



IMPACT OF HERDSMEN INSURGENCY ON THE PSYCHO-ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN BENUE NORTH-EAST SENATORIAL DISTRICT, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of herdsmen insurgency on the psycho-academic adjustment of secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria. Guided by two research questions and two hypotheses tested at the 0.05 significance level, the investigation employed an ex-post-facto design. The population comprised 54,209 students enrolled in 112 public and grant-aided secondary schools, from which a multistage sampling procedure produced a sample of 1,370 students drawn from the four most affected Local Government Areas; Kwande, Katsina-Ala, Logo, and Ukum. Data were collected using a researcher-developed instrument, the Herdsmen Insurgency and Students' Psycho-Academic Adjustment Questionnaire (HISPAAQ), a ten-item Likert-type scale. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) addressed the research questions, while Chi-square (χ^2) goodness-of-fit tests evaluated the hypotheses, using 2.50 as the criterion mean. Findings revealed that herdsmen insurgency significantly contributes to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and adversely affects school enrolment among students. The study recommends the deployment of professional trauma counsellors to secondary schools in the district to provide individual and group therapy aimed at fostering resilience and effective coping strategies.

Keywords: *Herdsmen Insurgency, Psycho-Academic Adjustment, PTSD, Enrolment, Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.*

Introduction

In many parts of Benue North-East Senatorial District, the sound of gunshots has replaced the usual morning chants of school assemblies. Several schools now stand deserted or partially occupied, with students learning under heavy psychological strain. In communities like Katsina-Ala, Ukum, and Logo, secondary school students wake up uncertain of their safety, their minds torn between escaping violence and sitting through mathematics lessons. The fear of sudden attacks by herdsmen, the loss of family members, displacement from ancestral homes, and exposure to gruesome scenes of conflict have left emotional scars that quietly follow these students into the classroom. Teachers report rising cases of withdrawal, aggression, restlessness, and declining academic performance among learners. Some students, though physically present, appear emotionally absent; unable to concentrate, reluctant to participate, and increasingly detached from academic goals. Many have lost the psychological footing required to thrive in school, while others have dropped out entirely due to trauma, poverty, or forced relocation. The schooling experience for these children is no longer normal; it is a struggle for mental stability and academic survival in a hostile environment. This schooling experience directly affects what scholars (Adebayo, Oladipo, & Ogundele, 2019) refer to as psycho-academic adjustment, which is the capacity of students to balance their psychological well-being with academic demands, especially under stressful or threatening conditions.

At the heart of these challenges bedevilling secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District is the persistent herdsmen insurgency that has plagued not just the area but Benue State for over a decade. Marked by violent clashes, village raids, killings, and mass displacement, this insurgency has not only devastated livelihoods but also turned schools into battlegrounds of fear and instability. As families flee or struggle to rebuild, students are left caught in the crossfire (mentally, emotionally, and academically).

In Benue State, herdsmen insurgency has intensified over the years, with devastating impacts on local communities. Benue State, known as the “Food Basket of the Nation,” is

primarily agrarian, and the recurrent clashes have led to widespread displacement, loss of property, and disruption of livelihoods (Okeke and Amadi, 2018). To address the insurgency, the Benue State government came up with the “Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law” in 2017. The implementation of this law resulted in mass exodus of herders from Benue State to neighbouring States from where they now launch attacks on the people of Benue State. Barely two months after the law had been implemented, a group of nomadic cattle herders suspected to be Fulani attacked some farming communities in Guma and Logo LGAs of Benue State killing 73 crop farmers including women and children (Amnesty International, 2018) to show their disapproval of the law (Yusufu, Aliyu & Ogaji, 2022).

The West African sub-region in general and Nigeria in particular started experiencing an escalation in resource conflicts between nomadic cattle herders and sedentary crop farmers beginning from mid-2015 (Yusufu, Aliyu & Ogaji, 2022). This conflict has since then become a common feature of States in North-Central Nigeria, especially Benue State. The conflict between the two ethnic groups has led to the death of hundreds of thousands of human beings and property worth millions of Naira have been destroyed, especially with the introduction of sophisticated weapons of warfare such as AK-47 guns among other assault weapons. In Benue State, no fewer than sixteen Local Government Areas (LGAs) have been affected by the menace of farmer-herder conflict with devastating consequences in the last decade. These include Katsina-Ala, Ukum, Logo, Kwande, Makurdi, Tarka, Buruku, Guma, Gwer West, Gwer East, Ado, Ogbadibo, Okpokwu, Agatu, Ohimini and Oju (Amnesty International, 2018).

The conflicts between these two groups meet all the criteria for classification of a traumatic event. A traumatic event is one that threatens, injures, causes death, or the physical integrity of self or others and also causes horror, terror, or helplessness at the time it occurs (American Psychological Association, 2008).

The herdsmen-farmers’ conflicts have caused serious psychological damage to the actors (herdsmen and farmers), and the effects have been evident in the maladaptive behaviours exhibited

by them (Hanior, Tor-Anyiin & Hough, 2022). The farmers and herdsmen conflict has resulted in many deaths across the nation. With the increasing activities of farmers and herdsmen in contemporary times, violent conflict has become a pervasive phenomenon in Nigeria. Different communities across the nation are brutally attacked and their sources of livelihood mindlessly destroyed. Properties worth billions of Naira, including places of worship, schools, hospitals and business enterprises are torched and turned to ashes (Tyavwase, 2020).

For adolescents in these areas, the constant threat of violence creates an environment of fear and uncertainty, affecting their psychological and educational development. The herdsmen insurgency in Benue North-East Senatorial District has had a particularly adverse impact on school-aged children, as families often prioritize safety over education. Schools in conflict-prone zones have been attacked, and students have witnessed traumatic events such as killings and arson, which further aggravate the educational crisis in the area. According to Justino (2016), herdsmen insurgency has the capacity to impact the psycho-academic adjustment of secondary school students in several ways. The author maintained that the effects are often multifaceted, encompassing psychological well-being, educational experiences, and overall academic performance. Students in regions affected by herdsmen insurgency have witnessed or experienced violence, leading to psychological distress. Moreso, Hanior, Tor-Anyiin and Adeyelu (2022) posited that exposure to traumatic events can result in anxiety and symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) such as intrusive memories, emotional numbness, heightened arousal and avoidance behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) affecting students' mental well-being. Furthermore, the links between conflict and students' academic achievement are numerous and complex, resulting from constraints in the supply of and/or demand of education. They include resource reductions, recruitment into armed groups, safety threats in and on the way to school, and the consequences of poverty and food insecurity (Justino, 2016). The increased rate of poverty, high rate of absence from schools, anxiety, depression and the increasing aggression

among students could be attributed to this herdsmen insurgency in the area due to the negative effect conflict could cause on people's emotional life (Abeshi & Haruna, 2022).

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that situations of insurgency, such as the one perpetrated by herdsmen in Benue North-East Senatorial District can cause serious psychological and academic consequences to victims which result in psycho-academic maladjustment. It is often measured through a combination of psychological and academic indicators that reflect how well students are coping in their learning environments. Key psychological indices include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression, which are common mental health outcomes in conflict-affected populations. On the academic side, indicators such as school enrolment, school attendance, and class participation are critical in assessing students' adjustment, as they reflect the willingness and capacity of learners to remain engaged with education despite external stressors. According to Adebayo, Oladipo, and Ogundele (2019), these combined indices provide a comprehensive picture of students' psycho-academic well-being, especially in high-risk contexts where exposure to violence and trauma directly impacts learning. When these indicators begin to decline, they often signal deeper psychological distress and maladjustment that require urgent attention.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a debilitating condition that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a life-threatening event, such as a natural disaster, serious accident, terrorist incident, sudden death of a loved one; or rape or other violent personal assault, (The Anxiety and Depression Association of America [ADAA], 2016). The death or injury of family members, friends, or community members during herdsmen insurgency can be a deeply traumatic experience for students. Grief and the emotional impact of loss are significant contributors to PTSD. Being forcibly displaced from one's home due to insurgency can be a traumatic experience. Loss of a familiar environment, community, and support networks can contribute to the development of PTSD in students. Living in an environment marked by insecurity and uncertainty about the future can be

psychologically distressing. The chronic stress associated with the unpredictability of herdsmen insurgence can contribute to the development and persistence of PTSD symptoms. In Benue North-East Senatorial District, students who have witnessed or experienced violence during herdsmen attacks may exhibit symptoms of PTSD, which impair their ability to focus on academics. Ede, Onwuzuruike, and Ugochukwu (2020) found that students in conflict zones are more likely to experience emotional detachment and difficulties in forming interpersonal relationships, further isolating them within the school environment. PTSD not only affects mental health but also disrupts the academic trajectory of affected students. In Benue State, students with PTSD are more likely to avoid social interactions and classroom participation, reducing their academic engagement and overall performance (Nwankwo and Opara, 2022).

School enrolment refers to the process of registering or admitting children into formal educational institutions, such as primary, secondary, or tertiary schools, for the purpose of acquiring knowledge and skills. It is a critical measure of educational access and reflects the number of students officially recorded as attending school within a given population. School enrolment serves as a key indicator of a country's commitment to achieving universal education, as outlined in global initiatives like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2015). Enrolment figures are often influenced by socio-economic factors, cultural norms, government policies, and environmental conditions. High enrolment rates suggest widespread access to education, whereas low rates may indicate barriers such as poverty, conflict, displacement, or cultural attitudes towards education. In regions experiencing insurgency, like Benue North-East Senatorial District in Nigeria, school enrolment is significantly impacted by violence and insecurity, with many children unable to attend school due to fear of attacks or displacement from their communities (Obasi and Akwuobi, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

In June 2024, a Mission secondary school in Makurdi was attacked and displaced by armed men. In an effort to ensure the students were

properly adjusted in the school, group and individual counselling sessions were organized by the school authority with the help of professional counsellors from Benue State University, Makurdi. This scenario underscores the seriousness of violence on the psychological and academic adjustment of students. It further paints how far the consequences of violence can be on survivors of violence. In other Local Government Areas of Benue State such as Logo, Ukum and Agatu, schools have been converted to IDP camps to house those displaced. This is at the detriment of educational development of such areas and the students. With IDPs scattered in schools converted to camps, it evident that academic activities will be halted. Most often, schools are burnt down to ashes in the rural areas by herdsmen insurgents. This makes it hard for learners to continue with their learning activities for a long time as they relocate to safer places with their families. Failure to provide effective psychological support to students exposed to the insurgency endangers their mental health and reduces the opportunities these children have for educational attainment. Furthermore, it has been established that exposure to traumatic events such as herdsmen insurgency might have psychological impact on victims (Hanior *et al.*, 2022). Exposure to violence, displacement, and the overall instability associated with violent conflicts may lead to trauma and chronic stress. Students may experience symptoms of psychological maladjustment such as anxiety, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts, impacting their ability to cope with daily life. It is against this backdrop that the current study aims to investigate the impact of herdsmen insurgency on the psycho-academic adjustment of secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The study sought to:

- i. determine the impact of herdsmen insurgency on development of PTSD among secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.
- ii. investigate the impact of herdsmen insurgency on school enrolment of secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. What is the impact of herdsmen insurgency on development of PTSD among secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria?
2. What is the impact of herdsmen insurgency on school enrolment of secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

1. Herdsmen insurgency has no significant impact on development of PTSD among secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.
2. Herdsmen insurgency has no significant impact on school enrolment of secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

Research Methodology

The ex-post-facto research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study comprised 54, 209 public secondary school

students in 112 Government owned and grant-aided secondary schools in Benue North East Senatorial District. The sample size of the study was 1,370 students selected from the four (4) most affected Local Government Areas (Kwande, Katsina-Ala, Logo and Ukum) in Benue North East Senatorial District. The multistage sampling procedure was used to select the respondents. The instrument for data collection was researcher-developed questionnaire titled "Herdsmen Insurgency and Students' Psycho-Academic Adjustment Questionnaire (HISPAAQ)." The questionnaire was made up of 10 items and followed the Likert modified four-point scale in which respondents indicated their levels of agreement or disagreement with the statements made by ticking any of the four options of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The options had numerical values of 4, 3, 2 and 1 points respectively. The data were analyzed based on the research questions using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation and the hypotheses were tested using the Chi-square (χ^2) goodness of fit test at .05 level of significance, with 2.50 serving as the criterion mean for decision making on the items to be responded to and below 2.50 was considered negative and disagree.

Results and Findings

Research Question 1

What is the impact of herdsmen insurgency on development of PTSD among secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria?

Table 1: Analysis of Impact of Herdsmen Insurgency on Development of PTSD among Secondary School Students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

S/N	Item description	SA	A	D	SD	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1	I often feel a sense of intense distress when reminded of the traumatic event.	679	361	197	73	3.26	.909	Accepted
2	I have noticed changes in my mood since the conflicts (e.g., persistent negative emotions, distorted blame, feelings of detachment).	644	404	207	55	3.25	.869	Accepted
3	I experience persistent negative thoughts and feelings about myself or the world since the conflict.	638	403	203	66	3.23	.889	Accepted

4	Over the past month, I have experienced intrusive memories related to the conflict.	629	442	174	65	3.25	.886	Accepted
5	I find it difficult to concentrate or sleep due to heightened alertness and being easily startled.	627	402	195	86	3.20	.923	Accepted
Cluster Mean and Standard Deviation = 3.23 SD= .895								Accepted

Table 1 indicates that the mean ratings of respondents' responses for items 1 to 5 are 3.26, 3.25, 3.23, 3.25, and 3.20 with corresponding standard deviations of .909, .869, .889, .886, and .923 respectively. Respondents rated all items above the 2.50 cut-off point. The cluster mean of 3.238 with the cluster standard deviation of .8952 is above the cut-off point of 2.50 which indicates that herdsmen insurgency has impact on the development of PTSD among secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

Research Question 2

What is the impact of herdsmen insurgency on school enrolment of secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria?

Table 2: Analysis of Impact of Herdsmen Insurgency on School Enrolment of Secondary School Students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

S/N	Item description	SA	A	D	SD	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
6	The conflicts obstructed the promotion of some students to higher classes.	629	425	197	59	3.24	.868	Accepted
7	Violence obstructed the academic calendar making every activity come to a halt	665	395	198	52	3.28	.861	Accepted
8	Some of the students repeated classes due to the herdsmen-farmers' conflicts.	670	380	189	71	3.25	.898	Accepted
9	External examinations are not conducted in the area because of the herdsmen-farmers' conflicts.	649	407	189	65	3.25	.881	Accepted
10	Some students dropped out of schools due to the herdsmen-farmers' conflicts.	648	400	204	58	3.25	.875	Accepted
Cluster Mean and Standard Deviation \bar{X} = 3.25 SD= .876								Accepted

Table 2 indicates that the mean ratings of respondents' responses for items 16 to 20 are 3.24, 3.28, 3.25, 3.25, and 3.25 with corresponding standard deviations of .868, .861, .898, .881, and .875 respectively. Respondents rated all items above the 2.50 cut-off point. The cluster mean of 3.25 with the cluster standard deviation of .876 is above the cut-off point of 2.50 which indicates that herdsmen insurgency has impact on the school enrolment of secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

Hypothesis 1

Herdsmen insurgency has no significant impact on development of PTSD among secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

Table 3: Chi-square Test of Impact of Herdsmen Insurgency on Development of PTSD among Secondary School Students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

Response	O	E	df.	Level of sign.	X ² cal	P-value	Decision
			3	.05	630.458	.000	Sig.
SA	679	327.5					
A	361	327.5					
D	197	327.5					
SD	73	327.5					
Total	1310						

Table 3 revealed that $\chi^2 = 630.458$, $df=3$ and $p = 0.00$. Since the p-value of 0.00 is less than the set alpha-value of 0.05 ($p < 0.05$) at 3 degree of freedom, the null hypothesis which states that herdsmen insurgency has no significant impact on development of PTSD among secondary school

students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria is therefore, rejected. This implies that herdsmen insurgency has significant impact on development of PTSD among secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2

Herdsmen insurgency has no significant impact on school enrolment of secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

Table 4: Chi-square Test of Impact of Herdsmen Insurgency on School Enrolment of Secondary School Students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

Response	O	E	df.	Level of sign.	X ² cal	P-value	Decision
			3	.05	578.721	.000	Sig.
SA	629	327.5					
A	425	327.5					
D	197	327.5					
SD	59	327.5					
Total	1310						

Table 4 revealed that $\chi^2 = 578.721$, $df=3$ and $p = 0.00$. Since the p-value of 0.00 is less than the set alpha-value of 0.05 ($p < 0.05$) at 3 degree of freedom, the null hypothesis which states that

herdsmen insurgency has no significant impact on school enrolment of secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria is therefore, rejected. This implies that herdsmen

insurgency has significant impact on school enrolment of secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion of the findings of this research was organized around the research questions and hypotheses. The two null hypotheses that were postulated and tested were all rejected.

The first finding revealed that herdsmen insurgency has significant impact on the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District. PTSD is a severe mental health condition that occurs as a result of exposure to traumatic events, and in the context of insurgency, this includes witnessing or experiencing violence, displacement, and the loss of loved ones. This aligns with findings by Hanior, Tor-Anyiin, and Adeyelu (2022), who reported that exposure to herdsmen-farmers' conflicts significantly increased PTSD symptoms among adolescents in IDP camps in Makurdi. Victims displayed signs of hypervigilance, emotional numbness, flashbacks, and sleep disturbances — symptoms consistent with trauma responses in conflict-affected populations. Similarly, Davou *et al.* (2018) found that over 50% of individuals exposed to violent ethno-religious conflict in Barkin Ladi, North-Central Nigeria, suffered from PTSD, confirming the far-reaching mental health consequences of violent insurgencies. These studies highlight how traumatic experiences such as witnessing attacks, losing loved ones, and displacement can severely impair students' psychological adjustment, making it difficult for them to focus or participate meaningfully in academic activities. The findings affirm that the psychological impact of insurgency is not confined to immediate physical injuries, but extends to long-term cognitive and emotional disruptions in young learners.

The second finding revealed that herdsmen insurgency had significant impact on school enrolment of secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District. This finding aligns with the study by Okwori and Angernyi (2019), who reported that farmers-pastoralists conflicts in Benue State significantly reduced student enrolment in primary schools due to heightened insecurity and destruction of school

infrastructure. Similarly, Ibrahim and Adebayo (2021) confirmed that herdsmen-farmers conflicts had a serious impact on enrolment figures in secondary schools across Benue State, as persistent attacks discouraged parents from enrolling their children. The fear of violence, loss of property, and the destruction of schools have made the idea of education seem secondary to survival for many families in conflict zones. Additionally, Mohammed, Ibrahim, and Suleiman (2017), in their study on Boko Haram insurgency in Adamawa, found that increased conflict intensity led to sharp declines in school enrolment, affecting human capital development across the region. These findings emphasize that violent conflict, regardless of form or location, poses a severe threat to students' educational access, especially in vulnerable and rural areas where protective structures are lacking.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It was concluded that herdsmen insurgency has significant impact on psycho-academic adjustment of secondary school students in Benue North-East Senatorial District, Nigeria. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. To address the experience of PTSD among secondary school students, it is recommended that trauma-informed counselling units be established within schools, staffed by trained psychologists who can offer specialized therapy such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) for students affected by insurgency-related trauma.
2. To improve school enrolment in insurgency-affected areas, a community-based re-enrolment campaign should be launched by elected political leaders like local government chairmen, House of Representatives members and senators, offering financial incentives such as free tuition, uniforms, and school supplies to encourage displaced and economically vulnerable children to return to school.

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