



KIDNAPPING FOR RANSOM: TRENDS, CAUSES AND GOVERNMENTAL INTERVENTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Kidnapping for ransom has become one of the most prevalent and economically harmful security issues in Nigeria. What started as a politically influenced kidnapping at the beginning of the 2000s has become a nationwide criminal enterprise. This paper's objectives were to examine the historical development, causal factors, and trends of kidnapping across all six geopolitical regions, as well as governmental interventions. The study adopted a semi-systematic review of empirical evidence, theoretical framework, and recent developments up to 2026. Using Routine Activity Theory, Strain Theory, Social Disorganization Theory, and Political Economy perspectives, the study argues that kidnapping-for-ransom is both a product and driver of broader governance and development failures. Findings revealed that a combination of socio-economic forces, such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, and ineffective capacity to enforce the law, corruption, insurgency, banditry, and proliferation of small arms has heightened the menace of kidnapping. Currently, there is a significant drift towards ransom payments through Nigerian banks and fintech platforms, indicating more penetration of formal financial systems. In addition, regional analysis revealed mass kidnappings in Northeast instigated by the insurgent, banditry associated with kidnappings in Northwest, highway kidnappings in North Central area, and organised criminal networks in the South East, South South, and South West. The paper concludes that government action measures such as military, anti-kidnapping laws, community vigilante groups, and financial control regulation have not produced much success in the long term because of structural problems and the uneven application of adopted measures. The paper recommends a holistic, multi-layered measure that would combine enhanced law enforcement capability, socio-economic reforms, improvements in cyber and financial intelligence, community engagement, and regional cooperation.

Keywords. Banditry, Insurgency, Criminal enterprise, inequality, proliferation of small arms



Introduction

Ransom-motivated kidnapping has become one of the most widespread and financially devastating types of violent crimes in Nigeria. Originally a comparatively regional phenomenon, it has now developed into a nationwide criminal organisation that spans across all the six geopolitical areas literally cutting across rural areas, urban areas, highways, and border areas. In the last twenty years, kidnapping has evolved from being less politically inclined kidnapping to a highly organised profit-making industry that brings in billions of naira yearly (Alemika, 2024; Okoli & Ugwu, 2024). The rising cases of kidnapping as a ransom demand have far-reaching consequences to the national security, economic growth, societal stability, and citizen confidence in the institutions of the state. The interplay of socio-economic, political as well as security-related issues has been found to influence the widespread nature of kidnapping in the country in a complex manner. These are poverty, unemployment among the youth, weak law enforcement capabilities, weak borders, small arms proliferation, ethno religious wars, and emergence of non-state armed groups etc (Agu & Ugada, 2024). The combination of all these has resulted in the facilitation of the existence of kidnapping syndicates, both small opportunistic gangs, and well-organised criminal businesses and insurgencies (Apata, 2025).

Kidnapping in Nigeria, now ranks as one of the highest globally, with thousands of victims every year and ransom payments summing up to billions of naira. In the years 2024 to 2025 alone, the sum of money paid in ransoms reached over N2.57 billion, which is indicative of the magnitude of the crime and the rising sophistication of the criminal networks (Adewale, 2026). Reports stated a new trend, kidnappers increasingly demanding ransom payment be made through Nigerian commer-

cial banks, pointing towards the fact that money was not paid in cash but channelled through more refined financial channels (Ameh, 2026). The shift highlighted by this development is the changing face of kidnapping and the increased involvement of criminal organisations and the formal financial systems.

The evidence is significant across multiple research studies., with quite an objective data offered by Archibong (2023), which records 2,371 kidnapping cases in the first six months of 2021 alone, proving that Nigeria takes the first place in the world ranking of kidnapping cases based on ransom. In addition, Okoli-Osemene, (2021), reiterates that the trend of kidnapping in the 21st century is described as being on the high side and therefore urgently requires stakeholder attention.

The main aim of the paper is to explore the historical development of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria, identify the causal factors, examine the trends in the six geopolitical regions and highlight governmental interventions. Despite the legal framework available to address the menace of kidnapping in Nigeria, the menace continues. This paper attempts to answer this question or gap by highlighting the challenges militating against effective governmental interventions

Evolution of kidnapping in Nigeria

Until the beginning of the 2000s, the problem of kidnapping in Nigeria was quite uncommon and mainly politically oriented. This method of political intimidation was occasionally involved in the military, although it was not common and economically driven (Maigida et al., 2026). Kidnapping for ransom was not common, and the majority of communities had traditional security systems that prevented crimes.



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The contemporary phase of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria started in the Niger Delta in the early 2000s. The movement of the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) employed kidnapping as a political bargaining power to demand control of resources, environmental justice and compensation by the multinational oil companies (Ikelegbe, 2010). In the early days, the main targets were foreign oil workers, and ransom payments were usually conducted by intermediaries. Overtime, however, this became commercialised. Expatriates, local elites and rich Nigerians became targeted and kidnapping ceased to be a political agitation but a profitable criminal enterprise. The success of early kidnappings which resulted in millions of naira was an incentive to the other groups to use the strategy (Onuoha & Okoli-Osemene, 2019)..

As early as the early 2010s, kidnapping had spread to the Southeast and South South areas. Abia, Anambra, Edo, and Delta states were turned into hotspots, and criminal gangs started targeting traders, professionals, politicians, and religious leaders (Okoli and Nwankwo, 2015). The spread of small arms, together with weak policing, helped to increase the number of kidnapping networks (Chimaobi et. al, 2024) In 2012, this changed when the mother of the then Finance Minister in Nigeria, Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, was kidnapped, and it proved that even those in high-profile positions were also vulnerable.

Boko Haram insurgency, however, brought a new aspect to kidnapping in Nigeria. The 2014 kidnapping of 276 Chibok schoolgirls attracted international media attention and underscored the importance of using kidnapping as a weapon of terror, recruitment and bargaining (Zenn, 2020). Mass abductions became a common way of negotiating ransom, exchanging prisoners and gaining political influence

by Boko Haram and its splinter factions. At the same time, the emergence of armed banditry in the Northwest, especially in the Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna and Niger states, caused kidnapping for ransom to explode. This was because the bandit groups kidnapped villagers, travellers, farmers, or even school children in quite large numbers. This trend was witnessed in 2021 when more than 300 students were abducted in Kankara, Katsina State.

By 2020, the issue of kidnapping for ransom had become rooted throughout the country. This was characterised by a number of developments:

Kidnapping on industrial scale: kidnapping became a multi-billion naira business with well-developed networks comprising of informants, negotiators, logistics planners and armed agents (Osemuyi & Festus, 2024). Furthermore, there were more cases of highway kidnappings on major highways such as Abuja-Kaduna, Lagos-Ibadan, Benin-Ore, and Enugu-Port Harcourt, these highways turned into hot spots of roadside kidnappings. Afterwards, urban kidnappings soared, with the increase in specific kidnappings of professionals, business owners, and children as evidenced in cities like Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt and Kano (Aleyomi & Olajubu, 2024).

Investigative reports by 2026 showed that kidnappers were increasingly demanding the payment of ransoms via Nigerian banks with the help of mule accounts, fintech wallets, layered transfers, and cryptocurrency intermediaries. This change indicates increased sophistication and the integration of kidnapping networks into mainstream financial markets.



Theoretical frameworks (Routine Activity, Strain, Social Disorganisation and Political Economy theory)

According to the Routine Activity Theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979), three factors have to come together: a motivated criminal, an appropriate target, and lack of effective guardianship to commit a crime. This model has a lot of application in the kidnapping situation in Nigeria.

Motivated offenders: Armed bandits, rebels, the unemployed youth, and organised criminal gangs.

Appropriate targets: Commuters, students, farmers, business owners and high-income individuals.

Absence of guardianship: Weak policing, permeable borders, schools that are not well patrolled and unguarded forest spaces. The theory provides the reason why kidnapping is more successful in places where the state is less present like the Northwest forests, rural communities, and highways.

Strength

It is very practical, making it effective for situational crime prevention and planning. It is also predictive, as it explains why crime rates can even increase when economic conditions improve. It provides a straightforward guide for law enforcement and policymakers to identify and reduce opportunities for crime.

Weaknesses

It overlooks the root cause of crime that creates a motivated offender, and it inadvertently shifts the burden of crime prevention on victims by emphasizing the lifestyle and routine of victims. It also focuses on opportunities in time and space and misses how social networks, corruption and the state shape both guardianship and offender behavior.

Secondly, according to Strain Theory (Merton, 2017), persons resort to crime when structures in the society deny them a chance to obtain

culturally desirable objectives in a legitimate manner. In Nigeria: high unemployment, widespread poverty, inequality, and perceived marginalization. These conditions cause strain, which drives people to kidnapping as another strategy of attaining economic prosperity. This is mostly apparent in young men in the Northwest and North Central parts, where there is limited access to economic opportunities.

Strengths

It shifts the focus from individual pathology to societal structures, explaining how inequality can drive crime. It also effectively explains why crime rates are higher within disadvantaged communities, where there is a wide gap between goals and means. It also provides a framework for reducing crimes by providing legitimate opportunities for those who are at a disadvantage.

Weaknesses

It could not account for middle class individuals who commit crime. It also did not take into consideration the role individual choice in crime commission

Thirdly, the Social Disorganisation Theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942) attributes crime to the disintegration of social institutions, which include family, education, and community networks. In Nigeria, factors such as displacement due to conflict, erosion of traditional authority, proliferation of slums, and weak local governance. These create conditions in which kidnapping networks thrive. Societies that have low social cohesiveness do not resist or report criminal activities.

Strengths

Focuses on how the neighborhood conditions and social structures influence crime rather than on the individual. It also explains why certain zones within the society serve as transitional sites that maintain higher crime levels. It provides a framework for community-based



preventive measures like improved housing, social services, local schools, etc

Weaknesses

It failed to explain why most people living in “disorganized areas” remain law-abiding citizens. There is the risk of making inferences about individuals based on group data, which can lead to bias against and stereotyping of specific locations

Lastly, Political Economy Theory is characterised by the prominence of structural inequalities, state failure, and struggle for resources in the development of criminal behaviour. Kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria is entrenched in governance failures, corruption, competition over natural resources, and uneven development across the country. The Niger Delta militancy period is a good demonstration of how political dissatisfaction and economic marginalisation evolved into an organized kidnapping business which was highly structured (Ikelegbe, 2010). In the same light, banditry in the North West is attributed to historical neglect, land conflicts, and incapacity of the state.

Strength

It bridges the gap between politics and economics by reiterating that situations do not exist in a vacuum but are sometimes shaped by legislative decisions.

Weakness

It has been criticized for having many branches that are heavily influenced by the researcher’s ideology, for instance, Marxist versus Neoclassical

Recent literature argues the need to adopt multidimensional frameworks that incorporates socio economic, psychological, and governance issues in order to explain kidnapping in Nigeria (Otu & Nnam, 2018). These frameworks acknowledge the fact that kidnapping is not caused by one factor but by structural and situational overlapping factors.

Causes of Kidnapping in Nigeria

Several factors have been identified as drivers of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria; they have been categorized into four major forms. They are:

1. Socio-economic Factors

- ***Poverty and Unemployment***

With an estimate of about 40% of Nigerians living in poverty, this forms a good background for criminal recruitment (Adegbami & Uche, 2016). Unemployment among the youths, especially in the north, has always been related to the emergence of armed groups and criminal gangs. Kidnapping provides a good alternative to a legitimate job to many young men with very little economic prospects. Kidnapping offers a lucrative alternative to legitimate employment. Ransom payments ranging from ₦200,000 for rural victims to tens of millions for high-profile targets create strong financial incentives (Okoli & Ugwu, 2024).

Inequality and Perceived Injustice.

The increase in the socio-economic inequality breeds resentment and helps to rationalise kidnappings as a constituent of wealth redistribution. Kidnappers in certain societies are seen as resisting state negligence or are taking advantage of rich elites who are considered corrupt or indifferent (Sheu & Ogunsola, 2024). Such a moral framing makes the community less willing to work with the police, as well as making kidnappers operate with impunity.

2. Governmental Factors

Weak Law Enforcement.

The police to population ratio in Nigeria is still lower than the recommended levels by the UN, and the force is characterised by low training standards, equipment, corruption, and lack of public trust (Okwuwada, 2023). These



weaknesses fuel the growth of kidnapping networks. Additionally, the level of police presence in most rural regions is low and the armed groups are able to effectively control the territory and carry out abductions without opposition.

Corruption and Complicity

The anti-kidnapping efforts are undermined by corruption within the security agencies. There are reports of security personnel colluding with kidnappers by giving intelligence, negotiating with, or sharing proceeds of ransom (Osemuyi & Festus, 2024). This kind of collusion undermines the trust of the population and encourages criminal groups.

Proliferation of Small Arms

Nigeria has an estimated six million illicit small arms, some of which are in the hands of bandits, insurgents and criminal gangs (Small Arms Survey, 2022). Accessibility of weapons reduces the entry barriers that existed in kidnapping and makes the attacks more lethal.

3. Conflict and Security factors

Insurgency and Banditry

Kidnapping has greatly increased in the Northwest due to the Boko Haram insurgency and establishment of armed banditry. Kidnapping helps insurgent groups to finance their activities, recruit new fighters, and to maintain prisoner exchanges (Zenn, 2020). Combating the bandits are bandit groups which operate out of forested enclaves in Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, and Niger states and engage in mass abduction of villagers and school-children, and frequently demand large ransoms.

Communal Conflicts

The existence of insecurity where criminal groups take advantage is due to the existence of Farmer-herder conflicts, ethno-religious tensions and land disputes. There are instances where kidnapping is employed as a retaliatory

strategy or as a source of funding armies of militias (Okwuwada, 2023).

4. Technological factors

Mobile Phones and Electronic Communication.

The prevalence of the mobile phones makes coordination among the kidnappers easy and also facilitates anonymous ransom negotiation (Ulutorti & Obinwa, (2025). In order to avoid this, criminals utilise various SIM cards, encrypted messaging applications and unregistered lines.

Switch to Digital Ransom Payments (2025-2026)

In 2026, reports, however, showed a major change, as kidnappers started to seek the payment of ransom via Nigerian banks and fintech applications in large amounts (Eziokwudimma, 2025). This trend emerged due to: lower risk on cash collection, opening of mule accounts using stolen or bought identities, layering of transactions to hide money trails, and infrequent transfer of ransom into the cryptocurrency.

National trends of kidnapping for ransom

The cases of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria have been on the increase in the last ten years, with thousands of kidnappings registered every year between 2019 and 2024, with peaks in the mass abduction of schoolchildren in the Northwestern and North Central parts (Osemuyi & Festus, 2024; Girei, 2024). Initially only the affluent and expatriates were targeted, but over time, farmers, traders, students, commuters, religious leaders, children, and civil servants have also become targets of kidnappers, reflecting the diversification of kidnapping networks and pursuit of volume-based ransom strategies (Buba & Mohammed, 2023).



Nigeria Regional trends of kidnapping.

Kidnapping has become national, and the trends differ across regions. In the Northwest Region, especially, Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina and Sokoto have become the centre of mass abduction. Bandit gangs operate in forested regions including: Rugu Forest, Kuyanbana Forest, and Kamuku Forest. These bandits raid villages on a large-scale taking dozens or hundreds of people in the region, with school kidnappings cases, becoming more symbolic. In the North East Region, Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) still resort to kidnapping as a weapon of fear and terror, recruiting and negotiations. Abductions often target school-children, women, aid workers, and security personnel. The most globally known incidences are the 2014 Chibok girls' abduction and 2018 Dapchi abductions.

In the North Central Region, which includes Niger, Kogi, Kwara, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Highway kidnappings have increased. The Abuja-Kaduna expressway has been regarded as one of the most notorious kidnapping areas in the nation. This is because criminal groups take advantage of forests and the proximity to the Federal capital in the region.

In the South East, business owners, politicians and professionals are more prone to kidnapping. Kidnappings have been on the rise in the region since 2010 to date and despite the fluctuating patterns, the vice has persisted.

In the South South region, especially Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa states, kidnapping occurrences have been attributed to militancy, oil theft and organised crime. Although the rate has reduced as compared to the period when the Niger Delta militancy was at its peak, kidnapping still remains a major menace.

In the South West region, there have been rising cases of kidnapping on major highways such as Lagos-Ibadan, Akure-Owo and Sagamu-Ijebu Ode. In Lagos and Ibadan, high-income individuals are targets of the urban kidnappings, whereas the rural kidnappings include farmers and travellers.

Notable Kidnapping for Ransom Case Studies in Nigeria.

The Chibok Schoolgirls (2014)

The most internationally high-profile kidnapping case in Nigeria is the abduction of 276 schoolgirls in the month of April 2014 in Chibok, Borno State by Boko Haram. Although presented as an ideological gesture in the beginning, the incident had ransom aspects to it, and negotiations included prisoner swaps and monetary offers (Zenn, 2020). The case has also illustrated the overlap between terrorism and kidnapping as the insurgent groups use abduction as a tool to exert political influence and get financial rewards.

The Dapchi Schoolgirls (2018)

Boko Haram kidnapped 110 schoolgirls in Dapchi, Yobe State, in February 2018. Majority of them were released later, allegedly, through negotiations, which included ransom payments and concessions (Amnesty International, 2018). The episode highlighted the weak point of educational organisations and the application of mass abductions to coerce the state.

Abuja-Kaduna Highway Kidnappings (2019-2023).

The Abuja-Kaduna highway has been known to witness numerous cases of kidnapping those who travel by road especially the high-profile victims like government officials and corporate leaders. The victims were commonly kept in the forest hideouts, and their ransom fee could be between N500,000 and N20 million (Demehin et al, 2024). The fact that these kid-



nappings continued despite the deployment of military patrols showcased the strength of criminal networks and the weaknesses of state action.

Kankara School Abduction (2020)

In December 2020, in Katsina State Government Science Secondary School, armed bandits kidnapped more than 300 students. The negotiation including the payment of ransom and political mediation led to the release of the students (BBC News, 2020). This event illustrated how kidnappings and their destructive effects on education were organised on an industrial level because of the bandits.

Tegina School Abduction (2021)

In May 2021, more than 150 students were kidnapped by bandits in an Islamic school in Tegina, Niger State. Parents said that they sold property and brought money together to pay ransom, which demonstrated the economic destruction caused to communities (Al Jazeera, 2021). The case was used to demonstrate the ways in which kidnaping makes the family of the kidnapped poor and this creates vulnerability cycles.

What has the Government done so far?

The Nigerian government has initiated several military and police campaigns against kidnapping, for instance, Operation Puff Adder in 2019; which targeted highway kidnappings in the North Central and Northwest; Operation Hadarin Daji in 2020 that focused on banditry and kidnapping in Zamfara and other states; and Joint Task Forces, deployed in the Niger Delta and the Southeast to deal with militancy-related kidnappings. Additionally, communities have responded by creating vigilante groups like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in the Northeast and local hunter's associations in the Northwest. Although these groups offer a certain level of security, they also bring up issues of human rights violation, lack of accountability, and even further violence (Okwuwada, 2023).

Nevertheless, the situation has not changed completely as kidnappings still persist, indicating the adaptability of criminal gangs and the constraints of security measures. Moreover, the legal system of Nigeria makes kidnapping a criminal offence as per the statutes of criminal code, penal code and anti-kidnapping laws at state level. In some states, including Lagos, Anambra, and Rivers, a law has been implemented, which prescribes the death penalty or life imprisonment to those found guilty of kidnapping (Okoli & Ugwu, 2022). Nevertheless, it is not strictly enforced, and the conviction rates are low because the investigations are weak and the courts are slow.

Sadly, the government's reactions have mostly taken the form of negotiations with kidnapers, at times through the efforts of the community leaders or the middlemen. Although it is illegal in the official policy to pay ransom, there are records of both state and non-state actors, conducting ransom payments to secure the release of victims (Osemuyi & Festus, 2024). Such practices unintentionally legitimises kidnapping and sustains the ransom economy. The payment of ransom by bank in 2026 led to the demand to tighten financial regulations. It has encouraged the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and the Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit (NFIU) to increase surveillance of suspicious transactions, implement Know Your Customer (KYC) measures, and work closely with the law enforcement to track ransom flows (Ameh, 2026). This however has not been fully operational as there is still some difficulty in implementation because of lack of capacity and corruption.

Asides the creation of task forces, tightening of bank transactions and so on the Nigerian Government has also been dealing with inter-



national partners, such as United Nations, African Union and the neighbouring states to deal with the cross-border kidnapping and arms trafficking.

Challenges to Governmental interventions

- Despite the harsh stipulated legal penalties, kidnapping continues to thrive due to low conviction rates and weak enforcement of laws. Criminals seem to perceive kidnapping as low-risk and high-reward, thereby undermining deterrence. (Anagba & Sokoajin, 2025). Also, Military and police operations, though have achieved some successes, but are often unable to sustain long-term security. Bandits and insurgents continue to exploit Nigeria's vast forests and porous borders to evade capture. Inadequate resources and corruption further weaken the effectiveness of the security agencies. (Ojewale, 2025)
- Furthermore, government responses have not adequately addressed the socio-economic causes of kidnapping. As poverty, unemployment, and inequality persists, it inadvertently sustain easy recruitment of individuals into criminal networks.
- With the emergence of bank-based ransom payments, the gaps in Nigeria's financial regulatory system have become exposed. Lack of vigorous monitoring and enforcement, gives kidnappers ways to

exploit formal financial channels to launder ransom proceeds.

- While vigilante groups provide localized security, they risk escalating violence and undermining rule of law. Their activities highlight the state's inability to provide adequate protection, further eroding public trust. This also leaves communities to bear the brunt of ransom payments, property loss, psychological trauma, and in some cases loss of lives.

Conclusion and recommendation

Kidnapping for ransom has become one of the most widespread and devastating security threats to the Nigerian economy. What started as politically inclined kidnappings in the Niger Delta has now evolved into a nationwide criminal enterprise which is fueled by poverty, inequality, poor governance, insurgency and the proliferation of small arms. This crime has infiltrated all the six geopolitical zones with different manifestations depending on local socio political forces. Poverty, unemployment, border porosity, inequality, and ineffective capacity to enforce the law, corruption, insurgency, banditry, and proliferation of small arms were the identified drivers of kidnapping for ransom.

Government responses, ranging from military operations to anti-kidnapping legislation, have achieved limited success due to structural weaknesses, corruption, and inadequate socio-economic interventions. While community vigilante groups provide localized security, they also raise concerns about accountability and long-term sustainability. kidnapping for ransom is both a symptom and a driver of Nigeria's broader governance and security crises. Therefore, sustainable remedies need to ad-



dress the underlying systemic conditions that allow crime to thrive. Kidnapping will continue to jeopardize economic growth, undermine public trust in state institutions, and national security in the absence of fundamental reforms.

Lastly, to eradicate or reduce kidnapping for ransom, to the barest minimum in Nigeria, this paper recommends the following:

- the need for an all-inclusive, multi-layered strategy that will ensure the strengthening of law enforcement and judicial capacity
- A thorough review of financial regulations and anti-money laundering schemes,
- have targeted socio-economic development programs for at-risk individuals and regions and
- finally strengthen regional cooperation to disrupt cross-border criminal networks

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