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Learning Under Duress: The Influence of Community Insecurity on Student Dropouts in Public Secondary Schools in Mandera West, Kenya

By

[1]Hafid Mohamed Sheikh, [2]Dr. Ruth Kimeu and [3]Prof. Moses K. Rotich

[1]Postgraduate Student, School of Education and Social Sciences, Lukenya University, Kenya
[2]Lecturer, School of Education and Social Sciences, Lukenya University, Kenya Associate
[3]Professor, School of Education and Social Sciences, Lukenya University, Kenya

Abstract
This article investigates the influence of community security levels on student dropout rates in the public secondary schools of Mandera West Sub-County, a pastoralist, borderland region of Kenya characterized by recurrent conflict. The major assumption of the study is that student dropout is a persistent challenge to achieving universal secondary education, particularly in regions marked by fragility and insecurity. The study's objective was to establish the influence of community security levels on student dropouts. Guided by Relative Deprivation and Systems Theories, the research employed a cross-sectional descriptive design. Data were collected from 245 secondary school students using structured questionnaires. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis via SPSS Version 28. The findings reveal a profound and statistically significant relationship between insecurity and school dropouts. Community insecurity, characterized by tribal conflicts, bandit attacks, and border disputes, was perceived by students as a major threat. A strong, negative, and statistically significant correlation was found between community security and student dropout rates ($r = -0.827$, $p < .000$), indicating that as security deteriorates, dropouts increase significantly. Regression analysis confirmed that community security was the most powerful predictor of school dropouts among all socio-economic factors studied ($\beta = -0.674$, $p < .000$). The study concludes that community insecurity creates a climate of fear, economic instability through livestock theft, and school disruptions, which collectively act as a primary driver of school dropouts in the region. The findings underscore the urgent need for education policies to be integrated with peace-building and security interventions. The study recommends strengthening community policing, deploying more security personnel to protect schools, and implementing conflict-sensitive educational programs to build resilience among students in conflict-affected borderland areas.

Keywords: Student Dropout, Community Insecurity, Conflict, Pastoralist Education, Mandera, Kenya, Borderland, School Safety

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1. Introduction

The global commitment to achieving Universal Secondary Education, as enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals, faces its most formidable challenges in regions marked by fragility, conflict, and violence. While factors such as poverty and school quality are widely acknowledged as drivers of school dropouts, the pervasive and often paralyzing impact of community insecurity on educational continuity remains a critical yet under-researched area, particularly in the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) of sub-Saharan Africa. In these contexts, education is not just a pathway to economic mobility but is a beacon of hope and a crucial investment in peace and stability. However, the very act of attending school can become a high-risk endeavor when the surrounding community is plagued by conflict.

Kenya's North-Eastern region, and Mandera County in particular, epitomizes this challenge. The county consistently records the highest rates of out-of-school children in the nation, with official statistics placing the figure at a staggering 27.2% (Akoth, 2024). This educational crisis unfolds against a backdrop of complex and overlapping security threats, including inter-clan conflicts often revolving around scarce resources like pasture and water, banditry and livestock rustling that destabilize the pastoralist economy, and the persistent threat of cross-border attacks from extremist groups. This environment of chronic insecurity creates a state of "learning under duress," where the pursuit of education is constantly negotiated against the primal need for safety.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the Kenyan government's policies aimed at increasing access to secondary education, such as subsidized fees and constituency bursaries, student dropout rates in Mandera West Sub-County remain alarmingly high. While socio-economic factors like household poverty and parental involvement are often cited as primary causes, these explanations are insufficient to capture the full complexity of the dropout phenomenon in a conflict-affected borderland region. The persistent climate of fear, the disruption of livelihoods through livestock theft, the displacement of families, and the direct targeting of educational infrastructure and personnel constitute a powerful, yet not fully understood, set of drivers forcing students out of school.

While some research has explored the impact of large-scale conflicts (like insurgencies) on national education systems (Wanjara & Ogembo, 2024), there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the specific, localized impact of low-intensity, recurrent community insecurity on secondary school persistence. Most studies on school dropouts in Kenya have focused on more stable regions, examining factors like poverty, early marriage, or school-based issues. There is a scarcity of empirical research that systematically investigates how the specific manifestations of insecurity in Mandera West—tribal conflicts, banditry, and border disputes—directly influence a student's decision or ability to remain in school. This study is, therefore, propelled by the critical need to fill this gap by empirically

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establishing the influence of community security levels on student dropouts in the public secondary schools of Mandera West Sub-County.

The core objective of this article is to establish the influence of community security levels on students' dropouts in public secondary schools in Mandera West Sub-County, Mandera County, Kenya.

2. Literature Review

This review synthesizes empirical literature and theoretical frameworks to contextualize the relationship between community insecurity and educational outcomes. It examines studies from global conflict zones, regional African contexts, and specific Kenyan cases to build a foundation for understanding the unique situation in Mandera West.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by a dual theoretical lens that helps to explain both the individual-level and systemic-level impacts of insecurity on education.

2.1.1 Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT)

Originally conceptualized by Samuel Stouffer, Relative Deprivation Theory posits that feelings of discontent and frustration arise not from absolute deprivation but from the perception that one's group is unfairly disadvantaged compared to others (Boakye & Béland, 2019). In the context of Mandera, this theory is highly relevant for understanding the root causes of the insecurity itself. Inter-clan conflicts and banditry are often fueled by a sense of relative deprivation over access to resources (pasture, water, political power) and a perception of historical or ongoing marginalization. This environment of conflict, born from deprivation, in turn creates a new layer of deprivation for students. When insecurity forces school closures, displaces families, or creates a climate of fear, students are deprived of their right to a safe and continuous education. They may feel a profound sense of hopelessness and frustration when they compare their disrupted schooling to the stable educational environment of peers in more peaceful parts of the country. This psychological toll—a feeling of being left behind and having one's future unjustly compromised—can be a powerful internal driver for dropping out.

2.1.2 Systems Theory

Developed by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, Systems Theory views society and its institutions as complex, interconnected systems where each part influences the others (Senekal, 2020). A school is not an isolated entity but an open system that is deeply embedded within and interacts with its surrounding environment, including the family, the community, the economy, and the security apparatus. From a systems perspective, student dropout is not an isolated event but an "output" of a dysfunctional system. Community insecurity represents a major disruption or "stressor" to the broader social system. This external shock directly impacts multiple sub-systems: it destabilizes the family sub-system through displacement and economic loss (livestock theft); it weakens the school sub-system through teacher absenteeism and attacks on infrastructure; and it erodes the community sub-system by breaking down social cohesion and trust. According to this theory, the failure of the security sub-system inevitably leads to a breakdown in the educational sub-system, manifesting as high dropout rates. This framework is essential for understanding that addressing school

dropouts in Mandera requires interventions that target not just the school itself, but the entire dysfunctional system, particularly the failures in community security.

2.2 Empirical Literature on Insecurity and School Dropouts

The devastating impact of conflict and insecurity on education is well-documented at a global level. Research in conflict zones like Afghanistan, Syria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo has consistently shown that insecurity is a primary driver of school dropouts. Armed conflict leads to the destruction of schools, the killing and abduction of students and teachers, and mass displacement, all of which bring education to a standstill (UNESCO, 2011). Bragg (2020), in a study on US high schools, found that even lower-level insecurity, such as the presence of violence in the surrounding neighborhood, was associated with higher odds of students dropping out, as it creates a perception of unsafety that undermines the learning environment. This suggests that the psychological impact of insecurity is as important as the physical threats.

In Africa, the link between conflict and educational disruption is particularly stark. The insurgency of Boko Haram in Nigeria provides a tragic example, where the direct targeting of schools ("Western education is forbidden") led to the closure of hundreds of institutions, the abduction of students, and a massive increase in dropout rates, particularly for girls (Ojukwu, 2017). Wanjara and Ogembo (2024) further argue that the creation of a pervasive climate of fear and the displacement of entire communities are the primary mechanisms through which such insurgencies destroy educational systems. These large-scale conflicts, however, differ in nature from the more localized, recurrent inter-clan violence and banditry characteristic of regions like Mandera.

In Kenya, research on insecurity and education has predominantly focused on pastoralist areas affected by cattle rustling. A study by Kipkorir (2014) in Baringo County established a direct link between cattle rustling and poor school participation. The study found that raids led to displacement, loss of family income (as livestock is the main economic asset), and trauma, all of which forced children out of school. Ngari and Wakiaga (2018), in a study on urban slums in Nairobi, also found that community insecurity, including crime and gang violence, negatively impacted school enrolment and attendance. Parents were often reluctant to send their children to school through unsafe routes, and the constant stress of living in a violent environment negatively affected students' ability to concentrate and learn.

Despite this body of work, a specific gap exists in the literature concerning the context of Mandera. While the county's educational crisis is widely reported, there is a lack of systematic, empirical research that specifically disaggregates the different forms of community insecurity (tribal conflicts, banditry, border disputes) and measures their distinct influence on secondary school dropout rates. Most studies have either focused on different regions of Kenya or have examined insecurity as a general concept without exploring its specific local manifestations. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a focused analysis of how these specific security challenges operate as drivers of school dropout in the unique context of Mandera West Sub-County.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional descriptive research design to systematically describe and analyze the influence of community security levels on student dropouts. This design was chosen for its appropriateness in capturing a snapshot of the prevailing situation and

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exploring relationships between variables as they exist in their natural setting, without any manipulation by the researcher (Siedlecki, 2020).

The study was conducted in Mandera West Sub-County, a region characterized by a pastoralist economy and significant security challenges. The target population comprised 1960 students from the three public secondary schools in the sub-county. A sample size of 332 students was calculated using Yamane's (1967) formula and was drawn using stratified sampling, with each school serving as a stratum to ensure proportional representation.

The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire administered to the sampled students. The questionnaire included sections on demographics and the four independent variables of the larger study. The section on community security contained Likert-scale items designed to measure students' perceptions of the prevalence of different security threats (tribal conflicts, bandit attacks, border disputes) and their overall assessment of the impact of insecurity on school attendance. Open-ended questions were also included to gather qualitative insights on students' lived experiences. The validity of the instrument was ensured through expert review by university supervisors, and its reliability was established through a pilot study in a neighboring sub-county, which yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.862 for the overall scale.

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using SPSS Version 28. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics, specifically Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis, were employed to test the study's hypothesis and determine the strength and significance of the relationship between community security levels and student dropouts. Qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed thematically to provide context and depth to the quantitative findings. All ethical protocols, including obtaining a NACOSTI research permit and ensuring informed, voluntary consent from participants, were strictly followed.

4. Findings

The findings are presented in two main sections. The first details the descriptive statistics that outline students' perceptions of the security environment. The second presents the inferential analysis, which statistically quantifies the relationship between community security and school dropouts.

4.1 Descriptive Findings: Perceptions of the Security Environment

Students were asked to rate the frequency of various security threats in their community. The results, presented in Table 1, indicate a high level of perceived insecurity.

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Table 1: Perceived Occurrence of Insecurity Indicators in the Community (N=245)

Indicator of Insecurity	Never / Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often / Always (%)	Mean	Std. Dev.
Tribal Conflicts	23.3%	2.0%	74.7%	4.04	1.353
Bandit Attacks	20.0%	18.4%	61.6%	3.81	1.503
Border Disputes	18.8%	5.7%	75.5%	4.01	1.463
Terrorism	20.4%	6.9%	72.6%	3.93	1.483
Kidnapping	71.4%	4.1%	24.5%	1.99	1.383

Source: Field Data 2025

The study sought to establish the extent to which various insecurity indicators affect the community. The results indicate that tribal conflicts, border disputes, and terrorism are the most prominent threats. Specifically, 74.7% of respondents reported that tribal conflicts occur "often or always," with a mean of 4.04 (SD=1.353). Similarly, 75.5% identified border disputes as frequent (M=4.01, SD=1.463), while 72.6% pointed to terrorism (M=3.93, SD=1.483). These high mean values suggest that these forms of insecurity are not only widespread but also deeply entrenched in the social fabric of the affected communities.

Bandit attacks also emerged as a significant insecurity concern, with 61.6% of respondents reporting them as common (M=3.81, SD=1.503). While slightly lower than tribal conflicts and border disputes, these figures demonstrate that banditry remains a persistent menace, particularly in regions where pastoralist lifestyles dominate and competition over resources is high.

In contrast, kidnapping was perceived as less prevalent, with only 24.5% of respondents indicating it occurs frequently, compared to 71.4% who reported it as “never or rarely” happening. This is reflected in its low mean score of 1.99 (SD=1.383), suggesting that although kidnapping is a serious crime when it occurs, it is not as pervasive as other forms of insecurity in the study area.

Overall, the results demonstrate that insecurity is multi-dimensional, with ethnic rivalries, territorial disputes, and extremist activities standing out as the most critical threats. These findings underscore the need for multi-sectoral interventions that address the root causes of conflict, including ethnic tensions, boundary disagreements, and radicalization. By contrast, while kidnapping is less frequent, it still requires preventive measures to protect vulnerable populations.

Students were also asked to describe the prevalence of school attacks and livestock theft. The results in Table 2 reveal a critical distinction.

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Table 2: Perceived Frequency of School Attacks and Livestock Theft (N=245)

Insecurity Type	Very Low / Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High / Very High (%)	Mean	Std. Dev.
Number of School Attacks	69.0%	4.1%	27.0%	1.88	1.620
Number of Livestock Stolen	21.7%	11.8%	66.6%	3.69	1.174

Source: Field Data 2025

While direct attacks on schools were perceived as a low-frequency event (M=1.88), the theft of livestock was perceived as a very high-frequency event (M=3.69), with two-thirds of students rating it as "High" or "Very High." This suggests that the primary impact of insecurity is not necessarily through direct violence against schools, but through the economic destabilization of families via livestock rustling.

Finally, when asked to what extent community insecurity influences school dropouts, the response was overwhelming. As shown in Table 3, a combined 87.8% of students felt that insecurity influences dropouts to a "Large" or "Very Large Extent."

Table 3: Perceived Extent of Community Insecurity's Influence on School Dropout Rates (N=245)

Extent of Influence	Frequency	Percent (%)
To a Small Extent	3	1.2%
Undecided	27	11.0%
To a Large Extent	72	29.4%
To a Very Large Extent	143	58.4%
Total	**245**	**100.0%**

Source: Field Data 2025

4.2 Inferential Analysis: The Statistical Link Between Insecurity and Dropouts

To test the fourth hypothesis (**H_{04}:** *There is no statistically significant relationship between community security levels and students' dropouts*), Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted.

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4.2.1 Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong, negative, and highly statistically significant correlation between community security and student dropout rates ($r = -0.827$, $p < .000$). The negative sign indicates that as community security improves (a higher score), student dropout rates decrease. Conversely, as security deteriorates, dropouts increase. A correlation coefficient of -0.827 is exceptionally strong, indicating a very powerful and predictable relationship between these two variables.

4.2.2 Regression Analysis

The multiple regression model, which included all four socio-economic factors, confirmed the preeminence of security as a predictor. The results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients for Predictors of School Dropouts

Model	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	p-value
(Constant)		.000
Household Income	.599	.000
Parental Involvement	-.415	.000
Peer Pressure	.209	.000
Community Security	-.674	.000

$R^2 = 0.803$

Source: Field Data 2025

The results show that community security was the most powerful predictor of student dropouts ($\beta = -0.674$, $p < .000$). The standardized beta coefficient of -.674 is substantially larger than that of any other variable in the model, including household income. This means that, even when accounting for the effects of poverty, parental involvement, and peer pressure, the level of community security has the single largest and most significant unique impact on whether a student stays in school or drops out. Based on these highly significant findings, the null hypothesis was decisively rejected.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling and unequivocal evidence that community insecurity is a primary and powerful driver of student dropouts in the public secondary schools of Mandera West Sub-County. The analysis reveals a story where the pursuit of education is fundamentally undermined by a pervasive and multi-faceted security crisis. The study's conclusion is built on the strong triangulation of descriptive perceptions and robust inferential statistics.

The descriptive findings paint a vivid picture of the environment in which these students learn. The perception that tribal conflicts, banditry, and border disputes are frequent occurrences confirms that insecurity is not an abstract threat but a lived, daily reality. This constant exposure to conflict creates a climate of fear and trauma that is fundamentally antithetical to a productive learning environment. This aligns with the findings of Ojukwu (2017), who argued that an insecure school environment significantly and negatively affects academic performance, which is a key precursor to dropping out.

A critical nuance that emerged from the data is the primary mechanism through which insecurity impacts education. While direct attacks on schools were reported as relatively

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infrequent, the theft of livestock was perceived as a rampant and constant threat. This is a crucial insight. It suggests that the most powerful way insecurity drives dropouts in this pastoralist context is not through direct violence against students but through economic devastation. As Kipkorir (2014) found in his study on cattle rustling, livestock represents the core economic asset for pastoralist families. When this asset is stolen, a family's ability to pay for the "hidden costs" of education—uniforms, supplies, boarding fees—is destroyed, forcing them to withdraw their children from school. This economic shock, coupled with the potential for displacement as families move in search of safety, creates a perfect storm for educational disruption.

The inferential analysis provides the statistical backbone to these perceptions. The exceptionally strong negative correlation ($r = -0.827$) between security and dropouts is a stark indicator of this relationship. More importantly, the regression analysis, which positions community security as the single most powerful predictor of dropouts ($\beta = -0.674$)—stronger even than household income—is the study's most significant contribution. It suggests that in a context like Mandera West, poverty and insecurity are not separate issues; they are deeply intertwined. Insecurity is a direct cause of poverty. Therefore, interventions that focus solely on financial support (like bursaries) without addressing the underlying security crisis will likely fail, as they are treating a symptom rather than the root cause.

These findings resonate powerfully with the study's theoretical frameworks. From a Systems Theory perspective, the chronic failure of the security system (policing, conflict resolution) has a cascading, destructive effect on the entire social ecosystem, leading to the breakdown of the family economic system and, consequently, the educational system. From a Relative Deprivation Theory standpoint, the constant disruption and fear engender a profound sense of hopelessness among students. They are deprived of the safety and stability that their peers in other parts of the country take for granted, leading to a loss of motivation and the ultimate decision to drop out.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to establish the influence of community security levels on student dropouts in a conflict-affected, pastoralist region of Kenya. The findings have demonstrated, with both qualitative and statistical certainty, that community insecurity is not just one factor among many, but is arguably the most powerful and pervasive driver of school dropouts in Mandera West Sub-County. The climate of fear, the economic shocks caused by livestock rustling, and the general instability created by tribal and border conflicts combine to make the continuation of education an untenable proposition for many students and their families.

The primary contribution of this article is its empirical validation of the centrality of security in educational outcomes in fragile borderland regions. It moves the discourse beyond a general acknowledgment of the problem to a statistical quantification of its impact, showing that security is a more powerful predictor of dropouts than even poverty itself. The implications for policy are profound. Educational planning in regions like Mandera cannot be conducted in a vacuum. To be effective, educational policies must be deeply integrated with security and peace-building strategies. Interventions such as strengthening community policing, deploying security forces to protect schools and communities, and implementing cross-border peace initiatives are not just security issues; they are fundamental educational prerequisites. Without a foundation of safety and stability, even the most well-funded and well-designed educational programs are destined to fail.

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