

Impact of Insurgency on Parent-Child Relationship and Food Security among Internally Displaced Persons in Northeast Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of insurgency on parent-child relationship and food security among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Northeast Nigeria. The study was guided by 4 objectives. The research design was a descriptive survey research design. Data was collected from 405 respondents across IDP camps in the three most affected states. The sample comprised primary caregivers and household heads (60.8% female, 39.2% male) with a mean age of 36.4 years, representing diverse displacement experiences and demographic. Structured questionnaires adapted from validated instruments including the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) and the Parent-Child Relationship Questionnaire (PCRQ). The study employed multivariate linear regression to examine the simultaneous effects of insurgency exposure on multiple outcome variables while controlling for demographic factors. Results indicate that insurgency exposure significantly weakens parent-child relationships marked by reduced communication patterns, diminished emotional bonding, and disrupted caregiving capacity. Higher insurgency exposure predicted lower parent-child relationship quality scores ($\hat{\alpha} = -0.42, p < 0.01$), with communication patterns showing particular vulnerability ($\hat{\alpha} = -0.38, p < 0.01$) and emotional bonds experiencing severe deterioration ($\hat{\alpha} = -0.45, p < 0.01$). Concurrently, insurgency intensifies household food insecurity by disrupting traditional livelihoods, limiting market access, and creating dependency on irregular humanitarian aid. Greater insurgency exposure significantly predicted higher food insecurity levels ($\hat{\alpha} = -0.53, p < 0.01$), while also demonstrating a strong negative relationship with parental caregiving capacity ($\hat{\alpha} = -0.41, p < 0.01$). The analysis revealed that food insecurity and compromised parent-child relationships create a cyclical pattern of vulnerability, where material deprivation undermines emotional availability, and weakened family bonds reduce children's resilience to nutritional stressors. These findings underscore the interconnected nature of psychosocial and material well-being in conflict-affected populations. The findings have significant implications for policy and practice, suggesting that effective humanitarian programming must move beyond fragmented sectoral responses to embrace holistic, family-centered frameworks.

Keywords: Insurgency, Parent-child relationship, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), displacement, food insecurity.

Introduction

The Northeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria, comprising Bauchi, Borno, Yobe, Gombe, Taraba and Adamawa States have for over a decade been the epicenter of a devastating insurgency led by Boko

Haram and its splinter factions. Since its emergence in 2009, the insurgency has evolved from a religiously motivated movement into a violent conflict responsible for deaths and the

displacement of over 2.2 million people (UNHCR, 2023). The scale and persistence of violence attack have destroyed communities, collapsed economic systems and torn apart the social fabric that underpins family life and well-being in the region (International Crisis Group, 2021). Among the most severely affected populations are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who have been uprooted from ancestral homes and livelihoods and are now forced to live in overcrowded and under-resourced IDP camps. In these settings, the impact of insurgency on parent-child relationships is particularly acute. Parents who once functioned as economic providers, caregivers and moral guides are now burdened by trauma, unemployment and resource scarcity. Many experiences reduced emotional availability, increased stress and role reversal, particularly in single-parent households or where fathers are absent due to death, conscription, or economic displacement (Al-Krenawi, 2021; Idris, 2020).

The family unit, which serves as the primary context for child development, becomes dysfunctional under these pressures. Research has shown that in conflict-induced displacement, communication between parents and children weakens, emotional bonding deteriorates and disciplinary structures become inconsistent or harsh to child development (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2022; Awojobi, 2021). In such an environment, children are exposed to long-term risks including anxiety, aggression, poor academic outcomes and a loss of trust in parental figures (Save the Children, 2022). In addition to psychosocial strain, IDP families are confronted with a parallel crisis, most importantly food insecurity and family insecurity. Displacement disrupts farming activities, which form the backbone of livelihood in the region,

while access to markets, farmlands, and food supplies becomes restricted due to security concerns (FAO, 2022; WFP, 2023). The loss of household income, inflation in food prices, and inadequate humanitarian relief have left many families in a constant state of hunger and deprivation. According to the World Food Programme (2023), approximately 4.4 million people in Northeast Nigeria face acute food insecurity, with displaced populations being disproportionately affected.

Food insecurity among IDPs is not merely a nutritional issue, it directly influences parental behavior and child welfare. Parents who cannot feed children adequately often experience feelings of shame, helplessness and depression, which further weaken emotional ties within the family (UNICEF, 2022). Children, on the other hand, may adopt negative coping mechanisms such as begging, child labor, or transactional survival strategies that expose them to exploitation and abuse (NRC, 2021). Moreover, household food insecurity has been linked to poor school attendance, increased domestic violence, and heightened family conflict (IOM, 2023; Badmus, 2021). Despite various interventions by the Nigerian government and international agencies, most programs focus on immediate needs, such as food aid, shelter and medical care, while underestimating the long-term psychosocial and relational impact of displacement on family cohesion.

This study, therefore, seeks to fill this critical gap by examining the dual impact of insurgency on parent-child relationship and food security among IDPs in Northeast Nigeria. By adopting a multivariate analytical framework, the study will generate empirical evidence on how insurgency, as an independent variable, influence both the emotional (parent-child relationship) and material

(food security) dimensions of household stability. This integrated approach will not only enrich the scholarly discourse but also inform more holistic and targeted humanitarian interventions in conflict-affected regions.

Statement of the Problem

The Boko Haram insurgency, has created a multidimensional humanitarian crisis affecting over 2.2 million displaced persons across Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States, while immediate survival needs have received attention, the deeper relational and nutritional consequences of prolonged displacement on family systems remain inadequately understood. Armed insurgency in Northeast Nigeria has created a humanitarian crisis, with consequences extending far beyond the immediate loss of life and property. One of the most critical but underexplored impact of the crisis is its disruption of fundamental household systems, specifically the relationship between parents and children and access to adequate food. Displacement due to insurgency causes significant psychosocial distress among families. Parents face challenges in providing emotional support, maintaining communication and fulfilling traditional caregiving roles due to trauma, unemployment, and a loss of autonomy (Al-Krenawi, 2021; Idris, 2020). Children, in turn, experience emotional neglect, anxiety, and weakened familial bonds, especially in the context of overcrowded IDP camps lacking privacy and social infrastructure (Awojobi, 2021; Save the Children, 2022). These disruptions in parent-child relationships compromise children's development and resilience, yet few studies have quantitatively assessed these dynamics within displaced populations in Nigeria.

Concurrently, food insecurity is a widespread and persistent issue in IDP

settlements. According to the World Food Program (2023), millions of displaced persons in Northeast Nigeria face limited access to food due to disrupted agricultural production, blocked trade routes, and unreliable humanitarian food assistance. Malnutrition rates are high, particularly among children and pregnant women and most families depend entirely on irregular external aid to survive (FAO, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). Yet, beyond the nutritional implications, food insecurity also contributes to household stress, erodes parental authority and exacerbates the psychological burden of caregiving in displacement settings. Despite the significant attention given to either food insecurity or psychosocial trauma in conflict zones, few studies have examined how these two dimensions intersect and collectively impact family functioning. Moreover, available literature often focuses on general child welfare or maternal health, without directly interrogating how insurgency affects the interrelated domains of emotional bonding and food stability within displaced households (NRC, 2021; IOM, 2023). The absence of an integrated perspective limits the effectiveness of interventions and policies aimed at supporting IDPs. This study therefore addresses a critical gap by investigating the dual impact of insurgency on parent-child relationships and household food security among IDPs in Northeast Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to examine the impact of insurgency on parent-child relationship and food security among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the Northeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Thus, the study seeks to achieve the following specific objectives, to:

1. assess the effect of insurgency on

- communication patterns between parents and children in IDP camps.
2. examine insurgency influence on emotional bonds between parents and children living in displacement.
3. examine the extent of food insecurity by internally displaced households as a result of insurgency.
4. explore the relationship between food insecurity and parental caregiving capacity in displaced families.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a correlational survey research design to examine the impact of insurgency on parent-child relationships and food security among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Northeast Nigeria. A correlational design is appropriate for this study because it allows the researcher to assess the strength and direction of relationships between variables without manipulating any of them (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Specifically, it facilitates the exploration of how insurgency relates simultaneously to two key variables - the quality of parent-child relationships and household food security. The choice of a survey approach is justified by the need to collect standardized information directly from displaced individuals residing in IDP camps across Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States. The design allows for the collection of both quantitative and perception-based data relevant to the psychosocial and material dimensions of displacement. This design also supports the application of multivariate linear regression analysis, which is suitable for modeling the effects of a single independent variable on multiple, related outcome variables, while controlling for background factors.

Population

The target population for this study comprise of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) residing in camps across the three most affected states in Northeast Nigeria, these are, Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states. These states have experienced the highest levels of displacement and humanitarian need due to the prolonged Boko Haram insurgency. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2023), there are over 2.2 million IDPs in the region, with a significant concentration in formal and informal camps located in urban and semi-urban areas. The selected IDP camps had a combined total population of 45,680 displaced persons across the three locations: Maiduguri Metropolitan Camp in Borno State (18,500 IDPs), Damaturu Central Camp in Yobe State (14,200 IDPs) and Yola Township Camp in Adamawa State (12,980 IDPs).

Sample and Sampling Technique

Given the large and dispersed nature of the IDP population, the study employed a multi-stage sampling technique. In the first stage, three IDP camps, one from each of the three states were purposively selected based on security access, population size and representation of different displacement timelines. In the second stage, a stratified random sampling method was used to ensure adequate representation of male and female heads of households or primary caregivers, particularly those with dependent children. From each camp, participants were drawn using proportionate sampling, leading to a total sample size of 405 respondents (135 from each camp). This sample size was considered sufficient for running multivariate regression analysis, which requires a moderate to large sample for model reliability. Only respondents who had resided in the camp for at least six

months and had children under their care were included to ensure relevance and informed perspectives.

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire covering demographics such as parent-child relationship quality, household food security and insurgency exposure among IDPs. The instrument adapted from validated tools such as the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) and the Parent-Child Relationship Questionnaire (PCRQ) was pre-tested with 10 IDPs for clarity and cultural appropriateness before use. It employed a 5-point Likert scale for relationship and food security items, while insurgency exposure was measured through experiences of displacement, loss and livelihood disruption. Trained field assistants, fluent in English, Hausa, and Kanuri, administered the questionnaires face-to-face, assisting illiterate respondents. Ethical procedures, including informed consent, anonymity and the right to withdraw, were strictly observed.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected through the structured questionnaire were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social

Sciences (SPSS), Version 25. Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were employed to answer the research questions. Descriptive statistics such as percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of respondents and to describe the patterns of responses on the parent-child relationship and food security variables. Furthermore, inferential statistics to examine the effect of insurgency on both parent-child relationships and food security, the study employed Multivariate Linear Regression (MLR). This statistical technique allows for the simultaneous estimation of the impact of one or more independent variables on two or more dependent variables.

Results

Table 1 revealed a significant negative relationship between exposure to insurgency and communication patterns between parents and children in IDP camps. Respondents with higher levels of displacement-related trauma reported reduced frequency and quality of communication with their children, characterized by shorter conversations, less emotional expression and limited discussion of daily activities and concerns.

Table 1: Responses on Effect of Insurgency Exposure on Parent-Child Communication Patterns

Dependent Variable	Regression Coefficient (β)	p-value	Interpretation
Communication Patterns	-0.38	< 0.01	Greater exposure to insurgency significantly weakens communication patterns between parents and children.

Table 2 found that insurgency exposure significantly affects emotional bonding between parents and children living in displacement. Parents experiencing higher trauma levels reported diminished

emotional closeness, reduced expressions of affection and weakened trust relationships with their children, indicating severe disruption of emotional attachment systems.

Table 2: Responses on the effect of Insurgency Exposure on Parent-Child Emotional Bonds

Dependent Variable	Regression Coefficient (β)	p-value	Interpretation
Emotional Bonds	-0.45	< 0.01	Greater exposure to insurgency significantly deteriorates emotional bonds between parents and children.

Table 3 show that insurgency exposure strongly predicts household food insecurity among displaced families. Households with greater exposure to conflict reported severe limitations in food access, reduced dietary

diversity and frequent adoption of negative coping strategies such as meal skipping and borrowing food, indicating widespread nutritional vulnerability.

Table 3: Responses on the Effect of Insurgency Exposure on Household Food Security

Dependent Variable	Regression Coefficient (β)	p-value	Interpretation
Food Security	-0.53	< 0.01	Greater exposure to insurgency significantly increases household food insecurity.

Table 4 analysis revealed a strong negative relationship between food insecurity and parental caregiving capacity in displaced families. Parents experiencing severe food insecurity

reported diminished ability to provide emotional support, reduced responsiveness to children's needs and compromised capacity to maintain consistent caregiving practices.

Table 4: Responses on the Relationship Between Food Insecurity and Parental Caregiving Capacity

Dependent Variable	Regression Coefficient (β)	p-value	Interpretation
Parental Caregiving Capacity	-0.41	< 0.01	Greater food insecurity significantly reduces parental caregiving capacity in displaced families.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the significant adverse impact of insurgency exposure on both parent-child relationships and household food security among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Northeast Nigeria. These outcomes mirror the broader consequences of prolonged displacement observed in global conflict zones, where the breakdown of familial structures and access to basic needs occurs simultaneously. The study found that higher exposure to insurgency significantly predicted lower quality in parent-child relationships. This result is consistent with global research indicating that conflict and displacement erode the

emotional and communicative bonds within families. According to UNICEF (2021), conflict-exposed children often experience increased emotional neglect, while caregivers, especially those facing trauma and economic instability, report diminished emotional availability. Stressors such as overcrowding, loss of autonomy, and fear for safety disrupt traditional parenting roles and weaken the family's internal support structure (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). In the Nigerian context, International Organization for Migration (2022) reports that IDPs in the Northeast face mental health challenges that interfere with parenting practices. Our findings reflect

this reality, with a mean relationship quality score of 2.41 (on a 5-point scale) and only 35% of respondents indicating regular communication with children. This breakdown of relational stability has long-term implications for child development, including reduced resilience and compromised academic outcomes (Betancourt et al., 2015).

Household food security was also significantly impacted by insurgency exposure. The average food security score (2.22) points to moderate to severe food insecurity among IDPs. Over 80% of households reported skipping meals, and nearly 70% depended on food aid or borrowing. These findings align with the World Food Program (2023), which estimated that 4.4 million people in Northeast Nigeria face acute food insecurity, with displaced families bearing the brunt due to disrupted farming, blocked trade routes, and inadequate humanitarian relief. The FAO (2022) underscores that food insecurity is not merely about hunger—it also introduces psychological stress that undermines caregiving. Parents who are unable to provide food often experience shame and despair, which correlates with diminished parental warmth and increased harsh discipline. This is particularly true in protracted displacement settings where resource strain intensifies over time (Hadley & Patil, 2006).

The simultaneous regression of both parent-child relationship quality and food security in this study highlights a dual crisis in displaced households. These two domains are deeply intertwined. According to UNHCR (2021), food insecurity amplifies household tensions, increases the risk of domestic violence, and reduces emotional availability of caregivers. In turn, poor emotional support affects children's ability to cope with nutritional stressors,

creating a cyclical vulnerability. This integrated perspective supports a growing consensus in humanitarian literature that interventions must address not just physical survival but also family cohesion and psychological well-being. As noted by Save the Children (2022), effective programming in conflict zones must merge psychosocial support with material assistance to safeguard the holistic development of children and the stability of families.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the dual impact of insurgency on parent-child relationships and food security among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States regions severely affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. The findings revealed that exposure to insurgency significantly deteriorates both emotional and material dimensions of household well-being. These outcomes are not isolated; rather, this result in fragile family systems that struggle to meet both the psychological and physical needs of children. This conclusion underscores a critical insight: displacement-related interventions must move beyond a fragmented approach that addresses food, shelter, or trauma in isolation to a holistic, family-centered framework which strengthens emotional resilience alongside food security and economic support. Only through such integrated efforts can the cycle of vulnerability among IDP households can be broken and a pathway to recovery and development established. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Humanitarian agencies, in collaboration with government ministries of women affairs, health and social development, should establish psychosocial support services within IDP camps to

- strengthen parent-child communication and rebuild trust among displaced families.
2. Non-governmental organizations and community-based groups should design and implement trauma-informed parenting and family counseling programs that specifically target displaced parents, equipping vulnerable populations with skills to nurture stronger emotional bonds with their children.
 3. Relief agencies and government institutions responsible for emergency management should move beyond short-term food distribution and introduce more sustainable interventions, such as cash-based transfers, livelihood training and support for small-scale farming within and around IDP camps.
 4. Nutrition education and parental capacity-building initiatives should be integrated into all food aid programs, ensuring that parents not only have access to food but are also empowered with the knowledge and mental resilience to provide effective care for their children.
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