

## DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATION AND PERCEPTION OF POLICE AS CORRELATES OF CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG YOUTHS IN ONITSHA METROPOLIS, ANAMBRA STATE

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### Abstract

*The research explored the role of differential association and perception of the police as predictors of criminal behaviour among youths in Onitsha Metropolis, Anambra State, Nigeria. A total of 400 youths from the area participated in the study, selected using cluster and incidental sampling methods. The sample comprised 276 males (61.4%) and 124 females (38.6%), with ages ranging from 18 to 41 years ( $M = 28.3$ ,  $SD = 4.84$ ). The study employed three instruments: the Differential Association Scale, the Perception of Police Scale, and the Criminal Behaviour Rating Scale. Predictive and correlation research designs were adopted, with data analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The results indicated that differential association was not significantly correlated with criminal behaviour ( $P > 0.05$ ;  $r = 0.080$ ;  $N = 400$ ), whereas perception of the police showed a significant negative correlation with criminal behaviour ( $P < 0.05$ ;  $r = -0.165$ ;  $N = 400$ ). These findings provide insights into the factors influencing youths' engagement in criminal activities. Consequently, the study recommended the implementation of effective community policing to improve youths' perceptions of the police. This research contributes to the understanding of empirically assessing the influence of police perception among Nigerian youths and challenges the applicability of differential association theory in explaining youth criminal tendencies within the Nigerian context.*

Keywords: Differential association, Perception of police, Criminal, Youths.

### Introduction

A serious challenge to societal stability, disrupting individual well-being and hindering collective progress (Okonkwo & Ezeonuegbu, 2022). This problem is particularly pronounced among young people, where crimes such as cybercrime, cultism, and drug abuse are becoming increasingly common (Okonkwo & Ezeonuegbu, 2022; Achebe & Onyemaechi, 2023). These behaviours frequently signify deeper societal issues, including

economic disparities, unemployment, and the weakening of community values. The rising prevalence of such actions necessitates a thorough investigation into the psychosocial and structural elements that contribute to criminal tendencies among youths.

Criminal behaviour involves activities that contravene societal laws, often resulting in harm to individuals, communities, or institutions (Hoge, 2021). For youths, these behaviours commonly, property, and participation in organized criminal groups. In Nigeria, the surge in youth-related crimes has been worsened, family instability, and limited access to quality education and opportunities (Obaji, 2020; Okonkwo, et al., 2023). Furthermore, systemic challenges like police ineffectiveness and corruption intensify the problem, creating an environment where.

The theory of differential association provides a compelling explanation of the social learning mechanisms that drive. As posited by Sutherland (1939), criminal tendencies develop through interactions in settings where deviant norms and attitudes are dominant. Empirical support for this theory highlights the impact of peer influence, family relationships, and social networks on youth (Smith & Thornberry, 2015; Felson, & Lane, 2019). Specifically, of belonging, particularly in environments where societal systems fail to support young individuals.

The perception of police plays a pivotal role in either mitigating or exacerbating. In Nigeria, the police have been criticized for issues such as excessive force, extortion, and a lack of accountability, as highlighted by movements like #EndSARS (Busari, 2020). Negative views of the police undermine public trust and embolden criminal acts by reinforcing the belief that justice is unattainable (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2022; Okonkwo & Ezeonuegbu, 2022).

Conversely, when law enforcement is perceived as fair and effective, public cooperation improves, reducing the propensity for criminal activities.

This study examined polarities among youths in Onitsha Metropolis, Anambra State. By exploring these factors, the study sought to provide practical insights into the psychosocial determinants of youth criminality, contributing to the design of effective strategies for crime prevention and societal stability.

## Statement of the Problem

Challenge with profound implications for individuals and society. It jeopardizes community safety, destabilizes social structures, overburdens law enforcement systems, and imposes significant economic costs. In Onitsha Metropolis, crimes such as theft, violence, cultism, drug-related, fraud, and defiance of authority figures, including police officers, are increasingly prevalent. These criminal activities are often rooted in adverse personal circumstances, social environments, (Onyemaechi, 2025) and a growing mistrust of law enforcement institutions.

Youths, who should be the foundation of society's future, are increasingly drawn into, driven

by negative societal influences and distorted perceptions of authority. Exposure to systemic issues, peer associations, and a lack of positive role models further exacerbate this trend, fostering maladaptive attitudes that normalize deviant actions. Although has been widely studied, there is a need for focused research on the interplay between differential association and perceptions of the police as correlates of youth criminality, especially within the context of Onitsha Metropolis, Anambra State, Nigeria. This study aims to address this gap by examining how these factors collectively influence the criminal tendencies of young individuals in the region. Hence, the study sought to:

Ascertain if differential association will significantly correlate with criminal behaviour among the youths in Onitsha metropolis, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Investigate if perception of police will significantly correlate with criminal behaviour among the youths in Onitsha metropolis, Anambra State, Nigeria.

### Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this study will address the gaps in literature on differential association, and police perception, providing a systematic understanding of criminal behaviour and inspiring future research in these areas.

Practically, the findings would guide the criminal justice system by illustrating how law enforcement attitudes influence public cooperation and criminal tendencies. Insights from the study can inform reforms, training programs, and policies that improve relationships between law enforcement and civilians, fostering trust and reducing crime.

The research would also aid policymakers by revealing how judicial and law offering recommendations for systemic improvements to create a more empathetic and effective justice system. Psychologists gain deeper insights into rehabilitation, while youths benefit from advocacy for reforms promoting justice and resilience, empowering them to engage positively with the system.

### Conceptual Review

#### Perception of Police and Criminal Behaviour

Community perceptions crime., adherence to legal norms, and overall community dynamics.

**Trust and Cooperation:** When police are perceived as fair, trustworthy, and effective, community members are more likely to collaborate with law enforcement. This trust encourages crime reporting, information sharing, and support for investigations, fostering stronger partnerships between residents and police. Such collaboration enhances collective efforts in crime prevention (Tyler, 2016).

**Deterrence and Compliance:** Perceptions of police legitimacy and respectability directly influence individuals' willingness to comply with laws. Distrust toward law enforcement, however, can diminish its deterrent effect, increasing the likelihood of noncompliance

**Social Control and Norms:** Police interactions shape community norms and expectations. Positive engagement with law enforcement reinforces prosocial behaviours and discourages criminal acts. Conversely, negative perceptions can undermine community cohesion and resilience, normalizing (Jackson et al., 2018).

**Reactions to Police Misconduct:** Instances of misconduct, abuse of power, or bias by police undermine public trust and confidence in the justice system. Such perceptions can lead to hostility toward law enforcement, decreased cooperation, and strained relationships, hindering crime prevention and community relations (Jackson et al., 2018, Okonkwo, et al., 2023).

**Alternative Legal Systems:** In areas where trust in police is low, communities often turn to informal mechanisms like neighbourhood watch programs, community mediation, or street justice. These alternatives emerge in response to perceived inefficacy or bias in formal law enforcement, complicating efforts to maintain social order (Rosenbaum, 2018, Abamara, et al., 2015).

In summary, perceptions of police behaviour and authority significantly influence community trust, cooperation, and adherence to legal norms. Positive perceptions foster social cohesion and support effective policing, while negative perceptions can lead to resentment and complicate law enforcement efforts. Addressing these perceptions is vital for promoting safer communities and enhancing the relationship between law enforcement and the public.

## **Theoretical Review**

Differential association theory suggests that criminal behaviour is learned through social interactions, where individuals adopt values, attitudes, techniques, and motivations from others (Akers, 2020). This theory focuses on the process of becoming a criminal rather than the underlying reasons for criminal behaviour (Hayward & Yar, 2021). While it shares common ground with the interactionist perspective, differential association specifically examines individual acts rather than societal boundary construction and perceptions (Becker, 2022). As a positivist framework, it explores the justifications and attitudes that facilitate criminal actions, often tied to cultural transmission (Akers & Sellers, 2017; Sutherland, 1939).

Sutherland emphasized the role of social interactions in shaping the self, viewing identity as continuously influenced by engagement with others (Tilly, 2021). Phenomenology and ethnomethodology further illustrate how individuals interpret their experiences and make context-dependent decisions, highlighting the impact of varying circumstances (Schutz, 2020; Garfinkel, 2022). For example, factors such as employment status or family dynamics can influence how individuals perceive and respond to similar situations in unique ways (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2020; Matsueda, 2017).

According to differential association, likely when those supporting lawful conduct (Akers, 2020). This predisposition is often amplified by early exposure to influential peers and reinforced through social interactions (Hayward & Yar, 2021; Hirschi, 2020). While practical needs, such as hunger, can drive criminal acts, both criminal and non-criminal are shaped by a broader interplay of needs and values, highlighting the complexity of these decisions (Klein & Lee, 2019; Akers & Sellers, 2017).

### Hypotheses

Based on the broad objectives of the study and comprehensive review of the literature, the hypotheses generated and tested for the study were stated and tested at 0.05 level of significance;

Perception of police will not significantly correlate with criminal behaviour among the youths in Onitsha metropolis, Anambra State.

### Method

#### Participants

A total of 400 participants were sampled from Onitsha Metropolis, Anambra State, with a population of 1,415,000 (NBS, 2020). The sample size was calculated using Slovin's formula (1960), resulting in  $n = 400n = 400n = 400$ . Cluster and incidental sampling methods were utilized to capture the demographic diversity of participants. The sample comprised 276 males (61.4%) and 124 females (38.6%), with ages ranging from 18 to 41 years ( $M = 28.3M =$ ,  $SD = 4.84SD = 4.84SD = 4.84$ ). Ethnic representation included Igbo (75.7%), Hausa/Fulani (8.2%), Yoruba (6.7%), and other minority groups (10.2%). In terms of religion, the majority identified as Christian (84.5%), followed by Muslim (10.2%) and traditionalist (5.0%). Educational qualifications were varied, with 53.6% of participants holding secondary school qualifications, 23.4% possessing a university degree, 24.4% earning a Master's degree, and 7.0% holding a Ph.D. Regarding income distribution, 63.4% fell into the lower-income category (earning less than ₦20,000), 26.1% were in the upper middle-income group (₦50,000–₦100,000), and 15.7% were classified as lower middle-income (₦21,000–₦49,000). The occupational breakdown revealed that 43.6% were traders, 25.5% were public or civil servants, and 27.7% were students.

### Instruments

The instruments used in collecting data from the participants were structured questionnaires which were the differential association scale, perceptions of Police Scale (POPS) and Criminal behaviour Rating Scale (CBS).

### Differential Association Scale

association scale is a 10-item scale designed by Edwin Sutherland (1939) to measure the

extent to which individuals are influenced by their social environment in shaping their criminal behaviour, based on Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory. The scale reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.94 and convergent validity of 0.65 (Marcin, 2022), with items including frequency of interactions with individuals involved in criminal activities, likelihood of learning criminal techniques from friends or acquaintances, degree of exposure to criminal norms and values in the social environment, influence of criminal peers in shaping personal beliefs and attitudes towards deviant behaviour, frequency of participation in criminal acts as a result of differential association, contacts with persons/peers manifesting behaviours attesting to their social maladjustment, demoralization, and engagement in criminality and drug addiction. The internal consistency of the scale was carried out by the researcher using 30 adults who were conveniently sampled from Awka Metropolis, the data collected reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 and a convergent validity of 0.74 with the death anxiety scale. The respondents were asked to state the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement in the appropriate part by marking (\*) in the 5-point type interval scale starting from, 1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neither agree nor disagree 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree.

### **Perception of police scale**

Perceptions of Police Scale (POPS), is an instrument designed by Nadal and Davidoff (2015) to measure perceptions of police and police bias. The Perceptions of Police Scale (POPS) included twelve statements that measure an individual's scale, (1) General perception toward Police efficacy, and (2) General Perceptions of Police Image. The scale reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92 overall, 0.91 for Subscale 1 (General perception toward Police efficacy) and 0.87 for Subscale 2 (General Perceptions of Police Image). Using the perception of police scale, the researcher will assess the police, particularly examining views of individuals from historically marginalized groups and impacts of police interaction on psychological processes, emotional and mental health outcomes. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agree with each statement (on a Likert scale from 1- 5, with a score of 1 being "I strongly agree" and a score of 5 being "I strongly disagree"). Sample items include: "Police protect me"; "Police are friendly"; "Police treat people fairly"; and "Police do not discriminate." Lower scores indicate perceptions of the police, while higher scores. The questionnaire has two parts. The first part was designed to seek personal information and demographic characteristics of the participants which includes the age, gender, ethnic group and socio-economic status of the participants. The second part contains 12 items for perception of police which was factorized in two subscales, first six towards efficacy while the other six items measure perception of police image, which all seek to elicit responses relating to the respondents' dispositions about the police. The internal consistency of the study which was carried out by the researcher using 30 adults who were conveniently sampled from



Awka Metropolis, the data collected reported a Cronbach of 0.89 overall. 0.78 with the fear of terrorism scale (Okonkwo & Ezeonuegbu, 2022).

### Crime Behaviour Rating Scale (CBRS)

This is thirty-three (33) scale used to measure tendency to commit crime. The (CBRS) was developed and validated by Animasahun (2011). It is designed to measure crime behaviours and characteristics that can easily predispose an individual to commit crime. All 33 items loaded saliently; i.e.; they have positive significant contributions and correlate significantly with the domain in each item as established in the results of Animasahun (2011). The 33 items will be directly scored. The scoring will be done on five (5) ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree" indicating the extent to which the items apply to the participants. Sample items of the (CBRS) include statements such as "my behaviours often go contrary to acceptable norms", "I can find any means to make money to survive". Animasahu, (2011) reported internal consistency reliability estimates (Cronbach Alpha) for CBRS (0.94) and the validity was obtained from 0.56 to 0.88; and discriminant validity of -0.016 (Eze&Okeke, 2017; Uche & Olatunji).

### Procedures

The data collection process was conducted across various locations in Onitsha, including motor parks, marketplaces, churches, schools, and streets, with support from five research assistants. Participants first received an informed consent form, after which they were provided with the questionnaires. Each session lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes, and participants were debriefed at the end of the process. Out of 510 questionnaires distributed, 400 were deemed valid and included in the analysis. The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and transparency. Participants were assured that their involvement was entirely voluntary, that their responses would remain confidential, and that this environment of trust aimed to encourage honest and unbiased participation.

### Research Design and Statistics

The study employed predictive and correlation designs. Data were analyzed using hierarchical regression (HRM) at a 0.05 significance level with SPSS version 26.0.

#### Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of differential association, perception of police and criminal

Source: Questionnaire Primary Data

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of differential association, perception of police and criminal behavior

N Minimum Maximum Mean

Std.

Deviation Skewness Kurtosis

Statistic Std. Error Statistic Std. Error

Age 400 18 41 28.3 4.84 0.982 0.122 0.128 0.243

Differential

Association

400 16 41 30.6 6.01 -0.540 0.122 0.108 0.243

Perception of

Police

400 19 50 32.4 9.58 0.315 0.122 1.237 0.243

Criminal Behaviour

400 69 100 86.9 7.42 -0.057 0.122 -0.716 0.243

Valid N (listwise) 400

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 provide an overview of the key variables examined in the study, including differential association, perception of police, and criminal, based on responses from 400 participants. The table includes measures of central tendency (mean), variability (standard deviation), and distribution characteristics (skewness and kurtosis) for each variable. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 41 years, with a mean age of 28.3 years and a standard deviation of 4.84. The skewness value of 0.982 suggests a slight positive skew, indicating a higher concentration of participants in the younger age range. The kurtosis value of 0.128, being close to zero, indicates a relatively normal distribution of ages. The differential association scores ranged from 16 to 41, with a mean of 30.6 and a standard deviation of 6.01. The skewness of -0.540 indicates a moderate negative skew, suggesting that more participants had higher scores in differential association, implying stronger tendencies toward learning through interactions. The kurtosis value of 0.108 shows a distribution close to normal. Participants' perceptions of police scored between 19 and 50, with a mean of 32.4 and a higher standard deviation of 9.58, indicating greater variability in perceptions. The skewness value of 0.315 reveals a slight positive skew, meaning a slight tendency toward lower ratings of police perception. The kurtosis value of 1.237 indicates a leptokurtic distribution, suggesting that responses were concentrated around the mean with a few outliers. Criminal scores ranged from 69 to 100, with a mean of 86.9 and a standard deviation of 7.42, reflecting moderate variability. The skewness value of -0.057 indicates an approximately symmetrical distribution, while the kurtosis value of -0.716 suggests a platykurtic distribution, indicating a flatter and more spread-out range of responses compared to a normal distribution.

Table 2: Summary showing pairwise inter-variable correlations.

Source: Questionnaire Primary Data; DA = Differential Association, POP = Perception

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of Police, CB = Criminal Behaviour.

P< 0.05\*

The analysis in Table 2 revealed that age does not have a significant relationship with any of the other variables. Specifically, the correlation between age and differential association is  $r=-0.079$ , which is negative but not statistically significant. This indicates that age does not notably influence the extent to which individuals learn through interactions with others. Similarly, the correlation between age and perception of police is  $r=-0.044$ , which is also negligible and suggests that age does not impact how individuals perceive law enforcement. Finally, the correlation between age and criminal is  $r=-0.006$ , a value close to zero, indicating no significant relationship between age and engagement in criminal acts. The correlation between differential association and perception of police is  $r=0.108$ , which is positive and statistically significant at the  $p<0.05$  level. This finding suggests that individuals who have

Variables AGE DA POP CB

Age 1

Differential Association -.079 1

Perception of Police -.044 .108\* 1

## Criminal Behaviour

-.006 .080

—

.165\*\*

1

higher levels of differential association, meaning they are more influenced by social interactions that promote, also tend to have more positive perceptions of the police. This could reflect the complex nature of social influences, where peer groups or personal experiences may shape not only one's law enforcement. However, the correlation between differential association ( $r=0.080$ ) but not statistically significant, indicating that the criminal the perception of police emerged as a significant factor in shaping. The correlation between perception of police and criminal is  $r=-0.165$ , which is negative and statistically significant at the  $p<0.01$  level. This suggests that individuals who hold more negative views of the police are more likely to engage in criminal.

## Discussion

The first hypothesis, which proposed that differential association would, was supported by the findings. This outcome indicates that, within the Onitsha metropolis, exposure to deviant peers did not significantly relate youth. His result contrasts with previous studies, such as Garcia et al. (2020), that identified a strong link between differential association and criminal. The lack of a significant relationship in this study could be explained by the presence of other influencing factors, such as social disorganization, which may diminish the impact of peer influence. In communities facing poverty and instability, other environmental stressors could

take precedence over peer influence, making differential association less influential.

Additionally, according to strain theory, structural pressures like limited social mobility may play a more prominent role in driving, potentially overshadowing the effects of peer associations. Moreover, social control theory suggests that strong familial and community bonds can act as protective factors, preventing youth from engaging in criminal activities even when they associate with deviant peers (Onyemaechi, et.al, 2021, 2022)

The second hypothesis suggested that perceptions of the police would not significantly correlate with, the critical role that youths' views of law enforcement play in influencing their involvement in criminal activities. This finding aligns with legitimacy theory, which posits that individuals are more likely to comply with the law when they perceive authorities as legitimate and trustworthy (Tyler, 2016). In this study, negative perceptions of the police were found to be associated with higher levels among youths, suggesting that how young people view the police can significantly shape their actions. This result can also be interpreted through the lens of procedural justice theory, which emphasizes that youths are more inclined to obey the law when they perceive police actions as fair, unbiased, and accountable (Tyler, 2016, Okonkwo, et al., 2023). When young individuals experience discrimination, unfair treatment, or a lack of accountability from law enforcement, their trust in the police erodes, which in turn increases the likelihood of engaging. Furthermore, the broken windows theory offers additional support for these findings by suggesting that communities characterized by visible signs of disorder and a general lack of trust in law enforcement create an environment where more crime is likely to thrive. In such communities, the absence of strong social controls and the perception of police as ineffective or unjust may embolden individuals to engage in criminal activities, as the risk of being apprehended or held accountable diminishes.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the factors influencing youth in Onitsha metropolis, Anambra State, with a focus on differential association and perceptions of the police. The results indicate that negative perceptions of law enforcement are associated with higher levels of delinquency, highlighting the need for reforms to enhance public trust in the police and improve their effectiveness. Although differential association did not emerge as a significant predictor, against delinquency. Moreover, positive perceptions of police legitimacy were found to decrease, emphasizing the importance of strengthening police-community relations.

Ultimately, the study advocates for targeted interventions that address both risk and protective factors to reduce youth crime and enhance community safety.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proffered to address the factors influencing youth in Onitsha metropolis:

Strengthening the relationship between the police and the community is critical in reducing

delinquency. Efforts should be made to increase the visibility of the should undergo training in procedural justice to ensure fair and respectful interactions with citizens, fostering trust and cooperation.

Given the link between negative perceptions of law enforcement and increased criminal, systemic reforms are necessary to improve the efficiency, transparency, and accountability of the justice system. This may involve reducing corruption, ensuring quicker legal processes, and enhancing the public's confidence in the fairness of legal proceedings.

While differential association did not emerge as a significant predictor in this study, the role of positive social networks in protecting against delinquency should not be overlooked.

Programs should be developed to encourage youth involvement in community-based activities, mentorship programs, and after-school initiatives that provide them with positive role models and opportunities for personal growth.

Implementing educational programs that promote respect for the law and highlight the negative consequences could reduce delinquency. Schools and youth organizations should play a pivotal role in raising awareness about the importance of law-abiding.

Interventions should focus not only on addressing risk factors such as negative perceptions of law enforcement but also on strengthening protective factors like supportive family structures, peer relationships, and community engagement. This approach will foster a holistic solution to youth crime prevention.

Providing youth with opportunities to engage in civic activities, such as local governance, public discussions, and community service, can help cultivate a sense of belonging and responsibility toward their community. This can reduce alienation and increase adherence to societal norms.

Continuous efforts should be made to improve public perceptions of the police. Initiatives such as transparency in law enforcement activities, community outreach, can rebuild trust between law enforcement agents and the public.

#### Limitations of the Study

Despite the contributions and insights gained from this study, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations, which may impact the interpretation and general ability of the findings:

The reliance on self-report measures to assess perceptions of the criminal justice system, differential association, perception of police, and criminal behaviour may introduce biases and social desirability effects. Participants may under report experiences or behaviours, leading to inaccuracies in the data collected.

The findings of the study may be specific to the context of Onitsha metropolis, Anambra State, and may not be readily applicable to other geographical locations or cultural contexts. Differences in social, economic, and institutional factors across regions may limit the general ability of the findings beyond the study setting.

Acknowledging these limitations is crucial for interpreting the findings of the study

accurately and for guiding future research efforts aimed at addressing youth involvement in criminal behaviour effectively. Future studies should aim to overcome these limitations by employing rigorous research designs, utilizing diverse methodological approaches, and considering a broader range of contextual and individual factors influencing delinquency among young individuals.

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