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POLICY BRIEF

Socio-Economic Empowerment of Boda-Boda Riders: Specialised and Commercial Training, Job Opportunities, Debt Management and Substance-Abuse Prevention

Target Audience: *The Ministry of Youth Affairs, Sports and the Arts, the National Youth Service, county governments, youth agencies, the National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA), financial institutions, and boda-boda associations and SACCOs.*

1.0 Background and Context

The boda-boda sector is a powerful but precarious livelihood system for unemployed and economically marginalised youth. The study established that youth unemployment and poverty or low income are the most consistent and dominant socio-economic drivers of boda-boda-related crime, reinforced by debt pressure, family financial obligations, lack of alternative livelihoods, substance abuse and peer influence. Socio-economic hardship alone does not explain crime; it becomes criminogenic when it interacts with weak regulation, peer networks, political manipulation and illicit-market opportunities.

The human cost of this vulnerability is documented in the study's evidence: FGD participants in Machakos stated that poverty is inevitable in the community and struggles for daily bread are real; riders in Bomet described hustling for survival from early morning until late at night; and key informants in Nyeri identified drug addiction and the emergence of a substance known as Kete as new criminal drivers, with drug-dependent youth resorting to phone snatching to fund the habit. The hospital records from Machakos, which documented 39 assault, rape and theft-related boda-boda crime patients in January 2026 alone, further illustrate the human cost. This policy brief makes the case for socio-economic empowerment as crime prevention.

2.0 Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods comparative design across seven counties (Bomet, Busia, Kirinyaga, Machakos, Marsabit, Mombasa and Nyeri). Quantitative survey data were collected from 2,631 respondents. Qualitative data were obtained through Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions with riders, stage leaders, SACCO officials, county transport officers, NGAO officers, police officers, prosecutors, border and security officers, community leaders and CSO representatives. Archival records from police crime registers, law court case registers and a health facility in four counties provided independent documentary evidence, while GIS-based spatial analysis mapped crime-risk sites. Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, a socio-economic vulnerability index (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.788$), logistic regression and thematic analysis.

3.0 Key Findings

3.1 Youth unemployment and poverty are the dominant drivers. Youth unemployment and poverty or low income emerged as the most consistent and dominant economic drivers across all counties. Marsabit and Busia recorded the highest socio-economic vulnerability scores, and these counties also displayed higher crime-frequency patterns, with Marsabit recording a crime-frequency score of 70.2 per cent.

3.2 Socio-economic vulnerability significantly increases crime exposure. The socio-economic vulnerability index had acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.788$). Logistic regression showed that a one-unit increase in the vulnerability index increased the odds of crime exposure by approximately 22.9 per cent, holding county constant. Vulnerability is significant but moderate, confirming that economic pressure matters most when combined with governance weakness, limited alternatives, peer influence, substance abuse and opportunity structures.

3.3 Debt pressure and daily remittance systems drive risk-taking. Debt pressure, often linked to motorcycle loans, daily remittance systems and SACCO obligations, was a significant factor. Riders operating under strict daily repayment conditions may be forced to work long hours, operate at night, or take risks to meet financial targets, increasing exposure to crime or vulnerability to criminal involvement.

3.4 Substance abuse and peer influence reinforce vulnerability. Substance abuse operated both as a driver and a consequence of crime, with riders spending income on alcohol and drugs and drug-dependent youth stealing to fund habits. In Nyeri, the emergence of a novel substance locally known as "Kete" illustrates how drug markets adapt and create new criminal drivers.

3.5 The human cost is health-system-visible. The hospital records from a Level 5 facility in Machakos documented 15 assault and rape cases and 39 total crime-related attendances in January 2026 alone. The qualitative evidence gave these statistics a human face: poverty is

inevitable in the community and struggles for daily bread are real (Machakos), and riders hustle for survival from early morning until late at night (Bomet).

4.0 Policy Recommendations

4.1 Introduce specialised and commercial boda-boda rider training. The Ministry of Youth Affairs, Sports and the Arts, the National Youth Service and county governments should introduce specialised and commercial rider training programmes to instil national values, ethical and moral standards, road safety education and financial literacy. Training should be subsidised and accessible, since many riders cannot afford formal training or licensing fees.

4.2 Create job opportunities and diversify livelihoods. County governments and national agencies should expand vocational training programmes, youth enterprise funds, agricultural value-chain initiatives and small-business support schemes, prioritising high-vulnerability counties such as Marsabit and Busia. Diversifying livelihood options can reduce pressure on the boda-boda sector and limit the conditions that push some individuals toward risky or illegal activities. Jobs must be treated not as a mere economic policy goal but as a national security imperative.

4.3 Regulate debt and hire-purchase arrangements. Regulatory reforms should promote fair and transparent financing arrangements, including standardised contracts, reasonable repayment schedules and oversight of informal leasing systems. Strengthening SACCO-based financing models and providing financial literacy training can help riders manage income, reduce indebtedness and avoid exploitative arrangements.

4.4 Integrate substance-abuse prevention into stage management. County governments should collaborate with NACADA, health departments and local organisations to provide sensitisation programmes, counselling services and referral systems for affected riders at stage level, while enforcement targets drug-distribution networks operating around boda-boda stages and transport corridors.

4.5 Support savings, insurance and structured pathways. County governments, financial institutions and boda-boda associations should support savings groups, affordable insurance, debt-management support and structured pathways into jobs and formal employment or enterprise, together with peer-mentorship programmes at stage level in counties where peer influence, drugs or alcohol were identified as reinforcing crime vulnerability.

5.0 Primary Implementation Pathway. The Ministry of Youth Affairs, Sports and the Arts should coordinate the national framework, with the National Youth Service delivering training, county governments and youth agencies implementing local programmes, financial institutions and SACCOs providing accessible financing and insurance, NACADA and health departments leading substance-abuse prevention, and boda-boda associations organising rider participation.

6.0 Conclusion

Socio-economic vulnerability is the background condition against which boda-boda-related crime evolves. It is not an excuse for offending, but it is the structural reality that recruitment, debt, drugs and political manipulation exploit. Empowering riders through subsidised training, job opportunities, fair financing, substance-abuse prevention and savings support is therefore crime prevention in its most durable form. The Ministry of Youth Affairs, Sports and the Arts, working with the National Youth Service, county governments, NACADA and financial institutions, can begin design immediately and achieve visible reductions in rider vulnerability within two to three years, transforming the sector from a source of insecurity into an engine of dignified youth livelihoods and national security.

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