



Unveiling the multifaceted dimensions: a sociological inquiry into kidnapping in Nigeria

Michael Olusegun Demehin¹ · Saheed Adekunle Raji² · Modupe Ala³

Accepted: 13 June 2024

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2024

Abstract

One of the enduring social crimes throughout history is kidnapping. While its manifestations are global, there are distinct local variations in its specifics. This social malady has surged with alarming frequency, especially over the past decade in Nigeria, bringing with it significant impacts on the stability of the country. Thus, it becomes crucial to delve into its patterns, various occurrences, and to comprehend the theoretical foundations that underlie it. In order to uncover the sociological underpinnings of this crime, and the intertwined triggers, this study extensively reviewed relevant literature. The argument presented in this paper delineates the annals of kidnapping in Nigeria into two phases: the slavery and precolonial era, and the contemporary period. Triggers for kidnapping were analyzed and categorized into distinct clusters: an underlying cluster (socio-economic disparities, a dysfunctional law enforcement and judicial system, and longstanding conflicts); a remote cluster (political instability, the presence of militant groups, and insurgency); and an immediate cluster (vulnerable demographics, lack of robust security measures, and instances of diverse unrest). Moreover, the paper contends that the persistence of kidnapping is exacerbated by the flourishing economy it has spawned. Through an examination of theories associated with kidnapping, a comprehensive conceptual framework was developed, integrating the multifaceted factors relevant to the Nigerian context. It is anticipated that the findings of this study will contribute to the formulation of new policies, and the refinement of existing ones, aimed at fostering a safe, secure, and peaceful socioeconomic development.

Keywords Kidnapping · Abduction · Militancy · Theory · Conceptual framework · Nigeria

✉ Saheed Adekunle Raji
rsa.oluwaseun@gmail.com

¹ Department of Health and Social Sciences, London School of Science and Technology, Aston Campus, Aston Cross Business Village, Birmingham, UK

² Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department, Largo Government Center, Maryland, USA

³ Department of Sociology, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria

Introduction

One critical social crime that plagues societies worldwide is kidnapping. This harrowing act transcends cultures, races, and regions, sparing no nation, regardless of its level of economic development. Motives for these abductions vary widely, ranging from ransom demands to child custody disputes and political agendas (Yang et al., 2007). As of 2021, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported a staggering 56,652 individuals kidnapped in the United States alone. However, prior to this, statistics fluctuated across different countries, reflecting the evolving nature of this crime. For example, in 2018, the UNODC highlighted Pakistan and England as having the highest rates of kidnapping (UNODC, 2018). Eleven years earlier, in 2007, Iraq and Iran held the grim title of the 'kidnap capital of the world,' with approximately 1,500 foreigners abducted for ransom annually. At the turn of the century, the UNODC documented a range of 12,500 to 25,500 annual kidnappings, with Colombia (3,600) and Mexico (3,000) leading the statistics. More recently, the World Population Review (2024) ranked the top ten countries with the highest rates of kidnapping as Turkey (42.669), Lebanon (15.384), Kuwait (12.69), Canada (10.285), Belgium (10.245), South Africa (9.569), New Zealand (9.508), Pakistan (9.452), Eswatini (9.354), and the United Kingdom (8.835). However, the heterogeneous nature of kidnapping often complicates tracking, especially in countries facing challenges with data collection, resulting in underreported cases.

Beyond these figures lies a stark reality: kidnapping disproportionately affects women and children. The UNODC (2020) reports that women and girls are frequently targeted for forced marriages, human trafficking, domestic disputes, ransom, gang-related activities, drug-related crimes, cultism, hijackings, mob justice, sexual offenses, political motives, traditional rituals, aggravated robberies, and various forms of exploitation. On the flip side, the perpetration of these crimes is overwhelmingly male, with over 80% of kidnappers and their collaborators falling within the age range of roughly 20 to 55 years (UNODC, 2020). Such statistics alone are enough to instil fear in the hearts of victims, often compelling them to surrender to their captors. The far-reaching impact of kidnapping underscores its status as a deeply troubling social phenomenon, one that demands concerted efforts from communities and authorities alike to combat its pervasive threat.

It is essential, however, to provide some conceptual definitions and clarifications of kidnapping. According to Otu and Nnam (2018), kidnapping is described as occurring " *when a person, or group of persons, without lawful authority, physically asports (i.e. moves) another person or persons without the person's or persons' consent, with the intent to use the abduction in connection with some other illegal or nefarious objectives, whether such asportation occurs within the geo-political space the kidnapping happened, or outside the space.*" This broad yet simple definition highlights the quadpod of kidnapping as a well-orchestrated activity involving the subject, the object, the purpose (intent), and the space. Expanding on the contextual aspect, Vannini et al. (2015) define political kidnapping as being motivated by financial and political reasons, operating in politically

unstable countries, exploiting both domestic and international networks to carry out the abduction and to launder the ransom. This type is also known as terrorist kidnapping, affecting specific parts of the geopolitical region within a defined territory. While ransom payments may primarily serve as funding sources for the perpetrators or terrorist groups, it often involves large-scale hostage-taking ventures with intimidation, coercion, and intense psychological impacts on the captives and related stakeholders. The repercussions can be global, as seen with groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Al-Qaeda with its transnational connections and activities, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines, Al-Shabaab in East Africa, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces) in Colombia, among others. Political kidnapping often thrives on geopolitical instability, ethnic or religious tensions, or persistent conflicts. Ransom kidnapping (kidnap-for-ransom) is a globally recognized aspect of kidnapping. Indeed, it has been argued that ransom kidnapping is one of the oldest forms of abductions, often involving the capture of an individual with the primary objective of demanding monetary payment, typically targeting victims perceived to have financial resources (Otu et al., 2021).

Research suggests a complex interplay of factors fuelling kidnappings in sub-Saharan Africa. Economic hardship and widespread poverty have been identified as primary drivers of kidnapping for financial gain (Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Reitano et al., 2017). This is exacerbated by weak governance and corruption, creating an environment of impunity where criminal networks thrive (Cannon and Iyekekpolo, 2018; Eteng et al., 2021; Mabvurira et al., 2022). Mabvurira et al. (2022) stated that apart from internal rings perpetuating child kidnappings in Zimbabwe, there are criminal networks across the southern borders of Africa involved in child kidnappings. Cannon and Iyekekpolo (2018) also claimed that kidnapping is sometimes used as an economic weapon to strengthen financial resources for more intense reasons for abductions, mainly for political agendas. Instances include actions by groups like Al-Shabab and Boko Haram across the drylands of East and West Africa. Furthermore, political instability and nonlinear conflicts also significantly contribute to kidnappings. Insurgencies and terrorist groups like Boko Haram employ abductions as tools of violence and intimidation (Cannon and Iyekekpolo, 2018; Dakuku, 2022; Ede & Okafor, 2023). Kidnappings also become intertwined with political agendas, targeting activists, journalists, and political opponents (Ibrahim & Mukhtar, 2017; Obarisiagbon & Aderinto, 2018).

Beyond financial and political motives, cultural practices and traditional customs can also play a significant role in the prevalence of kidnappings. In certain communities, abductions may be perceived as a legitimate form of conflict resolution or a means of extracting compensation (Ishaya et al., 2019; Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019). This underscores the importance of understanding the nuanced cultural contexts when analysing the dynamics of kidnapping. Children, in particular, are highly vulnerable to kidnappings in Africa, constituting a significant proportion of victims (United States Department of State, 2022). They are often targeted for exploitation, forced labour, or trafficking (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Moreover, women and marginalized groups are disproportionately affected, shedding light on the intersections of power dynamics and criminal activities (Nnam & Ordu, 2020a, b; Oriola,

2021). Literature suggests that certain professions and occupations increase the risk of kidnapping. Workers in the oil and gas industry, journalists, and humanitarian workers are frequently targeted due to their perceived vulnerability or access to resources (Albert et al., 2020; Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019). Understanding these occupational risks is crucial for developing targeted prevention strategies. It is inevitable that the broader socio-economic context forms a crucial aspect of comprehending the prevalence of kidnapping in the developing world. Poverty, high rates of unemployment, and lack of access to education create fertile ground for criminal activities (Ejiofor, 2022; Madubuike & Dimnajiego, 2023). Weak criminal justice systems and inadequate law enforcement capacity further exacerbate the problem, leaving communities vulnerable to exploitation and violence (Dakuku, 2022). In addressing the multifaceted nature of kidnapping, interventions must go beyond merely targeting the symptoms. A holistic approach that addresses the root causes—be they economic, political, cultural, or social—is essential for creating sustainable solutions and safeguarding vulnerable populations from the scourge of abduction.

The instances and events of kidnappings in Nigeria show strong similarities with those occurring throughout sub-Saharan Africa. However, a key sociological trend highlighted in the literature is the shift from politically motivated abductions to financially driven kidnappings. While politically motivated kidnappings were prevalent in the past, recent research by Nnam and Ordu (2020a, b), O'Connor et al. (2021), Dakuku (2022) and Okoli and Nwangwu (2023) underscores the increasing influence of economic factors. This shift is attributed to the lucrative nature of ransom payments, contributing to the rise of criminal networks engaging in kidnapping for financial gain. The inherent social challenges within the country are intricately linked to Nigeria's sociological landscape of kidnapping, as observed by Okoli and Nwangwu (2023). Thus, high unemployment rates, poverty, and income inequality create fertile ground for individuals to be drawn into kidnapping activities as a means of economic survival. The literature underscores the role of economic disparities in fostering a climate conducive to criminal enterprises that exploit the desperation of individuals seeking financial stability. Moreover, the evolution of kidnapping dynamics in Nigeria reflects broader societal shifts. For instance, the digital age has facilitated the coordination of abduction operations, with kidnapers using technology for communication, planning, and ransom negotiations (Ikezue, 2023). This technological sophistication has allowed criminal networks to expand their reach and operate across borders, making it increasingly challenging for law enforcement agencies to combat these crimes effectively. In addition to economic factors, cultural norms and social inequalities also play a role in the prevalence of kidnappings. Certain cultural practices may inadvertently contribute to the normalization of abduction as a means of conflict resolution or compensation, particularly in regions with deep-seated traditional beliefs (Ishaya et al., 2019; Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019). Addressing these cultural factors requires a delicate balance of respecting local traditions while also implementing strategies to prevent the exploitation of vulnerable individuals. In light of these multifaceted challenges, effective responses to kidnapping in Nigeria must adopt a comprehensive approach. This includes not only robust law enforcement efforts to dismantle criminal networks but also addressing the root causes such as poverty, unemployment, and social inequalities. Collaborative efforts

between government agencies, civil society organizations, and communities are crucial for developing sustainable solutions that prioritize the safety and well-being of all citizens.

Another salient sociological factor contributing to the prevalence of kidnappings in Nigeria is the impact of regional conflicts and instability. This is particularly evident in the increasing insecurity in certain parts of the country, especially in the north, where Boko Haram and other insurgency groups have wreaked havoc. Additionally, in the southeast, agitation for the state of Biafra has also led to various criminal activities, including abductions. According to O'Connor et al. (2021), the Boko Haram insurgency has rendered certain parts of the north ungovernable, alienating vulnerable demographics from societal development, particularly children. Boko Haram, a terrorist group with anti-development views against Western education, has resorted to various means to gain government attention, including a series of abductions targeting women, school-age children (especially girls and boys), farmers, and military officials (Chinwokwu & Michael, 2019; Dakuku, 2022; O'Connor et al., 2021; Ojo, 2020). Closely related to this is the farmer-herder conflicts, which have also been identified as contributing to the proliferation of kidnapping incidents. In regions marked by insecurity and weak governance, criminal groups exploit the power vacuum, leading to an increase in abductions for ransom and other criminal purposes. This assertion is supported by Ibrahim (2017), Ezemenaka (2018), Albert et al., (2020), Ojewale (2021), and Okoli (2022). The entanglement of regional conflicts, insurgency activities, and socio-political tensions creates a volatile environment that not only fosters kidnappings but also poses significant challenges to law enforcement and government efforts to ensure security and stability. Understanding these multifaceted factors is essential for developing effective strategies to combat kidnappings and address the underlying issues that fuel this criminal activity.

Prior to the escalation of the Boko Haram insurgency, there were series of hostage-takings and abduction that rent the air within the Niger-Delta, some of which mirrored under the resource control agitations. Albert et al., (2020) provided a detailed chronological background of abductions in the Niger Delta from the early 1990s which involved kidnapping of expatriate staff of oil and gas exploration companies, in addition to militancy and occupation of certain oil and gas infrastructure. To address this, Ajiboye (2023) document the efforts of civilian security operations especially the alertness of the Nigerian police in responding to the call for rescue of the victims. Prior to this, ritual kidnapping of persons termed as strangers, and forbidden though less reported were the leading drivers of different communal rituals.

Social disintegration and breakdown of traditional norms are highlighted as contributing factors in recent studies. According to Dakuku (2022) and Ugwuoke et al. (2023), the erosion of communal values and breakdown of traditional societal structures create an environment where criminal elements can thrive. This sociological perspective underscores the importance of understanding the societal fabric and the impact of changing norms on the prevalence of kidnapping.

So far much of the existing studies on this subject have investigated the diverse sociological perspective of kidnapping in Nigeria especially from the social ills and crimes. While some have attempted to unravel the socio-background contexts, security, and international linkages, very little attempt has been made to integrate the

impact of combination of drivers. This is important because human behaviour often is not tied to a singular factor but a convergence of drivers. It is against this that this paper attempt to answer certain research questions which can help to address this gap and help in contributing to the understanding of the dynamics of kidnapping not only in Nigeria but by extension in countries with similar socio-ecological traits and dimensions. The research question posed includes: what characterises the sociological background of kidnapping in Nigeria? What were the predisposing factors that triggered the occurrence of kidnapping in Nigeria? What is the nexus between sociocultural decadence and kidnapping in Nigeria? What is the nature of the economy of kidnapping in Nigeria? This paper thus is aimed at designing a comprehensive framework that integrates the answers to these research questions and build a sustainable and liveable country.

A brief historical account of kidnapping in Nigeria

While kidnapping is not a recent phenomenon in Nigeria, it has undergone distinct phases throughout history. Two identifiable phases can be traced based on historical and research accounts.

The first phase involved the use of kidnapping as part of the spoils of war, especially during intertribal and intercommunal conflicts when West Africans existed in distinct ethnicities and communities. Local wars of attrition and dominance occurred wherein the conquered were taken as slaves. The captured individuals were utilized as slaves for various activities, particularly in land cultivation, and some were transformed into guards. This practice persisted into the period of contact with the Europeans, whereby the slave trade also became a part of their commercial activities. The institution of slavery further transcended into mainstream transactions with the Europeans across the Atlantic, where abducted individuals and groups were sold as part of the vast network of trading and commodity exchanges. Nobles, monarchs, and various heads of the military and warlords were primarily engaged in these practices. The infrastructure used for such practices has been preserved for historical accounts in locations such as Badagry and Calabar to this date.

Cultural practices with strong patriarchal philosophies, particularly certain festivals and rituals, emerged in precolonial Nigeria. Females who were forbidden from entering the core of such practices were often used for ritual sacrifice if they transgressed these boundaries. Also, strangers who strayed into the core of certain rituals might become the needed sacrifice. These practices were prevalent in the southern, western, and eastern parts of Nigeria, especially during the precolonial epoch, and some still persist in certain localities today.

The contemporary period of kidnapping as an organized crime began with the activities of militants in the Niger Delta region. Kidnapping became a means of struggling for political attention on issues like unemployment, poverty, and environmental damage caused by international oil exploration companies. Expatriate oil workers were targeted and kidnapped for ransom as a business. Over time, this crime evolved and became a tool of political vengeance in the country. Kidnapping is now a pervasive issue in Nigeria, impacting all regions and social classes.

Nigeria is ranked as the 6th highest recorded country with cases of kidnapping globally (Wajim, 2020). The concept of kidnapping gained popularity, with various groups across the Nigerian State adopting it to express grievances and seek financial gains (Wajim, 2020). Beyond the Niger Delta militants, terrorists and herdsmen have embraced kidnapping as a complementary instrument for resource generation (Ekechukwu and Osaat, 2003). The high-profile kidnapping of around 300 girls in Chibok town in Borno State in 2014, claimed by the Boko Haram religious sect, exemplifies the involvement of terrorists in kidnapping in Nigeria (The Economist, 2020). This highlights that kidnapping is a pervasive social problem affecting all sectors of the Nigerian economy (Tade et al., 2020). What began as a voice of agitation has transformed into a societal issue negatively impacting various sectors of the Nigerian economy (Ekechukwu and Osaat, 2003).

Triggers of kidnapping in Nigeria

Kidnapping has emerged as a pervasive social cum security challenge in Nigeria, with far-reaching implications at various levels and national stability. To comprehensively understand this phenomenon, it is essential to disentangle its triggers at different levels. This is essential because the prevalence of kidnapping across Nigeria requires an assessment of its precipitation particularly at the defining temporal levels.

Within the context of underlying factors contributing to kidnapping in Nigeria, national socio-economic drawbacks, a dysfunctional law enforcement and judicial system, and long-term religious conflicts emerge as the main players. Nigeria's socio-economic challenges set the stage for kidnapping activities. High unemployment rates, income inequality, and poverty exacerbate social tensions, creating a pool of disenfranchised individuals susceptible to engaging in nefarious activities (Okoli, 2022). This notion is further emphasized by Ugwuoke et al. (2023), Tade et al. (2020), Wajim (2020), and Okoli and Nnamdi (2018), who argue that the lack of viable economic opportunities drives many young Nigerians towards criminality, including kidnapping, as a means of economic survival. The situation is compounded by the pervasive culture of criminal impunity resulting from weak law enforcement and judicial systems, thereby intensifying the proliferation of kidnapping. Corruption, lack of accountability, and inefficiencies within law enforcement agencies undermine efforts to combat crime effectively and deter potential perpetrators (Okoli & Nnamdi, 2018; Tade et al., 2020). Additionally, the slow pace of justice delivery and low conviction rates embolden criminals to engage in kidnapping with little fear of repercussions. At the core of this triad of factors are the diverse shapes of conflicts and crises within Nigeria's diverse sociopolitical landscape that fuel tensions and provide fertile ground for kidnapping activities. Frictions between different ethnic and religious groups, farmer-herder crises across the northern belt of the country, and sovereignty issues in the eastern part of the country are marked by violence and retaliation, with kidnapping used as a tool for revenge or leverage (Agri & Agri, 2020).

Various militias and armed groups have emerged due to the inability to swiftly and adequately respond to these foundational issues, resulting in the prevalence of kidnapping.

A number of remote triggers of kidnapping in Nigeria have been identified by various studies. The first is political instability and electoral violence, which create an environment of lawlessness and insecurity, providing a shelter for criminal elements to operate their nefarious activities with impunity. During periods of heightened political tensions, kidnappings often occur as a means of intimidating opponents, disrupting political processes, or extorting ransom from wealthy individuals or politicians. These events have been recorded in various parts of Nigeria, such as Kaduna State (Aloku & Atafo, 2022; Tukur et al., 2020), the northern region of the country (Ejiofor, 2022), and across the entire country (Bello, 2021). Political instability often births divergent outcomes, one of which is militancy and insurgency. The presence of militant groups and insurgent movements in Nigeria's volatile regions, such as the Niger Delta and the Northeast, exacerbates the kidnapping crisis (Dakuku, 2022). These militant groups (including Boko Haram, bandits, the series of defunct and active militant groups across the Niger Delta) often engage in kidnapping for ransom as a source of funding for their activities or to exert pressure on the government to meet their demands (Otu et al., 2021). Specifically, it has been registered that Boko Haram have been known to carry out mass abductions, particularly of schoolchildren, as a means of spreading fear and destabilizing communities (Sunday & Muhammad, 2022). These combined with economic hardship as a result of economic mismanagement and recession could unveil the disinformed individual(s) to result to various crimes including kidnapping for ransom, as a means of survival or to improve their financial situation.

At the immediate epoch, the factors driving kidnapping could include the availability of vulnerable demographics, insufficient security measures, and social/civil unrest. One common denominator in all kidnapping activities is the identification of potential targets. The expatriate staff of conglomerates and multinational companies, foreign nationals, wealthy individuals, politically-disposed persons, schoolchildren, and farmers form the pool of individuals who are highly vulnerable to being abducted in Nigeria. Criminal syndicates often conduct extensive surveillance and gather enough intelligence to identify high-value targets perceived as lucrative ransom prospects (Bello, 2021; Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Tade & Momodu, 2023). Moreover, the abduction of vulnerable groups is driven by opportunistic motives and the ease of execution (Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019). Potential targets are often captured under the permissive atmosphere of inadequate security measures. Inadequate and dysfunctional security protocols provide opportunities for criminals to carry out abductions and evade capture (Odia, 2023; Ogini, 2020). There exists a strong perception that the Nigeria Police Force and allied local security apparatuses have been infiltrated by criminal elements who are part of the syndicate involved in kidnappings. This perception sometimes drives the choice of private security organizations, some of which may also become tools in the hands of kidnappers (Ogini, 2020).

Kidnapping economy in Nigeria

While the literature lacks a definitive classification of kidnapping for ransom, particularly concerning Nigeria, certain distinctions related to financial gains can be identified. Regarding the operational pattern, two distinct categories of kidnapping emerge – retail kidnapping and wholesale kidnapping. In retail kidnapping, individuals with some level of wealth, including family members, relatives, friends, and acquaintances identified as potential targets, are often chosen for abduction. Ransom is paid, and the proceeds are shared among the layers of criminal gangs involved. This form of kidnapping typically follows a piecemeal arrangement and tends to be seasonal or occasional. On the other hand, wholesale kidnapping involves large-scale abductions, often associated with militant and terrorist groups. These activities may include attacking motorists on major roads and expressways, assaulting agrarian communities, terrorizing farmers, conducting random large-scale hostage-takings in hinterland locations, especially targeting vulnerable groups such as women and schoolchildren. The scope and intensity of wholesale kidnapping distinguish it from the more localized and opportunistic nature of retail kidnapping.

Available statistics on the dynamics of kidnapping and ransom payment in Nigeria are loosely available with diverse figures. According to the SBM Intelligence report titled “*The Economics of Nigeria’s Kidnap Industry*” between July 2021 and June 2022, roughly N653.7 million was paid as ransom, with over 500 incidents recorded and 3,420 persons abducted (SBM Intelligence, 2023). The report also indicated that about US\$9.9 million were demanded by the abductors. It is worth noting that the report omitted various sums (at least N100 million) paid as ransom by the victims of the Kaduna train incident in March 2022. Also, the report excludes the numerous unreported retail kidnappings recorded across several parts of the country, especially in major cities like Lagos, Port Harcourt, and parts of Eastern Nigeria, where kidnapping has become part of the burgeoning agitation for the release of Nnamdi Kanu – the leader of the IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra) movement. In terms of the spatial distribution of kidnap-for-ransom, the phenomenon is geographically concentrated in the northwest and north-central regions. States like Kaduna, Zamfara, Katsina, and Niger have become hotspots in recent years. These areas suffer from socio-economic challenges and weak law enforcement, creating prime conditions for criminal groups. In the south, kidnap-for-ransom tend to be more targeted towards wealthy individuals and persons with perceived high ransom values. Consequently, ransom demands in these areas tend to be higher.

The demographics of potential targets are also shifting towards vulnerable groups, especially schoolchildren. For instance, on April 14, 2014, 276 schoolgirls from Chibok were abducted by Boko Haram, drawing global attention. In 2015, roughly 40 girls were also kidnapped in Konduga village in Borno State. The Nigeria Human Rights Watch, documented by the United States Department of State, showed that between November 2014 and February 2015, over 500 women and 1,000 children were abducted in the Gwoza Local Government Area of Borno State (United States

Department of State, 2022). The spate of abductions by Boko Haram also extends to males, with 97 men and boys kidnapped in Baga in Borno State within the same year. While these statistics may have been skewed towards one part of Nigeria, subsequent incidents have shown that other regions were not spared.

A key influence that triggers the booming of the ‘kidnapping industry’ in Nigeria is the increasing spate of the crime. Within a decade (2013–2023), the number of reported kidnapping incidents in Nigeria increased annually by roughly 481, with exceptions in 2016 and 2022 when it reduced by 579 and 607, respectively (see Fig. 1). Taking into consideration that the figure of 1,384 for 2023 is a mid-year value, the graph shows some reduction in the magnitude of the reported cases. From 2016, the incidents intensified, reaching a peak in 2021 with an alarming 5,287 reported cases. However, the national picture comes to life when the incidents are considered at the state (subnational) level. Recent data (displayed in Fig. 2) shows that Kaduna, Zamfara, Niger, Katsina, and Sokoto were the top five states with the highest reported incidents of kidnapping between July 2021 and June 2022, and July 2022 and June 2023. Within this same period, Bayelsa, Jigawa, Ebonyi, Yobe, and Gombe recorded the least incidents with less than 12. A clear distinction is the location specificity of these cases. Well over 90% of the total reported incidents in 2021 to 2022 were of northern origin. However, there seems to be a sort of gradual shift towards the central and southern regions. For instance, by June 2023, there were about 120, 95, 73, 68, 66, 46, and 43 new incidents reported in Katsina, Kogi, Ondo, Nasarawa, Sokoto, Rivers, and Benue States. This depicts a nationwide expansion of kidnapping. The concomitant implication is the subsequent rise in ransom requested by the kidnapers to release their victims. As reported by SBM Intelligence (2023), the recent spike in the cases of kidnapping has led to a corresponding increase in ransom negotiations as abductors engage in non-banking transactions.

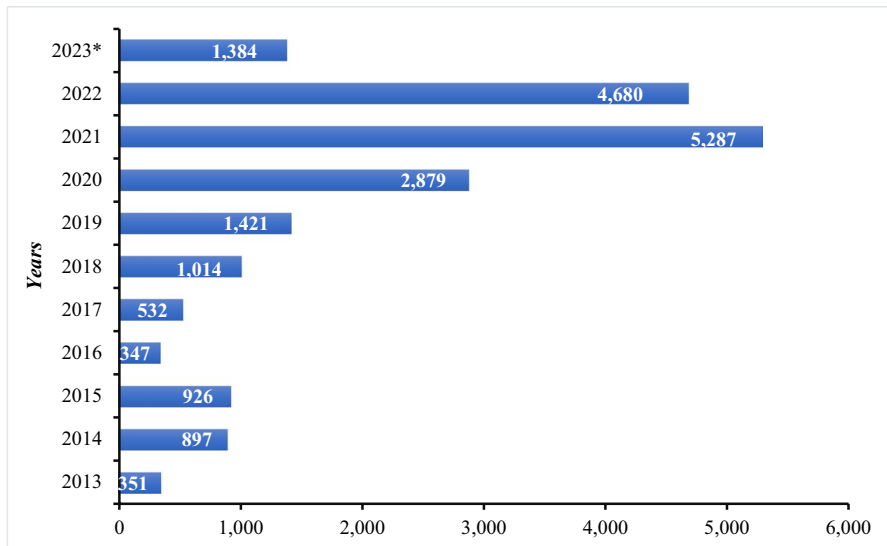


Fig. 1 Trend of reported kidnapping incidents in Nigeria within the current decade. Adapted from: SBM Intelligence (2023)

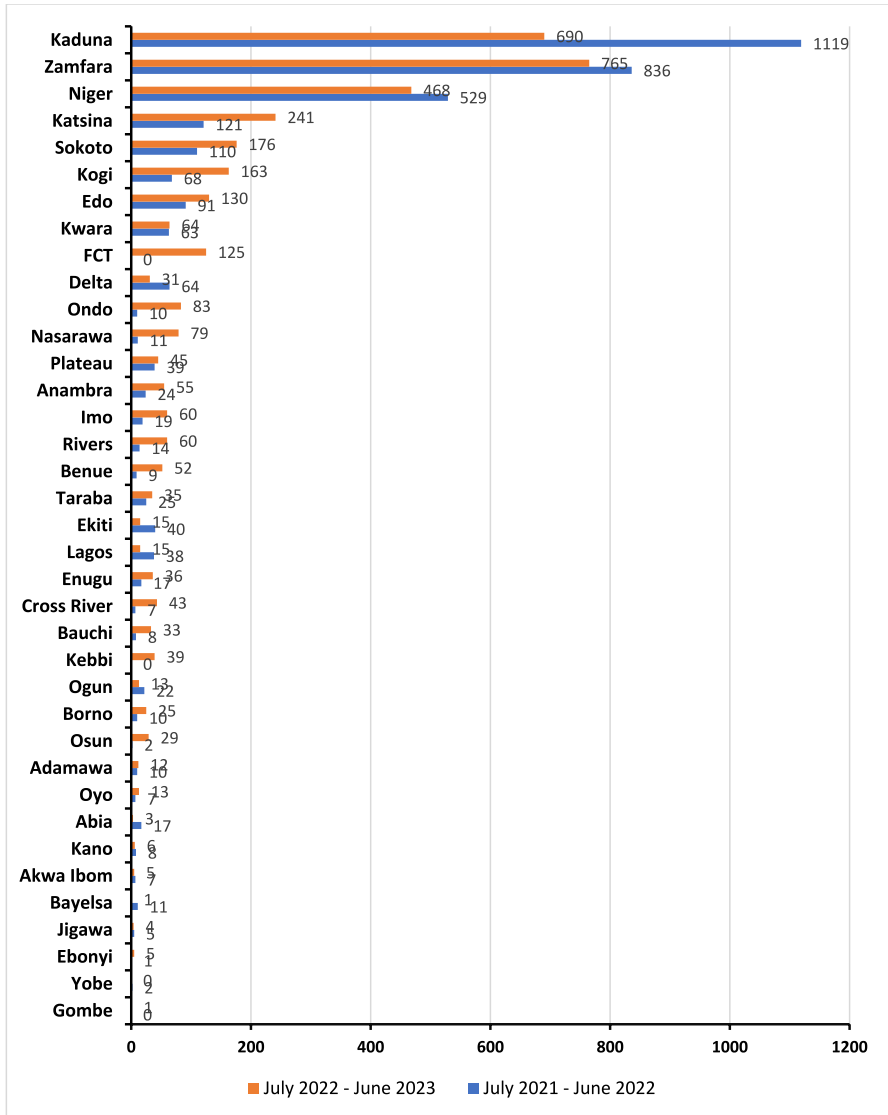


Fig. 2 Dynamics of changes in reported incidents of kidnapping at the subnational level in Nigeria between July 2021 to June 2023. Adapted from: SBM Intelligence (2023)

Government’s efforts in curtailing kidnapping in Nigeria

In response to the escalating kidnapping crisis, the Nigerian government has implemented a series of measures aimed at curbing this menace. To deter and punish perpetrators of kidnapping, the government has enacted stringent anti-kidnapping laws and policies. These laws prescribe severe penalties, including lengthy prison sentences and capital punishment for convicted kidnapers. One of the significant

legal instruments in this regard is the Anti-Kidnapping Act of 2017. This legislation imposes a minimum sentence of 10 years' imprisonment for kidnapping offenses, with higher penalties for cases resulting in bodily harm or death. Several provisions in other legal frameworks, such as the Terrorism Act of 2011, Sect. 364 of the Criminal Code, and Sects. 271 to 273 of the Penal Code, have also been enacted to curtail the growing spate of kidnapping. These provisions include stringent penalties, including lengthy prison terms, for individuals found guilty of abduction. At the subnational level, 15 States in Nigeria namely, Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Imo, Bayelsa, Bauchi, Cross River, Ebonyi, Kogi, Rivers, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, and Oyo—have taken decisive steps in the fight against kidnapping. These states have considered kidnapping as a capital offense and have enacted laws that impose penalties exceeding a decade of imprisonment along with fines (Umego, 2019). Unarguably, the recent incidents have made the efficiency of these legal instrument of infinitesimal impact.

Addressing the socio-economic root causes of kidnapping, the Nigerian government has prioritized economic empowerment and various youth development initiatives in vulnerable communities, especially within the identified kidnapping hotspots. Governments, especially at the subnational level, have initiated different vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and employment opportunities for unemployed youths. These programs aim to reduce the susceptibility of young people to criminal activities, including kidnapping. One of the initiatives developed is the Nigerian Youth Investment Fund (NYIF) under the auspices of the Central Bank of Nigeria, as a key component of the Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan. The program is aimed at generating half-a-million jobs within three years across the entire country. It was designed with youth-centric schemes launched to empower young Nigerians and mitigate the allure of criminality.

The Nigerian government, at the local and state levels, has also implemented community engagement programs and public awareness campaigns in various forms, including the use of local languages, to mobilize citizens against this crime. These initiatives aim to empower local communities to identify and report suspicious activities, foster trust and collaboration between communities and law enforcement agencies, and promote vigilance and security consciousness among citizens. One clear example of such initiatives is the NSCDC (Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps). Community policing strategies, such as neighbourhood watch groups, community patrols, and specific youth groups, have been introduced to enhance grassroots security and intelligence gathering (Otu et al., 2021).

Given the transnational nature of kidnapping syndicates, especially those involving terror groups, the Nigerian government has intensified efforts to secure its borders and enhance cooperation with neighbouring countries to prevent cross-border criminal activities. This includes deploying additional security personnel, installing military surveillance equipment, and establishing joint border patrols along Nigeria's porous borders (Otu et al., 2021; Ugwuoke et al., 2023). Furthermore, bilateral and multilateral agreements on security cooperation and intelligence sharing have been forged with neighbouring countries to disrupt the operations of such transnational kidnapping networks (Aminu & Mustafa, 2020; Ejiofor, 2022; Enenche, 2021; Odia, 2023).

One decisive measure undertaken by the Nigerian government involves enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of law enforcement agencies in combating kidnapping. This includes providing specialized training, equipping security personnel with modern technology, and increasing surveillance and intelligence-gathering capabilities. According to Ajiboye (2023), the government has allocated significant resources to the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) and other security agencies to enhance their operational capacity in combating kidnapping. Furthermore, collaborative efforts between Nigerian security agencies and international partners have been initiated to improve information sharing and coordination in combating transnational kidnapping syndicates (Ugwuoke et al., 2023).

Theoretical framework of kidnapping in Nigeria

By the nature of its occurrence, the complexity of kidnapping in Nigeria requires a multiplicity of analyses. For this reason, this study presents a general discussion of the prime theories that formed the basis of occurrence of kidnapping in Nigeria and it concludes with a derived conceptualization of its occurrence. Kidnapping, with its intricate social dynamics, diverse motivations, and far-reaching consequences, has been extensively studied, resulting in a broad body of knowledge. Table 1 provides a succinct enlistment and elucidation of the top theories that formed that building block of comprehending the occurrence of kidnapping from the perspective of social sciences as well as recent epistemological applications of each of the framework per recent studies in Nigeria.

The foremost anomie aetiology theory developed by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim in 1897 heralded these frameworks. It argued that every society fashions its own variety of crimes, criminals and by extension the geometry of criminality. Normlessness and moral confusion could be the consequences when individuals face a disconnection from societal norms, goals, and values. Social disorganization therefore is as a result of social inconsistency with established norm with escalation of deviant conduct at the individual space. Egbegi and Ajah (2018), Agba and Zubairu (2021), Bello (2021), and Madubuike and Dimnnajiego (2023) showed that this theory is relevant to Nigeria. These were mainly based on factors especially perceived lack of legitimate opportunities, stress of desperation which prompted the resulting to kidnapping to attain economic goals when conventional paths seem unattainable, and embolden to act outside of legal means due to perceived breakdown in social controls were identified as triggers of kidnapping by these studies.

The end means theory/strain theory, developed by Merton (1938), trumps anomie theory as it centres on the strain caused by a disjunction between cultural goals and the legitimate means available to achieve them. Both theories share a common thread in examining strain's role in shaping deviant behaviour, but they differ in their emphasis on means-ends disparities. A couple of studies (Egbegi & Ajah, 2018; Odia, 2023; Okoli & Agada, 2014; Olusa et al., 2023; Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019) have applied this theory to the kidnapping crime in Nigeria. The findings of these shows that the high prevalence of unemployment, poverty, and inequality

Table 1 Overview of key theories associated with sociology of kidnapping with recent literature references in Nigeria

S/N	Specific theory	Pioneer(s)	Succinct theory details	Recent literature references (Nigeria)
1	Anomie aetiology theory	Durkheim (1897)	This theory centers on the disruption of societal norms and values, resulting in a condition of normlessness and moral perplexity. Anomie is frequently linked to swift social changes, industrialization, and a deficiency of societal integration. As per Durkheim (1897), when individuals encounter a detachment from societal norms, objectives, and values, they may undergo a sensation of purposelessness and despondency, escalating the likelihood of deviant conduct and, in severe instances, suicide	Agba (2021), Bello (2021), Egbegi and Ajah (2018), Madubuike and Dimmna-jiego (2023)
2	End mean/strain theory	Merton (1938)	This study builds upon Durkheim's anomie theory by providing insights into the connection between societal structures, cultural goals, and deviant behavior. The theory introduces the concept of strain, highlighting the disconnect between culturally prescribed goals and the legitimate means available to attain them. Additionally, five modes of individual adaptation to this strain were identified, including conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion	Odia (2023), Olusa et al. (2023), Onuoha and Okolie-Osemene (2019), Egbegi and Ajah (2018), Okoli and Agada (2014)

Table 1 (continued)

S/N	Specific theory	Pioneer(s)	Succinct theory details	Recent literature references (Nigeria)
3	General strain theory	Agnew (1992)	This theory extends Merton's work (1938) by expanding the notion of strain to encompass diverse negative emotions beyond economic strain. It identifies three primary types of strain: (1) inability to attain positively valued goals, (2) deprivation of positively valued stimuli, and (3) exposure to negative stimuli. In contrast to Merton (1938), this theory broadens the scope to include a more extensive array of experiences that can result in criminal adaptations	Nwosu et al (2023), Okeke et al. (2023), Oludare et al (2021), Bello (2021), Tukur et al. (2020)

Table 1 (continued)

S/N	Specific theory	Pioneer(s)	Succinct theory details	Recent literature references (Nigeria)
4	Institutional anomie theory	Messner and Rosenfeld (1994)	This theory explores the influence of cultural values on shaping societal institutions. The authors assert that the widespread pursuit of the American Dream, emphasizing material success and economic achievement, infiltrates diverse social institutions, diminishing the importance of non-economic values. The authors argue that the pursuit and realization of the American Dream weaken crucial institutions such as family, education, and government, creating an imbalance where the economy wields disproportionate influence. They contend that societies prioritizing the economic aspect of life exhibit higher crime rates due to weakened institutional constraints on individuals seeking success through illicit means	Akinbobola (2022), Garpiya (2022), Nwabueze et al (2022), Agba and Zubairu (2021), Oludare et al (2021)

Table 1 (continued)

S/N	Specific theory	Pioneer(s)	Succinct theory details	Recent literature references (Nigeria)
5	Conflict theory/political economy	Marx and Engels (1848), Marx (1867)	This framework asserts that societal conflicts arise from the inherent competition for control over economic resources. Marx contends that the capitalist mode of production sustains social inequality by exploiting the working class by the bourgeoisie. The capitalist system inherently fosters class struggle, as the bourgeoisie aims to maximize profits, while the proletariat endeavors for improved working conditions and equitable wealth distribution. This theory establishes the groundwork for comprehending how economic relations mold social structures and contribute to class-based conflicts	Okoro (2022), Agri and Agri (2020), Aminu and Mustafa (2020), Ogini (2020), Nnam and Ordu (2020a, b), Iwarimie-Jaja (2003), Otu (2003)
6	Fraud triangle theory	Cressey (1973a), Cressey (1973b),	The fraud triangle posits that three pivotal factors must converge for any fraudulent activity, including kidnapping, to occur: pressure, opportunity, and rationalization. Pressure pertains to sociological, psychosocial, or compelling motivations that drive individuals to engage in fraud. Opportunity denotes the presence of circumstances that enable a person to commit fraud without detection. Rationalization involves the mental justifications individuals employ to condone their actions and minimize the perceived wrongness of their behavior	Ejirefe and Egbuaba (2023)

Table 1 (continued)

S/N	Specific theory	Pioneer(s)	Succinct theory details	Recent literature references (Nigeria)
7	Routine activity theory	Felson and Cohen (1979)	This theory revolves around three primary elements as catalysts for crime: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians. Motivated offenders encompass individuals with criminal intent and skills, driven by factors like poverty, lack of opportunity, or personal grievances. Suitable targets refer to valuables or vulnerable individuals accessible to offenders. Agents of crime deterrence, whether formal or informal, are termed capable guardians, and their absence contributes to the prevalence of crimes such as abductions. Therefore, the simultaneous presence of these factors triggers the occurrence of crimes like kidnapping	Abdullahi et al (2022)

Table 1 (continued)

S/N	Specific theory	Pioneer(s)	Succinct theory details	Recent literature references (Nigeria)
8	Social learning theory	Bandura (1977)	<p>This is a framework that underscores the significance of observational learning, imitation, and modeling in behavior acquisition. It challenges traditional behaviorist perspectives by asserting that individuals learn not only through direct reinforcement but also by observing and imitating the behaviors of others in their social environment. Bandura (1977) introduced the concept of reciprocal determinism, emphasizing the dynamic interaction among personal factors, environmental influences, and behavior. This theory suggests that the complexity of human learning goes beyond reinforcement and punishment; cognitive processes, attention, retention, and motivation also play pivotal roles</p>	<p>Aloku and Aiafo (2022), Oteniya et al (2022), Otu et al (2021)</p>

Table 1 (continued)

S/N	Specific theory	Pioneer(s)	Succinct theory details	Recent literature references (Nigeria)
9	Labelling theory	Lemert (1974)	This theory is grounded in self-identity and stereotyping, contending that the conventional perspective of crime being solely driven by personal deviance is inadequate. It asserts that the application of labels such as "criminal" or "delinquent" by societal institutions actively molds an individual's identity and future behavior. According to Lemert (1974), this theory is propelled by primary deviance (an act committed by an individual identified as deviant according to societal norms), social reaction (through labels created by institutions in response to the initial deviance), and secondary deviance (a form of internalization and acceptance of the deviant identity, potentially leading to a sense of personal fulfillment as a response to societal reaction)	Sunday and Muhammad (2022), Enenche (2021)

Table 1 (continued)

S/N	Specific theory	Pioneer(s)	Succinct theory details	Recent literature references (Nigeria)
10	Victimological theory	Mendelsohn (1956)	This framework delves into the victimology of a crime, particularly abduction, emphasizing the characteristics and behaviors of victims that heighten their susceptibility to kidnapping. Victimological analyses within abduction scenarios consider factors such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and lifestyle choices as potential contributors to victim vulnerability. The focus extends beyond the criminal act itself to encompass the aftermath, including the psychological, physical, and social consequences experienced by the victim. Key factors considered include age and physical attributes, mental and emotional state, social and behavioral patterns, and lifestyle choices	Balogun et al. (2021), Tade et al. (2019)

Table 1 (continued)

S/N	Specific theory	Pioneer(s)	Succinct theory details	Recent literature references (Nigeria)
11	Constitutive theory	Austin (1975) and Chambliss (1975)	In the context of social constructions of crime, the constitutive theory emerges as a central paradigm. This theory challenges the traditional view of crime as a fixed, objectively defined category. Pioneered by scholars like John Austin (1975) and William Chambliss (1975), it posits that crime and its meaning are actively constructed through shared understandings and interpretations within specific societies. This lens sheds new light on the phenomenon of abdication, illustrating how societal narratives and interactions shape our perception of this complex and often traumatic crime	Ejiofor (2022)

Table 1 (continued)

S/N	Specific theory	Pioneer(s)	Succinct theory details	Recent literature references (Nigeria)
12	Symbolic interactionism	Blumer (1969) and Goffman (1959)	Pioneered by Goffman (1959) and expanded by Blumer (1969), this theory builds on the argument regarding the fixation of crime by stating that deviance is actively constructed through everyday interactions and interpretations within specific social groups. Applying this lens begins with the 'social self' concept, where individuals develop a sense of self through social interactions, and this self is shaped by the symbols and meanings attributed to actions. On a societal scale, symbolic interactionism examines how individuals attach meanings to criminal acts, labels, and interactions within the criminal justice system	Tade and Momodu (2023), Sunday and Muhammad (2022)
13	Rational choice theory	Becker (1968)	This theory provides an economic perspective to comprehend social behavior, asserting that individuals make rational decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis. It posits that individuals act in their self-interest, seeking to maximize rewards while minimizing costs in their decision-making processes. Hence, individuals make choices based on available information and incentives, highlighting the importance of individual decision-making in shaping social structures	Johnson and Efebeh (2023), Oludare et al. (2021), Otu et al. (2021), Nweke (2020), Tade et al. (2019)

creates a strain on individuals, prompting some to resort to kidnapping as an alternative means to achieve societal goals, such as financial success or social status.

Individuals engage in deviant behaviour when experiencing negative emotions resulting from strain or stress. When such strain arises from failure to achieve positively valued goals, individuals may resort to the occurrence of deviant behaviour/criminal activities as a coping mechanism in response to economic hardships, social injustices, or personal grievances. This constitutes the general strain theory of Agnew (1992). Recent studies by Tukur et al. (2020), Oludare et al (2021), Bello (2021), Nwosu et al (2023), and Okeke et al. (2023) applied this framework to understand the dynamics of kidnapping in Nigeria. A related theory is the institutional anomie theory (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994) that focussed on the pursuit of economic dominance on cultural values has been utilised by Agba and Zubairu (2021), Oludare et al (2021), Akinbobola (2022), Garpiya (2022), Nwabueze et al (2022), in recent studies on kidnapping in Nigeria.

The conflict theory/political led by Marx and Engels (1848), Marx (1867) provide a classical social scientific lens to comprehend kidnapping in the context of socio-economic disparities and power struggles. The theory hypothesizes that capitalist societies perpetuate social inequality, with the ruling bourgeoisie exploiting the proletariat. Recent literature by Otu (2003), Iwarimie-Jaja (2003), Agri and Agri (2020), Aminu and Mustafa (2020), Nnam and Ordu (2020a, b), Ogini (2020), and Okoro (2022) argued that disequilibrium power structures between the haves and the have-nots in Nigeria creates a deviant behaviour with certain proletarians who sees kidnapping as a means of economic survival.

The fraud triangle theory which is originally a white-collar crime-based framework for studying financial crimes finds sociological expression in kidnapping. Pioneered by Cressey (1973a, 1973b), the theory applied the tripod of pressure, opportunity, and rationalization within the context of abduction. As shown in Table 1, there exists a large-gap in studies that applied this theory within the Nigerian context with Otu and Nnam (2018) and Ejirefe and Egwuaba (2023) as the only available examples. These studies however argued that the undercurrent and motivations for kidnapping are social discontent, vulnerable security network (weak law enforcement), and regional economic disparities.

Other theories such as routine activity theory (Felson & Cohen, 1979), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), labelling theory (Lemert (1974), victimological theory (Mendelsohn, 1956), constitutive theory (Austin, 1975; Chambliss, 1975), symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959), rational choice theory (Becker, 1968) have been developed overtime as sociological enterprises which tried to theorise the background drivers of kidnapping across the world. Table 1 also presents the recent studies that adopted and adapted these frameworks to the Nigerian situation. The multi-theoretical approach used in this study presents a couple of insights to comprehend kidnapping especially from the social science viewpoint. It fosters a holistic understanding of the problem, accommodates the dynamic nature of the phenomenon, draws upon cross-disciplinary insights, ensures contextual relevance, conducts a comprehensive causal analysis, promotes empirical rigor, and increases practical applicability. This approach reflects the complexity of

kidnapping, offering a robust foundation for both theoretical advancement and effective real-world interventions.

Synthesis of theories: developing a conceptual framework

Relying upon the synthesis of the afore-discussed theories, it is obvious that comprehending kidnapping as a sociological intensified crime takes a deconstruction and reconstruction of concepts from the perspective of synthesis. That is, there needs to be a convergence of ontologies and theories in a conceptualized manner.

This framework integrates various factors that contribute to the phenomenon, providing a nuanced understanding of its origins and manifestations. In this discussion, we explore the development of a conceptual framework that considers geographic factors, cultural practices of human sacrifice, religious extremism, location influence, political-economic instability, arms trafficking, and economic downturn as key elements shaping the landscape of kidnapping in Nigeria.

As displayed in Fig. 3, socioeconomic kidnapping trumps the two as it is expressed by eight connected drivers. Simply, socioeconomic kidnapping springs from profound economic disparities, exploiting the vulnerable amid financial precarity. Driven by income inequality, unemployment, and limited access to resources, individuals resort to abduction as a desperate means to address pressing financial grievances/perceived limited economic opportunities. This criminal manifestation often thrives in the shadows of economic misfortunes, cum educational disparities, reflecting a societal tapestry where economic desperation becomes a catalyst for

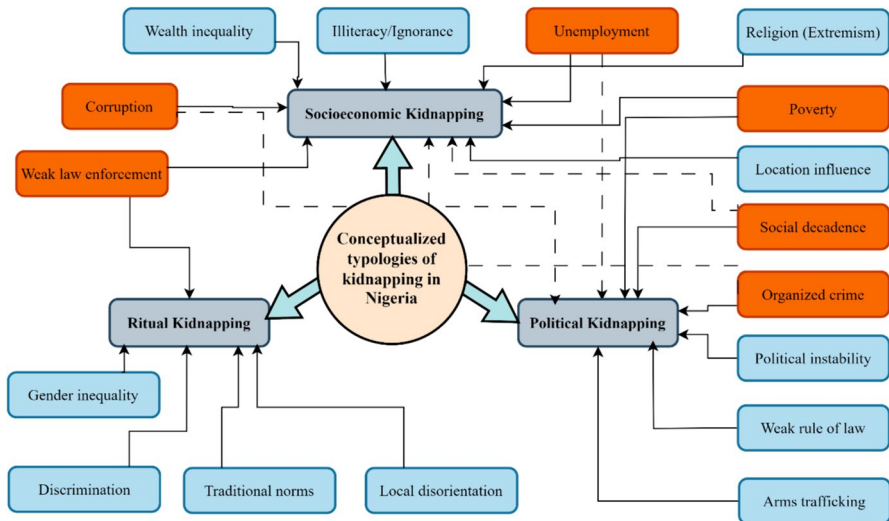


Fig. 3 Conceptual framework of kidnapping in Nigeria which synthesizes the kidnapping typologies, and their internetworked and intertwined triggers. This framework fuses the inherent multifaceted dimensions (social and environmental dynamics) that drives kidnapping with red colour indicating the poly-networked triggers and the blue indicates mono-networked triggers

criminal opportunism. Within the context of Nigeria, as revealed by the series of recent literature on the ranging abductions especially kidnap-for-ransom, the occurrence of socioeconomic kidnapping is motivated by weak law enforcement, corruption, wealth inequality, gross illiteracy/ignorance, intensified unemployment, poverty, location of certain persons, social decadence, and organized crime.

Closely connected to socioeconomic kidnapping is the quasi-mirror image expressed as political kidnapping. In this context, political kidnapping manifests as a deliberate strategy wielded by persons or groups seeking to advance political agendas, attain power, or voice dissent to prevailing government policies or as a mechanism to drive government attention to certain areas of neglect. Deeply rooted in sociopolitical instability, it often targets political figures, their families, or individuals affiliated with opposing ideologies. It can also extend to abduction of expatriate staff of corporations that contributes the lion share of national income. Perpetrators exploit the tumultuous landscape of political strife, aiming to instill fear, coerce concessions, or sway political decisions. This form of kidnapping entwines with power struggles, ideological conflicts, and the pursuit of political dominance, reflecting a volatile intersection where criminal acts become intertwined with political aspirations and societal discord. It is a direct reflect of power contestations treatise by the conflict theory/political economy pioneered by Karl Marx. Political kidnapping is stimulated by poverty and unemployment, which is rife in Nigeria. Political instability, weak law enforcement, social decadence are other drivers.

Ritual kidnapping is a socially intricate phenomenon that is interwoven with cultural, religious, and traditional practices. It is often rooted in symbolic significance and sacred practices. This form of abduction transcends mere criminality, delving into the realms of ancient rituals, ceremonies, or mystical beliefs. Perpetrators may adhere to archaic customs that involve the abduction of individuals for sacrificial rites, appeasement of deities, or fulfillment of spiritual obligations. Ritualistic kidnappings are deeply ingrained in cultural traditions and frequently stem from myths, folklore, or religious teachings and specific actions to attain spiritual objectives. Misorientation especially from local customary practices which generates issues regarding gender, discrimination and norms are key drivers to the occurrence of this form of kidnapping. In societies where strong patriarchy subsists, women are often barred from certain practices and when they accidentally encounter such uncommon practices such could become abducted for rituals. This scenario also applies to strangers who are unexpected to witness such event. In some parts of Nigeria, these practices are still in vogue in this twenty-first century.

Notably, in the description of these kidnapping typologies is the intertwined impact of drivers. As shown in Fig. 3, there are two categories of these drivers based on their strength to stimulate a particular type of kidnapping. At the first layer is the drivers that are singularly causal. That is, they contribute to no other typology but one. Examples include wealth inequality, religion, local influence and illiteracy/ignorance stimulating socioeconomic kidnapping, while political instability, weak rule of law and arms trafficking are single-layered factors stimulating political kidnapping. The factors driving ritual kidnapping are mainly single layered. At the next upper layer is corruption, weak law enforcement, unemployment, poverty, social decadence and organized crime jointly driving the occurrence of political and

socioeconomic kidnappings. These explains the convoluted nature of kidnappings in Nigeria such that specific social and economic indicators development challenges often lead to the occurrence of social ills and organized crimes such as kidnapping. With Nigeria facing one of the grievous socioeconomic challenges in history, the indicators to tackle to reverse the trend having been crystalized in this study.

Conclusion and policy implications

Kidnapping, as a sociological challenge in Nigeria, is multifaceted and complex, requiring a nuanced and comprehensive approach for effective mitigation. This study seeks to understand the trend and pattern of kidnapping occurrence and progression from the precolonial era to the contemporary epoch. It analyses the factors that trigger kidnapping, including undercurrents, remote causes, and immediate factors. Furthermore, the study examines the kidnapping economy, highlighting the role of ransom payments and the inefficiency of existing laws and crime-prevention measures in facilitating the booming transaction of kidnappings in Nigeria. The analysis of kidnapping trends over the past decade reveals a nationwide phenomenon, with notable hotspots, particularly in the northern region of the country. The study evaluates government efforts to address kidnapping across various layers, identifying gaps resulting from a lack of integration and coherence between citizens and existing counter-kidnapping measures. Finally, this study re-evaluates the theoretical framework of kidnapping across sociological epistemologies. It explores theories ranging from Durkheim's anomie aetiology to routine activity theory, symbolic interactionism, and rational choice theory. By synthesizing these theories, the study develops a conceptual framework that explains kidnapping occurrences in Nigeria through a fusion of factors categorized into a triad of trigger factors.

Through the fused conceptual framework, several policy realignments can be implemented across government and governance structures to effectively address the emergence of kidnapping in Nigeria. Strengthening law enforcement and judicial systems is paramount, considering the multidimensional nature of the issue. This entails enhancing the capacity of law enforcement agencies to promptly and effectively investigate and prosecute kidnapping cases. To achieve this, the Nigeria Police Force should undergo significant strengthening and enhancement. Strategic policing should be decentralized and disaggregated from the national to the subnational and community levels. This decentralized approach will facilitate a more targeted response to kidnapping at the local level. Additionally, adequate resources and training must be provided to law enforcement agencies to effectively combat organized crime syndicates involved in kidnapping. A review of existing policing protocols is imperative to ensure they are adapted to the evolving nature of kidnapping. Furthermore, judicial reforms are necessary to expedite the trial process and ensure swift justice for kidnapping offenders. Delays in the judicial process can undermine efforts to deter kidnapping and provide justice to victims and their families. Therefore, implementing reforms that streamline legal procedures and prioritize kidnapping cases can contribute significantly to mitigating the prevalence of kidnapping in Nigeria.

The identified socioeconomic precursors must be diligently addressed through a comprehensive approach. This entails implementing poverty alleviation programs and promoting inclusive economic growth to mitigate socioeconomic inequalities that serve as drivers of kidnapping. Targeted efforts to address poverty, unemployment, and underemployment, particularly in high-risk communities, are essential. Moreover, enhancing access to education, skills training, and employment opportunities can deter youth involvement in criminal activities. It is imperative to adapt existing measures to address local realities and develop social welfare programs to support vulnerable populations affected by kidnapping, providing both financial and non-financial assistance such as counselling and rehabilitation services.

In addition, the current political landscape in Nigeria requires strengthening to address grievances fuelling political kidnapping. This involves reinforcing democratic institutions and promoting good governance to combat corruption, electoral fraud, and human rights abuses. Dialogue and reconciliation processes should be institutionalized to mitigate political tensions and prevent the escalation of violence leading to kidnapping incidents. Furthermore, enhancing security measures during political events, including elections and public rallies, is crucial to deter kidnapping attempts targeting political figures and activists. These multifaceted efforts are essential for addressing the root causes and manifestations of kidnapping in Nigeria, promoting security, stability, and prosperity in the country.

It is critical to address religious fanaticism and cultural traditions that encourage criminal activity. It requires a nationwide approach that includes community outreach programs and awareness campaigns to counter cultural behaviours that support ritual kidnapping, such as charges of witchcraft and human sacrifice. Making these initiatives a priority is essential. In order to combat religious extremism and stop religion from being used as a tool for kidnapping, policy-based initiatives to promote interfaith discussion and tolerance are crucial for states that identify as secular. It is essential to work with traditional and religious organizations to denounce and stop ceremonial behaviours related to kidnapping. This cooperative strategy strengthens social cohesiveness and security while building community resilience to similar occurrences.

Responding to the complex issue of kidnapping in Nigeria necessitates a thorough and organized effort. The integration of efforts from multiple areas, including as law enforcement, socioeconomic growth, political change, and cultural awareness, is vital for this approach. A comprehensive strategy like this should involve involvement from all levels of government, law enforcement, civil society organizations, and other relevant parties. In order to effectively collaborate in reducing the incidence and impact of abduction, stakeholders should build a conceptual framework that takes these policy implications into consideration. The ultimate goal of this coordinated effort is to improve Nigeria's security, stability, and prosperity while creating a society that is safer and more resilient for all.

Declarations

Ethics approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Consent to participate For this type of study, formal consent is not applicable.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

References

- Abdullahi, H. I., Fasoranti, O. O., & Abrifor, C. A. (2022). Felson and Cohens` routine activity theory and waves of kidnapping in Nigeria: A theoretical exploration of criminal enterprise. *Journal of History and Social Sciences*, 13(1), 01–21. <https://doi.org/10.46422/jhss.v13i1.190>
- Agba, T. P., & Zubairu, U. (2021). Violent crimes and criminality: implications on human development in Nigeria. *Port Harcourt Journal of History & Diplomatic Studies*, 8(3), 451–470.
- Agnew, R. (1992). Foundation for a general strain theory of crime and delinquency. *Criminology*, 30(1), 47–88. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1992.tb01093.x>
- Agri, G. E., & Agri, E. M. (2020). Insecurity, conflict and socioeconomic development in Nigeria. *Social Sci Journal*, 8(1), 1–19.
- Ajiboye, B. M. (2023). Police hostage rescue operation: Assessing Nigerian police alertness and responses to kidnapped victims. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231200590>
- Akinbobola, B.A. (2022). An examination of the relationship between institution and crime for countries in the ECOWAS region: A test of Messner and Rosenfeld institutional Anomie theory. A PhD thesis submitted to the Southern University A & M College, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/openview/c870aa55cab1faebf92010315132ea21/1?pq-origsite=gscho lar&cbl=18750&diss=y>
- Albert, I. O., Danjibo, N., & Albert, O. (2020). Back to the past: Evolution of kidnapping and hostage taking in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. *Beijing Law Review*, 11(1), 211–226. <https://doi.org/10.4236/blr.2020.111015>
- Aloku, C. O., & Atafu, D. (2022). Influence of kidnapping on the psychological distress of residents in Kaduna metropolis. *American Journal of Psychology*, 4(1), 53–67. <https://doi.org/10.47672/ajp.1214>
- Aminu, A. M., & Mustafa, D. (2020). Exploring conceptual and theoretical understanding in the study of insecurity and macroeconomic variables in Nigeria. *Nigerian Defense Academy Journal of Economics and Finance*, 4(2), 258–270.
- Austin, J. L. (1975). How to do things with words. Harvard University Press. 2.
- Balogun, O. S., Akangbe, T. A., & Salihu, H. A. (2021). Criminal victimisation: Conceptual and theoretical perspectives. *Ilorin Journal of Business and Social Sciences*, 23(1), 137–151.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Becker, G. S. (1968). Crime and punishment: An economic approach. *Journal of Political Economy*, 76(2), 169–217.
- Bello, P. O. (2021). Socio-economic dynamism and the expansion of child kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8, 2061686. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2061686>
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Prentice-Hall.
- Cannon, B., & Iyemekpolo, W. (2018). Explaining transborder terrorist attacks: The cases of Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab. *African Security*, 11(4), 370–396. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2018.15609>
- Chambliss, W. J. (1975). On the taken-for-granted world of the habitual criminal. *Law & Society Review*, 9(1), 29–58.
- Chinwokwu, C. E., & Michael, C. E. (2019). Militancy and violence as a catalyst to kidnapping in Nigeria. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, 21(1), 17–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461355719832619>
- Cressey, D. R. (1973a). *Crime and other deviant behavior*. Oxford University Press.

- Cressey, D. (1973b). *Other People's Money: The Social Psychology of Embezzlement*. Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Dakuku, P. (2022). Nigeria's burgeoning kidnapping industry. *Premium Times*, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/556114-nigerias-burgeoning-kidnapping-industry-by-dakuku-peterside.html?tztc=1>
- Durkheim, E. (1897). *Suicide: A study in sociology*. New York: Free Press (Translated by J.A. Spaulding & G. Simpson in 1951).
- Ede, O., & Okafor, G. (2023). The impact of kidnapping on foreign ownership of firms in Nigeria. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, 65(3), 341–354. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tie.22328>
- Egbegi, F. R., & Ajah, B. O. (2018). Relevance of anomie theory on French revolution and its implication in Nigeria. *International Journal of Development and Management Review*, 13(1), 27–38.
- Ejiofor, P. F. (2022). Beyond ungoverned spaces: Connecting the dots between relative deprivation, banditry, and violence in Nigeria. *African Security*, 15(2), 111–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2022.2061320>
- Ejirefe, I., & Egwuaba, E. U. (2023). Impact of kidnapping on access to education in Etche Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. *Journal of Education, Humanities, Management & Social Sciences*, 1(3), 23–32.
- Ekechukwu, P. C., & Osaat, S. D. (2003). Kidnapping in Nigeria: A social threat to educational institutions, human existence and unity. *British Journal of Education, Learning and Development Psychology*, 4(1), 46–58. https://doi.org/10.52589/AJBMR_FB2SGXJW
- Eneche, A. (2021). Organized crime: An emerging criminal enterprise in Nigeria. *FOUYE Journal of Criminology and Security Studies*, 1(1), 200–205.
- Eteng, M. J., Nnam, M. U., Nwosu, I. A., Eyisi, E. C., Ukah, J. A., & Orakwe, E. C. (2021). Gender and modern-day slavery in Nigeria: A critical analysis of baby factory and terrorism. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 58, 101549. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2021.101549>
- Ezemenaka, K. E. (2018). Kidnapping: A security challenge in Nigeria. *Journal of Security and Sustainability Issues*, 8(2), 234–246.
- Felson, M., & Cohen, L. E. (1979). Expression of human activity patterns and criminal opportunity: An ecological theory of crime. *American Journal of Sociology*, 84(4), 936–976.
- Garpiya, U. (2022). Impact of kidnapping of students and staff on academic activities in Nigeria's institutions of learning. *Zamfara Journal of Politics and Development*, 3(1), 1–8. <https://zjpd.com/ng/index.php/zjpd/article/view/87/80>.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2018). Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.IV.2. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTIP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self IN Everyday Life*. Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Human Rights Watch (2023). World Report 2023: Events of 2022. Nigeria (pp 451–459). Retrieved from https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2023/01/World_Report_2023_WEBSPREADS_0.pdf
- Ibrahim, B. M. (2017). An analysis of the causes and consequences of kidnapping in Nigeria. *African Research Review*, 11(4), 134–143. <https://doi.org/10.4314/afrr.v11i4.11>
- Ikezue, C. E. (2023). The past, present and future of kidnapping in Nigeria; a historical analysis. *ZIK Journal of multidisciplinary Research*, 6, 14–35.
- Ishaya, T. G., Ubong, A. M., & Gadu, E. (2019). Kidnapping and abduction in Nigeria: Threat to national security and socioeconomic development. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 8(10), 49–76.
- Iwarimie-Jaja, D. (2003). *Criminology: The Study of Crime* (3rd ed.). Anyifov.
- Johnson, M. O., & Efebeh, V. E. (2023). The economic implications of terrorism in developing countries: Nigeria in focus. *International Journal of Public Administration Studies*, 3(2), 52–58.
- Lemert, E. M. (1974). *Human deviance, social control, and the state*. Prentice-Hall.
- Mabvurira, V., Zengeni, F., & Chigevenga, R. (2022). Trafficking and child smuggling in Zimbabwe: Legislation and policy. *African Journal of Social Work*, 12(1), 50–57.
- Madubuike, G. O., & Dimnajiego, K. E. (2023). Crime and youth unemployment in Nigeria: The psycho-social implications. *International Journal for Psychotherapy in Africa*, 8(1), 147–158.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1848). *The Communist Manifesto*. Penguin Classics.
- Marx, K. (1867). *Capital, Volume I*. Penguin Classics.
- Mendelsohn, B. (1956). *The criminology of youthful homicide*. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.
- Merton, R. K. (1938). Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review*, 3, 672–682.
- Messner, S. F., & Rosenfeld, R. (1994). *Crime and the American dream*. Wadsworth.

- Nnam, M. U., & Ordu, G. E. O. (2020a). A country in the throes of crime: A theoretical focus on the complexities of kidnapping in Nigeria. *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies: AJCJS*, 13, 1.
- Nnam, M. C., & Ordu, G. E. (2020). A country in the throes of crime: A theoretical focus on the complexities of kidnapping in Nigeria. *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies*, 13(1), 1–15. <https://www.wcp.umes.edu/ajcjs/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/10/VOL-13-0543.17-NNAM-FINAL.pdf>.
- Nwabueze, E. E., George, E. J., Alabo, O. I., & C., E. K. (2022). Politics and insecurity in Ikwerre ethnic nationality in Rivers State, Nigeria. *Central Asian Journal of Social Sciences and History*, 3(3), 99–113. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/M9KYT>
- Nweke, I. G. (2020). The impacts and possible ways of managing corruption and insecurity in Nigeria. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*, 3(5), 27–47.
- Nwosu, C., Okpoebo, C. C., Ilori, G. O., & Ilori, M. O. (2023). Rising kidnapping incidents in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja: An overview of its threat to safety of lives and property. *Kashere Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1(2). Retrieved from: <https://journals.fukashere.edu.ng/index.php/kjpir/article/view/146>
- O'Connor, R., Betancourt, T. S., & Enelamah, N. V. (2021). Safeguarding the lives of children affected by boko haram. *Health Human Rights*, 23(1), 27–41.
- Obarisiagbon, E. I., & Aderinto, A. A. (2018). Kidnapping and the challenges confronting the administrative of criminal justice in selected states of Nigeria. *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies*, 11(1), 41–54.
- Odia, L. O. (2023). Kidnapping, banditry: Security confidence building and Nigeria's progress. *Journal Police Criminology Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-023-09572-8>
- Ogini, W. O. (2020). Perception of the role of the Nigeria Police Force in militating against kidnapping activities in Ubiaja community of Edo State. *International Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, 5(4), 70–78. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijecs.20200504.12>
- Ojewale O (2021) The rising insecurity in Northwest Nigeria: Terrorism thinly disguised as banditry. *Africa in Focus: Brookings*. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2021/02/18/rising-insecurity-in-northwest-nigeria-terrorism-thinly-disguised-as-banditry/>
- Ojo, S. (2020). Governing 'ungoverned spaces' in the foliage of conspiracy: Towards (re)ordering terrorism, from Boko Haram insurgency, Fulani militancy to banditry in northern Nigeria. *African Security*, 13(1), 77–110.
- Okeke, C. A., Ikezue, C. E., & Oli, N. P. (2023). Causes, consequences and control of kidnapping in Nigeria. *African Scholars Multidisciplinary Journal (ASMJ)*, 3, 101–112.
- Okoli, A. C., & Agada, F. T. (2014). Kidnapping and national security in Nigeria. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(6), 137–146.
- Okoli, C. A., & Nnamdi, F. N. (2018). Kidnapping in Nigeria: an analytical review of trends and patterns. *Journal of Contemporary Security Policy*, 1(1), 12–25.
- Okoli, A. C., & Nwangwu, C. (2023). Organized crime–terror Nexus: Interrogating the linkage between banditry and terrorism in northern Nigeria. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 58(5), 766–778. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211069650>
- Okoli, A.C. (2022) Who's at risk of being kidnapped in Nigeria? *Defence Web*, 24 August. Available at: <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/security/human-security/whos-at-risk-of-being-kidnapped-in-nigeria/> (Accessed 23 Dec 2023).
- Okoro, A. O. D. (2022). Banditry and national security in Nigeria: a conceptual discourse. *Benue Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 1(1), 62–81.
- Oludare, A. M., Okoye, I. E., & Tsado, L. K. (2021). An exploratory study on kidnapping as an emerging crime in Nigeria. In H. C. Chan & S. Adjorlolo (Eds.), *Crime, mental health and the criminal justice system in Africa*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Olusa, A., Enisan, G. & Olujimi (2023). Implication of child kidnapping and abduction in the face of urban security in south western, Nigeria. Proceeding of the 53rd Annual Conference of Nigerian Institute of Town Planners (NITP) held between 7th and 11th November, 2022 at the International Conference Centre, At: Abuja, Nigeria, p 231–253.
- Onuoha, F. C., & Okolie-Osemene, J. (2019). The evolving threat of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria. In O. O. Oshita, I. M. Alumona, & F. C. Onuoha (Eds.), *Internal Security Management in Nigeria*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8215-4_12
- Oriola, T. B. (2020). Framing and movement outcomes: The #BringBackOurGirls movement. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(4), 641–660. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1811663>

- Oteniya, M. G., Magaji, U. S., Surajo, A., & Jalo, I. A. (2022). Educational social implications of human learning theories towards the management of activities of kidnapers in Katsina State. *British Journal of Education*, 10(9), 69–77.
- Otu, S. E. (2003). *Armed robbery in the southeastern states of contemporary Nigeria: A criminological analysis (A Doctoral thesis submitted to the department of criminology)* Pretoria. University of South Africa.
- Otu, S. E., & Nnam, M. U. (2018). Does theory matters: Constructing an integrated theoretical framework to describe kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 40, 29–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2018.02.010>
- Otu, S. E., Nnam, M. U., & Uduka, U. K. (2021). Adaptation, rationality, and manipulation: Insight into kidnapers' modus operandi in the south eastern states of Nigeria. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(11–12), 6529–6552. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518812065>
- Reitano, T., Tinti, P., Shaw, M., & Bird, L. (2017). Integrated responses to human smuggling from the Horn of Africa to Europe. Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 68 p. Retrieved from <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/global-initiative-human-smuggling-from-the-horn-of-africa-may-2017-web.pdf>
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2020). Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020. United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.IV.3. Retrieved from https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP_2020_15jan_web.pdf
- SBM Intelligence (2023, August 23). The Economics of Nigeria's Kidnap Industry: Follow the money. *SBM Intelligence*, <https://www.sbmintel.com/2023/08/the-economics-of-nigerias-kidnap-industry-follow-the-money/>
- Sunday, A., & Muhammad, S. (2022). Interrogating criminal label and the scourge of insecurity in contemporary Nigeria. *KIU Journal of Social Sciences*, 7(4), 63–74. <https://www.ijhumas.com/ojs/index.php/kiujoss/article/view/1350>.
- Tade, O., & Momodu, J. A. (2023). 'Life is more important than money': Ransom mobilization and delivery to kidnapers in northeast Nigeria. *Deviant Behavior*, 44(9), 1401–1415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2023.2197548>
- Tade, O., Ojedokun, U. A., & Aderinto, A. A. (2019). 'I went through hell': Strategies for kidnapping and victims' experiences in Nigeria. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 10(29), 1244–1256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2019.1628155>
- Tade, O. O., Usman, A., & Aderinto, A. A. (2020). I went through hell': Strategies for kidnapping and victims' experiences in Nigeria. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 29(10), 1244–1256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2019.1628155>
- The Economist December (2020), "Kidnapping in Nigeria the lost boys of Kankara", 19.
- Tukur, A., Hamza, K., & Yahuza, U. (2020). Vigilante group and the fight against kidnapping: The role of Yan Bulaã in Kubau Local Government Area of Kaduna State, Nigeria (2016–2019). *KIU Journal of Humanities*, 5(2), 189–201. <https://ijhumas.com/ojs/index.php/kiuhums/article/view/910>.
- Ugwuoke, C.O., Ajah, B.O., Akor,L., Ameh, S.O., Lanshima, C.A., Ngwu, E.C., Eze, U.A. and Nwokedie, M. (2023). Violent crimes and insecurity on Nigerian highways: A tale of travelers' trauma, nightmares and state slumber. *Heliyon*, e20489. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e20489>
- Umego, C. (2019). Offence of kidnapping: A counter to national security and development (February 19, 2019). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3337745> or <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3337745>
- United States Department of State (2022). 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Nigeria. 46. Retrieved from https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/415610_NIGERIA-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf
- Vannini, M., Detotto, C., & McCannon, B. (2015). Ransom Kidnapping. In J. Backhaus (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Law and Economics*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-7883-6_576-1
- Wajim, J. (2020). Proliferation of kidnapping in Nigeria: Causes and consequences. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*. 4(3), 95–98. <https://www.rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/Digital-Library/volume-4-issue-3/95-98.pdf>

World Population Review (2024). Kidnappings per Country 2024. Retrieved from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/kidnappings-per-country>

Yang, S. L., Bohsiu, W., & Huang, S.-L. (2007). Kidnapping in Taiwan: The significance of geographic proximity, improvisation, and fluidity. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 51(3), 324–339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X06291472>

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.