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At-Risk Youth as a Source of Peacebuilding: Findings from a Field Survey in Liberia

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Abstract

At-risk youth, who are disconnected and marginalized from others, are considered a threat to national security as well as human security in Liberia. Using data from a field survey conducted in March 2025, this study examines at-risk youth in Liberia. First, we characterize at-risk youth based on four factors: sleeping places, drinking habits, chronic infectious diseases, and affiliation with in-groups such as gangs or ghetto groups. Then, we examine how at-risk youth are distributed across the country. These youth are present in both urban and rural areas, regardless of gender. This study also shows that being at risk is associated with education level and unemployment status. At-risk youth tend to alienate themselves from their families, and they are less likely to trust others. However, they are likely to participate in community meetings, just as youth who are not at risk do. Their active participation in community meetings could mitigate their vulnerability and reduce the risk of conflict. Furthermore, this study identifies that a significant portion of the non-youth respondents and the majority of the ex-combatants remain in an at-risk state. These results demonstrate that vulnerable social status is prevalent in Liberian society even two decades after the end of the civil wars, extending beyond the youth generation. Building on the recent discussion of youth in the Youth, Peace, and Security agenda, this study contributes to the exploration of the positive role of at-risk youth in rebuilding interpersonal and intergroup relationships that foster confidence in communities.

Keywords: At-risk youth, Liberia, Trust

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1. Introduction

Even two decades after the end of the Second Civil War, peace in Liberia remains fragile. In June 2023, then-President George Manneh Weah described the issue of at-risk youth as a national emergency that needed to be treated as seriously as Ebola or COVID-19. In Liberia, at-risk youth are defined as "[y]oung people exposed to conditions that increase their likelihood of engaging in negative behaviors and experiencing social exclusion" (Ministry of Youth and Sports 2025, 7). From a national security perspective, at-risk youth are perceived as a potential risk to society because their marginalization may increase their likelihood of engaging in negative behaviors. Accordingly, the Liberian government expressed concern that the expansion of this issue across the country could pose a serious threat to national security. From a human security perspective, which focuses on the risks that individuals and communities face now and in the future (Hernandez et al. 2019, 2), at-risk youth are understood as being exposed to risks because they experience multiple vulnerabilities, including unemployment, a lack of education, and limited access to health services. In addition, as President Joseph Nyuma Boakai declared a public health emergency for drugs and substance abuse during his State of the Nation address in January 2024, the drug epidemic has emerged as an acute concern, particularly among young people (Boakai 2024). To address these challenges, government officials stressed the importance of rehabilitation, skills training, and psychosocial support to help reintegrate young men and women into society instead of leaving them on the streets (Ministry of Youth and Sports 2023). Liberia's youth policy also acknowledges the need to empower young people from the bottom up (Ministry of Youth and Sports 2025, 17). These official concerns and policy responses highlight that Liberian citizens, particularly youth, are marginalized and placed in vulnerable positions within the post-conflict society of the country.

In light of this situation, our research aims to address three research questions focusing on Liberian youth: who is likely to become at risk, how they interact with others, and the extent to which they trust others. To address these questions, we conducted a field survey in Liberia. Based on the responses, we first identified at-risk youth in our data. These youth are characterized by four risk factors: sleeping places, drinking habits, experiences with chronic infectious diseases, and in-group affiliations, which reflect key vulnerabilities in their daily lives. Existing literature primarily focuses on drug and substance abuse as the main problem of at-risk youth (Kanata and Ochiai 2016; Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo and de Bruijne 2025; Ochiai, Harris, and City of Rest 2013). However, at-risk youth are understood to suffer as a result of various social disadvantages, including a lack of education and skills, unemployment, poverty, alcohol misuse, sexual health challenges, and family breakdown (Ministry of Youth and Sports 2019; Republic of Liberia 2025). Among these issues, we focus on four problems commonly observed as characteristics of at-risk youth in Liberia but often overlooked in the literature: homelessness, heavy alcohol consumption, health issues, and gangsterism. This focus allows us to understand their vulnerabilities from a broader perspective.

Our survey also collected responses regarding demographics, social interactions, and attitudes toward others. Using the collated data, we analyzed which groups of people were likely to be at risk and

compared them with those who were not at risk in terms of their likelihood of participating in gatherings, their level of trust toward others, and how often they consulted others. Our study reveals that at-risk youth are present throughout the country, in both urban and rural areas, regardless of gender. We also found significant relationships between respondents' risk status and their educational level and occupation. At-risk youth are more likely to distance themselves from their families and are less likely to trust people in general. This suggests that their social networks and trust are limited to their in-group membership. However, they are as likely to participate in community meetings as not-at-risk youth. Given that peacebuilding studies emphasize the importance of rebuilding connections with people to help marginalized and vulnerable individuals to construct trust, their participation in such meetings could foster new interpersonal and intergroup relationships and contribute to sustainable peace in Liberia.

The remaining sections of this paper are organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the role of youth in Liberia. Section 3 then explains our field survey sampling method, sample size, and the structure of the questionnaire[1]. Section 4 identifies at-risk youth in Liberia and examines their demographic features, social interactions, and attitudes toward others. Lastly, Section 5 concludes this paper and offers some policy implications based on our analysis.

2. Youth in Liberia: Risks and roles in peacebuilding

As young people constitute a large proportion of the population, there is growing attention to their marginalization in Liberian society. Youth are defined as individuals aged from 15 to 35 in the African Youth Charter, adopted in 2006 and guided by the vision of the African Union (African Union 2006). According to the 2022 Population and Housing Census, conducted by the Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS), 40.3% of the total population is aged between 15 and 34, largely following the definition of the youth in Africa. This figure increases to 74.5% when including those under 14 years old (LISGIS 2023, 41). Ani, Ogunade, and Kamma (2025) also note that, in Liberia, youths typically include people aged 15 to 35, and they may not range above 50, although a more careful analysis that considers people's roles in society is required. An individual graduates from youth and gains adulthood status when they take on more responsibilities in their community, have greater access to elders, and achieve economic prosperity (World Bank 2013). From this perspective, a person is considered a youth until they overcome poverty and assume social responsibilities. Among the various definitions of youth, this paper primarily uses a definition based on the age range of 15 to 35 to examine the challenges faced by Liberia's growing young population.

In addition to applying this age-range definition, our analysis takes into account the social context in which youth are embedded. In theory, youth involvement in gangsterism is often discussed as being conditional on individual characteristics as well as social context (Howell and Egley 2005). Individual factors may include delinquency and involvement in violence from an early stage of childhood, along

[1] Some wordings and expressions in this paper were slightly modified from the original questionnaire to improve readability.

with alcohol and drug use. Such individual factors are closely linked to characteristics of peer groups, schools, families, and communities with which youth interact. As those factors affect their life courses, the likelihood of gang involvement is shaped in the developmental phase from early childhood to adolescence. While gangsterism has become a critical social issue in developing countries, additional evidence is required to identify the factors underlying gang involvement in each country (Higginson et al. 2018). In the case of Liberia, vulnerability of youth is framed from those perspectives in policies, such as unemployment, being female, and health status (HIV/AIDS), as well as alcohol and drug use (Ministry of Youth and Sports 2019). The same policy also states that peacebuilding is a means of encouraging inter- and intra-generational dialogue between youths and adults. Such a policy highlights that engagement with communities could be key to reducing youth vulnerability. To explore the role of the community, the next section reviews previous studies and discusses two contrasting views of youth in general: one as a source of violence and the other as a source of peace.

2.1 Youth as a source of violence

Both policymakers and researchers often view young people in Africa as potential sources of violence. This perspective stems from the idea that their dissatisfaction and disconnection create conditions that can lead to violence (Ismail and Olonisakin 2021). Young people are more likely to be dissatisfied when they face limited socioeconomic opportunities, including employment prospects. This situation results in poverty and prevents them from experiencing fulfilling lives. Without alternative solutions to unemployment and poverty, young people might join rebel and criminal groups (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Urdal 2006; Yair and Miodownik 2014). Additionally, young people may also become disconnected from informal social ties. For example, they might be alienated from their family members and relatives. They may become detached from social institutions, such as schools, hospitals, community groups, religious groups, and sports clubs. Once disconnected from informal social ties and social institutions, young people may lose opportunities and miss chances to improve their lives.

In post-conflict environments, ex-combatants, who are usually young, are perceived as perpetrators of violence due to their involvement in past violence and ongoing relationships with their former war colleagues (Höglund 2009; Themnér and Utas 2016). In Liberia, the mean age of ex-combatants during the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) programs was estimated at 25.3 years, with 11,353 children accounting for a total of 102,193 ex-combatants (Pugel 2007, 19). Ex-combatants continued to be marginalized even after the DDR program was implemented because the programs were not inclusive and failed to be completed (Utas 2005; Jennings 2008). In addition, more than half of the ex-combatants reported being separated from their home communities (Pugel 2007, 66). While anecdotal, many "at-risk youth" labeled as "Zogos" or "Zogees" were child soldiers and ex-combatants of the civil wars, marginalized from society as a result of the failure of DDR programs (Kanata 2012; Nebo 2022).[2] The number of ghettos, where Zogos and Zogees settle, is increasing;

[2] According to Ani, Ogunade, and Kamma (2025), "zogo" is a colloquial term used in Liberia to describe or stigmatize people marginalized from society, "especially disadvantaged youths who are caught in chronic substance abuse and a state of homelessness and destitution" (8–9). A female zogo is referred to as a "zogee".

in Monrovia alone, there were 866 active ghettos in 2023 (Global Action for Sustainable Development 2023).

The Liberian government believes that the increase in armed robbery, rape, and vigilantism is caused by ex-combatants suffering as a result of the high unemployment rate, thereby creating a threat to communities (Republic of Liberia 2008). Under conditions of limited economic opportunities, some scholars have highlighted the "hustling" or "doing small-scale business" of Liberian youth who are engaged in menial, low-skilled, or unskilled jobs (Munive 2010; World Bank 2013). Uneducated youth are generally considered difficult to place in skilled jobs and stable employment; however, "hustling" can provide a source of income for themselves and their families. In this context, by observing motorbike cyclists who transitioned from combatants, McMullin (2022) argues that hustling is a way of life for Liberian youth that can foster everyday peacebuilding.

2.2 Youth as a source of peace

Conversely, youth can also be seen as a source of peace. United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2250 introduced the agenda of Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) to underscore the importance of involving youth in peacebuilding processes, increasing their participation in social and economic opportunities, and ensuring equal access to public services and justice (UN Security Council 2015). The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and the UN Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) (2019) problematize traditional stereotypes of youth that associate them with violence, including terrorism, violent extremism, sexual violence, and transnational crime. Instead, the study argues that youth can play a critical role in supporting the disengagement of their peers from violent groups and in their economic, social, and political reintegration into society. The day-to-day activities of youth are typically influential in communities. In the context of peacebuilding, as Lederach (1997) illustrates, youth engagement at the grassroots level is an integral component of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is defined as a formal process of conflict resolution aimed at changing motivations, goals, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions in society (Bar-Tal and Rosen 2009). Essentially, reconciliation involves mutual recognition and acceptance, the development of peaceful relations, mutual trust, positive attitudes, sensitivity to others, and consideration of the other party's needs and interests (Bar-Tal and Rosen 2009).[3] Interpersonal and intergroup interactions can foster reconciliation, enabling youth to build relationships among themselves (UNFPA and PBSO 2019). For example, in Liberia, youth engage in community work such as maintaining water pumps and drainage systems, repairing bridges and roads, and constructing new commonly used facilities, including latrines, clubs, Palava Huts, and houses. Here, youth become part of the communities that shape group identity and build stronger ties to community members (World Bank 2013, 14–15). Mutisi (2012) notes that sports teams, motorcycle unions, and voluntary youth associations could become sources for constructing new

[3] The concept of reconciliation is multidimensional, and the definition stated here is only one aspect of the concept. Reconciliation further looks to collective forgiveness, healing, and justice, for instance. This paper focuses primarily on the aspect of building relationships with others.

relationships. Such social groups and institutions can facilitate interactions among individuals that build networks.

In the context of peacebuilding, previous studies highlight the importance of rebuilding connections for marginalized and disadvantaged individuals in order to foster trust. Maclay and Özerdem (2010) suggest that marginalized people, such as ex-combatants, require horizontal and vertical reintegration. For ex-combatants, reintegration entails gaining acceptance from society, where connections with others are a minimum condition for constructing interpersonal and intergroup relationships, as well as for engagement in decision-making at both the community and national levels. Similarly, Kilroy and Basini (2018) refer to networks that include family members, partners, connections with ethnic groups, factions, sponsors, religious groups, and friends as part of social capital, along with norms and trust, that enable access to receive economic support or medical assistance. For disconnected and marginalized youth, rebuilding cordial relationships and gaining confidence in society are crucial to addressing their concerns.

As discussed in this section, youth tend to be viewed differently in the field of conflict and peace studies. When broader society perceives young people as marginalized and disconnected, they are more likely to engage in violent actions and incidents. In Liberia, the disconnected younger generation often tends to be labeled as at-risk youth, and this labeling increases the perception of security threats. However, youth are a potential source of peacebuilding when they are given opportunities to connect with others, participate in society, and engage in daily socioeconomic activities. In such situations, there is likely room to consider youth who foster social confidence by increasing interpersonal and intergroup relationships. While previous studies have demonstrated the adverse circumstances of at-risk youth primarily through case studies, their demographic characteristics in relation to interconnectivity and levels of trust have not been fully explored, to our knowledge. Given that issues related to youth have become significant in Liberian society, our research contributes to this underexplored area by conducting a field survey covering areas representing approximately 85% of the Liberian population.

3. Methods

To delineate at-risk youth and their relationships with the broader community in Liberia, we use original data collected through a field survey. We conducted the field survey with Tuakwa Consultancy Hub, a company based in Ghana, with support from the Ministry of Justice of Liberia. We set the sample size for each target county based on its population share.[4] We define youth as individuals aged 15 to 35, but our survey focuses on Liberian citizens aged 18 or older for ethical considerations.

[4] In the overall sample, the sample sizes targeted for at-risk youth and ex-combatants were 300 and 100, respectively. These figures were calculated based on the previous studies estimating the numbers of at-risk youth and ex-combatants (Pugel 2007; Republic of Liberia 2025; UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2023). While at-risk youth in these estimations focus on substance users, our paper identifies at-risk youth by applying four risk factors that shape their experiences of marginalization and exclusion.

Table 1: Survey location and planned sample distribution

County	Population	Population Share	Sample Size
Bomi	133,705	2.97%	45
Bong	467,561	10.38%	156
Grand Cape Mount	178,867	3.97%	60
Grand Bassa	293,689	6.52%	98
Grand Gedeh	216,692	4.81%	72
Lofa	367,376	8.15%	122
Margibi	304,946	6.77%	102
Montserrado	1,920,965	42.63%	640
Nimba	621,841	13.80%	207
Total	**4,505,642**		**1,502**

Source: LISGIS (2023)

Among the 15 counties in Liberia, the survey selected nine counties: Bomi, Bong, Grand Cape Mount, Grand Bassa, Grand Gedeh, Lofa, Margibi, Montserrado, and Nimba. Although we were unable to include six counties due to access difficulties, the nine counties targeted by our survey project represent 85.82% of Liberia's total population.[5] Based on Liberia's national population census report (LISGIS 2023), the sample size for each county was determined as shown in Table 1.[6] For example, a sample size of 640 was set for Montserrado County, because its population share among the nine counties is 42.63%.[7] Respondents were selected from both urban and rural areas. In Lofa, for example, we targeted the district with the capital city, Voinjama, as an urban area, and Kolahun and Foya as rural areas. In these target areas, enumerators read the questions from the SurveyCTO questionnaire aloud from the screens of registered mobile devices and typed in the responses. This survey method is called computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). Although the questions were written in American English, enumerators asked respondents in Liberian English. Enumerators were assigned to target counties based on their language skills in case the enumerators needed to explain the questions in local ethnic languages.

The survey was conducted between March 18 and 27, 2025, collecting data from 1,541 respondents.[8] Existing surveys, such as the National Population and Housing Census (LISGIS 2024) and Afrobarometer (Afrobarometer 2025), target the general population, including young people, but our data is unique in providing information on the risks youth face, as well as respondents' current status following the Liberian civil wars.

[5] The population in Liberia in 2022 was 5,250,187 (LISGIS 2023). Our survey does not cover six counties: Gbarpolu, Rivercess, Sinoe, River Gee, Grand Kru, and Maryland. The population of these six counties was 744,545, accounting for 14.18% of the total population.

[6] In addition, enumerators were instructed to consider key social characteristics, such as gender and age, when selecting interviewees.

[7] The population share of Montserrado County in our overall sample is 42.66%.

[8] A pilot survey was conducted between February 18 and 22, 2025.

Our questionnaire comprises several sections covering various topics such as demographics, social networks, access to community resources, and levels of trust and respect toward at-risk groups.[9] Each section asked questions in the following areas: basic characteristics of each respondent, such as age, gender, origin, educational level, language, and occupation; respondents' interactions and communication with others; respondents' access to public and community services; respondents' trust in specific categories of people, and perceptions of at-risk groups in society. At the end of the survey, we collected the data from 1,541 respondents. As the following section illustrates, the data from 1,490 respondents are used in our analysis. Table 2 presents summary statistics for the variables used in the analysis.

Table 2: Summary statistics

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Risk factors (dummy variables)					
Sleeping places	1,490	0.064	0.244	0	1
Drinking habits	1,490	0.193	0.395	0	1
Chronic infectious diseases	1,490	0.151	0.358	0	1
In-group affiliation	1,490	0.079	0.269	0	1
Overall	1,490	0.356	0.479	0	1
Demographics					
Age	1,490	36.06	12.883	18	98
Status during civil wars	1,490				
Self-employed	375				
Employed by private companies	70				
Employed as combatants	56				
Student	127				
Unemployed	270				
Retired	11				
Don't know/Not available	581				
Gender	1,490				
Female	637				
Male	850				
Prefer not to say	3				
Educational attainment	1,490				
Postgraduate	26				
University	187				
Secondary school/High school	518				
Primary school	307				
Informal schooling only (incl. Koranic schooling)	31				
No formal schooling	421				
Employment status/Occupation type	1,490				
Skilled job	129				
Unskilled job	778				
Student	279				
Never had a job	304				
Income per month	1,490				
Above $500	18				
$301-500	48				
$101-300	206				

[9] Our questionnaire also contains a list experiment and two conjoint experiments, but these experimental components are not used in this paper.

$11-100	522				
$0-10	347				
Don't know/Not available	349				
Meeting participation (dummy variables)					
Community	1,490	0.492	0.500	0	1
Family	1,490	0.545	0.498	0	1
Relative	1,490	0.166	0.372	0	1
Religious	1,490	0.319	0.466	0	1
Clan	1,490	0.028	0.166	0	1
Secret/Closed society (such as Sande/Poro)	1,490	0.044	0.206	0	1
Savings cooperative (Kuu)	1,490	0.057	0.232	0	1
Trust (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)					
Statement 1	1,490	3.256	1.648	1	5
Statement 2	1,490	3.886	1.291	1	5
Statement 3	1,490	4.036	1.198	1	5
Statement 4	1,490	4.348	1.019	1	5
Statement 5	1,490	4.342	1.119	1	5
Consultation (1 = Do not consult at all, 5 = Always consult)					
Family members/Relative	1,490	3.039	1.369	1	5
Friend	1,490	2.441	1.275	1	5
Colleague	1,490	2.272	1.280	1	5
Neighbor	1,490	2.085	1.243	1	5
Town/Community leader	1,490	1.891	1.226	1	5
Clan/Village leader	1,490	1.776	1.203	1	5
Religious leader	1,490	2.705	1.525	1	5
Local government official	1,490	1.695	1.189	1	5
Central government official	1,490	1.628	1.144	1	5

Source: Field survey 2025.

4. Analysis

In this section, we use our survey data to identify at-risk youth and examine their demographic distribution, as well as interactions with and attitudes toward others. Of the 1,541 responses collected, 1,490 responses were used for our analysis. Fifty-one responses were excluded for the following six reasons: (1) responses were collected before the start date of the survey (March 18, 2025); (2) responses were not submitted using the most updated version of the survey questionnaire; (3) responses were submitted using an unregistered device; (4) respondents were not Liberian citizens; (5) respondents were under 18 years of age, or their age was incorrectly entered as over 100 years old; and (6) respondents did not pass the attention test by selecting the name of Liberia's first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, from three options.

4.1 Identifying at-risk youth

While previous studies often focus on substance abuse as being representative of at-risk youth, this study broadens the definition, because case studies demonstrate that at-risk youth suffer not only from substance abuse but also from marginalization under some additional social risks (Utas 2012). This is why the youth targeted by the Liberian government in their policies are those who are unemployed, disabled, female, and those who are affected by HIV/AIDS. Therefore, we determine whether respondents are at risk based on their responses to our survey questions about their lifestyle.

Specifically, we use four sets of questions on sleeping places, drinking habits, experiences with chronic infectious diseases, and in-group affiliation. These four factors were selected based on previous studies of at-risk youth in the Liberian context. According to the definition, at-risk youth are excluded from society. This exclusion often leads them to leave their homes, associate with other marginalized youth, and join gangs or live in ghettos. These conditions frequently result in sleeping in unsafe places, substance abuse, and increased exposure to disease due to poor living environments. Among those who satisfy these criteria, at-risk youth are aged 35 or younger. In this subsection, we first introduce our criteria for being at risk and identify at-risk respondents regardless of age. Then, we examine at-risk youth by comparing them with older at-risk respondents.

We use the following four groups of questions to identify at-risk respondents.

1. Sleeping places: We define respondents as being at risk if they answered that they slept in a barracks, bush, cemetery, church premises, market, parking lot, prison, school, shop, street, or unfinished building.
2. Drinking habits: We use three questions to define respondents as at risk. The first question concerned their frequency of drinking, while the second question asked about the amount of alcohol they consume each time. Using these two questions, we estimate respondents' daily and weekly alcohol consumption and define respondents as being at risk if they drink alcohol heavily. The consumption level that is considered heavy drinking for women is 3 pints or more per day (or 6 pints or more per week), and for men is 3.75 pints or more per day (or 11.25 pints or more per week).[10] The third question asked whether they needed assistance with mobility when drunk. We regard them as being at risk if they needed assistance with mobility and drank more than half of the standard for heavy drinking. See Appendix A for more details about the criteria.
3. Chronic infectious diseases: We define respondents as being at risk if they answered that they have experienced chronic infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, and HIV/AIDS.
4. In-group affiliation: We define respondents as being at risk if they answered that they belonged to an in-group. An in-group refers to a gang or ghetto group.[11]

We consider a respondent to be at risk if they meet at least one of these criteria. Of the 1,490

[10] According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2025), heavy drinking for women is defined as having 4 or more drinks on any day or 8 or more per week, while for men, it is defined as having 5 or more drinks on any day or 15 or more per week. Since Liberia may not have an official standard of alcohol abuse, we use the U.S. standard. A standard drink is defined as 12 fluid ounces (i.e., 0.75 U.S. fluid pint) of regular beer (with 5% ABV or alc/vol), for example. This is equivalent to 5 fluid ounces of table wine (with 12% ABV) and 1.5 fluid ounces of spirits (with 40% ABV). However, to ensure a conservative evaluation, we use the beer standard, which has the lowest alcohol concentration, to identify respondents at risk in terms of drinking habits. Similarly, to ensure a strict evaluation, the male criteria are applied to respondents who answered "Prefer not to say" for gender.

[11] We also asked for the names of the in-groups they belong to if they answered that they belong to one. If respondents answered with a random word that does not indicate a gang or ghetto group (e.g., a random number or "No"), we do not consider them to be at risk based on that criterion. See Appendix B for the questions we used in our survey.

respondents, 530 respondents (35.57%) were at risk. Specifically, 95 respondents slept in non-residential spaces; 288 had heavy drinking habits; 225 experienced a chronic infectious disease; and 117 belonged to an in-group. Most respondents who met either the criterion for drinking habits or chronic infectious diseases tended to meet that criterion alone: 194 met only the drinking habits criterion, and 146 met only the chronic infectious disease criterion. In contrast, respondents who had issues with sleeping places or in-group affiliation typically had additional problems: only 21 and 32 respondents, respectively, met these criteria alone.

These at-risk respondents were found not only in urban areas but also in rural areas. Of the 530 at-risk respondents, 314 (59.25%) participated in our survey outside of Montserrado County, where the capital city of Monrovia is located. Figure 1 shows the percentage of at-risk respondents in each county where we conducted our survey. The darker the color, the higher the percentage of respondents who could be considered at risk. Margibi has the highest percentage of at-risk respondents at 56.63%, followed by Grand Bassa (53.06%), Nimba (44.12%), Grand Cape Mount (34.43%), and Montserrado (33.49%). These results reveal that socioeconomic disadvantages are widespread across the country.

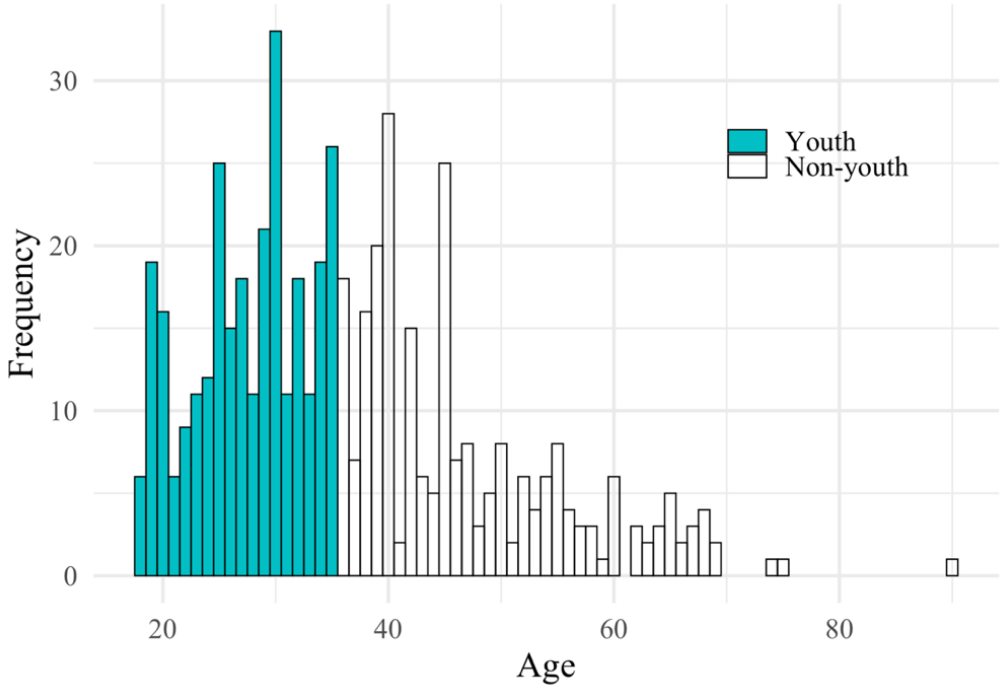
Figure 1: The percentage of respondents at risk in each county

Source: Field survey 2025.

The age range of at-risk respondents is also broad. Figure 2 illustrates the age distribution of at-risk respondents. The colored bins represent at-risk youth, while the uncolored bins represent older at-risk

respondents. The figure shows that at-risk respondents are not only youth, but also older respondents, especially those in their late 30s and 40s. However, among the 530 at-risk respondents, 287 (54.15%) are youth, indicating that they account for the majority.

Figure 2: The age distribution of at-risk respondents



Source: Field survey 2025.

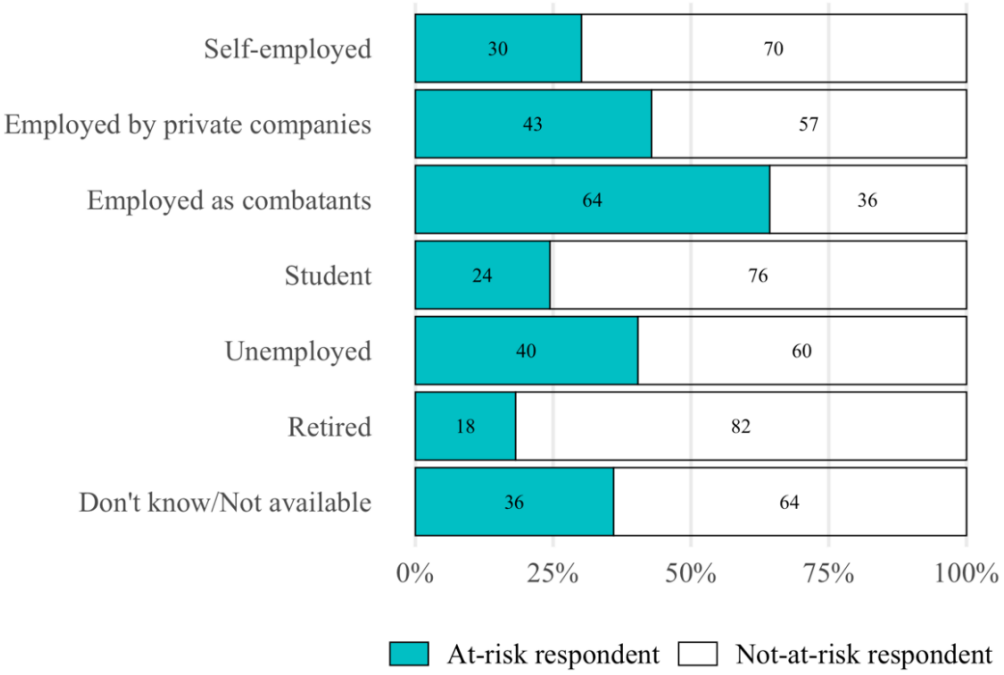
Next, we examine at-risk youth by comparing youth and older respondents. Youth account for 56.98% of all valid respondents, and of the 849 young respondents, 287 (33.80%) are at risk. Young respondents are more likely to meet two of the four criteria: sleeping places and in-group affiliation. The relationships are statistically significant at the 0.1% level based on chi-squared tests.[12] The main difference between young and older at-risk respondents is their likelihood of meeting more than one criterion for at-risk status. Only 16.87% of older at-risk respondents meet more than one criterion, whereas 33.45% of at-risk youth do so. These results suggest that at-risk youth may suffer from more problems, particularly concerning sleeping places and in-group affiliation.

Lastly, before examining the demographics of at-risk youth, we investigate whether ex-combatants are more likely to be at risk than others. We surveyed respondents' status during the Liberian civil wars. Fifty-six respondents answered that they were employed as combatants at that time. Figure 3 shows the percentages of at-risk and not-at-risk respondents by their status during the civil wars. The highest rate of at-risk respondents was among those employed as combatants (64.29%). This result

[12] Also, at-risk youth account for a larger proportion of at-risk respondents who meet these two criteria. 80 out of 95 respondents who sleep in non-residential spaces, and 93 out of 117 respondents who belong to an in-group are the youth.

implies that ex-combatants are more likely to be at risk and remain vulnerable.

Figure 3: At-risk respondents and status during civil wars



Source: Field survey 2025.

4.2 Demographics of at-risk youth

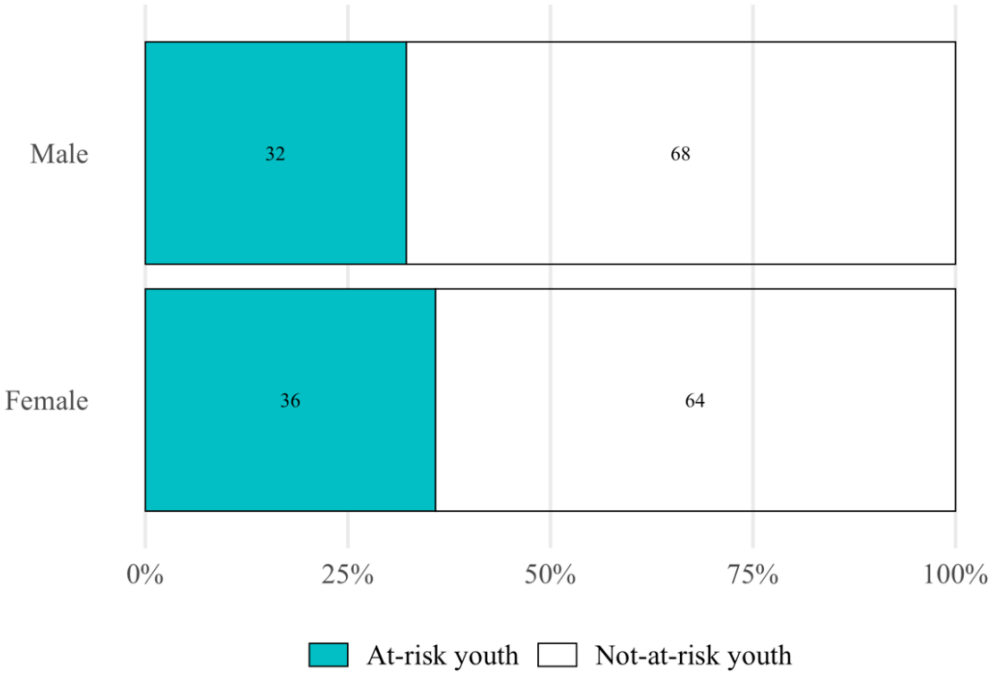
This subsection presents the demographics of at-risk youth. We focus on four characteristics: gender, education, occupation, and income. First, Figure 4 shows the percentage of at-risk and not-at-risk youth by gender. Among male youth, 32.20% are at risk, while 35.81% of female youth are at risk. This means that both men and women are equally at risk, as there is no statistically significant relationship between gender and being at risk among youth, based on a chi-squared test. In addition, women accounted for nearly half (47.04%) of at-risk youth, suggesting that gender is not a significant factor in determining youth vulnerability in Liberia.

Second, Figure 5 illustrates the percentages of at-risk and not-at-risk youth by the highest level of education attained. The six answer options for our question are as follows: no formal schooling, informal schooling only (including Koranic schooling), primary school, secondary school/high school, university, and postgraduate. The figure suggests a relationship between educational attainment and risk, indicating that youth are less likely to be at risk as educational attainment increases.[13] Although there are no at-risk youth with a postgraduate education, and thus the chi-squared approximation may be incorrect, the chi-squared test shows that there is a statistically significant relationship between education level and being at risk at the 0.1% level. Additionally, only 10.45% of at-risk youth attained

[13] Those who received only informal schooling have the highest percentage of at-risk respondents, but this category includes only 12 respondents, and it may be inappropriate to compare this percentage with those of other categories.

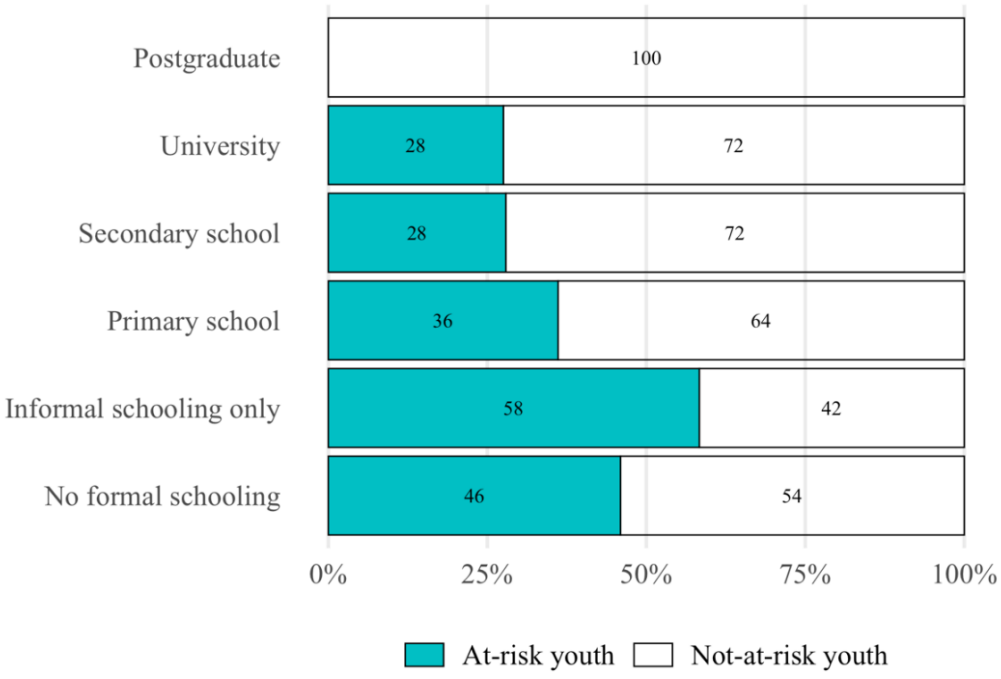
a level above university, while 33.45% attained a secondary school level, 24.42% attained a primary school level, and 29.62% had no formal schooling.

Figure 4: At-risk youth and gender



Source: Field survey 2025.

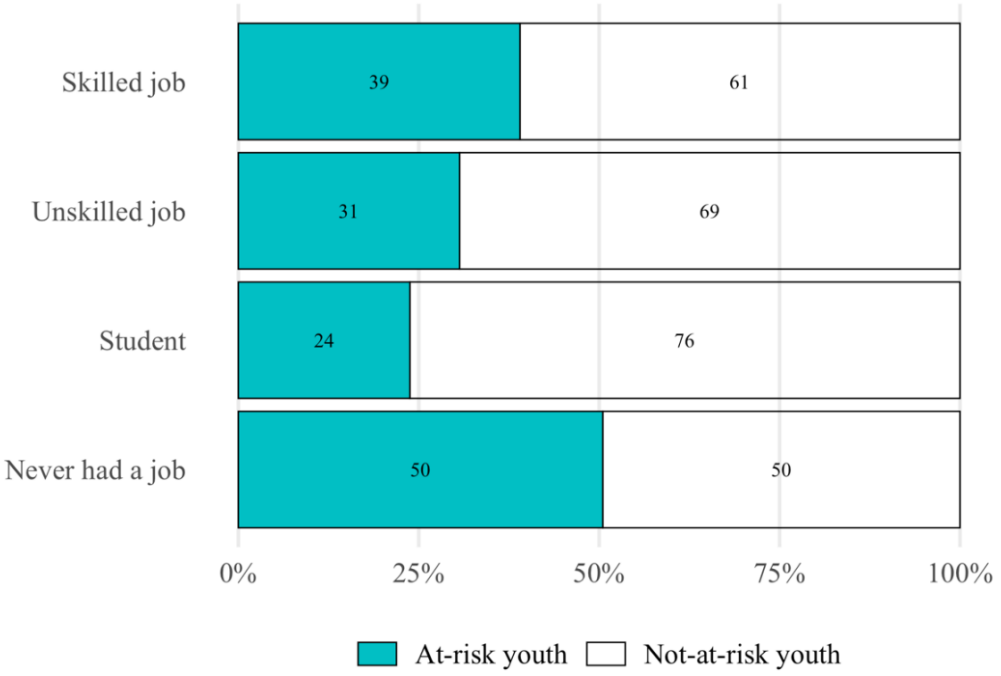
Figure 5: At-risk youth and education level



Source: Field survey 2025.

Third, Figure 6 illustrates the percentage of at-risk and not-at-risk youth by employment status and occupation. For the analysis, we classified the 14 answer options into four categories: never had a job, student, unskilled job, and skilled job.[14] The figure shows that those who have never had a job, at 50.50%, are the most likely to be at risk. In contrast, students are the least at risk, at 23.77%. A chi-squared test confirms a statistically significant relationship between occupation and risk at the 0.1% level. Those with a skilled job are more likely to be at risk than those with an unskilled job; however, they only account for 5.57% of at-risk youth.

Figure 6: At-risk youth and employment status/occupation



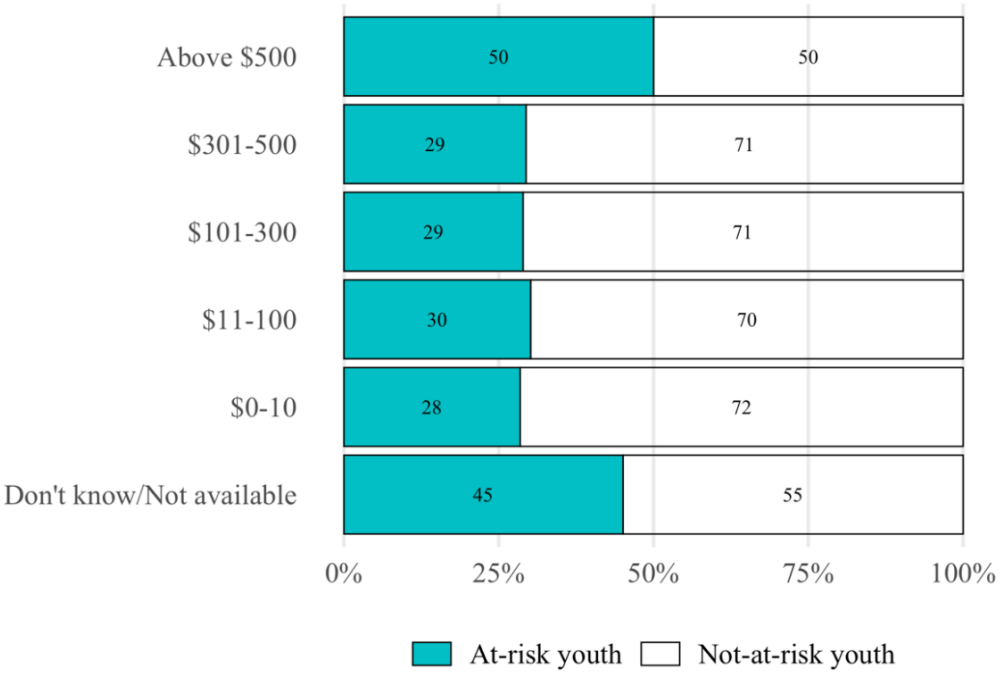
Source: Field survey 2025.

Lastly, Figure 7 shows the percentage of at-risk and not-at-risk youth by income. Respondents were asked about their current monthly income in US dollars and were given the following five options: $0–10, $11–100, $101–300, $301–500, and above $500. Focusing on respondents who answered "Don't know/Not available" or whose income was less than $500 reveals the difference between those with and without income. Among young respondents, 27.44% reported not knowing their income or that their income information was unavailable. However, 67.38% of those respondents have never had a job, a figure that rises to 94.42% when students are included. Therefore, we can reasonably

[14] The 14 answer options are based on the Afrobarometer Round 8 questionnaire in Liberia. Skilled jobs include the following six options: artisan or skilled manual worker, clerk or secretary, supervisor/foreman/senior manager, security service provider, mid-level professional, and upper-level professional. Unskilled jobs include another six options as follows: housewife/housemaker, farming/fishing/forestry workers, trader/hawker/vendor, retailer/shopkeeper, unskilled manual worker, and others. The "others" option is included in the unskilled job category because most of the respondents who answered "others" described their work as unskilled or that they were currently unemployed.

assume that those who answered "Don't know/Not available" likely have no income.[15] This group is likely to be at risk, and the relationship between income and being at risk is statistically significant at the 1% level based on a chi-squared test. Note that those with incomes above $500 are most likely to be at risk (50.00%), but there are only eight respondents in this category, making a meaningful comparison difficult. Additionally, the above $500 category includes criminal activity: one respondent reported selling drugs as his occupation. This indicates that there is a possibility that at-risk youth can earn money through illicit activities.

Figure 7: At-risk youth and income



Source: Field survey 2025.

4.3 At-risk youth's interactions with and attitudes toward others

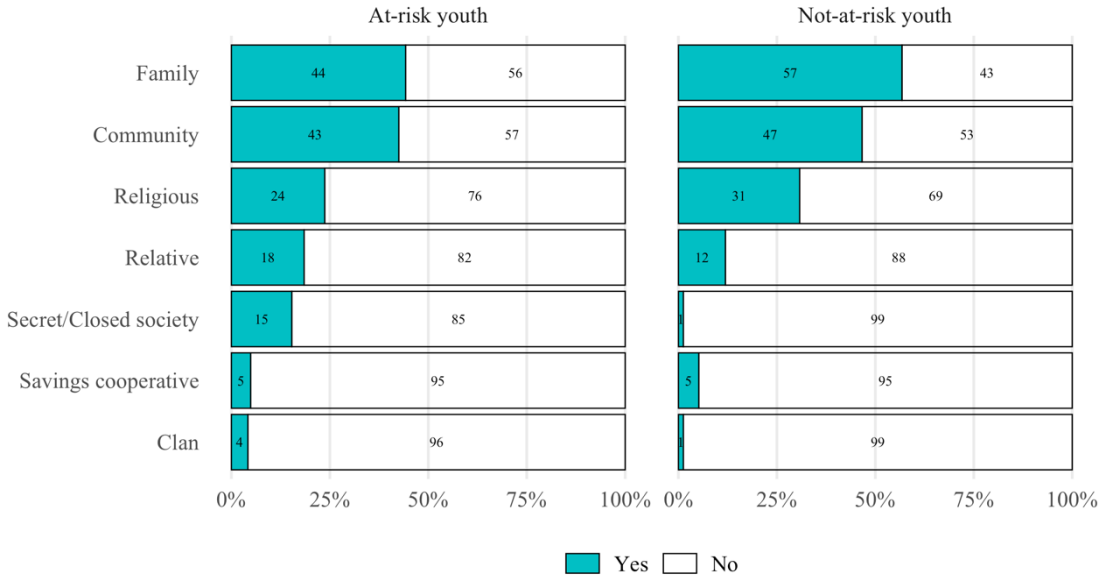
This subsection examines how at-risk youth interact with others and how much they rely on them. Our survey asked respondents two broad types of questions about their relationships with others. One type of question focused on interactions with others in meetings. The other type of question concerned trust in others. The trust questions were classified into two subtypes: generalized trust and

[15] It is possible that some respondents who reported having "never had a job" or being "students" may have underreported their income because they engage in illicit activities. While this possibility cannot be entirely ruled out, we consider it more likely that the majority of these respondents genuinely have little or no income, given that some respondents answered honestly that they engaged in illicit activities, and respondents could indicate that they had legal jobs. Even if a subset of respondents concealed income derived from illicit activities, it would imply that the "Don't know/Not available" income category includes respondents with no income and those with unreported high income. In either case, this does not undermine the relationship between income categories and being at risk.

particularized trust.[16] Generalized trust refers to trust in people with whom one is not familiar, whereas particularized trust is defined as trust in specific people known to the person, such as family members, friends, and colleagues. We examine these questions in order.

First, Figure 8 shows the percentage of at-risk and not-at-risk youth who interact and do not interact with others in seven types of meetings as follows: community,[17] family, relative, religious, clan, secret/closed society (such as Sande/Poro), and savings cooperative (Kuu).[18] In the figure, these events are ordered by the percentage of at-risk youth who do not interact with others at those events, from top to bottom.

Figure 8: At-risk youth and meeting participation



Source: Field survey 2025.

The figure shows that at-risk youth are less likely to participate in meetings common to not-at-risk youth, such as family, community, and religious meetings. In contrast, they are more likely than youth who are not at risk to participate in certain types of meetings, such as relatives, secret/closed societies, and clan meetings. These differences are statistically significant at the 5% level based on chi-squared tests, except for community meetings and savings cooperative meetings. This result reflects a reality

[16] Trust, in general, is defined as a belief that others will not cause us harm and will look after our interests (Newton 2007). Social trust is a horizontal and interpersonal form of trust that is meant to be "expectation of reliance that individuals in a community have towards each other on the basis of shared norms, mutual reciprocity, and cooperative behaviour" (Moreno 2011, 2672).

[17] Community in Liberia can be composed of several units and subgroups of chiefdoms, clans, towns or villages, hunters, and minority ethnic groups, who agree to create their own community in accordance with management of their land (Liberia Land Authority 2014). While customary land management prevails through the practice of traditional norms, self-identification and membership of the community are unique in each case.

[18] We also asked about the frequency and level of satisfaction with these events when respondents answered that they had participated. However, those questions are not used in this paper.

in which at-risk youth are isolated from their families and other members of society and interact only with specific groups of people, especially their in-group members. This indicates that at-risk youth are disconnected from the social networks that not-at-risk youth usually possess. Yet their relatively high level of participation in community meetings, where usually Liberian society forms interpersonal and intergroup relationships, suggests that they are not entirely disconnected from social networks.

Second, Figure 9 illustrates whether respondents agreed with statements about generalized trust. Our survey included the following five statements, to which respondents responded using one of the following five options: strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree.[19] The results showed that respondents reported trusting people in their agreement with the first two statements, but not with the third to fifth.

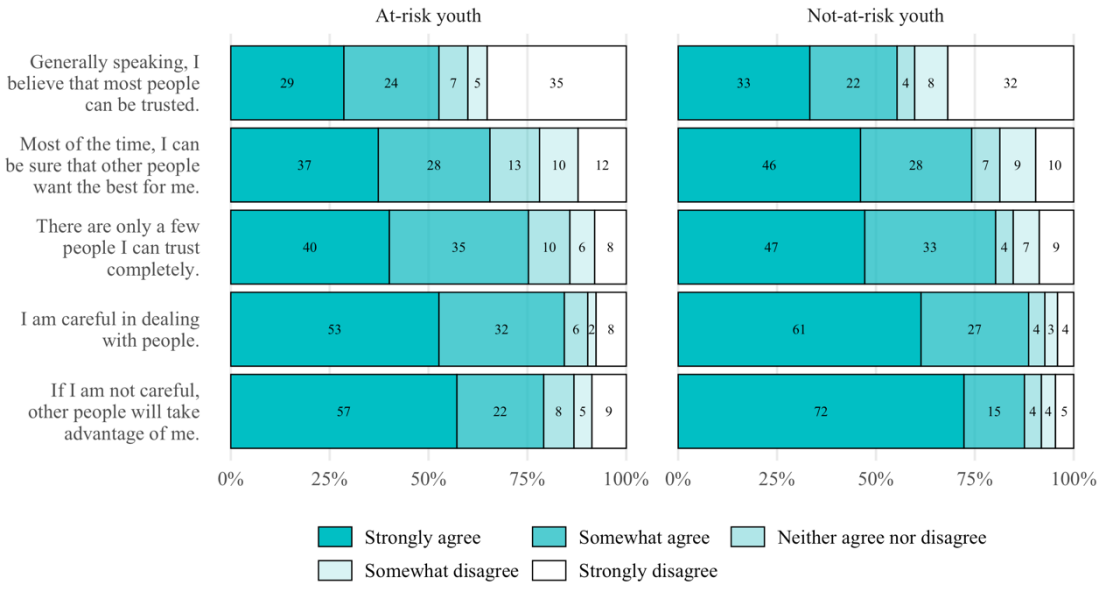
1. Generally speaking, I believe that most people can be trusted.
2. Most of the time, I can be sure that other people want the best for me.
3. There are only a few people I can trust completely.
4. I am careful in dealing with people.
5. If I am not careful, other people will take advantage of me.

In the figure, we ordered these statements by the percentage of "strongly agree" responses from at-risk youth. Regarding the first two statements, the combined percentages of "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" are higher for not-at-risk youth than for at-risk youth. Similarly, regarding the third statement, the combined percentage of "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" is higher for not-at-risk youth than for at-risk youth. However, the fourth and fifth statements do not show a similar tendency, and the results indicate that there are higher percentages of people who disagree with the statements among at-risk youth.

Chi-squared tests show mixed results, but some indicate that at-risk youth are less likely to trust people than not-at-risk youth. For the tests, we classified the five answer options into two categories: (1) strongly agree, somewhat agree, or neither agree nor disagree, and (2) somewhat disagree or strongly disagree. First, we did not find a statistically significant relationship between the first statement and being at risk. However, when we narrow the definition of at-risk youth by including only those who belong to an in-group, there is a statistically significant relationship between generalized trust and being at risk: 59.14% of in-group youth disagree with the first statement, compared with 43.92% of non-affiliated respondents. Second, regarding the second and third statements, we found statistically significant relationships between generalized trust and being at risk, at least at the 10% level, indicating that at-risk youth are less likely to think that people in general want the best for them or to trust people completely. Third, regarding the fourth and fifth statements, we found statistically significant relationships at least at the 10% level; however, these results imply that at-risk youth are more likely to trust others than not-at-risk youth. Future research will clarify this tendency regarding generalized trust among at-risk youth.

[19] In our survey, we used "you" as the subject of the second and fifth statements. However, to align with the other statements, we use "I" here.

Figure 9*:* At-risk youth and generalized trust

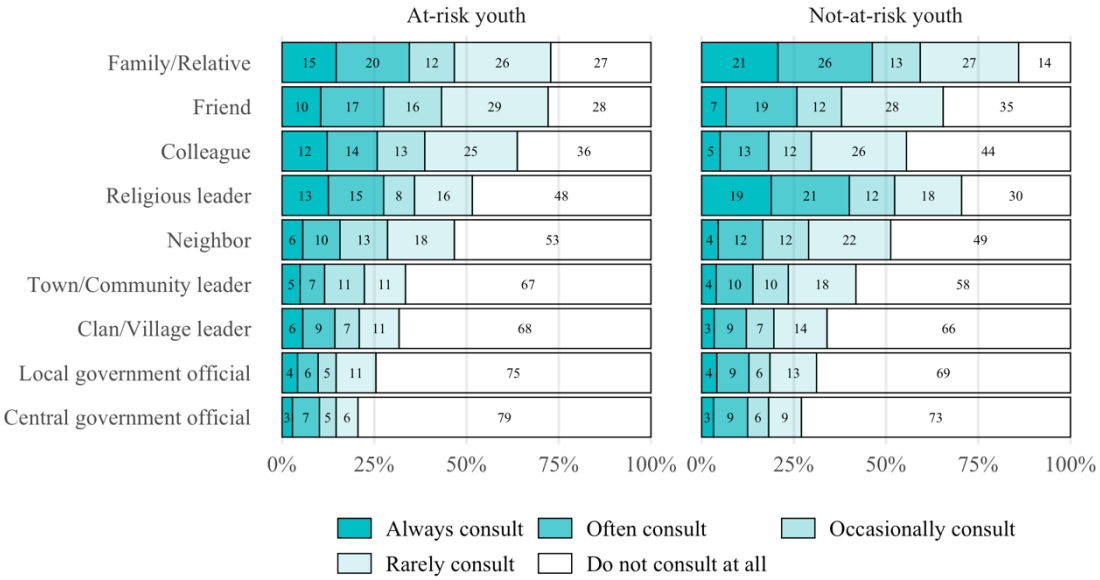


Source: Field survey 2025.

Lastly, Figure 10 illustrates the frequency with which at-risk and not-at-risk youth consult specific individuals regarding their difficulties. The nine groups of people included in our survey are family members/relatives, friends, colleagues, neighbors, town/community leaders, clan/village leaders, religious leaders, local government officials, and central government officials. Respondents were given five response options: always consult, often consult, occasionally consult, rarely consult, and do not consult at all. The figure is ordered by the percentage of "not at all" responses from at-risk youth.

At-risk youth have different tendencies from not-at-risk youth regarding consultation partners. At-risk youth are more likely than not-at-risk youth to consult only with their friends and colleagues when considering consultation at least rarely. For chi-squared tests, we classified the five answer options into two categories again: (1) rarely consult or do not consult at all, and (2) others. The tests show that at-risk youth are less likely to consult with family members or relatives, but more likely to consult colleagues at least at the 1% statistical significance level. These results indicate the same situation for at-risk youth: they went away from their families and spent time with their colleagues in their groups, including a gang or a ghetto. In addition, we found that at-risk youth are less likely to consult religious leaders, with a statistical significance at the 0.1% level. Religious leaders are among those who work to create safer environments for at-risk youth. They run rehabilitation centers and provide social services to youth. Currently, they are limited in their reach (Ani, Ogunade, and Kamma 2025), but their involvement with at-risk youth could be helpful in the future.

Figure 10: At-risk youth and consultation with others



Source: Field survey 2025.

5. Conclusion

While some view youth as a source of violence and a threat to society, others see them as drivers of prosperity, social equality, and inclusiveness. In an effort to bridge these two contrasting aspects of youth roles, this research identified at-risk youth in post-conflict Liberian society, using original data collected through a 2025 field survey. Our data is unique in providing information on the risks that youth face, as well as respondents' current status after the Liberian civil wars.

It is not surprising that 35.57% of respondents were identified as at risk. We first identified at-risk respondents based on four factors: sleeping places, drinking habits, chronic infectious diseases, and in-group affiliation. We then compared at-risk youth with older at-risk respondents and examined at-risk ex-combatants. We also scrutinized the demographic characteristics of at-risk youth, their interactions with others, and their attitudes toward others. Our analysis found that at-risk youth face issues related to sleeping places and in-group affiliation. We note that a significant portion of the respondents in their 30s and 40s are also identified as at risk. Additionally, among those who identified themselves as ex-combatants, 64% were at risk, indicating that a vulnerable social status is prevalent across Liberian society more than 20 years after the end of the civil wars.

Our analysis demonstrated that Liberian at-risk youth hold bounded interpersonal and intergroup relationships. Even two decades after the end of the civil wars, society remains vulnerable at glance, as a significant number of youths are isolated from their closest social institutions, such as family and other members of society. Our results regarding generalized trust show that at-risk youth may or may not have more generalized trust than others, while their particularized trust is rigidly confined within their in-groups. In this sense, at-risk youth in Liberia have limited social connections, which creates

challenges for including youth in peacebuilding. Simultaneously, we highlight that Liberian at-risk youth participate in community meetings as much as not-at-risk youth do, and that at-risk youth are more likely to participate in relative, secret or closed societies and clan meetings. Above all, as community meetings are opportunities for a range of groups, such as villages, clans, and minority groups to join, this type of gathering can facilitate inter- and intra-generational interactions. This finding suggests that policies aimed at expanding opportunities for participation can support integrating at-risk youth into a more inclusive society. Specifically, encouraging youth engagement in community meetings may foster their empowerment and help build trust within the communities.

In particular, as the YPS agenda articulates the positive role of youth in fostering peace, community meetings that incorporate all members in the community could be one source for creating opportunities to build interpersonal and intergroup relationships, serving as a potential path to prevent the escalation of vulnerabilities and the outbreak of conflict. The YPS agenda also highlights the importance of protecting youth from structural barriers that hinder their ability to raise their voices and receive support, or from structured environments that put them at risk. In Liberia, where risk factors are affected by longitudinal elements, including civil wars, identifying possible social ties is crucial to protect the youth from potential violence and insecurity.

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Appendix A

Table A1 summarizes one of our criteria for identifying at-risk respondents based on their drinking habits.

Table A1: The frequency, amount, and mobility assistance required for drinking by gender

	Gender	More than 3 pints	3 pints	2 pints	1 pint	Total
Multiple times a day	F	12 (7)	5 (1)	14 (5)	6	37 (13)
	M	31 (17)	20 (5)	33 (4)	11 (1)	95 (27)
Once a day	F	2	4	16 (1)	76	98 (1)
	M	6	3 (2)	24 (1)	124 (1)	157 (3)
Multiple times a week	F	2 (2)	5 (1)	14 (7)	4 (1)	25 (11)
	M	4 (3)	20 (7)	19 (4)	7 (2)	50 (16)
Once a week	F	3 (3)	2 (1)	17 (5)	10	32 (9)
	M	1	8 (4)	40 (7)	21 (1)	70 (12)
Once a month	F	0	4	17	32 (2)	53 (2)
	M	1	3	18	39 (2)	61 (2)
Less than above	F	2	0	4 (1)	20 (1)	26 (2)
	M	0	1	9	37	47
Do not drink alcohol	F					363
	M					368
Don't know/Not available	F					3
	M					5

Note: (1) All valid answers, including those submitted by respondents who are not young, are used in this table. (2) The number of respondents who answered that they need assistance with mobility when they are drunk is in parentheses. (3) All respondents in the dark gray cells are regarded as heavy drinkers, while in the light gray cells, only respondents who answered that they need assistance are regarded as heavy drinkers.

Appendix B

The survey questions we used to identify at-risk respondents are listed below. Some expressions in Appendix B were slightly modified from the original questionnaire for readability, as with the main text.

1. Sleeping places
    - Where do you sleep?
        a. Home
        b. Church premises
        c. Cemetery
        d. Others (Fill in blank form)
2. Drinking habits
    - How often do you drink alcohol?
        a. Multiple times a day
        b. Once a day
        c. Multiple times a week
        d. Once a week
        e. Once a month
        f. Less than above
        g. Do not drink alcohol
        h. Don't know/Not available
    - How much alcohol do you drink at one time?
        a. 1 pint
        b. 2 pints
        c. 3 pints
        d. More than 3 pints
    - When you drink, do you ever get so drunk that you require assistance for mobility?
        a. Yes
        b. No
3. Chronic infectious diseases
    - Have you experienced chronic infectious diseases (such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, or HIV/AIDS)?
        a. Yes
        b. No
        c. Don't know/Not available
4. In-group affiliation
    - Do you belong to any in-groups?
        a. Yes
        b. No
    - Which in-groups do you belong to?

Abstract (in Japanese)

要 約

本研究は、2025 年にリベリアで実施したサーベイ調査のデータを用いて、社会的に疎外された、危険にさらされている若者（at-risk youth）がどのような人口統計学上の特徴をもつのかを明らかにする。また、危険にさらされている若者が、他者との交流関係や他者への信頼感などの観点で、危険にさらされていない若者と比較してどのような特徴をもつ傾向にあるのかを検証する。そのために、まずは、寝る場所、飲酒習慣、慢性感染症、内集団への所属という 4 つのリスク要因を用いて、若者か否かにかかわらず、危険にさらされている回答者を特定した。そして、どのような回答者がそうしたリスクを有する傾向にあるかを確認したところ、都市部のみならず、地方部で調査に参加した回答者の相当数が、また若者のみならず、30～40 代の非若者層の相当数がリスクを有しており、社会的に脆弱な層が広く人口全体にみられることが明らかになった。また、多くの元戦闘員も危険にさらされた状態にあり、内戦終結から約 20 年が経過した現在でも、その影響が依然として継続していることが示唆された。次に、若者に限定して分析を行った結果、リスクの有無は、性別との間に統計的に有意な関係がない一方で、学歴や雇用状況との間に統計的に有意な関係があり、教育レベルの低い若者や、失業状態にある若者がリスクを有する傾向にあることが明らかになった。加えて、危険にさらされている若者は、家族から孤立し、一般的に他者を信頼しない傾向にあることも明らかになった。他方で、危険にさらされていない若者と同程度にコミュニティの集会に参加しているという結果も得られた。そのことから、こうした集会への参加、そして他者との交流を通じて、若者がリベリア社会の平和構築を促進する役割を担うことが期待される。

キーワード：危険にさらされている若者、リベリア、信頼