these children grow up on the streets and become socialized with negative influences that contribute to their engagement in criminal behaviours (Egodi,2023;Simeon,2023).

The phenomenon of skolombo, just like every abandoned, neglected and some orphan children who become vulnerable, lives on the streets (Rotdow, 2021). Corroborating this assertion, Celestine (2019) adds that, parents themselves often face with illiteracy, unemployment and hunger, leading them to disregard the dressing, feeding and socialization of their children. This dire socio-economic situation further renders the parents incapable of providing for their children, and in some distressing cases, they resort to selling their children to unscrupulous individuals who subject them to forced labour, prostitution and slavery (Zbigniew, 2023). Among these street-dwelling children, there is a subgroup known as the "Lakasara girls," considered the most notorious. Similar to their male counterparts, they can be observed congregating on major streets in Calabar city. Typically aged between 8 and 17 years, they are dressed in tattered clothes and engage in begging for alms. They also act as decoys and informants for male criminal gangs, aiding in the targeting, injuring and robbing of unsuspecting individuals of their possessions.

The escalating crime rate and the prevailing insecurity in Nigeria serve as a clear reflection of the activities of these groups. They have emerged as major perpetrators of theft and cult-related activities, instilling fear in every corner of Calabar. Equipped with sophisticated firearms, clubs and machetes, they target individuals, confiscating phones, money and various other valuable possessions. According to Akpan (2019), these groups operate in a highly organized and coordinated manner, having even engaged the police in intense gun battles, effectively holding the city hostage for several hours. Concerned about the threat posed by these disorganized groups of orphaned and vulnerable children (Skolombo and Lakassara girls), the government established a security task force known as "Operation Skolombo." This unit was designed to provide quick intervention and rapid response in order to combat criminals. Regrettably, little progress has been made in curtailing the threat they pose. Instead, the groups continue to expand their ranks, contributing to the escalating levels of insecurity and criminal activities within the region.

Hypotheses

i. There is no relationship between government neglect of orphans, vulnerable children and insecurity.
ii. Region and cultural practice has no link with Orphan and vulnerable children (Skolombo) existence and insecurity.

Literature Review

Government neglect, OVC's and insecurity:

The widespread and deepening crisis of insecurity, characterized by rampant killings and widespread destruction of lives and property carried out by criminal gangs like Skolombo, Lakassara girls, Egbesu boys, and others, is an issue of grave concern within Nigeria's political and socio-economic landscape (Yusra & Jeremy2023; Stephen & Sofela 2019; Dorcas & Pius, 2018). According to Celestine's (2019) survey on conflict development in Nigeria, the prevailing threat and prevalence of insecurity can be attributed to catastrophic government policies and structural imbalances resulting from class divisions, which perpetually oppress the impoverished masses. It is worth noting that 55% of the population falls into the vulnerable and multi-dimensionally deprived category. The alarming reality is that the neglect of orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs) has emerged as a major catalyst for insecurity, presenting a significant challenge for the country (Lucia & Daphney 2022). This shifting dynamic highlights the critical importance of addressing the issues surrounding OVCs to effectively tackle the security crisis at hand.

To emphasize the grave implications of neglecting orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs) on the security of the country, the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development in Nigeria estimates that there are approximately 17.5 million OVCs nationwide. These children face significant challenges relating to health, hunger, accommodation and more. Alarmingly, it is argued that 95% of this population does not receive any form of medical, emotional, social, material or educational assistance. This dire situation has been likened to a "ticking time bomb," potentially leading to various forms of criminal activities (Sisay, 2023; Deda & Daniel 2023). It is particularly concerning that both the Cross River State and Nigerian government have not implemented concrete projects specifically designed to cater to the needs of OVCs. The existing efforts made by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are insufficient to address the overwhelming challenges associated with the social well-being of OVCs in Nigeria. Ideally, the government should collaborate with NGOs to strengthen and establish comprehensive programs that address the root causes of abandonment, ultimately eradicating the OVC issue and mitigating its consequential effects(Itai,2023).

For example, UNICEF (2019) conducted a study that ranked Nigeria's burden of orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs) higher than several war-affected countries, including Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya and Syria (Olubukola,2022 &

Christopher,etal 2019). The study highlighted that in 2013 alone, there were 10 million Nigerian orphans due to various causes, with 2.3 million attributed to AIDS, along with 450,000 children and 180,000 adolescents living with HIV. Furthermore, the 2013 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) indicated a significant increase in the number of orphaned children as they grow older. The data revealed that the percentage of orphaned children rises from 4.29% among children under the age of five to 16.1% among children aged 15-17. Additionally, the same report showed that urban children are slightly more likely to be orphaned and vulnerable compared to rural children, with rates of 7% and 5% respectively.

Orphans in Nigeria

The definition of OVCs, as stated by the Kwara State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Welfare, encompasses motherless, abandoned, abused, lost and mentally ill children. It also includes children caught in the midst of heated custody battles, paternal disputes and those who have escaped or been rescued from trafficking situations. This situation is not unique to Nigeria alone. According to a UNAIDS 2022 desk report by spring, the number of OVCs increased from 28.4 million in 1990 to 39.2 million in 2000, and further rose to 100 million in 2013. In 2021, an estimated 11.9 million to 18.3 million children worldwide had lost one or both parents, making them orphans and vulnerable. Of these OVCs, 9.1 million to 13.6 million are estimated to live in Sub-Saharan Africa (HumAngle, 2021; UNICEFDATA, 2022).

The lack of coherent and effective policy implementation by the Nigerian government has contributed to the disconnection that has led to insecurity among OVCs (Ugo etal, 2019; Anthony etal, 2020). This is further heightened by rampant corruption among politicians and government agencies responsible for addressing the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children, including accommodations, education, healthcare, and nutrition (Anita, 2021). According to the National Population Commission of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and ICF International's report, an estimated 95% of OVCs do not receive sufficient assistance to meet their nutritional, cognitive and emotional developmental needs at each stage of childhood. The report recommends that the government should implement programs that facilitate the fulfilment of OVCs' needs, including early identification of childhood illnesses, monitoring, and support for treatment. Additionally, robust educational policies are necessary to identify and nurture talent among OVCs, serving as a pathway for their personal development, self-sustainability and contributing to overall societal progress.

Samuel (2022), succinctly expresses that the recurring insecurity caused by OVCs and its associated consequences will persist as long as the multifaceted inequality imposed on Nigerians by self-serving, avaricious and greedy politicians continues unchecked. The family, which serves as the primary socializing agent and a safety net for the underprivileged, including orphans and vulnerable children, is under immense strain, rendering it unable to fulfil its role

effectively. Consequently, vulnerable children have limited access to nutrition, healthcare, and education (Ashley,etal 2023). The Rapid Assessment Analysis Action Planning (RAAP) in 2014, as cited by Mustapha, demonstrates that vulnerable children are less likely to enrol in school and more susceptible to engaging in risky sexual behaviour and substance abuse(Addis,etal 2023). The obligations to ensure the rights of OVCs in terms of survival, development, and participation are severely lacking when considering the prevalence of child abandonment, exposure to moral dangers, maltreatment, abuse, and exploitation in Nigeria(Reliefweb,2023; Chinwe & Eghosa 2021;Timothy &Imaobong 2023). This disconcerting trend is a result of intertwined social, cultural, political, and economic factors that have stretched the coping capacities of communities, families, and the government in recent in Nigeria (Samuel, 2022).

Religion, Cultural Practice and Ovc's

In the world, where over 7 billion people reside, including 2.2 billion children, there exists a group of children who lack parental care or are at risk of losing it (Chinwe, Nnama-Okechukwu and Eghosa, 2021). Besides government neglect, poverty and unemployment, some of these children face vulnerability due to the direct impact of cultural and religious factors. Research conducted by Adjoa (2022), Nnana-Okechuku and Okoye (2019), UNICEF, and Victor (2018) reveals that various socio-cultural indicators contribute to the orphan and vulnerable phenomenon in Nigeria and Africa in general. Harmful cultural and religious practices such as child marriage, child witchcraft accusations, female genital mutilation, and the Almajiri system have been extensively linked to the prevalence of OVCs in Nigeria (Chinwe et al., 2019).

Similarly, Isioma (2019) observed that when a child is labelled or accused of being a witch or wizard, they are immediately expelled from their home, subjected to ridicule, and shunned by both their parents and the community. They are viewed as evil children who are undeserving of life, and in some instances, they are taken to designated "evil forests" to perish. Supporting the aforementioned assertion, Kai-Tak,etal (2022) emphasizes that the superstitious belief system that leads to the ostracization of children from their communities based on witchcraft accusations is deplorable, reprehensible and a violation of children's rights. The Nigeria Child Rights Act (2003) in Part II, Sections 9 and 6 clearly states that no child should be subjected to physical, mental, or emotional harm, abuse, neglect, maltreatment, torture, or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. However, it is disconcerting that the provisions of this Act are often disregarded, even among educated and enlightened Nigerians who lack the courage to speak out and take action in accordance with the law. Within Nigerian society, superstitious beliefs propagated through extremist religious practices often compel parents and adherents to comply with pronouncements made by chief priests or "native doctors." This adherence to such beliefs perpetuates the harmful treatment and stigmatization of children accused of witchcraft (Williams, 2021; Nkemakolam, 2021; Mulkah, etal 2018).

It is important to acknowledge that when these children are expelled from their homes, they are forced to roam the streets in search of means to survive (Santino ,2021;Anita,2021). Being jobless and unemployed, their instinct for survival pushes them towards illegitimate means of accessing basic needs such as food, shelter, and security. In this process, they engage in various heinous crimes including but not limited to armed robbery, drug trafficking, arson, kidnapping and thuggery (Natasha, 2018). In Calabar, children are particularly vulnerable as they are used by caregivers to hawk on the streets in order to generate income for their families. This exposes them to multiple risk factors, leading them to settle in poor, crime-infested neighbourhoods characterized by overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and limited access to modern healthcare facilities, further increasing their vulnerability. According to Jesusegun (2021), the use of children by their families to generate income comes with dire consequences. Children engaged in child labour, such as street vending, are more likely to drop out of school and become vulnerable to sexual abuse, kidnapping and the risk of losing their lives. As conceptualized by Ewelina (2018), children are innocent beings with specific needs, and their susceptibility to growing up as conformists or deviants of society depends on the opportunities, situations, and circumstances they encounter. Regrettably, the failure of religious groups, families, and governments at various levels contributes to the perpetuation of violence and other delinquent behaviours associated with OVCs in society.

Methodology

The study utilized a survey research design. Survey research, as explained by Miller (1991), provides an accurate portrayal of individuals, events or situations. It allows researchers to gather data from a diverse range of respondents, providing a comprehensive profile of the relevant aspects of the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, the research area focused on Calabar Municipality, which consists of ten electoral political wards and has a population of 631,000, as indicated by the population of the metro area. The targeted population for the study included Skolombo (OVC) individuals and the staff of the Ministry of Social Welfare in Cross River State, specifically in Calabar. The sample size was determined using the formula $n = Z^2pqld^2$ for population above 10,000.

Where:
n = Sample size for a population > 10,000
z = Standard normal deviation = 1.96
ρ = Prevalence rate, i.e. proportion of target population estimated to have the par ticular characteristic of interest = 50%;
q = I – p; and
d = degree of accuracy, set 0.05

Therefore;

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 \; x \; 0.5 \; x \; 0.5}{(0.05)^2}$$

= 384 subjects

However, since the study population is above 10,000, the sample size was calculated thus; nf = n/1+(n/N)

Where;

nf minimum sample size for population <10,000

n = minimum sample size for population > 10,000; and

N = estimated total population OVC (Skolombo) in Calabar Municipality which approximately 600

Therefore:

$$N = \frac{384}{1 + \left(\frac{384}{600}\right)}$$

= 234

A total of 260 questionnaires were administered, accounting for a 10% allowance for non-response. The sample size was increased to accommodate this adjustment. The research employed a multi-stage sampling technique, which involved dividing the study population into smaller clusters and narrowing them down as needed. This approach facilitated easier management of the survey, reduced costs and saved time. Respondents were selected using a simple random method. The primary instrument for data collection was a questionnaire. The statistical tools employed in the study included simple percentage calculations and the Pearson Moment Correlation Coefficient. The researcher adhered strictly to established ethical principles that guide social research. These principles encompassed disclosure policies, anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent and safety protocols. The researcher, aided by five locals who were fluent in both English and the indigeneous Efik language, administered the questionnaires. This assistance was invaluable in effectively interpreting English questions into the Efik dialect for the respondents.

Findings

A total of 260 questionnaires were distributed in the selected wards within the study area of Calabar Municipality. Out of these, 235 copies (representing 90.4% of the surveys) were correctly filled and collected. However, 22 copies (8.5% of the surveys) were considered unusable due to mutilation. The distribution of respondents across the wards was as follows: Ward 1 accounted for the highest number of respondents (22.7%), followed by Wards 2, 3, 4, and 5 (each representing 20.2%, 20.2%, 20.2%, and 16.8% respectively). The majority of the respondents fell within the age bracket of 16-25, comprising 56.7% of the total sample. This was followed by the age bracket of 26-35, which represented 32.4% of the respondents. Those aged 36-45 accounted for 8.0%, while respondents aged 46 years and below made up 2.1% of the sample, with those below 16 years constituting 0.8%. Regarding educational attainment,

only 3.3% of the respondents had attended primary school. Approximately 21.1% had attempted secondary school, while a significant majority of 75.6% had no formal education at all.

What Type of Assistance Have you Received From the Government of Cross River State as Ovc

The orphans and vulnerable children were asked about the assistance or services they have received from the local and state government. Based on the data presented in Table 1, it was found that 73.5% of the respondents stated that neither the local government nor the state government has provided them with any form of assistance. Additionally, 15.9% of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the services they have received, equating it to treatment akin to that of a slave. On the other hand, 10.6% of the respondents commended the efforts of both the local and state governments in alleviating their challenging circumstances. In terms of housing, a significant 84% of the OVCs lamented that they are homeless. A further 12.6% acknowledged being partially accommodated but in inadequate, overcrowded, and insecure conditions. Only 2% of the OVCs reported having access to proper shelter. Regarding healthcare, the study revealed that a staggering 90% of the OVCs, known as Skolombo, do not have access to healthcare services. This lack of access contributes to the escalation and severity of health crises among this vulnerable population when they occur.

Table 1: Response regarding service accessibility

Assistance	Not benefited	Partly benefited	Fully benefisted
Feeding	175 (73.56)	38 (15.9%)	25(10.6%) 238 (100)
Accommodation	200 (84.0%)	30 (12.6%)	8(3.4%) 238 (100)
Health	215 (90.10%)	18(8%)	5(2.4%) 238 (100)

Source: *Field study, 2023.*

An excerpt from one of the OVC interviewee master A (not real name) on the kind of service they have enjoyed from government transcribed thus:

I have not received any assistance or support from this government, which I consider to be terrible and cruel. However, I do not solely blame them for my situation. If my parents had not abandoned me and my siblings, we would not be going through these difficult experiences. Last year, in 2022, a government official took us to a primary school and promised to cover all our expenses. Unfortunately, after just two months, the official disappeared, and we were expelled from the school. That marked the end of our educational journey.

Types of crime you have involved yourselves in

According to the findings presented in Table 2 below, it is evident that OVCs (Skolombo) in the study area have been engaged in various criminal activities. Specifically, 67.2% of the

OVCs have been involved in armed robbery, while 11.8% have participated in acts of kidnapping. Additionally, 8.4% of the OVCs have been involved in cases of rape, and 12.6% have been associated with drug-related offenses.

Table 2
Response regarding involvement in types of crime

Crime		Percentage
Armed robbery	160	67.2%
Kidnapping	28	11.8%
Rape	20	8.4%
Drug	30	12.6%
Total		100

Source: field work 2023

Except from Master Ek (not real name), an interviewee transcribed thus; Master! as you observed me standing before you, nothing holds my interest any longer, because I have entered into agreement with substances that has led me to engage in heinous acts such rape, kidnapping and even murder. I lack sympathy because i exist in anonymity; the street is my habitat; nobody knows me; In fact if given the opportunity, I would seek to undermine the authority of all government officials. I don't fear death because I have experienced it numerous times while struggling to survive on the street.

Have you ever had a decent paid job?

The data presented in Table 3 indicates that 87.2% of the respondents do not have any daily or monthly paid jobs provided by the government. Additionally, 6.9% of the respondents stated that the government pays them a meagre and irregular monthly sum, which is highly discouraging. Furthermore, 5.9% of the respondents affirmed that due to their unemployment, they are forced to resort to criminal activities as a means of survival.

Table 3
Showing response regarding the kind of job OVC (Skolombo) do in Calabar Municipality – Cross River State.

Job type	Frequency	Percentage
No paid job	208	87.2%
Monthly paid by Government	20	6.9%
Self paid job	10	5.9%
Total		100

Except from Mr Aka (not real name), a 24 years OVC interviewee transcribed thus: The current government has abandon us. They perceive us as criminals, failures and outcasts of society.

Some even dehumanise us by referring to us as scavengers subsisting on left overs, and homeless. Our circumstances have forced us into this situation, and the government has turned its back on us. However, I can guarantee you one thing, as long as we roam this state, the wealthy and government officials will not find peace.

Ho: 1

Alternative hypothesis1 (H_I): There is a strong relationship between neglect of orphans and vulnerable children in Calabar Municipality that leads to insecurity.

Null hypothesis (H_2): (Ho): There is no strong relationship between government neglect of orphans and vulnerable children in Calabar Municipality that leads to insecurity.

Table 4
Pearson Product Moment Correlation of government and OVC

Variables	N	MSD	r-value	Sig	
Government	238	14.33	2.75	0.639*	000*
OVC neglect	238	15.44	2.74		

*Significant at 0.05 level, df = 398, critical r-value = 0.0098.

The result in Table 4 revealed that the calculated t-value of 0.639 is greater than the r-value of 0.098 at 0.05 level of significance with 398 degree of freedom. With this result, the null hypothesis is rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis, establishing therefore that, there is a relationship between government neglect and the existence of OVC in Calabar Municipality that leads to insecurity.

Ho: 2

Alternative hypothesis (H_I): Religion and cultural practices are not predisposing factors to OVC existence and insecurity in Calabar Municipality.

Null hypothesis (H_2): (Hi): Religion and cultural practices is related to OVC existence and insecurity in Calabar Municipality.

Table 5
Pearson Product Moment Correlation of religion and cultural practices as predisposing factor to OVC existence

Variables	N	MSD	r-value	Sig

Religion and native doctors	238	12.79	2.48	0.712	000*
OVC insecurity	238	15.44	2%		

*Significant at 0.05 level, df = 398, critical r-value = 0.098.
Source: *Field work, 2023.*

With the result, the calculated value of 0.712 is greater than the table value of 0.098, the null hypothesis is rejected and hence validating the alternative hypothesis, which establishes that, there is a significance relationship between religion and cultural practices to OVC existence that leads to insecurity in Calabar Municipality.

Discussion of results

The study established a significant relationship between government neglect of OVCs (Skolombo), religious and cultural practices, and insecurity in Calabar Municipality. These findings aligned with the report on supporting orphans and vulnerable children by USAID in 2021. It is evident that more efforts need to be intensified by non-governmental agencies, as the financial and economic constraints faced by the government make it challenging to address the unique needs of OVCs. Collaborative efforts between the government and multi-sectorial units are essential to provide protection and facilitate training in various skill acquisition programs, thereby improving the conditions of OVCs. The study further supports the assertions made by Chinwe et al. (2019) that children in developing societies across the globe are deprived of family care, support, and love, while government negligence exacerbates their suffering. This neglect serves as a predisposing factor for crime, particularly in Nigeria and other parts of the world.

The findings of this study corroborate the research conducted by Celestine and Maurice (2019) on conflict development, which highlights the prevailing threat and insecurity in Nigeria. It reveals that the root causes of this insecurity stem from catastrophic government policies and structural imbalances, perpetuating the subjugation and multidimensional deprivation of the impoverished masses. Consequently, these circumstances contribute to various forms of crime and an unsafe civil environment. Celestine and Maurice (2019) aptly points out that the insecurity resulting from the neglect of OVCs, along with its associated consequences, will persist as a recurring issue if the multifaceted inequality inflicted upon Nigerians by corrupt politicians and government officials continues unchecked.

The study also found a clear connection between religion, cultural practices, and the misconduct of orphans and vulnerable children, which ultimately leads to serious insecurity in Calabar Municipality. These findings are in line with previous research by Chinwe, et al. (2019), who has asserted that apart from government neglect, poverty and unemployment, religious and cultural factors contribute significantly to the vulnerability of children. The study highlighted how harmful cultural practices such as witchcraft beliefs, child marriage, female genital mutilation, child labour, and the "*almijiri* syndrome" exacerbate the vulnerability of

children in Calabar Municipality and Nigeria as a whole. As described by Isioma (2019), when a child is labelled or accused of being a witch or wizard by a "native priest" or a "witch doctor," they are immediately expelled from their homes and subjected to ridicule and ostracism from the community. This practice is also prevalent in certain churches, particularly those known as "white garment churches," where such accusations may occur during prophetic sessions or regular services. These findings further support the view expressed by Ewelina (2018), that religious beliefs and the practice of ostracizing children based on accusations of witchcraft are reprehensible and a violation of the Child Rights Act. Furthermore, the study affirms the observation made by Okoye (2019) that even among educated Nigerian parents, superstitious beliefs imposed by extremist religious practices can trap adherents into complying with dubious pronouncements made by chief priests, thereby contributing to the increase in orphan and vulnerable children in Calabar. In summary, the study revealed that a significant majority of the children classified as orphans are not truly orphaned due to the death of one or both parents, but rather are vulnerable or orphaned as a result of the aforementioned harmful practices.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the aforementioned facts and evidence, it is crucial to emphasize that the issue of OVCs in Nigeria and many other developing African countries is influenced by government actions or inactions, as well as the dissemination of dubious prophecies by self-proclaimed "prophets" and witch doctors/native doctors. Consequently, this situation has created a significant security threat for all members of society. The persistence of this phenomenon can only be mitigated if urgent measures are taken to address the high levels of poverty resulting from unemployment and the government's neglect in tackling the socio-economic challenges at hand. The study therefore recommend as follows:

i. Good citizens should adopt OVC legally or become foster parents so as to provide habitable environment/homes for the children growth with warmth, love and care.
ii. Government should invest robustly in educating the OVC's both formally and informally to be independent and functions maximally without depending on anybody.
iii. Free medi-care should be made accessible and free for all orphans and vulnerable children so as to stem the tide of unnecessary and avoidable dead from common and severe diseases.
iv. Skill acquisition centers should be specifically establish for the OVC – made so to avoid idleness and redundancy which in several instances have been referred to, as responsible for why OVC involves in criminality.
v. Government should disband those religious centers and cultural practice that without any fault of children are labeled or accused as being witches or wizards.
vi. Parents and communities that ostracized or banished any child on grounds of witchcraft should be prosecuted according to the law (at this instance, the child's right act).

vii. Government should sensitize parents and religious leaders that no child is evil and should not be condemn and made to suffer unjustly.

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