



# **Youth Unemployment and Participation in Political Violence in Eyecourt, Harare**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**The main objective of the study was to assess how youth unemployment stimulates youth participation in political violence in Eyecourt and develop a comprehensive understanding of other unemployment interrelated factors and their interrelationships in driving political violence among youths in the area. Using a qualitative research methodology, the study utilized Eyecourt Township as a case study. Thirty participants, both perpetrators and victims of political violence, were selected using snowball sampling. Data collection tools included in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study found that youth unemployment significantly drives political violence. Other related factors such as limited economic opportunities; lack of civic education fosters intolerance and violent behavior towards political opponents; political terrain in Zimbabwe, stimulates youth involvement in political violence; and rapid urbanization exacerbates the situation by creating large pools of idle youths susceptible to recruitment for militias and contestations for land. The study concludes that these are key factors explaining youth participation in political violence. It recommends targeted interventions such as conflict early warning systems, special youth economic zones, vocational training, and the establishment of special courts to handle political violence cases. These measures aim to create economic opportunities, reduce youth frustration and aggression, fostering stability and peace in Harare and across Zimbabwe.**

**Keywords:** youth unemployment, political terrain, rapid urbanization, civic education, political violence

## **INTRODUCTION**

Political violence is a variable dependent on a multiplicity of factors including youth unemployment, lack of education, political terrain and rapid urbanization. Before delving into these factors, political violence refers to the use of physical force or coercion by individuals, groups, or governments to attain or sustain political objectives (Goodwin and Jasper, 2014). It's used to influence or control government policy, obtain power, or challenge the current political system and comprises actions namely military combat, terrorism, riots, assassinations and other politically motivated acts of violence (Nordstrom, 2004).

## **FACTORS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE**

Youth Unemployment is defined as individuals aged 15-35 actively seeking but unable to find employment (Betcherman and Khan, 2018; ILO, 2020) significantly affecting economic opportunities and long-term social and economic well-being. Another factor is limited access to education. Lack of education can perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality. Individuals with limited education face reduced employment prospects, lower earning potential and increased vulnerability to economic instability. Political terrain describes the complex context in which political actors and institutions operate (Calhoun et al., 2012). This includes social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors influencing politics. It often constitutes power structures, ideologies, political parties, interest groups, public opinion, and policy disputes. The study looks at rapid urbanization, which refers to the fast growth of urban areas due to population increase often resulting from rural-to-urban migration for better economic opportunities and living conditions. Combined with youth unemployment and other factors, it can contribute to political violence (Urdal, 2012).

### **Youth Unemployment and Youth Political Violence**

The relationship between youth unemployment and political violence is complex and multifaceted, involving historical, economic, and social factors. Literature provides different historical contexts and factors for political violence because of unemployment, economic decline and political violence, particularly among the youth. For instance, youth political violence is not a new phenomenon in global politics. European Revolutions in the 17th to 19th centuries were due to educational expansion without corresponding employment opportunities (Goldstone, 1991; Gills, 1974; Jarausch, 1974). From anti-colonial movements in Africa to anti-authoritarian movements in the Soviet Union, and resistance movements in Asia (Goldstone, 1991; Gills, 1974; Jarausch, 1974) all present evidence for political violence and the interconnectedness of various factors.

One of the causes as provided by empirical evidence points to the decline in economic conditions and limited economic opportunities that have led to youth unemployment significantly causing political violence and instability (Demeke, 2022). In the Arab States, there has been notable political violence because of youth unemployment. The Arab Spring violent uprisings were caused by the high unemployment rates in North Africa (Azeng & Yogo, 2015). In Iraq, Amirali (2019) found that youth unemployment was a primary factor leading to political unrest, as the labor market's inability to provide jobs for young people created conditions ripe for conflict. This aligns with Cincotta et al. (2003), who argue that when the labor market fails to absorb young jobseekers, it breeds frustration and resentment, leading to violent conflict. Similarly, Sambanis (2002) noted that in Iraq, young males were more likely to engage in violent political activities when faced with limited economic prospects. Caruso and Gavrilova (2012) also shared similar insights in the context of Palestine as they identified male youth unemployment as a central factor in political violence. In Kenya, Riechi (2019) found that high unemployment rates among youths increased their likelihood of engaging in crime and political violence. Thomas (2015) also highlighted the long-term negative consequences of unresolved youth unemployment on both individual and societal levels. In this sense, the failure of modern governments to provide viable economic opportunities for youths drives their participation in political processes and violence (Dodo, 2021). Mueller (2000) found that in the Balkan region in southeastern Europe youths joined militias for the economic opportunities provided by theft and banditry.

In Zimbabwe, several studies show that youth unemployment is a significant driver of political violence. Saylor (2016) found that the lack of employment opportunities for urban youth negatively impacts political and social stability, with dissatisfaction and aggression stemming from unmet financial needs leading to political violence. Yingi (2020) supports this, noting that poverty and limited economic opportunities are central to violent political behaviour among youths, particularly those with lower education levels. Mude (2014) further explains that urban youth unemployment leads to political violence due to grievances of unemployment and the perceived economic benefits of such violence: This also resonates with Mueller's (2000) findings that youths are drawn to political violence for the opportunities it presents. The evidence presented shows the critical link between youth unemployment and political violence in Zimbabwe, driven by frustration, social exclusion, and the lure of economic gains.

### **The Political Terrain in Zimbabwe**

Studies concur that the political terrain in Zimbabwe, shaped by the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party, significantly influences youth participation in political violence. Yingi (2020) highlights that the ZANU-PF party portrays opposition members as enemies rather than political competitors, fostering a culture of hatred between ZANU-PF and its rival, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Maringira and Gukurume (2020) note that during former President Robert Mugabe's presidency, he demonized the MDC, labelling them as agents of regime change and neo-colonialism, a stance continued by his successor, the current President, Emmerson Mnangagwa. This hostile political environment has led ZANU-PF youths to engage in political violence against opposition supporters. Mwonzora and Helliker (2020) further explain that during the 2008 presidential run-off election, war veterans incited rural youths to defend the revolution by any means, including violence against opposition members.

Argarwal (2012) supports this by stating that political attitudes and beliefs are passed down by the older generation to the young people, influenced by the prevailing political terrain. Mwonzora and Helliker (2020) also note that ZANU-PF uses intimidation tactics, especially in rural areas, where people are threatened with losing their land if they do not support the party. Additionally, Yingi (2020) points out that participation in political violence is often incentivized, with youths knowing they have immunity when siding with the ruling party. This normalization of looting and violent conduct stems from the fast-track land reform programme and the negative reward mechanisms established by ZANU-PF to maintain power through violence against opposition supporters.

### **Limited Access to Quality Education**

Various studies across different regions highlight how educational inequalities and lack of opportunities at all levels from primary, secondary, to tertiary create conditions that drive youths towards political violence. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), limited access to education was identified as a key factor leading youths to engage in political violence (Search for Common Ground, 2020). Kanyama (2017) noted that despite laws mandating free primary education, 32% of children aged 6-17 are out of school, contributing to ongoing violence. The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (2013) found that the exclusion of Banyamulenge girls from formal education in the Ruzizi Plain influenced their participation in political violence. This situation mirrors Zimbabwe as significant educational inequalities, particularly in rural areas, lure and drive youth involvement in political violence. Thyne (2006) argued that

participation in political violence can offer economic opportunities and social status changes for educated youths, making it an incentive. Mamdani (2001) observed that the Rwandan genocide involved less educated rural youths motivated by fear, revenge, and potential economic gains.

Breidlid (2005) identified inadequate education resources as a cause of the civil war in Sudan. In Sierra Leone, Richards (2003) found that unfulfilled educational aspirations and lack of equitable access to education led youths to join rebel groups. During Apartheid in South Africa, segregated education systems mobilized township youths. Studies indicate that lack of access to education at all levels, including secondary and tertiary, influences youth participation in political violence. The UNDP (2005) highlighted that university admission conditions led to conflict in Sri Lanka in the 1970s, with discrimination against Tamil youth contributing to militant movements. In Zimbabwe, university strikes and protests over school fee hikes are common, reflecting the impact of educational disenfranchisement on political violence.

### **Rapid Urbanization**

Rapid urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa has been linked to youth political violence due to factors such as economic stagnation and political instability. Beall and Fox (2012) argue that while urbanization is generally associated with positive human development, it can also lead to social strain and unrest if not managed properly. Rodgers (2010) supports this by noting that population size, habitation density, and social diversity in urban areas can create conditions conducive to violence. Tegenu (2011) highlights that rapid urbanization, especially when coupled with a youth bulge, increases the likelihood of political violence. Tsegaye and Bo (2010) found that in Ethiopia, rural-urban migration of youths has been a significant factor in urban political violence. Migration-led urbanization, which outpaces the available financial and human resources, puts urban communities at greater risk of violent conflict (IOM, 2012).

Cockayne et al (2017) emphasize that urbanization presents governance challenges, particularly in fragile and conflict-prone states in Sub-Saharan Africa. Bricker and Foley (2013) identify demography, governance, and inequality as key factors in urban political violence, with large cohorts of unemployed youths creating risks for unrest. Urdal (2011) notes that urbanization accompanied by high rates of uncompleted secondary education increases the likelihood of political violence. Muggah (2017) discusses governance failures in rapidly urbanizing areas, where the state's inability to provide livelihoods, socio-economic services, and security drives youth participation in political violence. In such contexts, non-state armed groups may emerge, mediating relations between state actors and local populations, and potentially engaging in criminal activities (Cockayne, 2016).

Rapid urbanization in Zimbabwe has been a significant driver of youth political violence, primarily due to the socio-economic challenges it presents. Rapid urban population growth has coincided with shrinking economic opportunities that often fail to keep pace, leading to high unemployment and underemployment among youths. This economic stagnation fosters frustration and resentment, making urban youths more susceptible to mobilizing for political violence. Maringira and Gukurume (2020) highlight that the ZANU-PF party has historically exploited these conditions, using urban militias to maintain political control through violence and intimidation.

The lack of adequate governance and infrastructure in rapidly urbanizing areas exacerbates these issues, as noted by Cockayne et al (2017). They argue that governance failures in urban settings create fertile ground for violent political conflict. Additionally, Tegenu (2011) points out that the combination of rapid urbanization and a youthful population increases the likelihood of political violence, as seen in the urban centers of Zimbabwe. These dynamics underscore the critical link between rapid urbanization and youth political violence in Zimbabwe, driven by economic disenfranchisement and political manipulation. The various studies highlight how the rapid growth of urban populations, without corresponding economic opportunities and adequate governance, leads to frustration and resentment among urban youths, making them more susceptible to political mobilization and violence.

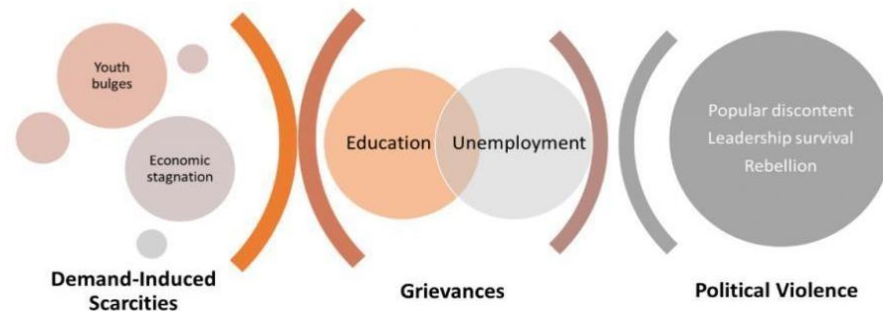
Given the weight of the above literature review, the research gap on youth unemployment and participation in political violence in Eyecourt, Harare, lies in the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the continuous and pervasive nature of political violence beyond electoral periods. Empirical studies predominantly focus on electoral violence and contexts of civil war, overlooking the unique drivers of political violence in non-war settings like Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the socioeconomic, political, and educational elements that impact youth behavior are not sufficiently explored, which calls for focused research to create efficient interventions and policies that deal with the underlying causes of young political violence in Eyecourt, Harare.

Given the context, the study objectives were to assess how youth unemployment stimulates youth participation in political violence in Eyecourt, to develop an understanding of how lack of education necessitates youth participation in political violence in Eyecourt, to establish the influence of a violent political terrain as a driver of youth participation in political violence in Eyecourt and to establish the relationship between rapid urbanization and youth participation in political violence in Eyecourt.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study was guided by the youth bulge theory. The theory proposes that large cohorts of youths in a society ultimately lead to conflict. Goldstone (2001) further elucidates that the youth have played an important role in political violence through history and the existence of the youth bulge has been historically associated with political violence in communities. Rooted in ideology and false consciousness, the youth are often recruited for social and political conflict.

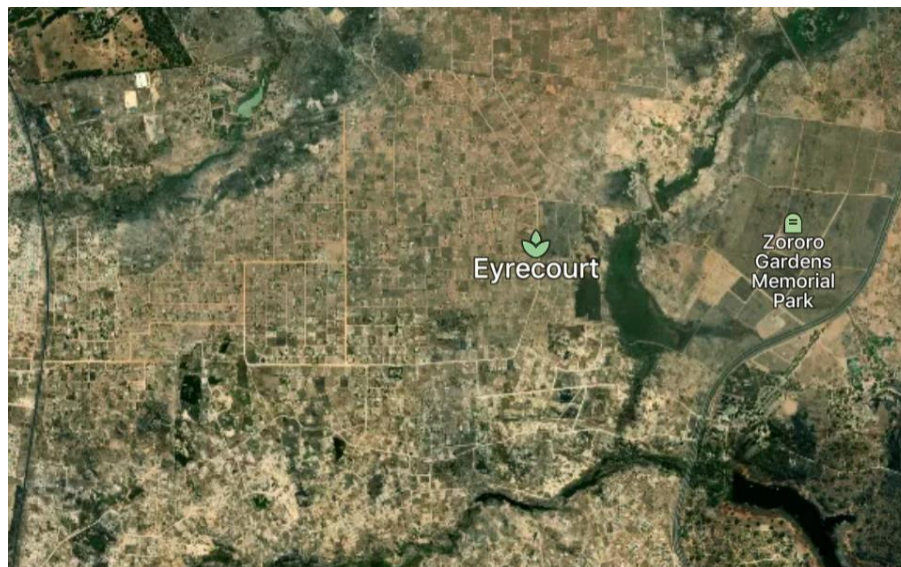
Weber (2013) and Bricker and Foley (2013) bring a new dimension to the youth bulge theory, arguing that rather than looking at the demographic side of it alone, it is important to point out that societies that have such demographic characteristics coupled with stagnant economic growth and high rates of unemployment are at the highest risk of political violence. Urdal (2006) therefore submits that the youth bulge alone is not enough to generate violence but the youth bulge coupled with political and economic factors will result in political violence by the youths. Unemployment from the youth bulge results in grievances and this is enhanced through education. The concept states that if there is a higher level of education among the youths and they feel that their life prospects are enhanced but they fail to secure meaningful employment, there is a high risk of the occurrence of violent conflict and the study takes a closer look at these issues as it unfolds.



**Figure 1: Youth Bulge Theory Conceptualization**

### **Study Area: Eyecourt**

Eyecourt Township is a township located 20 kilometers south of Harare. Eyecourt became a township just after the fast-track land reform programme in the year 2000 when the land was seized from the white settlers by the state for residential use where the ruling ZANU-PF party used to reward party loyalists and supporters, especially the youth. As a result, Eyecourt tends to be a ZANU-PF stronghold up to this day. Worthwhile to note is the fact that Eyecourt has become one of the fast increasingly populated areas in Harare due to urbanization and rural-urban migration. These factors have provided the rationale to select Eyecourt as the study area for this paper.



**Figure 2**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study used the qualitative research approach, which provided answers to the research questions and fulfilled the stated objectives of the study. The approach ensured a deeper understanding of the social world through the lenses of the eyes of the research participants or social actors. The study used a social constructivist approach because it allowed the researchers to understand the drivers of youth involvement in political violence. Case study research design was adopted as the best ideal for answering the how and why questions, in this case, it is therefore important to use a case study design because the main thrust of the study focuses on the why questions (Yin, 2003).

This qualitative research paper used non-probability and snowballing sampling techniques to select participants. The research paper targeted the youths in Eyecourt both disaggregated by gender (male and female) between the ages of 15-35 years to understand both the perspectives of the perpetrators and the victims of political violence. The target sample for the study was a total of 30 youths with at least 15 being perpetrators.

Data collection techniques included both primary and secondary data. Primary data was gathered using qualitative data collection techniques namely in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The rationale for selecting these techniques is their flexibility to allow the research participants more room to explain themselves and describe social phenomena in depth rather than be restricted to pre-defined answers (Bhattaracheje, 2012). The study used thematic analysis as a data analysis technique in the data collection, presentation, and analysis phases.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The study faces scope and methodological limitations. The study focused on a single township in Harare, and this may not represent a broader picture of an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of political violence in Harare and other cities in Zimbabwe. The data cannot be generalized as it solely used qualitative methods and more triangulation with quantitative methods could have ensured the study's reliability and validity.

Future research should provide more scientific evidence using longitudinal studies that can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors and the unique drivers influencing youth involvement in political violence. A more targeted approach to policy-responsive interventions should be used to lobby advocacy efforts towards holding governments responsible for tackling the root causes of youth frustration and aggression and reduce the incidences of political violence and promote stability in Zimbabwe and the region. Future research should explore why young women participate in political violence. Historically, discussions have focused on young men, but this study found that young women are also involved. In addition, future studies on youth participation in political violence could benefit from including social media analysis in their methodology to provide insights into the motivations, networks, and behaviors of young people involved in political violence.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

### **Youth Unemployment and Political Violence**

The study reveals that youth unemployment in Eyecourt, Harare, significantly drives political violence. Unemployed youths, frustrated by their inability to secure meaningful employment, resort to political violence to change the status quo and improve their socio-economic conditions. This frustration is exacerbated by unfulfilled government promises, leading to a sense of hopelessness and aggression among the youth. One of the respondents highlighted:

*"To change things, we must attack because those in power don't understand our struggles. We have no other option, so when others say, "Let's go," we join because we're tired of this situation." (Female Aged 33)*

The finding and other remarks triangulated align with the youth bulge theory by Urdal (2004) suggesting that large cohorts of unemployed youths are more likely to engage in conflict due to

their low opportunity costs and high frustration levels. Dodo (2021) argues that the failure of governments to provide employment opportunities results in youth frustration and subsequent political violence. Financial gains also play a crucial role in motivating youths to participate in political violence. The study found that political violence is perceived as a source of income, with youths engaging in violent acts for direct payments or looting opportunities. This can be shown below as a respondent noted:

*“My man, when we go to beat up people, we would have gone to work, we do not just do it for the sake of doing it but you see at the end of the day you can get yourself a ten dollars or twenty dollars so all will be fine, you will actually be the same with someone who spent the whole day at work so we do not even back down on the chance because this is what is earning us a living in the absence of employment.”*  
(Male Aged 29)

This is consistent with Azeng and Yogo (2013), who found that economic incentives drive youth involvement in political violence in Africa. Similarly, USAID (2005) highlights that financial rewards from politicians and rebel groups attract youths to violent activities. In Eyecourt, the need for financial gains has become deeply entrenched, with political violence seen as a livelihood strategy for both young men and women.

### **Lack of Education and Political Violence**

The study identifies lack of education, particularly civic education, as a significant factor driving youth participation in political violence. The study found that youths with low levels of education have little to no understanding of democratic processes, leading them to perceive opposition supporters as enemies. This lack of civic knowledge fosters intolerance and violent behaviour towards political opponents. The findings are supported by USAID (2005), which underscores the importance of civic education in preventing political violence. Similarly, Search for Common Ground (2020) found that limited access to education in the DRC leads to youth involvement in political violence. One of the participants highlighted:

*“I doubt if the people that live here actually understand what democracy all is about, when you look at it, most young men and women in this area did not complete their secondary education meaning that concepts such as democracy did not sink in, and they do not work for them. Such people are dangerous because they do not understand that opposition and criticism is necessary for a functional government, they will see you as an enemy and they will do anything to harm you.”*  
(Female Aged 31)

Educational inequalities in Eyecourt mirror those in other conflict-prone regions. For instance, Barakat and Urdal (2008) argue that countries with youth bulges and low secondary education completion rates are more prone to political violence. Collier (2006) also found that low education rates correlate with higher risks of conflict and civil war. In Eyecourt, the lack of education erodes the youths' ability to understand and engage in democratic processes, making them more susceptible to political manipulation and violence.



### **Violent Political Terrain and Youth Violence**

The political terrain in Zimbabwe, particularly in Eyecourt, is characterized by a culture of violence and intolerance towards opposition parties. Several youth respondents agreed that they engage in political violence to gain political identity and comradeship status within the ruling ZANU-PF party. This need for political identity and belonging drives youths to participate in violent acts, aligning with the party's culture of using violence against political opponents. The findings are consistent with Yingi (2020), who notes that the ZANU-PF party portrays opposition members as enemies, fostering a culture of hatred and violence. This also resonates with respondents sentiments who highlighted:

*“These guys feel that for them to be identified as ZANU-PF youths they have to bully people around, even when people tell them to stop what they are doing, they respond that it is what it means to be a ZANU-PF youth hence they are actually motivated to participate in political violence.” (Male Aged 33)*

*“Comradeship in the party is shown by the ability to stand firm and defend yourself in times of war and violence, there is no comrade who is afraid of fighting.” (Male Aged 27)*

Political chants and symbolism also play a role in shaping the youths' attitudes towards violence. The study found that political songs and slogans instill a culture of violence among the youths, influencing their beliefs and behaviors. Some respondents stated:

*“Growing up we listened to songs by Elliot Manyika singing that ZANU came with bloodshed, so if the party is to remain in power we will have to fight.” (Male Aged 35)*

*“You hear the President referring to us as Varakashi, so when we engage in fights we will be doing as what is expected of Varakashi.” (Female Aged 28)*

This aligns with Urdal (2004), who argues that youths are more likely to engage in political violence due to their susceptibility to political and religious extremism. Politicians further exacerbate this by using hate speech and incentivizing violent behavior, as noted by Umar (2016).

### **Rapid Urbanization and Youth Violence**

Rapid urbanization in Eyecourt has led to an influx of idle youths, creating a breeding ground for political violence. Many respondents noted that they are easily recruited by politicians to participate in violent acts. This is supported by Urdal (2006), who argues that large cohorts of idle youths increase the risk of conflict and violence. Dodo (2021) also highlights that rapid urbanization in Zimbabwe has created a fertile ground for political violence. One of the respondents stated:

*“Some [youths] just migrate from the rural areas, and they have nothing to do here, when they come, they just join what others are doing because that is what is there for them, the problem is we have many young people who have nothing to do, and politicians take advantage of such situations, and they get people whom they can use for purposes of political violence.” (Male Aged 34)*

Drug and substance abuse among the youths further exacerbates the situation. The study found numerous incidences where respondents highlighted that politicians exploit the youths' addiction to drugs, using it to control and manipulate them into engaging in political violence. Yingi (2020) similarly found that drug abuse among youths in Zimbabwe makes them more susceptible to political manipulation and violence. The study results also show the need for land also drives youth participation in political violence. In Eyecourt, land is used as a reward for loyalty to the ruling party, motivating youths to engage in violent acts to secure their socio-economic status. This aligns with the findings of Tsegaye and Bo (2010), who found that competition for land in rapidly urbanizing areas, increases the likelihood of political violence.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study highlights a complex interplay between socio-economic factors, political dynamics, and educational disparities driving youth involvement in political violence. Youth unemployment through limited economic opportunities, exacerbated by unfulfilled government promises, leads to frustration and aggression among the youth, pushing them towards political violence to change their socio-economic status. Financial incentives and opportunities for looting further entrench this behavior, making political violence a perceived livelihood strategy.

Lack of education, particularly civic education, significantly contributes to youth participation in political violence. As shown in the study, youths with low levels of education have little to no understanding of democratic processes, leading to intolerance and violent behavior towards other politically affiliated opponents. The political terrain in Zimbabwe, characterized by a culture of violence and intolerance towards opposition parties, further stimulates youth involvement in political violence. Political chants, symbolism, and influence from politicians play a leading role in shaping the youths' attitudes and behaviors, making them more vulnerable to political manipulation and mere pawns in the hands of cruel politics.

Rapid urbanization in Eyecourt has led to an influx of idle youths and this has enabled a breeding ground for political violence. The lack of economic opportunities and governance failures in rapidly urbanizing Eyecourt has contributed to youth mobilization for political violence. Drug and substance abuse among the youths further exacerbates the situation, with politicians exploiting their addiction to control and manipulate them into engaging in violent acts. Temporary opportunities created by politicians in the guise of rewarding those who demonstrated loyalty to the ruling party by engaging in political violence for future allocations of residential stands and land at the prejudice of the victims goes to show how rapid urbanization or urbanization in general has contributed to political violence.

The issues identified in the study require the government to implement targeted interventions aimed at reducing youth unemployment. Improving employment opportunities through creating job opportunities and where skills gaps exist provide training programmes through technical and vocational education and training can be considered steps in the right direction to alleviate youth unemployment and reduce the economic incentives for engaging in political violence. Enhancing more advocacy efforts and awareness raising on democratic processes through civic education and promoting democratic values can go a long way in fostering principles of diversity, intersectionality, tolerance and reduce violent behavior towards political opponents.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study issues recommendations to the following stakeholders relevant to addressing the issues of youth unemployment and political violence in Eyecourt, Harare: The Zimbabwean government should introduce a pro-youth employment policy geared towards ensuring that youths are absorbed into employment, create special economic zones for youth businesses, and ensure that a portion of job vacancies are reserved for young people. Civil Society Organizations should help lobby for prioritizing teaching civic education from primary education to promote democratic values and tolerance through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education including integrating it in the next curriculum review. Additionally, the judiciary should set up special courts to handle political violence cases and send a clear message that such behavior will not be tolerated. Implementing early conflict warning systems and a strong anti-drug policy will also help address the socio-economic issues that lead to youth involvement in political violence. This coordinated effort will reduce youth frustration and aggression, fostering stability and peace in Harare and across Zimbabwe.

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