

## A Systematic Review of Socioeconomic Drivers of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria

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### Abstract

International organizations have recently reported that Nigeria has a growing army of out-of-school children (OOSC). Efforts by successive Nigerian governments to address the country's rising OOSC profile have yielded few results. Several demographics, socioeconomic, geographical and other factors have been noted to fuel the prevalence of OOSC in Nigeria. However, no evidence of the link between socioeconomic factors and OOSC in Nigeria has been established. This paper adapted the PRISMA guideline to report a systematic review of the socioeconomic drivers of OOSC in Nigeria. Regrettably, the search yielded no paper to be included in the analysis after critical assessment by two independent assessors. The search was done in Scopus. The review has identified several potential research opportunities. Other implications for research and practice were discussed. Major policy prescriptions were made and some directions on urgent call for action were pointed.

**Keywords:** Call for action; Education; Education Poverty; Review; Socioeconomic.

### Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (Naami and Mort, 2023). This includes making primary education the foremost and basic right for all children (Jegathesan et al., 2023), particularly children with developmental or physical disabilities (Olusanya et al., 2023). Despite this, many children lack access to basic education, which negatively influences their social, cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial development (Brou et al., 2023) and, as a result, out-of-school children (OSSC) are a direct manifestation of a lack of basic education (Ogwumike et al., 2024). The consequences of OOSC are far-reaching. It perpetuates poverty cycles, limits economic opportunities, and hinders social development (Ayoade and Farayola, 2022). Additionally, OOSCs are more vulnerable to exploitation, sexual violence, substance abuse, abduction, accidents, and crime (Omokhodion, 2015; Bamgboye et al., 2017; Oyenuga and Farinde, 2023). Globally, 250 million children are out of school, and this is primarily due to gender disparities in access to education and stagnation in global education

advancement (UNESCO, 2023). This number includes children who never started formal schooling and children who started school but later dropped out. The United Nations defines out-of-school children as those who have not yet enrolled in any formal school, excluding pre-primary education.

UNESCO, in their global education monitoring report, raised the alarm that OOSC is increasing gradually in Sub-Saharan Africa. Using the Bayesian hierarchical model, the report submitted that Nigeria is among some sub-Saharan countries that have an increasing trend of OOSC in the three indicators (primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary) (UNESCO, 2022). The number of OOSC has continued to increase in Nigeria despite efforts by the federal and state governments, international and local donor agencies, partners, and non-governmental agencies (NGOs). These efforts include the enactment of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) law in 1999, which mandates the compulsory universal right to primary education. Other efforts, such as the introduction of school feeding, nomadic schools, and Almajiri schools, have yielded little effect. On the other hand, implementation,

structural integration, funding, corruption, and sustainability have been cited as contributors to the failure of government efforts to address the increasing trend of OOSC in Nigeria (Baban'umma, 2018; Ogunode, 2022).

Many studies examine broad determinants (poverty, conflict, infrastructure) without isolating measurable socioeconomic variables such as household income, parental education, or wealth indices (Adeleke and Alabede, 2022; Ogunode and Adanna, 2022; Adeleke, 2024; Oyekan et al., 2023). This limits causal interpretation and weakens their applicability to socioeconomic-focused policy questions. In addition, none of the papers are indexed in Scopus. Second, different studies use varying definitions and indicators for out-of-school children (never enrolled vs dropouts), making it difficult to harmonize findings or draw unified conclusions. Third, socioeconomic variables are often intertwined with other determinants such as insecurity, gender norms, and policy failures. Many studies do not adequately control for confounders, making it difficult to isolate the independent effect of socioeconomic factors. These aforementioned studies, while informative, cannot be directly applied due to limitations in scope, methodological rigor, contextual generalizability, and the absence of systematic synthesis, thereby necessitating a more structured evidence-based review focusing specifically on socioeconomic determinants.

### Methodology

To conduct this systematic review and achieve the study objectives, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework will be adopted. The PRISMA framework is a standardized guideline that enhances the transparency

and rigor of systematic reviews through a structured process of study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. It is suitable for this study because it enables a systematic and unbiased synthesis of evidence on the socioeconomic drivers of out-of-school children in Nigeria, ensures reproducibility, and clearly highlights existing gaps in the literature, thereby strengthening the validity and policy relevance of the findings. The procedure has been used by several authors, for example (Dreer, 2023; Zara et al., 2023). The PRISMA procedure recommends synthesizing quantitative and qualitative data in reviews. As a result, two phases were completed using this approach. The first step involves identifying documents, and the second is to analyze and synthesize the findings.

### Literature search strategy

A literature search of published articles was conducted to identify relevant pieces of literature on the socioeconomic drivers of OOSC in Nigeria. Concerning the timeframe, the literature search was open-ended. However, the search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published in English and indexed in Scopus. Although limiting the search to Scopus may exclude some relevant studies indexed in other databases, the database's extensive coverage, rigorous indexing standards, and inclusion of high-quality peer-reviewed journals provide a strong basis for ensuring the credibility and reliability of the evidence retrieved. The search included using a combination of keywords related to OOSC, socioeconomic factors, educational exclusion, etc., with Boolean operators (AND, OR) used to refine the search and ensure inclusiveness. The following search strings were used, as documented in **Table 1**. The search was done between February 2 and March 5, 2024.

**Table 1.** The Search Strategy

| S/N | Search Strategy                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Documents |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1   | ((("Out of school" OR "Out-of-school") AND "Nigeria") AND "Socioeconomic")                                                                                                                                                                                                              | 9/41      |
| 1   | "Out-of-school children" AND "Socioeconomic factors" AND "Nigeria"                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | 0         |
| 2   | "Out-of-school children" OR "Non-enrolled children" OR "School dropouts" OR "Educational exclusion" AND "Economic status" OR "Family income" OR "Poverty levels" OR "Socioeconomic disparities" OR "Socioeconomic determinants" AND "Nigeria"                                           | 4/4       |
| 3   | "Out-of-school children" OR "Non-enrolled children" OR "School dropouts" OR "Educational exclusion" AND "Parental education" OR "Parental literacy" OR "Parental occupation" OR "Parental involvement" OR "Parental awareness" AND "Nigeria"                                            | 0         |
| 4   | "Out-of-school children" OR "Non-enrolled children" OR "School dropouts" OR "Educational exclusion" AND "Gender disparities" OR "Gender bias in education" OR "Gender-based educational barriers" OR "Girls' education challenges" AND "Nigeria"                                        | 2/2       |
| 5   | "Out-of-school children" OR "Non-enrolled children" OR "School dropouts" OR "Educational exclusion" AND "Cultural barriers to education" OR "Traditional beliefs and education" OR "Cultural norms affecting schooling" AND "Nigeria"                                                   | 0         |
| 6   | "Out-of-school children" OR "Non-enrolled children" OR "School dropouts" OR "Educational exclusion" AND "Cultural barriers to education" OR "Traditional beliefs and education" OR "Cultural norms affecting schooling" AND "Nigeria"                                                   | 0         |
| 7   | "Out-of-school children" OR "Non-enrolled children" OR "School dropouts" OR "Educational exclusion" AND "Ethnicity and education" OR "Tribal differences in education" OR "Ethnic group and school attendance" AND "Nigeria"                                                            | 0         |
| 8   | ((("Out-of-school children" OR "Non-enrolled children" OR "School dropouts" OR "Educational exclusion") AND ("Educational accessibility" OR "School infrastructure" OR "Distance to schools" OR "Availability of educational resources") AND ("Nigeria"))                               | 0         |
| 9   | ("School dropout" OR "Dropout rates" OR "Factors contributing to dropout" OR "School leaving" OR "Early school leaving") AND ("Educational attainment" OR "Educational achievement" OR "Level of education completed" OR "School completion" OR "Educational outcomes") AND ("Nigeria") | 0         |
| 10  | ("Nigeria education policies" OR "National education system" OR "Educational structure in Nigeria") AND ("Out-of-school children" OR "Non-enrolled children" OR "School dropouts" OR "Educational exclusion")                                                                           | 0/1       |
|     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | 9/24      |

### Data collection plan/study selection

The study selection process consisted of two stages: screening titles and abstracts and full-text screening. The titles and abstracts of the retrieved articles were screened to assess their relevance to the research question. The inclusion criteria were based on studies on socioeconomic drivers of out-of-school children in Nigeria, published in Scopus-indexed journals. Hence, studies that were not peer-reviewed, not published in English, or not published in Scopus were excluded. The selected articles (9) underwent full-text screening to determine their eligibility for inclusion in the review. However, after full screening, these studies did not meet the inclusion criteria because they focused more on

other drivers of out-of-school children than on socioeconomic factors.

### Data Quality Assessment

Ensuring the integrity and reliability of the data is paramount to this systematic review. A rigorous data quality assessment was conducted to evaluate the relevance, credibility, and trustworthiness of the selected studies. This assessment encompassed the examination of various aspects, such as the study design, methodology, data collection methods, and sample size. The quality of reporting, the risk of bias, and the representativeness of the study populations were equally assessed. This comprehensive data quality assessment helped in determining the studies that would be finally included in the review.



### **Bias and Limitations**

To minimize bias, all the stages of the review process, including study selection, data extraction, and quality assessment, were conducted using a clear and comprehensive review protocol. However, it is important to acknowledge that this systematic review is subject to potential publication bias, especially given that it focuses only on Scopus-published studies.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This systematic review is based on the analysis of previously Scopus-published studies and does not involve human subjects or personal data. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

### **Result**

#### **Challenge of Obtaining Information**

After a thorough search in Scopus using a combination of keywords, we found only nine studies that discussed the issue of OOSC in Nigeria. However, none of these studies linked out-of-school to socioeconomic factors in Nigeria after critical assessment by two independent assessors. The PRISMA flowchart depicting the adapted search strategy, adapted from Guzman et al. (2021), and the resulting data are presented in Figure 1.

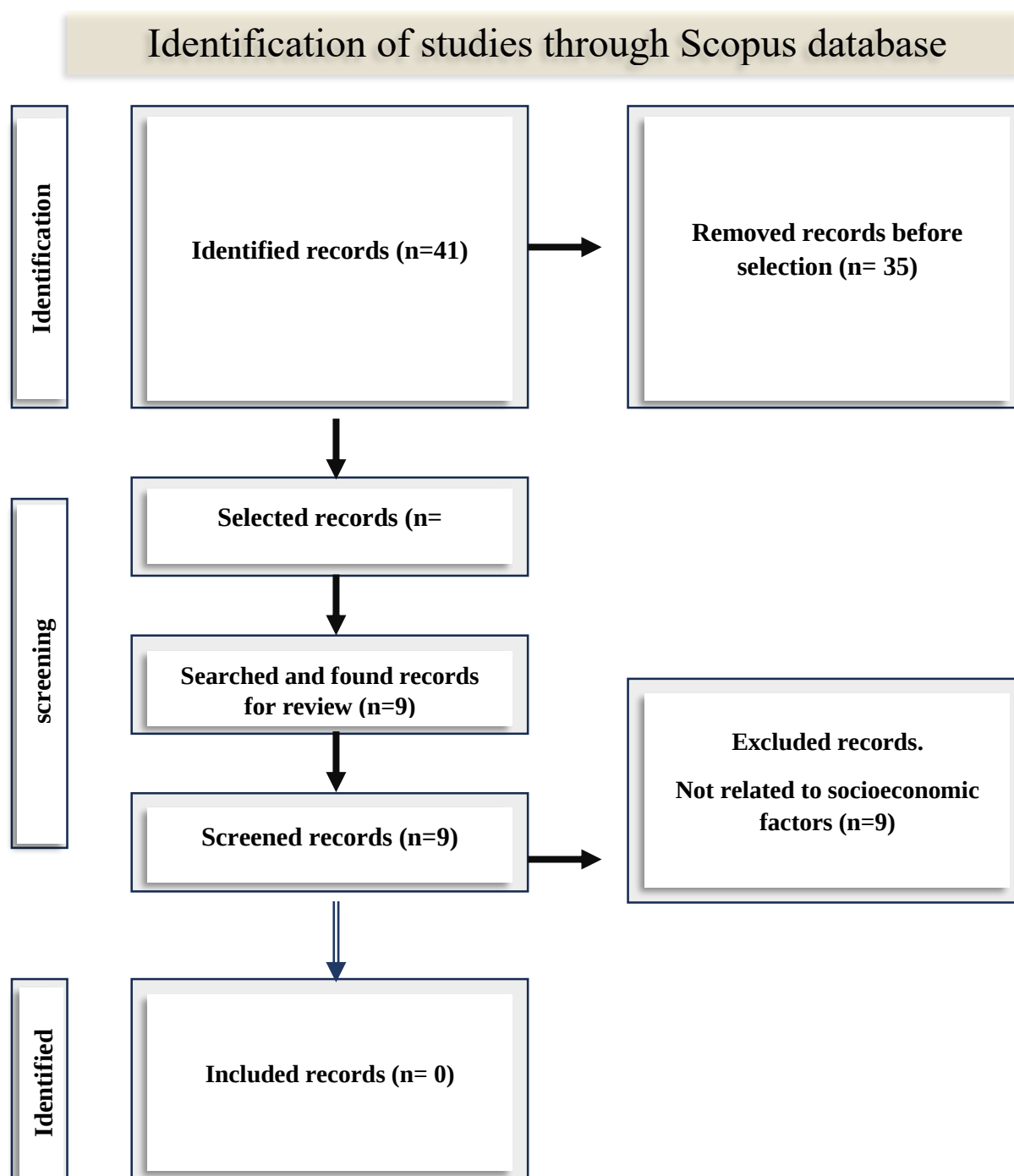


Figure 1: The PRISMA Flow Diagram

### Discussion

The lack of documents is a testament to the fact that efforts have not been made to address the socioeconomic factors that drive OOSC in Nigeria. It could be explained in several ways. It could be a lack of interest in the subject matter by researchers, a lack of

empirical data to support research in the area, a lack of funding to carry out research in the subject, a lack of interest in publishing in quality journals indexed in Scopus and probably Web of Science, and a lack of funding to publish in high-impact journals that are indexed in Scopus. Hence, the reasons mentioned have

resulted in a reduction in coverage of the topic in the Scopus database. This corroborates with the findings of Okagbue et al. (2024) that the quality of research output in Nigeria is low, which the authors outlined as a lack of adequate funding and policy issues, economic and career factors, predatory publishing and corruption, and a lack of research focus and ideology.

A search was available in Google Scholar, but the authors want only those articles from a controlled database with a high likelihood of containing peer-reviewed articles that can be trusted and reliable and contain scientific methods that are reproducible.

Over the years, researchers have failed to generate evidence that will guide policymakers on how and the extent to which socioeconomic variables reported in peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus drive OOSC incidence in Nigeria.

A systematic review with no search results can provide valuable insights into future research directions and priorities in the field, and a lot of research activities are likely to address the effects or impacts of socioeconomic variables on OOSC. The absence of search results can indicate a viable gap in the existing literature, highlighting a potential area for new research or a substantial lack of consensus in the methodological approaches in the papers published by the different authors (Kunonga et al., 2023). The lack of existing studies provides an amazing opportunity for researchers to conduct original research and contribute new knowledge to the field or indicate that the topic is under-researched but important, highlighting its significance for further investigation because OOSC is an important social issue that needs to be addressed. Another important point is that the absence of literature may indicate that the topic falls at the intersection of different disciplines, that is, education and economics or sociology. Further research strategies will be collaborative and multidisciplinary to capture the themes in both education and socioeconomics and build interconnections between different themes by different researchers to achieve a quality research outcome.

Encouraging research in this context will provide necessary evidence that could inspire and inform policymakers in designing interventions targeted at reducing OOSC in Nigeria. Interventions may address different aspects of the problem, such as equity, fairness, demand, supply, and inclusion. It could also guide efficient allocation of resources and serve as evidence-based advocacy for addressing OOSC in Nigeria.

Finally, the basic components of socioeconomic factors should be studied independently with OOSC and combined to form a larger evidence base. The advantage is that more papers could be eligible for inclusion and pass the critical assessment test. However, methodology (sampling and study design) differences could reduce the reliability of the findings. The major limitation of the paper is that the search term is very wide. The reason the authors crafted the search strategy is to get a comprehensive list of socioeconomic drivers of OOSC in Nigeria.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The lack of adequate research on the socioeconomic drivers of OOSC in Nigeria reflects a significant gap in understanding the root causes of this issue. This recommendation seeks to highlight the importance of addressing this neglect of evidence and provides actionable steps for policymakers and stakeholders to tackle the problem effectively. Drawing lessons from other countries and emphasizing the linkages between OOSC and various socioeconomic factors, this recommendation aims to underscore the urgency of action and the dangers of inaction.

#### **Increase Research Funding and Collaboration:**

There is an urgent need for increased funding from the Federal Government of Nigeria for research to collaborate among themselves or with corporate organizations on the socioeconomic drivers of OOSC in Nigeria. This funding should be directed towards supporting multidisciplinary and collaborative research that can provide comprehensive insights into the root causes of the OOSC syndrome in Nigeria.

#### **Strengthen Policy Frameworks:**

Policymakers in Nigeria should prioritize the development of policies that address the socioeconomic drivers of OOSC in the country. These policies should be evidence-based and should aim to improve access to quality education for all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background. Some of the policies could be a push to strengthen and enforce the existing laws and create new ones as the need arises.

#### **Reduced politicization of education:**

Removing education from the direct control of Nigerian politicians could potentially lessen the undue influence of political agendas on educational policies and resource allocation. This could lead to a more meritocratic and needs-based approach to tackling the OOSC in Nigeria.

#### **Promote Awareness and Advocacy:**

Increasing awareness about the importance of addressing the socioeconomic drivers of OOSC is key to mobilizing

support for action. Advocacy efforts should focus on highlighting the linkages between OOSC and issues such as weak social structures, insurgency, homelessness, low life expectancy, destitution, diseases, sexual violence, disability and poverty.

### **The Dangers of Inaction**

Addressing these primordial factors requires a multifaceted approach that involves improving access to education, addressing poverty, and strengthening social support systems. However, failing to address the socioeconomic drivers of OOSC in Nigeria has far-reaching consequences. It perpetuates a cycle of poverty and inequality, limits economic growth and development, and undermines the country's efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Additionally, it contributes to social unrest, insecurity, and instability, further exacerbating the problem.

### **Conclusion**

The systematic review of the socioeconomic drivers of out-of-school children (OOSC) found no paper that could be analyzed to build evidence that could be beneficial to stakeholders and policymakers in education. The paper discussed several implications of the findings for research and practice and concluded that the basic components of socioeconomic factors should be studied independently with OOSC and combined to form a larger evidence base. However, the difference in methodologies could limit the evidence synthesis, and the interpretation could be misleading.

### **Funding**

No funding is reported.

### **Ethical Approval**

No ethical approval is required. It is a systematic review of published papers.

### **Informed consent**

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

### **Author's contribution**

All the authors contributed in the preparation, result synthesis and review of the final draft.

### **Conflict of interest**

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

### **Data availability statement**

No data is available for declaration

### **Consent for Publication**

All the authors have agreed on the final version of the paper and have agreed for the paper to be published in a peer-reviewed journal.

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