

Beyond Poverty: A Socioecological Analysis of the Factors Reinforcing Human Trafficking among Residents of Onitsha, Anambra State, Nigeria

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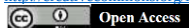
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ABSTRACT

In Nigeria, Onitsha has become a major centre for trafficking activity. Despite poverty being often identified as the main cause, research into its socioecological model at various levels remains underdeveloped. To analyse socioecological factors that perpetuate human trafficking in the community of Onitsha, Anambra State, Nigeria. This was a cross sectional survey design, involving 384 respondents who were selected by multi-stage sampling of 15 residential layouts in Onitsha. Structured questionnaire was used for data collection and descriptive statistics and chi-square tests were used to analyse the data. 86.3% of the respondents believe that the poor are more vulnerable to trafficking, and 96.4% think the pursuit of quick money is a motivator to participate in trafficking. Greed and poverty were the top predictors (49.5% and 49.7%, respectively). There is a wide range of socioecological factors including individual greed, family poverty, community normalisation of exploitation and structural economic inequality that reinforces the occurrence of human trafficking in Onitsha. Multi-level strategies are needed to address all the dimensions to achieve effective intervention. This study strengthens SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) by offering evidence for the need to go beyond poverty alleviation and identify socioecological factors that drive trafficking, such as institutional corruption, cultural normalisation of exploitation and the lack of effective governance structures that increase vulnerability.

1. Introduction

Trafficking in persons is one of the most egregious violations of human rights in the modern world that impacts millions of people in all regions of the world. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2012), 20.9 million people are estimated to be suffering from forced labour around the world, a large number of which are estimated to be trafficked for the purpose of forced labour. Human trafficking has reached alarming proportions in Nigeria where the nation is a source, transit and destination state for trafficked persons (Enaikele & Olutayo, 2011). The Nigerian context in particular is very complex, with the high population density, deep economic disparities, porous borders and entrenched trafficking networks exploiting systemic vulnerabilities (Omoigberale & Anyanwu, 2025).

Onitsha, a large commercial city and river port in Anambra State, South-East Nigeria, has become one of the hotspot locations for trafficking. Onitsha with a projected population of 3,610,807 (NPC, 2006) is a key area of the Niger River with commercial activities and a critical hub in trafficking networks (Emoh, Oni & Egolum, 2013). The social-economic situation in the city is marked with high level of inequalities and unemployment which are reflected in the public space by the conspicuous consumption of properties by the privileged few, this situation is favourable for the emergence of trafficking. According to reports, Onitsha has been the scene of many trafficking cases of children, young girls into prostitution and many cases of child trafficking for ritual killing; while some residents live in fear in certain areas of Onitsha (Ujumadu, 2022).

Poverty has been the main focus of the discussion on trafficking in persons in Nigeria. Indeed, poverty has been identified as the most important structural factor in the prevalence of trafficking, and chronic unemployment, educational disenfranchisement and multi-dimensional precarity have been identified as a factor of poverty (Omoigberale & Anyanwu, 2025). Lack of economic opportunities,

weak access to education and ignorance have been consistently cited by the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) as being causative factors for the occurrence of human trafficking in Nigeria (New Telegraph, 2026). Focusing exclusively on poverty, however, can overshadow the multitude of factors at play at various levels within the social ecology that perpetuates trafficking. Trafficking cannot simply be an isolated criminal aberration but rather a symptom of other structural ills spatial injustice, normative complicity and systemic developmental exclusion—as Omoigberale and Anyanwu (2025) state.

The socioecological model was created by Bronfenbrenner (1979), and offers a useful approach for examining the factors that contribute to human trafficking at multiple levels. This model proposes a multi-level framework individual, interpersonal, community and societal – that influences individual behavior. When used in the context of human trafficking, the socioecological model helps to understand how various factors from individual aspirations to family dynamics, community norms and structural economic conditions can interact and lead to creating vulnerability and perpetuating the cycle of trafficking. This has been recently applied to the situation of trafficking in Africa with the argument that trafficking is not an outside phenomenon but something that is sustained in the relational ecologies where it is normalised, obfuscated or rationalised (Bhabha & Digidiki, 2018).

Although the root causes of trafficking are increasingly understood as being multi-factorial, empirical studies to explore the socioecological factors that contribute to trafficking in particular Nigerian contexts are still limited. The research on trafficking in Edo State (Okafor 2026), the study of the trafficking child networks in Nigeria (Omoigberale & Anyanwu 2025), and the study of public perception of trafficking of female in Onitsha (Ndiora n.d.) have been studied. But there is still a lack of understanding on how various factors at different levels of the social ecology interact to reinforce trafficking among the residents of Onitsha community. This study aims at bridging this gap with the usage of a socioecological model which will examine the factors reinforcing human trafficking among the dwellers of Onitsha, Anambra State.

The specific objectives of this study are: (1) to identify the socio-economic characteristics of the residents of Onitsha and their awareness and perceptions on human trafficking; (2) to examine the types of human trafficking that exist in Onitsha; (3) to ascertain the factors that reinforce human trafficking amongst the residents of Onitsha and (4) to determine the relationship between socio-economic status, desire for wealth and involvement in human trafficking. Three hypotheses are tested by the study: (H1) the desire to make money is perceived as the main reason why people are involved in human trafficking; (H2) poor people are more likely to be involved in human trafficking than rich people; and (H3) those without children are more likely to become involved in human trafficking than those with children.

This study is notable in a number of ways. First, it adds to the increasing literature on human trafficking in Nigeria, and gives empirical evidence from one critical trafficking hub that is under-researched – Onitsha. Secondly, the study explicitly uses a socioecological approach, transcending the reductionist understanding of poverty, in favour of a more complex view of the several layers of factors that reinforce trafficking. Third, the findings have significant policy and practice implications, as social workers and anti-trafficking agencies look to support effective intervention strategies. Last but not least, the research helps in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies) by providing evidence that will be used to build more robust institutions to effectively prevent and combat human trafficking.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is an intricate and multidimensional reality which is difficult to define. According to the most widely accepted definition, the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (the Palermo Protocol), trafficking is defined as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall mean

at the very least, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or removal of organs (UN, 2000).

This definition emphasizes three key components of trafficking: how (the means), what (the act), and why (the purpose). Significantly, the definition also addresses the possibility of trafficking within the borders of the States involved and that consent is not relevant if any of the prohibited means is used (Gallagher & Holmes, 2008).

There are several forms of human trafficking in Nigeria. These cover child trafficking for domestic servitude, street hawking, forced labour, trafficking of young girls and women for prostitution and sexual exploitation, trafficking for ritual killing and the emerging trend of “baby factories” where women are impregnated and the babies sold (Huntley 2013). The ILO/IPEC 2000 report indicated that 40 percent of Nigerian street children and hawkers were trafficked persons and WOTCLEF reported that there were about 20,000 Nigerian women involved in the sex industry in Italy in 2002. According to Gushulak and Macpherson (2001), 80 percent of foreign prostitutes in Italy were Nigerian women, mostly from Edo, Delta and Lagos States whose average age range was 15-35 years (Agbu, 2003).

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Human Trafficking

There are a number of theories used to explain human trafficking. Economic theories focus on the significance of supply and demand; poverty and limited economic opportunities provide a demand for vulnerable people, and demand for cheap labour and commercial sex provides a supply of vulnerable people for the industry of trafficking (ILO, 2005). Migration theories consider trafficking as a dysfunctional migration; migrants are pushed into the hands of traffickers due to restrictive immigration policies and criminalisation of irregular migration (Salt & Stein, 1997).

Criminological theories, like Hirschi's (1969) social control theory, argue that the weaker the social bond the more likely the person is to commit a criminal act such as trafficking. Trafficking is viewed as a profitable business by the organised criminals, and the organisers of such crime are more interested in the high profit and the low risk of getting caught (Gallagher & Holmes, 2008). Feminist theory underscores the gender aspect of trafficking, noting women and girls' susceptibility to sexual trafficking due to their relative vulnerability in the context of patriarchal structures and gender inequalities (Kempadoo, 2005).

The critical perspective (based on structural violence theory (Galtung, 1969) and critical realism) asserts that trafficking is not a crime, but a reflection of structural violations. Theoretically, Omoigberale and Anyanwu (2025) propose that trafficking is an epiphenomenon of structural violence, spatial injustice, normative complicity and systemic developmental exclusion. This approach looks beyond a person to the historical processes of marginalisation, state neglect and global economic inequalities that can facilitate trafficking.

2.3 Factors Reinforcing Human Trafficking in Nigeria

2.3.1 Poverty and Economic Inequality

In Nigeria poverty is always cited as the main driving force of human trafficking. The NAPTIP has pointed out that the causes of human trafficking are lack of economic opportunities, inadequate access to education and ignorance. In Nigeria, the resources are abundant but unequally distributed with a few very rich and many very poor, this makes a few people very vulnerable to trafficking, according to Duru and Ogbonnaya (2012). Okafor (2026) discovered that poverty creates a vulnerable population which are exploited by traffickers, thereby perpetuating the process of exploitation and poverty. But poverty is not the reason for trafficking. Chronic unemployment and educational disenfranchisement are factors that contribute to the poverty, in addition to multi-dimensional precarity as Omoigberale and Anyanwu (2025) acknowledge. Lack of sustainable means of livelihood, lack of vocational opportunities and lack of access to quality education have been identified as some of the factors contributing to trafficking (New Telegraph, 2026). The combination of these factors leaves people highly susceptible to traffickers taking advantage of this.

2.3.2 Greed and the desire for wealth

In addition to poverty, greed and the desperate wish for rapid monetary gain have proved to be important factors leading to trafficking. Johnson (2004) and the UN (2006) noted that rich "big men" ostentatiously display their wealth in villages and/or cities and foster the aspirations among young people that lead them to be vulnerable to the traffickers. The idea of 'get rich quick', coupled with a visible

consumption of the rich, develops a cultural environment that normalises the practice of trafficking as a way to improve economically. Enaikele and Olutayo (2011) discovered that the desire for wealth constitutes as one of the motivating factors of traffickers.

2.3.3 Social and cultural factors

Social and cultural factors are important factors in perpetuating trafficking. Conditions of complicity develop in those communities where trafficking is normalised, as an economic necessity to ensure livelihoods. In some communities, families do not care to find out the source of wealth of their wealthy members, creating a culture of silence around trafficking. The use of recruiters and facilitators from within the community, instead of outsiders, questions the dominant anti-trafficking perspectives which view trafficking as a crime committed by foreign syndicate groups. Uche (2013) suggested that some parents, most likely for economic concerns, ignorance or simply a lack of love, cease to feed their children, which leads to the giving away of their children for trafficking. This is due to the disintegration of family units and the declining ability of families to provide protective factors for children from exploitation.

2.3.4 Political and Institutional Factors

It is noted that political instability, corruption and institutional failure are important factors contributing to trafficking. Agwu (2025) investigated the extent to which corruption within anti-human trafficking agencies, such as bribery, impersonation, misuse of donations and collusion with traffickers, has an impact on the prevention, protection, prosecution and partnership aspects of anti-trafficking. Police corruption is becoming commonplace, the norm in society, fostering a "high profit-low risk" environment for traffickers, who are thus unlikely to face legal penalties.

The divide in government in Nigeria is also a factor that contributes to trafficking. Traditional authorities may also have competing normative power within legal contexts, and further, within the culture, the traditional authority set-ups and proactively reproduces culturally sanctioned forms of complicity. Lack of adequate state counter-power allows trafficking networks to function with impunity.

2.3.5 Spatial Factors

Spatial factors such as peripheralisation of rural areas and the knowledge of the trafficking in certain geographic areas have been recognised as important reinforcing factors. The spatiality of trafficking in infrastructurally marginalized rural backlands, around the urban fringe and in transit hubs of movement is indicative of what Soja (2010) refers to as spatial injustice. As a major commercial centre and transit space, Onitsha is both an origin and destination for trafficking, owing to its integration into a broken and looted Nigeria.

2.4 Empirical Studies on Human Trafficking in Onitsha.

There is very little empirical studies on human trafficking in the Nigeria city of Onitsha. In his study of public perception of female trafficking in Onitsha, Ndiora (n.d.) discovered that most of the inhabitants of Onitsha were not aware of what trafficking in females was, and that the victims were not aware of the crime before they were trafficked. The study revealed a positive relationship between poverty and female trafficking in Onitsha and the quest to make money as the key motivating factor of female traffickers.

Onitsha has been reported to have many cases of child trafficking, with in some areas not less than 12 children being trafficked within less than 4 months. The area of Awada in Onitsha seems to be worst hit, with dwellers in palpable fear of their lives. Often, traffickers entice victims into being trafficked with offers of well-paying positions in other cities such as Onitsha, Owerri, and Aba that are generally developed.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Although there is a significant body of research on human trafficking in Nigeria, there are some gaps. First, most studies have primarily addressed poverty as the sole factor, and not the complex interrelationship of factors on various levels of the social ecology. Secondly, there has been a lack of research on the issue of trafficking in Onitsha, though it is a major trafficking hub. Third, there have been only a few studies that have used a socioecological model to examine the various factors that contribute to trafficking. This study aims to tackle these challenges using the Socioecological framework to look at the factors that perpetuate human trafficking in the residents of Onitsha.

3.0 Theoretical Framework: Socioecological Model

The socioecological model was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) and subsequently adapted for use in public health and social problems is the foundation of this study. According to the socioecological model, individual behavior is influenced by the interaction of various influences from different levels of the social environment. If applied to human trafficking, this framework offers a broad perspective of how elements at varying levels (individual, interpersonal, community, and society) interact to make trafficking more likely and to sustain trafficking.

3.1 The Individual Level

The individual factors that affect vulnerability to trafficking are age, gender, education, personal aspirations and psychological traits. People with low educational attainment and little economic opportunity, who may have high dreams of becoming-rich, are especially susceptible (Enaikele & Olutayo, 2011). The 'get rich quick' fantasy, fostered by the visible wealth of others, gives rise to individual level motivations that may include victimisation or perpetration in trafficking. This study will analyze individual-level factors by drawing on respondents' demographic characteristics, educational levels and perceptions of trafficking.

3.2 The Interpersonal Level

The interpersonal level refers to the relationships with family, peers and social networks which could aid or hinder trafficking. For families living in poverty, child trafficking may be a means of coping (Uche, 2013). The use of kinship based recruiters and localised facilitators shows how inter-personal relationships are utilised in trafficking networks. The absence of protective family structures in society is seen in parents unable or unwilling to care for their children, and they can give them out for trafficking. This study looks at the interpersonal aspect by analyzing parents' involvement in trafficking and the factors that motivate parents to engage in trafficking.

3.3 The Community Level

At a community level, the norms, values and social structures within a locality influence behaviour. Conditions that are favourable to trafficking are present in communities where trafficking is normalised, in communities where the wealthy show their wealth through extravagant spending and where there is little accountability for exploitation behaviors. The geographical clustering of trafficking in certain areas is indicative of vulnerabilities at the community level. The high population density of the city, the high visibility of wealth, and the existence of trafficking networks in Onitsha contribute to the reinforcing elements of the city's community environment. This study looks at community level factors by analysing the awareness of the respondents of trafficking in their community as well as the types of trafficking prevalent in Onitsha.

3.4 The Societal Level

The societal level includes the wider political, economic and cultural frameworks that influence the context in which trafficking is occurring. Societal-level factors that set up conditions of vulnerability include poverty, unemployment, educational disenfranchisement, corruption, and institutional failure. Trafficking in resources is caused by unequal access to resources, lack of sustainable means of livelihood and poor quality education. Failure of anti-trafficking agencies in corruption negatively impacts prevention and protection. Competing and overlapping governance, with formal and traditional powers holding competing normative power, leaves space for trafficking networks to take advantage of. The analysis of the respondents' perceptions of the causes of trafficking and their suggestions of reducing trafficking in this study investigates the factors at the societal level.

3.5 Application of the Socioecological Model to This Study

The socioecological model (Fig 1) offers a useful approach for this study as it allows for an analysis of the interaction of various levels of factors that reinforce human trafficking in Onitsha. The model does not assign a specific root cause of trafficking but instead understands that interpersonal relationships, community norms, and societal structures contribute to individual vulnerability. This multi-level approach is particularly suitable for the context of Onitsha because this phenomenon is complex, involving the interplay of individual aspirations, family poverty, community normalization of exploitation and structural economic inequality.

Additionally, the model has implications for intervention. All socioecology levels, including individual, interpersonal, community and society, should be targeted by effective anti-trafficking strategies to provide education and economic opportunities, reinforce interpersonal protective factors

like family support, influence social norms that normalize trafficking, and address systemic inequalities and institutional weaknesses at the socioecology level. This multi-level approach is in line with the objectives of SDG 16 to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies by building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

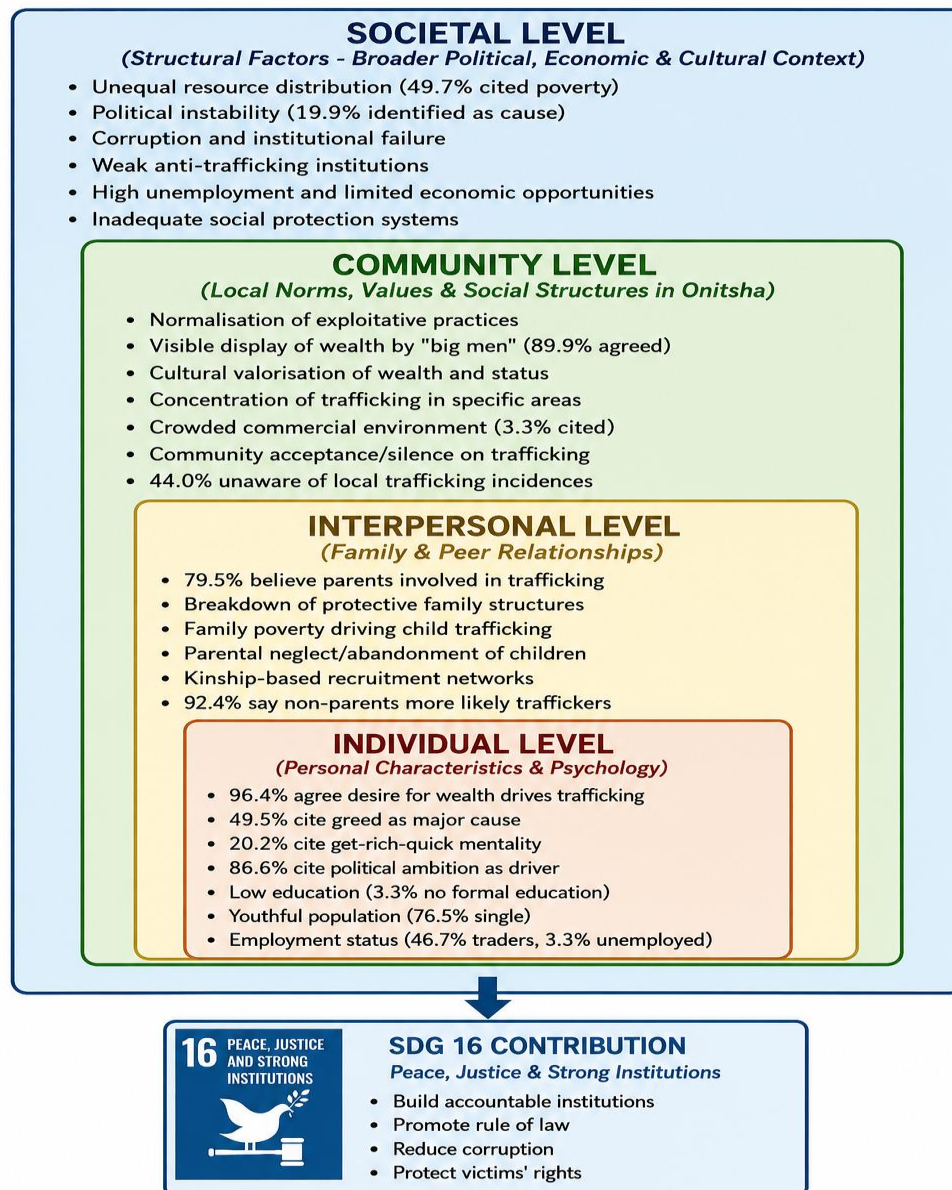


Fig 1: Socioeconomic Model of Human Trafficking in Onitsha (Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study used a cross sectional survey design to produce data to meet the study's research questions and test the study's hypotheses. The cross-sectional survey design is suitable to gather information from a part of the study population and can use a selected sample to describe or represent a large population at a specific time. The choice of this design is based on the fact that it allows to collect data on several variables at the same time, to describe the characteristics of the study population, and to test the relationships between the variables.

4.2 Area of the Study

The study was carried out in Onitsha, a city, commercial centre and river port in the bank of Niger River, Anambra State in south eastern Nigeria. As of 2006, the Onitsha metropolitan population was projected to be 3,610,807 by 2015 (NPC, 2006). Onitsha is located at an important crossing point on the

river Niger on the north bank and at the head of the part of the river that can be navigated by large boats. The city is situated in between the latitudes 6°07'N and 6°12'N and longitudes 6°45'E and 6°50'E.

Emoh, Oni and Egolum (2013) identified fifteen identified residential layouts/estates in Onitsha which were; G.R.A Onitsha, Akpaka G.R.A, Federal Housing/3-3 Area, Federal site and services, Trans-Nkisi Layouts, Onitsha Inland Town, Omagba Layout, Modebe Avenue & Adjoining Streets, Old Market Road & Adjoining Streets, New Market Road & Adjoining Streets, Oguta Road & Adjoining Streets, Awka Road & Adjoining Streets, Woliwo Layout, and Ogba, Odoakpu, and Federal housing. The city of Onitsha was chosen for this study because it is a commercial hub, having a large population and relevant human trafficking activities in the city have been documented.

4.3 Population and Sample Size of the Study

The population of the study was those who lived in Onitsha. The study population was projected to be 3,610,507 by 2015 (NPC, 2006). These people are of different ages, genders, occupations, educational backgrounds and social-economic statuses all living in the 15 residential layouts/estates identified in Onitsha.

The sample size of the study was calculated as from Salant and Dillman (1994) was 384 respondents. This choice was made based on the upsurge of human trafficking in recent times in Onitsha, in particular, and Nigeria in general. With a sample size of 384, it is deemed sufficient to represent a large population and the techniques of inferential statistics are applied.

4.4 Sampling Technique

A multi-stage sampling procedure and purposive technique were used in this study. The sampling was done in four phases:

Stage One: Involved simple random sampling (balloting) of the 15 identified residential layouts/estates in Onitsha, five of which were picked. The five areas chosen were: G.R.A Onitsha, Akpaka GRA, Federal Housing/3-3 Area, Federal site and services.

Stage Two: 10 streets were chosen in each of the 5 areas.

Stage Three: The number of twelve households was selected in each one of the selected residential layouts/estates by simple random sampling technique. 5 areas and 12 households per area equated to 192 households.

Stage Four: Two respondents were selected from each household using availability sampling method. This meant that the required age range was searched out and any person available was chosen. This made the total number of respondents 384.

This multi-stage sampling method ensured that the sample was representative of the wide-ranging population of Onitsha, and also made the sampling practically feasible because of the limitations of time and resources.

4.5 Data Collection Instrument

The main data collection tool in this study was a questionnaire. The survey questionnaire consisted of two parts:

Section "A" focused on personal/demographic variables like age, sex, marital status, level of education, occupation, religion and duration of stay in Onitsha.

Section "B" which centered on the trend, effects and factors affecting human trafficking in Onitsha metropolis. Items in this section covered awareness of human trafficking, how parents and children become aware of human trafficking, type of trafficking prevalent in Onitsha, reasons for parents to engage in trafficking, unacceptable behaviour that follows human trafficking, the perception of who is a victim of trafficking, causes of trafficking, involvement of parents in trafficking, experience of kidnapping and suggestions for reducing trafficking.

The questionnaire comprised both quantitative and qualitative data (closed and open-ended questions). The instrument was pre-tested for clarity, reliability and validity.

4.6 Methods of Data Collection

The researcher with two assistants gave out and collected questionnaires from the respondents. The questionnaires were given directly to the respondents in their homes. Of the 384 questionnaires distributed, 366 were properly filled and returned, 10 were incorrectly filled and 8 were never returned. This equates to a response rate of 95.3%. This high response rate was due to careful follow-up and local assistants who had a knowledge of the study area.

4.7 Methods of Data Analysis

The data obtained through the questionnaire was carefully edited to complete, consistent and accurate data. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for the analysis. Specifically:

Demographic characteristics of the respondents and their answers to the particular issues of the research were described using descriptive statistics like frequencies, percentages and frequency table. This enabled a thorough description of the sample and the patterns of responses.

Chi-square (χ^2) tests were used to test all three hypotheses. To assess the association between categorical variables the chi-square test was applied and to determine if there was a statistically significant relationship between the variables under investigation. A significance level of $p \leq 0.05$ was used to determine statistical significance.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were followed throughout the research process. All respondents gave informed consent to participate in the study, which was explained to them, and they were informed that they can withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained and none of the information was collected that would identify the participants. The study was carried out under ethical standard in research with human subjects.

4.9 Study limitations.

The study faced certain challenges in making the objectives of the study into reality. The study area was large and not all roads were accessible to the researcher and resources were limited. Moreover, there were some respondents who were not willing to be part of the study because of the sensitivity of the study. Overall, the study managed to meet the response rate goal and gathered valuable information to meet the research objectives despite these limitations.

5.0 Results

Results are only presented for 366 questionnaires that were completed correctly out of 384 questionnaires that were distributed, which is a 95.3% return rate. Results are presented under the headings of demographic characteristics, specific research issues and hypothesis testing.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents (N=366).

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	183	50.0
	Female	183	50.0
Marital Status	Single	280	76.5
	Married	74	20.2
	Divorced	12	3.3
Occupation	Trading	171	46.7
	Student	123	33.6
	Civil Servant	48	13.1
	Unemployed/Farming	24	6.6
Religion	Catholic	208	56.8
	Islam	84	23.0
	Anglican	62	16.9
	African Traditional	12	3.3
Education	FSLC	142	38.7
	B.Sc.	97	26.5
	SSCE	75	20.4
	M.Sc. /PhD	38	10.4
	No formal	12	3.3
Residence	1-10 years	133	36.3
	11-20 years	123	33.6
	20+ years	110	30.1

Equal gender distribution (50.0% each), predominance of singles (76.5%), traders (46.7%) and students (33.6%), Catholics (56.8%) and respondents with at least primary education (96.7%) are indicated in Table 1. Most had resided in Onitsha for 1-20 years (69.9%).

Table 2: Awareness and perceptions about trafficking

Issue	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Awareness	Yes	366	100.0
Source	Radio/TV	304	83.1
	Schools/Churches	38	10.4
	Neighbours	24	6.6
Local incidence awareness	Yes	157	42.9
	No	48	13.1
	Don't know	161	44.0
Reason for awareness	Witnessed event	84	23.0
	Everybody talks	49	13.4
	Media/Crowded	24	6.6

100.0% of all respondents knew about trafficking, mostly through radio/TV. 44.0% were not aware of any incidences of trafficking in the locality, whereas 23.0% had personally seen incidences of trafficking.

Table 3. The types and causes of trafficking

Issue	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Types	Child trafficking	145	39.6
	Prostitution trafficking	134	36.6
	Ritual killing trafficking	87	23.8
Reasons parents engage	Poverty	182	49.7
	Don't know	63	17.2
	Money	61	16.7
	Greed	60	16.4
Major causes	Greed	181	49.5
	Get-rich-quick	74	20.2
	Political instability	73	19.9
	Moral decadence	38	10.4

Child trafficking (39.6%) was the most common, followed by prostitution (36.6%) and ritual killing (23.8%). When asked what they thought was the main reason why parents engage in trafficking, poverty was mentioned at a higher level of 49.7% and greed mentioned at a higher level of 49.5% as the overall reason for parents to engage in trafficking.

Table 4: Consequences and vulnerability factors

Issue	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Unacceptable behaviours	Ritual killing	111	30.3
	Drug misuse	73	19.9
	Gang fights	73	19.9
	Alcohol misuse	36	9.8
	Prostitution	36	9.8
	Stealing	24	6.6
	Rape	13	3.6
Poor vulnerable?	Yes	316	86.3
	Don't know	38	10.4
	No	12	3.3
Parents involved?	Yes	291	79.5
	No	75	20.5
Victims of kidnapping	Yes	36	9.8
	No	330	90.2

The most significant unacceptable behaviour was ritual killing (30.3%). The majority of the respondents (86.3%) agreed that poor people are more vulnerable, and 79.5% were convinced that parents are involved in trafficking. 9.8% reported being personally or family victimised.

Table 5: Drivers and solutions.

Issue	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Desire for wealth drives trafficking?	Yes	353	96.4
	No	13	3.6
Recognition of rich drives trafficking?	Yes	329	89.9
	No	37	10.1
Political ambition drives trafficking?	Yes	317	86.6
	No	49	13.4
Suggested solutions	Counselling	111	30.3
	All of above	109	29.8
	Expulsion	97	26.5
	Imprisonment	37	10.1
	Huge fines	12	3.3

Almost all respondents concurred that desire for wealth (96.4%), recognition of the rich (89.9%) and political ambition (86.6%) are motives of trafficking. Counselling was the preferred solution (30.3%) as was combined approaches (29.8%).

Test of Hypotheses

Table 6: Chi-square tests

Hypothesis	X ²	df	p-value	Decision
H ₁ : Desire to make money perceived as major reason	3.737	1	.035	Accepted
H ₂ : Poor people more likely victims than rich	8.769	1	.002	Accepted
H ₃ : Non-parents more likely to engage	27.858	1	.000	Accepted

Hypothesis 1: Among 157 respondents who felt there was a relationship between desires and trafficking, 84.7% attributed the main driver of trafficking to desire to make money while 15.2% attributed the other desires. $X^2 = 3.737$, $df = 1$, $p = .035 \leq .05$. H₁ accepted.

Hypothesis 2: When asked about who was more likely to be a victim, 87.9% of 157 respondents who felt a relationship between economic status and victimisation indicated that the poor were more likely to be the victims than the rich. $X^2 = 8.769$, $df = 1$, $p = .002 \leq .05$. H₂ accepted.

Hypothesis 3: Of the 157 respondents who perceived a correlation between parenthood and trafficking, 92.4% indicated that non-parents were more likely to engage in trafficking than 7.6% who indicated that parents were more likely to engage in trafficking. $X^2 = 27.858$, $df = 1$, $p = .000 \leq .05$. H₃ accepted.

6.0 Discussion

Onitsha's demographic profile, which is balanced by sex, majority single (76.5%), mainly traders (46.7%) and students (33.6%), higher education level, mostly Catholic (56.8%) shows its social composition as a commercial centre. The youthful profile is also a factor relating to trafficking vulnerability, since younger and unmarried persons are more likely to be recruited. Commercial and educational institutions are suggested as intervention sites because of the high number of traders and students. The current levels of awareness regarding trafficking, 100.0%, differ from Ndiora's (n.d.) earlier report where majority of the people in Onitsha were not aware of the trafficking of females suggesting that there has been a rise in awareness over time. The awareness source that is more dominant is mass media (83.1%) which indicates that community-based channels are under-utilized. As the socioecological model suggests, multi-level intervention is needed to achieve effective prevention; using mass media alone will not be enough to shift entrenched views where trafficking is normal. The split awareness of the situation (44.0% unaware, 42.9% aware) may be because of the covert nature of trafficking, the normalisation of exploitation in the community, or because of the reluctance to recognise trafficking. The concern is that direct witnessing is at 23.0% which indicates that trafficking is not only prevalent, but visible in Onitsha.

The most dominant ones were child trafficking (39.6%) followed by young girls for prostitution (36.6%) which aligned with literature. According to ILO/IPEC (2000) 40% of street children in Nigeria

are victims of trafficking. Gushulak and Macpherson (2001) reported 80% of foreign prostitutes in Italy were Nigerian women (Agbu, 2003). The finding of 23.8% of those respondents who said they had seen trafficking for ritual killing is alarming and should indicate a high level of exploitation. The coexistence of multiple forms of trafficking with the lack of interventional capacity in Onitsha is in line with Omoigberale and Anyanwu (2025) observation of the cultivation of trafficking in relational ecologies where exploitation is normalised.

This finding of 49.7% by parents as primary reason for them to be involved in trafficking is in line with literature. Duru and Ogbonnaya (2012) reiterated that resource inequities condition people to be trafficking victims. NAPTIP highlights poverty in terms of lack of economic opportunities, poor education access and ignorance as causative factors (New Telegraph 2026). Uche (2013) posited parents, for economic reasons or lack of love, give out children for trafficking. But greed (49.5%) and “get rich quick mentality” (20.2%) as significant causes adds another layer of complexity, as well as poverty. The socioecological model is the explanation here: poverty exists as a structural condition in society, and greed exists as a psychological motivator among individuals as a result of social norms that value wealth. Johnson (2004) and UN (2006) noted that the rich “big men” exhibited their wealth in a lavish manner which creates aspirations in the minds of the young and makes them vulnerable. Poor people are more vulnerable (86.3%) and desire for wealth is a motivating factor for involvement (96.4%) also point to the near consensus on the poverty-trafficking nexus. The acceptance of Hypothesis 2 ($p = .002$) gives some statistical support that economic status is indeed significantly associated with trafficking vulnerability which corroborates Okafor (2026).

79.5% think parents are involved in trafficking is concerning which reflects that protective family structures are broken down. The intimate/family level is a key determinant in the socioecological model: where families are actively involved in trafficking, protective functions are undermined. This breakdown is reflected in Uche's (2013) observation that “parents cease to care for the teenagers”. The acceptance of Hypothesis 3 ($p = .000$) – non-parents more likely to be involved may be due to the lack of parental responsibilities as a protective factor. Parents may be less inclined to engage in protective parenting because of “dependents to protect. However, it is important to note that the finding of greater likelihood among non-parents to be perpetrators as opposed to victims should be interpreted with caution and warrants further research.

The level of unstable political situations as a trafficking cause is 19.9%, which is indicative of broader political and institutional factors. Agwu (2025) explored the impact of corruption in anti-trafficking agencies on prevention and protection. The high level of corruption in the State forms an atmosphere that is conducive to traffickers as is theorised by Omoigberale and Anyanwu (2025) as a “high-profit-low-risk” environment. The dual nature of governance in Nigeria (formal and traditional institutions holding competing normative power) creates opportunities for trafficking networks to exploit. Without a strong state anti-trafficking, trafficking networks are able to operate with impunity. Cultural valorisation of wealth and status as a driver is reflected in the fact that 89.9% agreed recognition given to rich drives trafficking, and 86.6% agreed desire for political positions drives engagement. Trafficking is not just economic, it is social and cultural and is part of the aspirations and values of Nigerians.

The most prominent unacceptable behaviour that is of concern is human ritual killing (30.3%). The prevalence of misuse of drugs (19.9%) and gang fights (19.9%) indicate that trafficking is linked to other social issues such as drug abuse and violence, thus requiring a more holistic approach. The low rate for the identification of rape may be due to underreporting or normalisation of sexual violence.

The socioecological model offers an understanding of multi-level factors from the individual's desire for wealth, through to the interpersonal level of family poverty and parental involvement, the community level of normalisation of exploitation and visible wealth, and the societal level of structural poverty, corruption, institutional failure and political instability. The majority of respondents (30.3%) indicated that counselling and ‘all of the above’ were the main solutions that they wanted to see as primary solutions, demonstrating a rehabilitative approach in keeping with the values of social work. A social worker speaks on behalf of the individual who cannot speak for him/herself (NASW, 2008). To be effective, interventions should include intervention strategies at all levels of ecology: individual

education and economic opportunities, strengthen interpersonal protective factors, change community norms, and address structural inequalities and institutional weaknesses.

This study is relevant to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) as it gives evidence that anti-trafficking interventions need to go beyond addressing poverty to addressing socioecological drivers. Individual greed, family poverty, community normalisation of exploitation and structural economic inequality are all contributing to trafficking. To combat trafficking, effective, accountable and inclusive institutions must be developed for trafficking prosecutions, victim protection, and addressing structural conditions. The study points to the fact that corruption is an enabler for trafficking, and thus institutional integrity and accountability become key issues.

Policy Implications

Policy interventions need to take into account issues at all socioecological levels. Policies should be implemented at the individual level and should emphasize education and economic empowerment, especially for youth. Trafficking alternatives are vocational training, entrepreneurship support and financial literacy. Mass media as primary awareness source (83.1%) points to the possibility of community-based campaigns involving trusted local leaders as complementing media campaigns. At the interpersonal level, policies should further reinforce family protection mechanisms by providing parental education programmes, family support services and child protection mechanisms within the community. 79.5% feel that parents are involved in trafficking, and interventions must take into account the underlying factors of the vulnerability of parents - poverty, unemployment and lack of support. Economic pressures can be relieved through the implementation of social welfare programmes, such as cash-transfer programmes.

Results of the corruption and institutional failure research reveal the need for the strengthening of anti-trafficking institutions. NAPTIP needs adequate resources, training and political support for them to conduct inquiries, pursue the prosecution of the perpetrators and the protection of the victims. Enforcement of the anti-corruption rules and the accountability framework should be tightened up. Hypothesis 1 acceptance ($p = .035$) implies that the motivation for money is a motivator for involvement and has implications for law enforcement integrity. When asked about the causes of trafficking, unstable political situations were identified as an important factor, accounting for 19.9% of the respondents, indicating that political stability and good governance are crucial for prevention. Policy measures that foster political stability, counter corruption and enhance the rule of law can make trafficking less desirable.

Policy interventions should be community based involving the involvement of community leaders, traditional institutions and religious organisations. Community dialogues, public forums and awareness raising can disrupt culturally entrenched norms that facilitate trafficking. Religious institutions (Catholics (56.8%) and Muslims (23.0%) in the sample) may have an active role to play in awareness campaigns. There is a need for structural interventions that will address poverty and inequality. Economic policies need to be inclusive which in turn discourage inequality and generate employment, especially for young people and women. Vulnerability can be mitigated through investments in education, health care and social protection. Policies should focus on cultural/social drivers, with the main drivers identified being greed (49.5%) and get-rich quick mentality (20.2%), which can be tackled through programmes that focus on alternative values and offer role models. Preference for counselling (30.3%) and 'all of the above' (29.8%) indicates the need for multi-sectoral support for victims: psychological counselling, medical care, legal, and economic empowerment. Stigma and marginalisation need to be tackled in reintegration programmes. Social workers play a very important role in the provision of services and in the advocacy for the rights of the victims.

Policy implications relate to SDG 16: effective, accountable and inclusive institutions (Target 16.6), rule of law and equal access to justice (Target 16.3) and reducing illicit financial flows (Target 16.4). Policies can help to promote peace, justice and inclusive development by taking into account socioecological drivers of trafficking.

7.0 Conclusion

A socioecological framework approach was used to consider factors that reinforce human trafficking among the residents of Onitsha, Anambra state, Nigeria. Results indicate that trafficking is supported by multifaceted interactions across various levels, including individual aspiration for wealth,

“get-rich-quick” mentality, interpersonal family poverty, and the normalisation of exploitation and conspicuous wealth in the community, as well as structural poverty, corruption, institutional failure, and political instability at the societal level. All three hypotheses were supported. The desire to make money was seen as the most important motive for being involved in trafficking (H1: $p = .035$). It was felt that poor people were more likely to be victims than rich people (H2, $p = .002$). Non-parents were seen as more likely to become involved than parents (H3, $p = .000$). The results here give empirical evidence for relationships between economic status, individual aspirations and involvement in trafficking.

The study has important policy and practice implications. Anti-trafficking interventions must take place at all socioecological levels: individual education and economic empowerment; community awareness campaigns; institutional strengthening; and structural interventions on issues of poverty and inequality. Social workers have important roles in direct service provision, in advocating for policy change and in community prevention efforts against trafficking. The study makes a significant contribution to the literature by having empirical evidence from an important yet little researched centre of trafficking activities in Onitsha. The study uses a socioecological model, which transcends the poverty-laden explanatory models. The findings also help to achieve SDG 16 which provides evidence to develop effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions to prevent trafficking.

The limitations are: limitations of the cross sectional design; limitations of self-reported data that are prone to social desirability bias; and the limitations of focusing on Onitsha limiting generalisability. Longitudinal designs are recommended to be used as well as qualitative methods and studies into other Nigerian contexts of trafficking should be conducted. It is important to note that this study, although limited, has important lessons for factors that make trafficking possible in Onitsha, and has a framework to help understand and deal with trafficking that is based on Nigerian realities. This will help to build a future where trafficking is not an attractive prospect for economic advancement or survival for victims, communities and policy makers.

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