

# **The *Japa* Syndrome of the Nigerian Youth As A Survival Strategy: A Socio-economic Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

Nigeria is often referred to as the giant of Africa; still, it has over the last two years experienced an alarming surge in the migration of young Nigerians to other developed states. Factors such as the chronic unemployment rate, which stands at 33.3% as of 2020, high levels of insecurity, and unfulfilled aspirations have caused increased pressure in the search for better opportunities abroad. More interestingly, the increased migration rate most likely has nothing to do with the idolisation of these states, but rather is largely due

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to a lack of national development and economic growth, as youths have been found to migrate to countries with better economies within Africa. Although no accurate data exists on the rate of migration, this circumstantial migration reflects the continued struggle of citizens to improve their living conditions. The sudden increase in the international migration of young Nigerians is a critical issue that has not received much attention from the Nigerian government, especially in tackling the root causes and ways to further reduce its negative effects on the socio-economic development of the nation. Given these concerns, this study aims to further explore the push and pull factors influencing the migration of Nigerian youths and their patterns. More importantly, it examines the socio-economic implications of an increase in the migration rate in Nigeria. The findings of the study will be useful for an in-depth reality check and will serve as a wake-up call for the Nigerian government.

**Keywords:** *Japa*, Migration, Socio-Economic Analysis, State Fragility Theory.

### **Introduction**

Migration is an ancient activity, and therefore, is not a new phenomenon. International migration is a social reality of the present as people move across regions for a variety of reasons. In 2020, the World Migration Report estimated the number of international migrants to be 281 million (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2022). However, the recent surge in the migration of Nigerian youths across borders deserves urgent attention from the Nigerian government and policymakers. The search for greener pastures and better living conditions by Nigerian youths has become an epidemic, as both young graduates and skilled professionals are fleeing in numbers. The term *japa* is a Yoruba slang that means to run, flee, or escape. In this context, it essentially means to flee from Nigeria, where poverty, financial instability, insecurity, etc. are the order of the day, to a more stable environment, to ensure survival. Nigeria has an estimated total population of about 209.6

million people and 74.22% are youths between the age of 15 and 35 years (NBS, 2020). The majority are those that the Nigerian government has failed to cater to their needs.

Current realities such as inflation, unemployment, and poverty are major drivers of permanent migration. According to the Visa Facilitation Services Global (VFS), the number of visa applications processed in 2022 from Nigeria has risen by more than 40% compared to 2021 (*Guardian Nigeria*, 2023). Unfortunately, critical sectors such as the health, manufacturing, business, and education sectors suffered greatly from shortage of human resources. The National Medical Association estimated that approximately 727 Nigerian-trained medical doctors would relocate to the United Kingdom between December 2021 and May 2022. Although the recommended doctor-patient ratio by the World Health Organisation is 1:600, Nigeria's health sector is in a pitiable state as the doctor-patient ratio is 1:5,000. The Pharmacy Council of Nigeria also affirmed that more than 783 pharmacists left Nigeria in 2021 (Adebowale-Tambe, 2022), while the National Association of Nigerian Nurses and Midwives (NANNM) put the number of nurses and midwives who migrated from Nigeria in the past five years at 75,000 (Onyedika-Ugoeze, 2023). This suggests that more than 76,510 people in the health sector migrated in the last five years.

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and has numerous natural resources that portray it as a rich nation; its resources are mismanaged, pushing its citizens to extreme poverty. As the economic situation worsens, people seek survival strategies, including migration. Migration involves the movement of people from one place to another, with the primary intention of living permanently in a new location. In recent times, people moved from one country to another for work, access to healthcare facilities, and other basic social amenities or for some other reasons. The Nigerian National Migration Policy 2015 asserted that 'migration is a fundamental part of human nature' (2015:5). The document further highlights that people migrate either temporarily or permanently in search of a better standard of living. Considering that emigration is not an inexpensive process, the increase in the number of Nigerian youths attempting to leave the country calls for urgent attention.

Migration often occurs as a reaction to a crisis that has economic, political, and sociocultural dimensions (Duru, 2021). This finding suggests that people migrate to survive in vulnerable situations. Abedi-Lartey (2016) emphasises that migration is merely a survival strategy used by the poor as a catalyst in the transformation process of the destiny of individuals and consequently family members, local communities, and the wider society through their remittances. However, the *japa* syndrome in Nigeria is a peculiar situation as individuals who live above the poverty line and can be categorised as belonging to the middle and high classes are trooping out of the country. Factors that influence people's decisions to migrate are generally categorised into push and pull factors. Push factors include, but are not limited to, insecurity, unemployment, and lack of access to healthcare and other social amenities, while pull factors are the better conditions of living that attract people to these places.

Iwuh (2018) considers the push factors of Nigerian youth migration to be high levels of unemployment and poverty. These two factors have been the major underlying reasons why Nigerians flock to developed countries in Europe and other seemingly better countries within the African region. In 2022, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) estimated that 133 million Nigerians live in multidimensional poverty. This is a significant increase from the 82.9 million estimates in 2019. In addition, the Nigerian National Migration Policy of 2015 established that there is a significant relationship between poverty and migration (Adepoju, 2015), but the Nigerian government has not taken pragmatic measures to ensure that much of its population lives above the poverty line, with access to better opportunities and improved standard of living.

Furthermore, the level of unemployment in Nigeria has increased steadily over the last half-decade, which has affected the youth and economic development of the country. As of 2020, the unemployment rate was 33.3%, with an inflation rate of 24.08% in July 2023 (Bailey, 2023). The results of a study conducted by Odumade (2020) show that there is a significant relationship (0.820) between the youth unemployment rate and Nigeria's economic growth. The findings of Dinbabo et al. (2021) suggest that socioeconomic inequality, particularly the lack of opportunities and expectations of a better life, significantly influences the decision to migrate

among African migrants. This affirms Smith's (2019) position that unemployment and other developmental problems exacerbate the migration crisis in Africa. Recent studies have found that economic factors are primarily responsible for illegal migration (Ikuteyijo, 2020; Nwafor et al., 2022; Khairi & Wahab, 2018), and that the same factors have been found to motivate individuals to migrate legally.

A study on irregular migration by Nwafor et al. (2022) in two towns within the southeastern geopolitical zone of Nigeria showed that many respondents were opposed to irregular migration but preferred to attempt it rather than remain in vulnerable positions. The findings further affirm the push factors of poverty and unemployment, as identified by other scholars (Kohnert, 2007; Dimkpa, 2019; Duru, 2021). However, Khairi and Wahab (2018) argued that state administration is a significant driver of migration. This suggests that a state characterised by discrimination and marginalisation will potentially have a high number of citizens engaged in migration. The present economic situation of the country cannot be thoroughly investigated without reference to the corrupt practices of political leaders and government institutions. Corruption plays a significant role in the stagnant economy of the nation, and this has been affirmed by researchers (Anowai, 2011; Gertrude, 2023).

Migration is viewed as an opportunity to improve one's living conditions and, ultimately, that of the unborn generations. This perspective has induced Nigerians, particularly youths, to move across international borders. Currently, *japa* is not restricted to a few selected or skilled professionals. By the day, more Nigerians (skilled and unskilled) are willing to migrate to search for better living conditions. This study posits that youths essentially migrate to survive. It further provides an overview of youth migration and establishes the relationship between migration and survival.

#### **Conceptual Clarification: Who is a Youth?**

The concept of youth is ambiguous as it has varying definitions, especially in terms of age categorisation. Thus, defining a youth using the age range has proven to be a difficult task. For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines 'youth' as any person between 15 and 24 years of age. Due to the African peculiarity, the transition to independent adulthood is measured by

achieving economic and social stability, which may extend into the late 20s and sometimes, beyond; thus, the African Youth Charter of 2006 defines a youth as a person between 15 and 35 years. Consequently, Nigeria's 2009 National Youth Policy categorised individuals aged 18 to 35 years as youths. However, the National Youth Policy of 2019 considered individuals between 15 and 29 years as youths for the proper execution of the policy, which targets young people transitioning from childhood to adulthood (National Youth Policy, 2019). For this research, individuals between 15 and 35 years of age are considered as youths.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts two theories to explain the variables under study. The first is Emile Durkheim's Anomie/Strain theory of 1893 with additional contributions by Robert K. Merton during the early 1900s. Merton argued that anomie/strain does not result simply from unregulated goals but rather from a faulty relationship between goals and legitimate means of achievement. Hence, social structures exert immense pressure on individual citizens. One such pressure is that the social structure defines the expected duties of citizens, including civic or political, economic, and social responsibilities. At the same time, the social structure expects all individuals to fulfil these responsibilities while institutionalised means to achieve them are unevenly distributed or sometimes not available at all. Merton argued that once these cultures exist in a society, the strain set in the result is usually a drive for almost everyone to achieve lofty goals through whatever means attainable, which could be positive or negative. Posing vulnerable individuals in society, especially youths, into misbehaviour; therefore, the state of fragility unleashed.

The second theory draws from the State Fragility framework. The theory behind the framework is that a state needs strong institution(s) to achieve and maintain stability. Functioning institutions are essential for the government to receive the support of the citizens, but with fragility being a direct consequence of faulty institutions, bad governance becomes the order of the day. (Sternehäll, 2016; Habib, Elmore, Gulas, Ruhde, Mathew, & Parente 2022; Deal, Hartt, & Mills, 2023).

When a state is unable to ensure essential functions and when a government fails to adequately address the needs of its people, the breakdown of the state-society relationship (social contract) in terms of providing security to its citizens, delivering public goods, upholding the rule of law, and ensuring justice leads to a widespread lack of trust, illegitimacy, and various criminal activities such as cybercrime, armed robbery, kidnapping, and ritual killings. It also results in insurgencies, the displacement of people as refugees, and even the migration (both legal and illegal) of its population (Rotberg [2003](#), 2004; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-OECD, [2007](#), [2012](#); Di John, [2010](#); Menocal [2011](#); Sternehall, [2016](#)). In the words of Kofi Annan, “If a state is fragile, the people will not enjoy the security, development, and justice that are their right” (Kofi Annan 2005). Hence, many Nigerians are seeking a better life where available in western/developed states and even within stable developing states.

In application, one could argue that the Merton’s anomie/strain paradigm also puts the Nigerian youth’s *japa* syndrome in perspective. The *japa* syndrome of Nigerian youths as a survival strategy becomes a response to social structure breaking down and state fragility unleashing, a malaise for development.

### **Methodology and Results**

This study adopted a descriptive research design and survey method. The target population for the study are the youths who currently live in Nigeria between the ages of 15 and 35 years. The population of youths is estimated to be 95,315,144, with females constituting 51.5% and males accounting for 48.5%. South-West had the highest number of 23,758,879 (National Youth Survey, 2020). All six geopolitical zones were considered, and 386 copies of the questionnaire were administered using Google Forms. All copies of the questionnaire were completed and returned. The sample size was determined using the Cochran’s formula. The study sample was selected using simple random sampling. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentages, with a margin error of 5% (0.05) and a confidence level of 95%.

**Cochran Equation, 1963**

$$n_o = \frac{1.96^2(0.5 \times 0.5)^2}{0.05^2}$$

$$n_o = \frac{3.8416 \times 0.25}{0.0025}$$

$$n_o = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025}$$

$$n_o = 384.14$$

Z value = 1.96 (found in the Z table at the confidence level of 95%)

P value is the estimated proportion of an attribute that is present in the population (0.5)

$$Q = 1 - P$$

e is margin of error (0.05)

**Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Table 1: *Percentage distribution of respondents by their socio-demographic characteristics*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	152
Female	233
I prefer not to say	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>386</b>
<b>Age Group</b>	
15-18	54
19-25	196
26-35	136
<b>Total</b>	<b>386</b>



<b>Marital Status</b>	
Not married	282
Married	101
Separated	2
Divorced	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>386</b>
<b>Geopolitical zone</b>	
North-Central	68
North-West	25
North-East	11
South-East	18
South-South	53
South-West	211
<b>Total</b>	<b>386</b>
<b>Level of Education</b>	
SSCE	27
OND/HND	94
Bachelors	185
Masters	67
Ph.D.	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>386</b>
<b>Employment Status</b>	
Employed	178
Unemployed	162
Self-employed	46
<b>Total</b>	<b>386</b>

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*Source: Fieldwork, 2023*

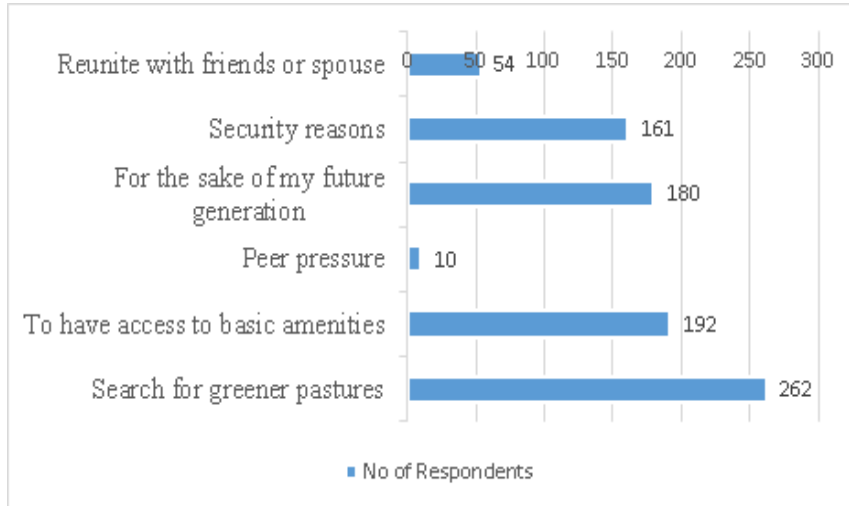
### Issues on Migration

Table 2: *Distribution of respondents by their intention to migrate in the next five years*

Questions	Frequency
<b>Do you plan to migrate legally within the next 5 years?</b>	
Yes	299
No	87
<b>Total</b>	<b>386</b>
<b>Where is your desired destination?</b>	
Europe	127
South or North America	79
Australia	36
Is any other African country better than Nigeria	57
<b>Total</b>	<b>299</b>
<b>Do you intend to return to Nigeria for some years after you migrate?</b>	
Yes	203
No	96
<b>Total</b>	<b>299</b>
<b>Would you consider migrating illegally?</b>	
Yes	54
No	332
<b>Total</b>	<b>386</b>
<b>Are you aware of the dangers of migrating illegally?</b>	
Yes	369
No	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>386</b>

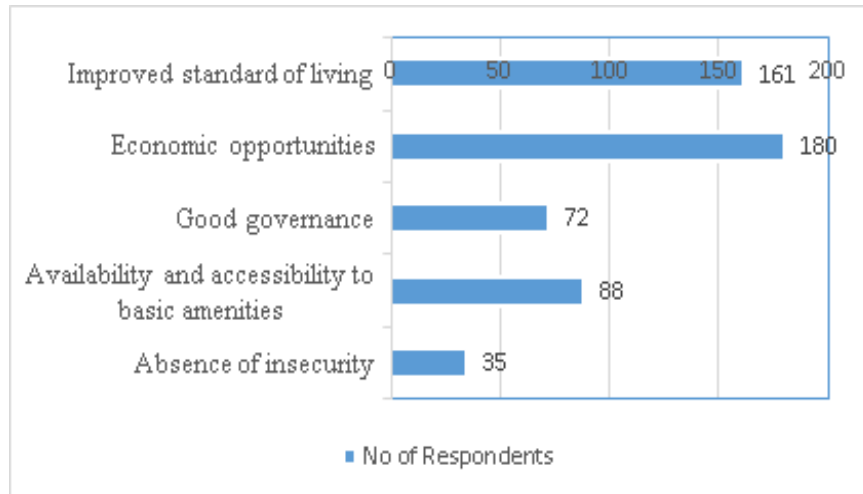
Source: Fieldwork, 2023

**Chart 1: Reasons for considering migration.**



Other reasons identified by the respondents are: to pursue higher education and for career growth.

**Chart 2: Reasons respondents will be motivated to return to Nigeria**



Further identified reasons include patriotism and the desire to reunite with family members.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This study provides data on the nexus between a hostile socio-economic environment and *japa* syndrome among Nigerian youths. There is a direct relationship between the socio-economic challenges in Nigeria and Nigerian youths' interest in migrating outside the country. Human insecurities, such as economic, political, and personal factors, and the fear of the inability to reach their full potential as human beings in Nigeria are the driving forces behind the *japa* syndrome. Thus, an enabling environment for Nigerian youth to thrive and have a sense of belonging to their state would alleviate this syndrome. This is because the migrating generation is more interested in the economic status and opportunities available to them in their destination than in their geographical location. Thus, their emigration is directly connected to their survival strategy.

First, it is important to note that a generation of *japa* bound Nigerian youths is a double tragedy for the Nigerian state. This is because while they are in Nigeria waiting for their chance to move, they arguably contribute minimally to the development of Nigeria as a result of the fact that they are more focused on ways to facilitate their dreams of emigrating to better destinations. In these destinations, they unleash their creativity and contribute to its development while enjoying the benefits of a relatively stable socio-political environment. Second, every youth who emigrates from Nigeria is a loss. The loss of young productive minds could have contributed to the development of the nation. In this sense, Nigeria's loss is the gain of wherever the youth relocates to. Thus, Nigeria's brain drain is the destination's brain gain. Brain drain is "a human capital flight" (Adeyemi, Joel, Ebenezer, & Attah, 2018:66). It entails "the movement of people especially the most skilled and competent individuals or manpower from less developed countries to developed countries where they believe the returns of their human capital is appreciated" (Adeyemi, Joel, Ebenezer, & Attah, 2018:66). Hence, *japa* syndrome in Nigeria loosely connotes the malady of brain drains.

This malady entails the escape of human resources from the shores of Nigeria to other parts of the world, with relatively better opportunities. As these individuals leave, they create a vacuum in the Nigerian system. This is because every member of society contributes to such progress, or otherwise, based on their functionalities. Thus, with the rate at which Nigerian youths emigrate from Nigeria, they create a continuous vacuum in the system. Many who have succeeded in relocating are capable of being productive in any society. No country wants to welcome individuals who do not contribute to its growth and development. However, as these youths contribute to the growth and development of other countries, Nigeria is not enjoying the movement of agile and productive youths from other countries. Arguably, the same hostile socioeconomic environment that promotes *japa* syndrome discourages many young productive minds from migrating to Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

Nigerian youths frequently encounter the phenomenon known as the *japa* syndrome, which signifies a profound social and economic crisis characterised by high unemployment rates, insecurity, and the lack of access to basic amenities. The prevalence of these prompts a significant number of young Nigerians to emigrate in pursuit of more favourable opportunities. Migration is a natural aspect of human existence, but the desire of many Nigerian youths to emigrate indicates the presence of underlying structural issues that require immediate attention and resolution.

This study emphasises the need for the Nigerian government to address these issues and mitigate the negative impacts of migration on the nation's development. Underlying factors driving migration can be addressed by prioritising job creation, enhancing security measures, and expanding social welfare programmes. To facilitate the country's growth, it is imperative to allocate resources towards education, promote entrepreneurship, and combat corruption.

### **Recommendations**

To significantly reduce the rate of migration of youths, the Nigerian government must make it a priority to tackle issues such as unemployment,

insecurity, and the inadequate provision of essential services. Below are a few recommendations which if implemented can arrest the malaise of *japa* syndrome.

**Allocate resources towards education and skills development:** Strengthening education and skills development initiatives would provide Nigerian youths with the essential abilities to actively contribute to the progress of the country.

**Facilitate Entrepreneurship:** Fostering entrepreneurship can generate additional employment prospects and decrease dependence on foreign nations for work chances.

**Enhancing Governance and Combating Corruption:** Resolving governance concerns and combating corruption will establish a favourable climate for corporate growth and inspire Nigerian youths to envision a promising future.

**Improvement of Social Welfare Programmes:** Reinforcing social welfare programmes can mitigate poverty and establish a safety net for marginalised communities.

**Promotion of Awareness of the Hazards of Irregular Migration:** Educating young individuals about the perils associated with irregular migration can contribute to a decrease in the number of adolescents jeopardising their lives in pursuit of better opportunities.

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[day in Nigeria. The majority of Nigerian youths suffer from unemployment, inflation, and poverty, leading to a shortage of human resources in critical sectors such as health, manufacturing, business, and education.— The Guardian Nigeria News – Nigeria and World News](#)

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