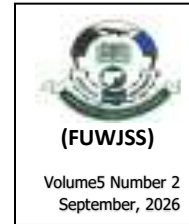


EFFECTS OF TRAUMATIC CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG UNIVERSITY OF JOS UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study examines how traumatic childhood experiences influence interpersonal relationships and criminal behaviour among undergraduate students at the University of Jos. Using a descriptive survey design, the study assessed childhood trauma as the independent variable and interpersonal relationship patterns and criminal behaviour as dependent variables. Two hundred students (100 males and 100 females), aged 16 to 28, were selected from the Faculties of Social Sciences, Education, Arts, Management Sciences, and Natural Sciences to ensure diverse representation. Data were collected using three standardized instruments: the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF), the Interpersonal Relationship Scale (IRS), and the Self-Report Delinquency Scale (SRDS). Three hypotheses were tested using Pearson Product–Moment Correlation and multiple regression analysis. Results revealed a strong, significant relationship between traumatic childhood experiences and interpersonal relationship difficulties ($r = .876, p < .01$). Similarly, traumatic experiences were significantly associated with higher tendencies toward criminal or antisocial behaviour ($r = .876, p < .01$). Regression results further showed that childhood trauma significantly predicted both interpersonal difficulties and criminal behaviour ($r = .520, p < .01$). The study concludes that childhood trauma negatively affects undergraduate students' relationships with others and increase the likelihood of antisocial or criminal behaviour. The study recommends that the University of Jos Management should adopt trauma-informed support systems, strengthen counseling services, and develop programmes that enhance students' interpersonal skills while reducing behavioural risks linked to early trauma.

Keywords: Trauma, counseling services, undergraduate students, antisocial, childhood

Introduction

Childhood is believed to be an essential phase of human development because it is a stage marked by the rapid progression of emotional, social,

and cognitive development (Clark et al., 2024; Gonçalves et al., 2025; Goomez et al., 2024). In this developmental stage, all kinds of experiences, whether they are positive or negative, can influence one's behavioural and interpersonal relationships in their adult years (Agbaje et al., 2021). Childhood trauma can be viewed from a broader perspective as any event that can pose a threat to the psychological well-being of a child, which includes physical, emotional, or sexual maltreatment, neglect, and witnessing violence (World Health Organization, 2022; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

Traumatic childhood experiences, which are sometimes referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), early-life stress, toxic stress, or developmental trauma, can be described as a combination of negative life events that happen to an individual during their childhood before reaching 18 years old (Heagele et al., 2025). Negative experiences such as abuse, neglect, family dysfunction, and neighborhood violence are considered a public health problem due to potential outcomes that adversely affect the psychosocial development of a person (Trivedi Pillai & Trivedi, 2021). Due to the adverse experiences, an individual might encounter severe difficulties in their adult life regarding their psychological health, personal relations, and social adjustment. Contextual factors, such as poverty, armed conflict, displacement, and poor child protection systems, contribute to the susceptibility of children to such adversities (Moyo et al., 2025).

Nigeria, just like every other developing nation, is bedeviled by instability in socioeconomic factors, cultural beliefs that legitimize the use of harsh punishment, which, in turn, predisposes children to trauma, and in the long run, if not addressed, can influence mental health and behavioral functioning (Annor et al., 2020). The effects of these negative encounters can also affect the developmental processes and interfere with the ability to form secure attachments, emotional regulation, and maintain social relationships (Aaraj et al., 2026; Fan et al., 2025; Warmingham et al., 2023; Valdes et al., 2025).

The effects are even more worrisome among university students because young adulthood is the time of identification and establishment of intimate relationships, and socialization is at its optimum. Studies have found that traumatic childhood events were linked to emotional dysregulation, executive functioning, and psychological distress, which extend beyond childhood to adulthood (Agbaje et al., 2021).

Children who suffer trauma tend to develop insecure patterns of attachment that later translate to a lack of trust, withdrawal from social activities, and an inability to form healthy relationships during adolescence and adulthood (Chahal & Shah, 2025). It has been proven that emotional abuse during childhood affects the development of interpersonal functioning

among adults more than physical abuse in terms of self-dependence, friendships, and social life (Nazir et al., 2023). Also, individuals who had been exposed to several adverse childhood experiences in the past are more likely to have trust issues or the inability to build emotional bonds, while those who had not been exposed to multiple adversities growing up are more likely to have healthier relationships and function optimally in a social context. (Daines et al., 2021).

Beyond interpersonal dysfunction and social challenges, it has been proven that traumatic childhood experiences are associated with antisocial and criminal behavior (Gomez Tabares, 2025). Exposure to adverse experiences increases the likelihood of maladaptive behaviours such as substance abuse, aggression, and delinquency (Tzouvara et al., 2023). These behavioral patterns are not only reflective of unresolved trauma. Still, they may also represent long-term neurobiological adaptations to chronic early-life stress, including altered development of prefrontal regulatory systems, heightened amygdala-driven threat responsivity, and impaired impulse control capacities (McLaughlin et al., 2020; Danese & McEwen, 2022; McEwen & Morrison, 2023).

Studies show that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are predictors of emotional dysregulation, aggression, and poor social functioning among youths, which leads to antisocial tendencies (Agbaje et al., 2021; Kliewer et al., 2024; Akintola et al., 2025). A study conducted among Nigerian university students and adolescents established that those who experienced childhood adversity report symptoms of impulsivity and behavioural problems (Agbaje et al., 2021; Akintola et al., 2025; Sekoni & Dania, 2024). Similarly, ACEs are linked to delinquent behavior, risky sexual behavior, and substance use, which can propel an individual to criminal behavior (Ojo et al., 2025; Chenube, 2025; Kliewer et al., 2024).

Mental health research shows that childhood trauma increases vulnerability to aggression and interpersonal conflict, which can persist into adulthood (Iweama et al., 2021; Umoke et al., 2021; Nwagu et al., 2021). From the foregoing, one can argue that traumatic childhood experiences contribute enormously to both relational dysfunction and criminal behavioural outcomes, particularly in contexts of poverty, weak social support, and limited access to mental health care (Ogunbemi et al., 2025; Akpunne et al., 2025).

It has been established that among tertiary-level students, the level of ACE is even more pronounced, as reported by different studies. Agbaje et al. (2021) investigated the prevalence of ACEs among all tertiary students across Southeast Nigeria, and found that about 86.7% of them had experienced one or more ACEs, with those who reported four or more ACEs having an odds ratio of 11.67 for psychological distress. On the same note,

Sekoni and Dania (2024) observed that 91.4% of tertiary students in Southwest Nigeria had been exposed to at least one ACE, while Muwanguzi et al. (2023) reported that 99.8% of the undergraduates in Uganda were exposed to at least one ACE, and that cumulative ACEs were correlated with depression severity and suicidal ideations. The severity of mental disorders among young people is also significantly influenced by early exposure to adverse events.

Ceccarelli et al. (2022) further explained that in many low- and middle-income countries, early exposure to traumatic experiences increases the risk of mental health problems among young people. Despite this, there is a dearth of empirical research that investigates the relationship between traumatic childhood experiences, interpersonal relationships, and criminal behaviour among Nigerian undergraduates, and it is against this background that the present study was undertaken.

Traumatic Childhood Experiences, Interpersonal Relationships and Criminal Behaviour

It has been established empirically that traumatic childhood experiences can significantly impact the psychological, social, and behavioural development of an individual (Blechner et al., 2024; Smith & Pollak, 2020). It is commonly assumed that people who were exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are those exposed to one or more traumas relating to abuse, neglect, and domestic violence during the course of their lives and are likely to face the long-term consequences or effects of the trauma that persist even when the events have ended. These long-term consequences can come in different forms and can cause them to behave in ways that deviate from the norms. This includes difficulties in regulating emotion, problems with interpersonal relationships, and maladaptive behaviors (Arnold et al., 2023; Rogers et al., 2022). Globally, it has been recorded that about 61% of adults report at least one ACE, while 1 in 6 experience four or more ACEs (CDC, 2023; WHO, 2020).

In Africa, traumatic childhood experiences have become even more prevalent, and the consequences are far-reaching, attracting the attention of different scholars. Amene et al. (2024) conducted a multicountry VACS analysis, in order to know the prevalence of traumatic childhood experiences. They reported a staggering number of 72% of females and 82% of males experienced at least one ACE, while 20% of females and 24% of males experienced three or more ACEs. The study also found that approximately 36%–55% reported physical violence and 8%–16% reported sexual violence based on country and sex.

In Nigeria, given the high burden of childhood adversity, scholars are working around the clock to demystify the causes and consequences. Agbaje

et al. (2021), in their study in understanding the association between ACEs and psychological distress among university students, found a strong correlation between ACEs and psychological distress faced by university students. Akintola et al. (2025) examined the severity of ACEs and reported that 70% of adolescents experienced at least one ACE, with 33.1% experiencing moderate and 13.4% had experienced severe adversity. The major finding in this study is that people who had experienced severe ACEs are more, compared to those with moderate ACEs. More so, Agwogie et al. (2024) investigated the negative consequences of ACEs in a Nigerian population and found that ACEs are linked to substance use behaviours in populations, which invariably lead to negative behavioural outcomes.

In spite of the effort by different scholars in an attempt to investigate traumatic childhood experiences, most have concentrated on psychological consequences such as depression and anxiety as the main outcomes, yet little has been done concerning how ACEs play a collective impact on interpersonal relationships and criminal behaviour. Ogunleye and Adeyemo (2020) carried out a survey of Adverse Childhood Experiences and Psychosocial Well-being of Pre-Clinical Medical Students in a Nigerian University among 277 respondents, males (N=139), females (N=138). It was found that 40.8% of individuals who had at least one ACE reported low self-esteem and poor psychological well-being (Adj OR=6.3, $p=.003$). Indeed, the implication of this result is that trauma-informed university interventions are deemed necessary to improve the psychosocial health and relationship outcomes among people who have experienced ACEs.

In addition, Zhang et al. (2024) performed a longitudinal cross-lagged network analysis of Childhood Trauma, Emotion Regulation, Peer Attachment, and Family Functioning in 1,280 adolescent males (N=531), females (N=749). It was discovered that people exposed to emotional abuse showed symptoms of maladaptive emotion regulation. Therefore, childhood trauma, especially when connected to emotional abuse, can lead to systematic disruptions in both emotional and interpersonal development during adolescence.

Similarly, Ifayomi, Ali and Ellis (2024) in a systematic review study investigated Child Sexual Abuse in Nigeria that synthesized N=31 empirical Nigerian studies out of 1,325 screened papers and found that the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse was found to range between 2.1% to 77.7% across Nigeria, with long-term effects such as poor relationship formation, anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Quan, Zhang, and Chen (2025) also examined Childhood Trauma and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction Among Chinese College Students among N=1,404 and found that childhood trauma had a direct and indirect impact on satisfaction in romantic relationships. Thus, the

finding establishes that childhood trauma affects the quality of romantic relationships.

Ojo and Adebayo (2025) conducted a cross-sectional survey on the influence of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Partner Selection Among Students with Hearing Impairment in South-West Nigeria among 600 participants, males (N=300), females (N=300). The result showed that the higher scores of ACE, predicted maladaptive partner selection choices. Fasesan and Jemilohun (2024), in a cross-sectional study on Childhood Trauma and Its Relationship with Anxiety, Depression, and Suicidal Ideation in Ilisan-Remo, Nigeria, among 501 participants, males (N=201), females (N=300), discovered that ACEs were associated with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, which can substantially impair interpersonal functioning

In terms of traumatic childhood experiences and criminal behavior, Atariata et al. (2022) studied Childhood Experiences and Perpetration of Violence in Delta State Prisons using a cross-sectional survey among N=293 male Nigerian prisoners. It was found that exposure to childhood violence (OR=2.0, $p=0.007$) and physical neglect (26.3%) were significant predictors of violent offending. Similarly, a systematic review and meta-analysis study by Astridge et al. (2023) explored ACEs: Prevalence in Youth Offenders and Their Effects on Youth Recidivism, synthesising N=31 mixed-gender studies. Youth recidivism was strongly predicted by cumulative ACEs. Findings indicated that childhood trauma has a significant impact on the probability of recidivism.

On the same note, Pessoa and Almeida (2024) explored The Link Between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Mental Health in offenders, in a systematic review and meta-analysis of N=12 mixed-gender studies in six databases. Those who had four or more ACEs had 15 times the likelihood of self-harm in prison. Olorunlambe and Adeniyi (2024) investigate PTSD and Depression Among Welfare- and Justice-Involved Adolescents in Nigeria. A cross-sectional research method was employed to collect data from 205 participants, including males (N=151), females (N=54). It was reported that early traumatic experiences were found to be a predictor of PTSD and depression, both of which are factors that increase the likelihood of engaging in crime.

Olorunlambe et al. (2025) examined the latent class study of Child Maltreatment and Psychopathology Among Institutionalized and Incarcerated Adolescents in Nigeria, and used a cross-sectional survey to receive information from 205 people, males (N=151), and females (N=54). The researcher discovered that two-thirds of people who were subjected to more than one type of maltreatment, and the multiple maltreatment group had the worst PTSD outcomes, which led to the conclusion that poly-

victimisation has a drastic negative effect on psychopathological and criminal trajectories in at-risk Nigerian youth.

Speranza et al. (2022) looked at the role of complex trauma and attachment patterns in intimate partner violence in adults. The researchers employed a mixed method to gather data from 179 females, comprising an IPV group (N=98) and a control group (N=81). The major finding was that women in the IPV group reported a higher rate of childhood interpersonal adversities and disorganized attachment states of mind than those in the control group. Thus, the conclusion is that unresolved childhood trauma can systematically disrupt relational functioning and create measurable vulnerability to interpersonal criminal violence in adulthood.

Jackson et al. (2023) explored a study on Adverse Childhood Experiences and Adolescent Delinquency: A Theoretically Informed Investigation using the UK Millennium Cohort Study among N=18,000. It was found that participants' cumulative ACEs at ages 5 and 7 significantly predicted delinquency at age 14, with low self-control, early delinquency, substance use, unstructured socialising, and disrupted parent-child attachment. Interestingly, it was established that childhood adversity influences criminal behaviour through multiple interconnected developmental mechanisms.

Basto-Pereira et al. (2022) examined the global impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on criminal behavior across 10 countries. The cross-sectional study was used to collect data from 3,797 young adults aged 18–20 years. Results showed that exposure to higher ACEs is a predictor of engaging in multiple criminal behaviours, including violence and antisocial acts, and greater offending risk.

Burke et al. (2023) conducted a latent class analysis to investigate Adverse Childhood Experiences and Pathways to Violent Behavior for Women and Men using a nationally representative United States sample among N=approximately 36,309 participants, males=approximately 17,600, females=approximately 18,709. They discovered that all ACE typology groups were significantly more likely to engage in violent behaviour than the low-adversity group (OR>2.10, p<.013), with the relationship between ACEs and violence significantly stronger among women.

Wang et al. (2025) conducted a longitudinal adolescent study to explore the Co-occurring Early Adolescent ACEs and Associations with Later Peer Relationships among a developmental sample. They found that Childhood trauma predicted poorer peer relationships, impaired social functioning, and increased relational conflict across adolescence, with interpersonal difficulties identified as a key developmental pathway linking early trauma to later maladaptive and criminal behaviour. Muhammad, Anjugu, & Akawu (2025) examined perceived relation between childhood trauma, resilience,

locus of control, and deviant behaviour. They adopted the survey approach to gather data from 270 secondary school students in Keffi, Nasarawa State, Nigeria. The result revealed that there was a strong positive association between childhood trauma and deviant behaviour, and that resilience and internal locus of control interplayed in this relationship.

Zhu et al. (2024) carried out a meta-analysis on Adverse Childhood Experiences and Intimate Partner Violence. The study analysed N=27 studies with 41 samples (65,330 participants). The results showed that there is a positive association between ACEs and IPV perpetration and victimisation. In another study, Ugwu, Ramadie, and Ajele (2024) carried out a cross-sectional study on Childhood Adversity and Peer Influence in Adolescent Bullying Perpetration among Nigerian adolescents. This study found that childhood adversity is a strong predictor of bullying and antisocial behaviour, with peer influence and personality moderating this association. This indicates that the social milieu is an important moderator of behaviour following early trauma.

Theoretical Framework

The Attachment Theory, originally developed by John Bowlby (1969), serves as a foundational framework for which child relationships with caregivers can be understood and how interpersonal relationships are formed later in life. Bowlby is of the opinion that the bond between a child and a primary caregiver forms the basis for which internal working model is developed which subsequently influences relationships and emotional regulation in the future. This theory is based on the premise that a secure attachment develops when caregivers are responsive and loving, and are consistent or emotionally available.

On the other hand, when the child is exposed to early childhood adverse experiences such as neglect and abuse, they tend to develop an insecure attachment pattern, including anxious and avoidant orientations. Studies have corroborated this evidence, showing that insecurities may be formed in the future as a result and can extend into adulthood, such that the individual may become vulnerable to anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and face relational difficulties (Çarıkçı-Özgül & Işık, 2024; Blake et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025).

Within the university setting, students who may have experienced these challenges often find it difficult to build intimacy, have problems with communication, and cooperation. This may lead to social isolation or may result in conflictual interactions. Furthermore, it has also been established that insecure attachment is associated with externalizing behaviors such as aggression, impulsivity, and antisocial tendencies, which may precipitate

into criminal conduct when coupled with environmental stressors (van IJzendoorn et al., 2023).

Research Methodology

The descriptive cross sectional survey research design was adopted for this study. This design was deemed appropriate because it gave the researchers the liberty so that they can collect quantitative data from the population as defined, as well as describe and examine relationships between variables as they naturally existed. Therefore, through this approach, data on traumatic childhood experiences, interpersonal relationships, and criminal behaviour among University of Jos students were gathered using standardized self-report questionnaires.

The total sample for this study is two hundred (200) undergraduate students from the University of Jos. The participants were drawn from the Faculties of Social Sciences, Education, Arts, Management Sciences, and Natural Sciences to ensure that there is an adequate representation that cuts across various academic and social backgrounds. The sample comprised of 100 male and 100 female students between the ages of 16 to 28 years. This age range was selected because it best reflected the period of late adolescence and early adulthood, which is often considered to be the stage where the manifestation of interpersonal relationship patterns mostly exists, and behavioural expressions linked to earlier traumatic experiences become problematic.

Data for this study were collected using a structured questionnaire composed of four sections (A–D). The questionnaire integrated demographic information and three standardized psychological scales relevant to the constructs of childhood adversity, interpersonal relationship patterns, and behavioural tendencies.

Childhood trauma was assessed using a 12-item version of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Scale, which was originally developed by Felitti et al. (1998) under the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente ACE Study. The scale examined major categories of early-life adversity, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; neglect; parental conflict or separation; domestic violence; household substance misuse; household mental illness; and incarceration of a family member. Items were rated using a Yes (1) or No (0) response format. The ACEs scale has been validated across different populations and consistently shows a strong predictive validity for psychological and behavioural outcomes in later life (Mei et al., 2022; Afifi et al., 2020).

Interpersonal relationships were evaluated using a short form of the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL). The instrument was developed by Cohen and Hoberman (1983). The instrument assessed

perceived social support, including domains such as companionship, emotional closeness, guidance, and tangible assistance. Items on the scale was rated on a 4-point scale, where: 1= Definitely True, 2= Probably True, 3= Definitely False, 4= Probably False. Regarding psychometric properties, it has shown strong psychometric property with reliability coefficients typically above .80 and has demonstrated construct validity across different age groups and sociocultural contexts (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983).

Behavioural tendencies were measured using the Deviant Behaviour Variety Scale (DBVS) developed by Elliott and Ageton (1980). The instrument is made up of 19 items that capture an array of deviant behaviours, including aggression, theft, vandalism, illicit drug use, truancy, and other antisocial acts. Responses were dichotomous: Yes (1) if the respondent had ever engaged in the behaviour, or No (0) if they had not. The DBVS is widely used in adolescent and young adult research and has demonstrated excellent reliability and strong predictive validity for externalizing behaviours (Elliott & Ageton, 1980; Huizinga & Elliott, 1986).

Before the distribution of the questionnaire, an introductory letter was obtained from the Department of Psychology, University of Jos, to seek formal permission from the university authorities to conduct the study. After approval was granted, the researchers visited lecture halls to distribute the questionnaires to students who met the inclusion criteria and were willing to participate. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, confidentiality was guaranteed, the risk and benefits of participating was explained, and the right to withdraw at any point of the research. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before they completed the questionnaire. The questionnaires were filled out on the spot and immediately collected by the researchers to ensure a high response rate.

The data obtained from the respondents were subsequently coded using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Both Descriptive and inferential statistics as used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to analyse and present the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. As per the inferential statistic, Pearson Product–Moment Correlation analysis was employed to test the relationships between traumatic childhood experiences, interpersonal relationships, and criminal behaviour among the students. The hypotheses were tested at a 0.01 level of significance, and the results were presented in tables for clear interpretation.

Results and Discussions

Results obtained after analyzing data collected in the study are presented in this section. Both the descriptive and inferential aspects of the analyses are presented

Table 1: Frequency and Percentages of Socio-Demographic Variables

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	
Gender	Male	114	57.0	
	Female	86	43.0	
Marital Status	Single	182	91.0	
	Married	15	7.5	
	Divorced/Separated	3	1.5	
Level of Study	100 Level	28	14.0	
	200 Level	32	16.0	
	300 Level	14	7.0	
	400 Level	58	29.0	
	500 Level	18	9.0	
Faculty	Postgraduate (MSc/PhD)	50	25.0	
	Social Sciences	58	29.0	
	Natural Sciences	40	20.0	
	Arts and Humanities	25	12.5	
	Education	25	12.5	
	Health Sciences	20	10.0	
	Engineering	12	6.0	
	Law	10	5.0	
	Agricultural Sciences	10	5.0	
Accommodation Type	Off-Campus	86	43.0	
	Hostel	54	27.0	
	Living with Family/Relative	60	30.0	
Parents' Education	Highest	Primary	12	6.0
		Secondary	48	24.0
		Tertiary	120	60.0
		No Formal/Prefer Not to Say	20	10.0
Childhood Structure	Family	Both Parents	122	61.0
		Single Parent	122	61.0
		Guardian/Relative	42	21.0
		Orphan/Institutional Care	26	13.0

Table 1 displays the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The results indicate that males (57%) constituted a slightly higher proportion of the sample compared to females (43%), suggesting a relatively balanced

gender representation. Most participants were single (91%), while a small proportion were married (7.5%) or divorced/separated (1.5%). In terms of academic level, the majority were in 400 level (29%), followed by postgraduate students (25%) and those in 200 level (16%), showing good coverage across academic stages. The faculty distribution reveals that most respondents were from the Faculty of Social Sciences (29%), followed by Natural Sciences (20%), while Law and Agricultural Sciences each accounted for the least representation (5%). Regarding accommodation, 43% lived off-campus, 30% stayed with family or relatives, and 27% resided in hostels. Parental education showed that most participants' parents had tertiary education (60%), followed by secondary education (24%), while only 6% had parents with primary education. Concerning childhood family structure, a larger proportion of respondents grew up with both parents (61%), while 21% were raised by guardians or relatives, and 13% had experienced orphanhood or institutional care. This distribution provides a diverse representation of the student population across key demographic variables.

Table 2: Relationship Between Traumatic Childhood Experiences and Interpersonal Relationships on criminal behaviour among University of Jos Students

		Traumatic childhood experiences	Interpersonal relationships
Traumatic childhood experiences	Pearson Correlation	1	.876**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	200	200
Interpersonal relationships	Pearson Correlation	.876**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	200	200

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 indicates a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between traumatic childhood experiences and interpersonal relationships among University of Jos undergraduate students ($r = .876$, $p < .01$). This suggests that students who report higher levels of traumatic experiences in childhood are more likely to experience difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, which in turn may contribute to tendencies toward criminal behaviour. The significant correlation highlights those early adverse experiences can negatively affect social interactions, trust, and emotional bonding, potentially increasing vulnerability to antisocial or criminal actions later in life. Therefore, the hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between traumatic

childhood experiences, interpersonal relationships, and criminal behaviour among University of Jos students is supported.

Table 3: Relationship between Traumatic Childhood Experiences and Criminal Behavior among University of Jos Students

		Traumatic childhood experiences	Criminal behavior
Traumatic childhood experiences	Pearson Correlation	1	.876**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	200	200
Criminal behavior	Pearson Correlation	.876**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	200	200

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 presents the relationship between traumatic childhood experiences and criminal behavior among University of Jos students. The result shows a strong positive correlation ($r = .876$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of traumatic childhood experiences are significantly associated with increased criminal behavior tendencies among the students. This implies that individuals who have experienced more childhood trauma are more likely to engage in criminal or antisocial behaviors. The finding supports the hypothesis that traumatic experiences during childhood have a significant influence on the development of behavioral problems, including criminality, in later life.

Table 4: Correlation between Traumatic Childhood Experiences, Interpersonal Relationships, and Criminal Behavior among University of Jos Students

Control Variables			Interpersonal relationships	Criminal behavior
Traumatic childhood experiences	Interpersonal relationships	Correlation	1.000	.520
		Significance (2-tailed)	.	.000
		df	0	197
	Criminal behavior	Correlation	.520	1.000
		Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.
		df	197	0

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson correlation results in Table 4 show a significant positive relationship between traumatic childhood experiences and both interpersonal relationship difficulties and criminal behavior among University of Jos students ($r = .520, p < .01$). This implies that students who reported higher levels of traumatic experiences in childhood are more likely to experience challenges in forming or maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships and exhibit tendencies toward criminal or deviant behaviors. Therefore, the hypothesis that traumatic childhood experiences significantly predict interpersonal relationship difficulties and criminal behavior among University of Jos students is supported.

This study investigated the impact of traumatic childhood experiences on interpersonal relationships and criminal behavior among students of the University of Jos. The results show that greater childhood trauma is positively related to deficits in establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, as well as engagement in criminal or antisocial acts. Specifically, Table 3 shows a strong and significant link between traumatic childhood experiences and criminal behaviour ($r = .876, p < .01$). In simple terms, students with more childhood trauma were more likely to show antisocial or criminal tendencies. Difficulties in interpersonal relationships partially mediated the association between childhood trauma and criminal behavior, implying that impaired social functioning can be linked to early adverse experiences.

The relationship between childhood trauma and interpersonal difficulties shows that early trauma has long-lasting social implications. The higher the score on trauma, the greater the difficulties in trust, communication, and emotional regulation. This is consistent with this finding, Ifayomi, Ali, and Ellis (2022) and Ojo and Adebayo (2025), who found that childhood abuse adversely affects adult interpersonal functioning. The present study extends the effects of trauma beyond clinical and forensic populations to university students.

The significant relationship between childhood trauma and criminal behavior found in this study supports previous Atariata et al. (2022) and Olorunlambe et al. (2025), who reported that high rates of antisocial and criminal behaviors are associated with higher exposure to adverse childhood experiences. The current research has shown that even among students, a population not typically associated with crime, traumatic experiences can predispose individuals to engage in antisocial acts.

The partial mediation effect of difficulties in interpersonal relationships linking trauma and criminal behavior shows the ways through which early adversity can lead to the outcomes of antisocial behaviors. This finding resonates with studies such as Basto-Pereira et al. (2022) and Burke et al. (2023), which emphasize the role of relational and identity-based processes

in shaping behavioral trajectories following childhood adversity. Specifically, difficulties with social skills, trust, and emotion regulation may put individuals at risk for antisocial behavior, suggesting the need to address relational functioning as a key intervention target.

The findings of this study research have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they support the social pathway model by showing that social difficulties mediate the association between childhood trauma and problematic outcomes. Pragmatically, the findings support the provision of trauma-sensitive programs in schools, such as screening for childhood adversities, counselling services, and social-emotional skills training to promote relational skills. The prevention of adverse emotional and relational outcomes of trauma may have a positive effect on reducing antisocial and criminal behavior, and overall well-being of the students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the study shows that traumatic childhood experiences have far-reaching consequences for social functioning, interpersonal relationships, and criminal behaviour, and, while to a degree mediated by interpersonal relationships, are also directly predictive of later antisocial behavior and criminal acts. Given that childhood maltreatment can negatively affect social functions, interpersonal relationships, criminal behaviour, and antisocial behavior of young adults, including university students, there is a need to include elements during interventions targeting relationship skills while also attempting to prevent criminal acts and social problems.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the university build on the trauma-sensitive counselling programmes provided by its Psychological Service Center, in collaboration with other departments in the university. More so, social and emotional learning strategies should be incorporated to train student service employees to promote social skills and the prevention of antisocial behaviour. The university should establish peer-mentoring and support group programmes for university students that encourage positive social interactions, especially among trauma - affected students. In addition, policymakers should consider prevention approaches for child abuse, child neglect, and child violence by collaboration with schools and various local groups.

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