

Poverty and Abandonment of the Elderly: The Need for Social Gerontological Management in Calabar Municipality, Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examined the relationship between poverty and the abandonment of the elderly persons in Calabar Municipality, Cross River State, Nigeria. Survey research design was adopted. Data were collected from respondents through a structured questionnaire and analyzed using appropriate statistical tool. The finding revealed that there is no significant relationship between poverty and abandonment of elderly persons in Calabar Municipality, meaning that abandonment is not attributed to economic status of individuals or family alone, but other social and cultural factors play significant roles in influencing abandonment of the elderly like change in family structure, social relationship of production occasioned by modernization and religion. The study recommended that greater attention be given to family relationship, social support system, community-based care, institutional care and policies aimed at improving general social welfare for the elderly.

Keywords: Poverty, Abandonment, Elderly, Social Gerontological Management

Introduction

The elderly people are central to global demographic analysis. Their care and sustenance are taking central position in national and global development discourse. It is on this note that elders constituted the central subject of this investigation. Elders are individuals of high repute, who are highly revered by their families, loved ones and society at large (Mboto, Ikeorji & Pius, 2018). The roles of elders in the society are symbolic in terms of maintenance of peace, order, social solidarity and unity (Bassey, 2024). Poverty is a state or condition where people lack the basic necessities of life, such as food, money, clothing, clean water, shelter and medical care which makes life worth living. Panchal (2020) identified Nigeria as the poverty capital of the world. This study was structured to examine the relationship between poverty and elderly care in Nigeria with particular reference to abandonment of the elderly.

Elderly abandonment refers to a severe form of abuse of elderly person where a family member, caregiver or anyone responsible for the care, upkeep and protection of the elderly person willfully diserts a vulnerable older individual. Bassey (2024) noted that abandonment of the

elderly in Nigeria is a growing crisis in which older people face profound physical isolation, emotional neglect and inadequate healthcare provision in the absence of a broad based national social security for the elderly. It is the light of this situation that it became imperative to examine if poverty is a major contributing factor to abandonment of the elderly in Calabar Municipality in particular and Nigeria in general. The main objective of the study was to determine the relationship between poverty and elderly abandonment in order to discover and provide prognosis of action toward gerontological management in Nigeria, which is an integral component of social development.

Conceptual Clarification

Elderly: This refers to people who are aged 65 years and older. A stage in life where physical, mental and social changes require more attention, proper healthcare, nutrition and supportive assistance to ensure good health, quality of life and acceptable standard of living. World Health Organization (2025) maintained that elderly problems include: decline in health, old age, long-term issues like arthritis, hypertension, diabetes and other heart diseases, risk of social isolation, depression, cognitive decline etc. This situation requires economic resources to be properly managed and cared for. United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) consider an older person from aged 60 or 65 years and above, as Nigerian policy for the elderly also put the age of elderly person at 60 years and older (United Nations Population Fund, 2026; National Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

Poverty: United Nations (1965) defines poverty as a denial of choice and opportunities, and a violation of human dignity which includes the lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society, coupled with insecurity in the face of powerlessness. The World Bank (2026) considered poverty as a well pronounced deprivation in well-being, measured in terms of household's income and consumption levels falling below a designated standard required to maintain a basic livelihood.

There are different classifications of poverty, such as: primary poverty, secondary poverty, absolute poverty, relative poverty, temporary and permanent poverty (Habitat for Humanity, 2026). Primary poverty is not having enough money to meet basic needs, which simply means living below the poverty line. Secondary poverty refers to earning just enough income to meet basic necessities, which means ability to meet only coping. Absolute poverty is generally when household income is below certain level, undermining ability to satisfy basic needs in terms of food, clothes, shelter, healthcare, education, etc. Relative poverty has to do with earning less than average household incomes, referring to having money, but not enough. Relative poverty is seen as a form of social exclusion and can be temporary or permanent, just like other dimensions of poverty (Habitat for Humanity, 2026).

Elderly abandonment: This is conceived by Findlaw (2026) as a severe form of abuse of the elderly person where a designated caregiver, family or person assigned responsibility willfully deserts or neglect an older adult who cannot care for his or herself, living with or entrusted to them, by leaving them without necessary supervision, food, medicine or shelter. Major characteristics of elder abandonment identified by Fundlaw (2026) include: intentional desertion, rejection in common locations as hospitals, nursing facilities, empty homes and space, which is triggered by caregiver financial strain or general lack of community support.

Management of Gerontological Care: Science Direct (2026) refers to management of gerontological care (MGC) as a team-based process that plans, coordinates, tracks health and social services for older adults. The goal of MGC is to keep older people independent, safe and healthy, while supporting their families. The core components of MGC include: health check, custom plan, safety fixes and team work. health check has to do with looking at mental, physical and memory need of the elderly. Custom plans refer to making a clear daily schedule for upkeep

of elderly in terms of medication and meals. Safety fixes is the process of removing fall hazard in the home and environment of the elderly. Team work refers to the fact that not only one professional is responsible for the care of the elderly, but many, working as a team, which includes social workers, doctors, nurses, therapists, etc.

Major and important tasks in management of gerontological care (MGC) include: stop over-medication, daily support, family help and ongoing watch. In stop over-medication drug lists are constantly check in order to avoid harmful side effects. Daily support has to do with arranging bathing, eating, moving around and cleaning elderly person's environment. Family help is the process of guiding elderly person's relatives through stress and making hard choices. Ongoing watch refers to adjusting the care plan as health of the elderly changes over time.

Management strategies presented by World Health Organization (2025) identified three fundamental strategies for care of the aged, namely: home care, assisted living and skilled nursing care. Home care refers to assistance provided by relatives or members of the family to their elderly members. Home care is the traditional care strategy or system for the elderly in African society, including Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria, where basic needs of the elderly are provided by their immediate family, where he or she stayed with. Assisted living is where the elder is provided with people who they are not related with to assist them in daily activities. Such assistance or experts like social workers are well trained. Skilled nursing is when elderly are placed in institutional or specialized nursing homes with comprehensive medical services.

Literature Review on Poverty and Elderly Abandonment

Poverty and elderly abandonment are deeply rooted in global discourse. When financial strain, a lack of social security and weak pension system are prevailing in the society, older adults are likely to lose their physical and economic support. This may explain or force many elderly persons into severe isolation, neglect or outright abandonment as families and those the elderly depend on struggle to survive.

Ajah-Okohu et al., (2024) study of many communities in Ebonyi State revealed that high level of poverty and other socio-cultural factors heightened the abandonment and abuse of elderly by children and extended families. The study indicated a situation where children abandoned their parents to urban areas due to poverty and lack, only coming home to celebrate funeral of abandoned parents. Another factor discovered in their study is frequent brainwashing of children that their parents are witches and wizards, and are causes of their misfortune and poverty

Eboiyehi (2013) studying elderly widows and poverty in rural Nigeria stated that poverty among elderly widow in Nigeria is the most pervasive and yet least recognized as a social problem. Using in-depth interview and focus group discussion, he found that spousal loss, poor and lack of property inheritance, low level of education and low occupation are poverty indicators that promotes the deplorable conditions of the widows and triggers abandonment and their eventual destitution. Though Calabar is not a rural area, this study is a useful insight which unraveled the indicators of poverty, as the relate to elderly abandonment.

Iremeka (2025) in Punch Newspaper painted a vivid portrait of elderly abandonment in Nigeria, occasioned by loneliness, neglect which are quite heartbreaking. Iremeka (2025) identified sources of elder poverty to include the contributing pension which is lower than the defined benefit scheme in terms of pensioner's take home, as well as cultural changes where older people are no more revered by family members as in olden days, difficulties and economic challenges faced by relatives also contributed to poverty experiences by the elderly. Literature review revealed the existence of elderly abandonment in Nigeria occasioned by poverty, which is investigated in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria on this study.

Theoretical Framework

Modernization theory of Aging was adopted as appropriate theoretical framework. The theory maintains that as societies shift from traditional rural systems to modern urban economies, the status and value of older people decline. For example, young people move to bigger cities like Lagos and Abuja for jobs and economic opportunities leaving elderly parents behind in rural areas and smaller urban areas. Traditional respect which invoked care of the elderly breakdown under the pressure of westernization and modern individualism. Consequently, older people are seen as economically unproductive rather than wise community anchors in a fast-paced monetary economy of modern time. The proponents of this theory were Donald Cowgill and Lowell Holmes (Cowgill & Holmes, 1972).

The modernization theory of aging explains the phenomenon of elderly abandonment, especially in the study area, Calabar, which is a relatively small urban settlement with less economic opportunities where younger ones are leaving to big cities like Lagos, Port Harcourt and Abuja to gain greater economic opportunities in the process of which their aged parents are neglected or abandoned. Cowgill and Holmes (1972), modernization theory of aging provided the theoretical foundation for analyzing elderly abandonment in developing societies, like Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. The modernization theory of aging is based on the assumption that the social status, power and influence of older adults decrease as a society becomes more modern, industrialized and urbanized.

Methodology

The study adopted ex-post facto survey design because the event has already occurred. A questionnaire titled "Poverty and Elderly Abandonment Questionnaire" was developed and used in collection of data from respondents. The geographical population of Calabar was crudely applied as study population being 289,900 people (NPC, 2006). To study the aged, a sample of 110 was taken and a return rate of 85.45 percent was obtained being 94 respondents. Both primary data from survey and secondary data from textbooks, journals, internet and other library materials were utilized. The instrument of data collection was structured dichotomously into "yes" and "no" responses. Experts in test and measurement validated the instrument contents, while reliability was ascertained through a pre-test with 20 percent of the total sample size, which provided the same result as the actual test. Data obtained was analyzed using chi-square statistical test at 0.05 significant level.

The study observed ethical requirements by ensuring anonymity of respondents. Ethical consideration is very fundamental in social research (Bassey, Bassey, Uzoh and Ushie, 2021). Elderly that were frail, consent of care givers or family member supporting was sort. Secondary materials used were adequately referenced. In few cases, approval was sought from institutions where elderly stayed to comply with ethical requirements, as some of the elderly were seen in institutions and medical establishment. The study was hindered by fund constrain, which limited the sample size and area of coverage. Another limitation was attitude to research, which affected cooperation of subjects and care-givers from attending easily to the researcher in the process of data gathering. Secondary data was also scarce as much as not been done about the topic, especially in the study area.

Study area: Calabar Municipality is one of the eighteen Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Calabar Municipality lies between latitude 04° 15 and 5° north, and longitude 8° 25 east (Bassey, 2024). In the north, Calabar Municipality is bounded by Odukpani Local Government Area and Great Qua River. In the southern shores, Calabar River and Calabar South Local Government Area. Calabar Municipality has an area of 331,551 square kilometers and with a population of 279,800 inhabitants (Bassey, 2024; National Population Commission, 2006). Calabar Municipality is divided into ten political wards, 540 is the postal code, with

three indigenous ethnic groups, namely: Efik, Quas and Efuts. People of other ethnic groups settled in Calabar Municipality, as the city is a state capital. The local government area is administered by the Calabar Municipality Council, headed by a chairman, with legislative and executive arms. The traditional occupation of the people are fishing, farming and hunting, as the city is situated in the water front with adjoining forest. Calabar municipality is also known for its tourism activities (Bassey, Bassey and Bassey, 2024).

There is high level of poverty in Calabar Municipal, which manifest as urban deprivation, food insecurity and income inequality (Ottong & Bassey, 2008). The high level of economic vulnerability is occasioned by a limited industrial base, high unemployment, underemployment and wide gaps in basic infrastructure. This high poverty in Calabar forced families to adopt coping strategies such as dietary adjustment or reduction of meal frequencies. Poverty being a broad economic strain in Calabar Municipality is revealed in adolescent street hawking, rising number of vulnerable street children driven from broken and impoverished homes, stranded and destitute elderly scattered around the town living in abandoned properties, vacant stores and under trees in the street (Bassey, 2024).

Data Analysis and Discussion

Out of 110 questionnaires administered, 94 were received back, giving a return rate of 85.45 percent, upon which analysis was made. Male 38 (40.43 percent), while female were 56 (59.57 percent). Educated were 80 being 85.11 percent and uneducated were 14 being 14.89 percent. 82 were Christians, being 87.23 percent while 12 practiced African Traditional Religion, being 12.77 percent. Only 27 were married, being 28.72 percent, while others were widows, widowers and separated 67, being 71.28 percent.

Implication of the demographic data was far reaching. Despite the vulnerable condition of the elderly subjects of the study, they were educated and literate, showing that education is not a barrier to elderly neglect or abandonment. Thus, both educated and uneducated elderly are subject to abandonment. The high level of education of the subject also reflects the general level of education in the study area, as noted by Bassey, Bassey & Uzoh in their study of community libraries and social development.

The sample consist more of male than female, implying that more males are abandoned than female. Consequently, gender does not restrict abandonment. Both male and female are abandoned. This is in line with Nair (2021) position that older men and women are at equal risk of abuse and abandonment.

The study data shows that 82 respondents being 87.23 percent were Christian, implying that majority of the people in the study area are of Christian faith. The remaining practiced different versions of African Traditional Religion. In Christianity, the Bible New International Version (2011) (Exodus 20:12) command believers to honour their father and mother, which implies taking good care of them. Consequently, members of Christian faith involving in elderly abandonment requires more to be reveal, if they actually abide by biblical injunctions. 27 respondents were married elderly (28.72 percent) showing that couples were also neglected by relative and children. In essence, not only separated, widow or widowers were involved or abandoned, elderly abandonment is a wide spread social problem affecting everyone in the society creating fear for the emerging greying society.

Test of Hypothesis

Null hypothesis: There is no association between poverty and abandonment of the elderly.

Items in the instrument: Poverty does not cause abandonment of the elderly

Significant level: $\alpha = 0.05$

Test statistics: Chi-square

Table 1: Computed chi-square table for hypothesis testing

Row/Column	Fo	Fe	Fo-Fe	(Fo-Fe) ²	$\frac{(Fo-Fe)^2}{Fe}$
1-1	37.95	38.82	-0.85	0.7569	0.0195
1-2	49.05	50.2	-1.15	1.3225	0.026
2-1	2.05	2.2	0.85	0.7225	0.3284
2-2	3.95	2.82	1.13	1.277	0.453
Total	94	94	0		$\Sigma 0.827$

Table value: df=1 and significant at 0.05 $X^2 = 3841$

Decision Rule: Null hypothesis (H_0) will be rejected if computed chi-square value is greater than the critical table value of chi-square that is where $X^2_{cal} \geq x^2_{0.05}$

Decision: Since the table value is > that computed value, null hypothesis (H_0) is accepted

Conclusion: There is no association between poverty and the abandonment of elderly.

Discussion of finding

Findings of hypothesis test revealed that there is no relationship between poverty and abandonment of the elderly. This finding negates Day (2007) position that poverty is the main reason why elderly ones are abandoned by their relates and care givers, leading to their wellbeing being compromised. The position of Day (2007) is shared by many other scholars (Burneet, et al., 2016; Ajah-Okolu, et al., 2024; Eboiyeh; 2013; Iremeka, 2025; and Ajomale, 2007).

Despite the findings of this study that poverty is not related to elderly abandonment going contrary to previous studies indicated above, it is in line with African Efik saying that “the poor has the mind to do what the rich cannot do”. This means that both poor and affluent people abandoned the elderly ones as shown by the finding of this investigation. Though Ajah-Okolu et al (2014) identified poverty as one of dwindling family support system, religious belief of brainwashing of misfortune trigger elderly abandonment more than poverty in Africa, which covers the study.

The open ended section of the instrument which requested respondents to provide causes of elderly abandonment, provided the following; absence of social security provisions for the elderly, absence of government policy, general accommodation crisis, religious beliefs and practices, hostile attitude of some elderly, disinterest of charity organizations in elderly, failure of government to provide institutional care facilities for the elderly, inadequate social awareness on need for elderly care, changes in social institutions like family, inequality in work places and social roles as predominant causes of elderly abandonment, outside poverty.

The modernization theory of aging provided by Cowgill and Holmes (1972), also give weight to the fact that poverty alone cannot account for elderly abandonment, but changes in structure of society and mode of production displaced the value of the elderly. Social structure of society anchored on nuclear family does not give room for accommodation of elderly grandparents. Social relations of production occasioned by modernity foster woman formal employment and separation of work from family, thereby promoting elderly abandonment due to their inability to fit into new production relations.

Conclusion

This study concludes that there is no relationship between poverty and abandonment of elderly in Calabar Municipality, where Efiks are majority and predominant ethnic group, with other

groups Efut and Quas that are indigenous to Calabar also having diversity of people from different tribes in Nigeria and outside Nigeria. The study examined the relationship between poverty and elderly abandonment in Calabar Municipality. The finding suggests that elderly abandonment cannot be attributed solely to the economic status of individuals or households in terms of their poverty level.

Although poverty may create different conditions and provide constraints for family caring and supporting their elderly ones, it indicates that other factors contribute more heavily to abandonment of the elderly. Such factors include religious belief, cultural practices, change in family structure, modernization influence, economic transaction and migration, attitude of elderly themselves and the care-powers. Consequently, addressing elderly abandonment in Calabar Municipality and Nigeria as a whole requires a broader approach which goes beyond poverty reduction programmes and strategies implementation, to adoption of management of gerontological care strategies.

Recommendations

Based on the finding that poverty is not significantly related to elderly abandonment in Calabar Municipality, Cross River State, Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

1. Strengthen family support system, encouraging maintenance of strong relationship with elderly members and provide them with adequate emotional, social and physical support, regardless of their economic circumstances.
2. Promotion of awareness on elderly care by government agencies, community leaders, religious institutions, non-governmental organizations, on the importance of caring for and protecting older persons.
3. Investigation of other causes of elderly neglect since poverty was found not to be significantly related to elderly abandonment and adoption gerontological management care strategies by institutions and agencies.
4. Improve social welfare services for older persons in terms of provision of institutional care homes, counselling services, social support, healthcare assistance and protection for vulnerable elderly people.
5. Encourage policies protecting elderly persons, that such policies are formulated, implemented and monitored at local, state and national level.
6. Overall, interventions aimed at reducing elderly abandonment should not focus exclusively on poverty, since there is no significant relationship found between poverty and elderly abandonment.

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