



IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROBLEM OF ARMED BANDITRY TO NATIONAL SECURITY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This study analysed the problem of armed banditry and its implications for Nigeria's national security. Using a quantitative research design, the study utilised secondary data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), ACLED, and various humanitarian and security reports to achieve its desired objectives of analyzing the drivers of banditry and its impacts on national security in Nigeria. The research argued that human, economic, and state security, as well as the effectiveness of government interventions, are key to national security. Findings indicate that armed banditry is driven by a tripod of factors: socio-economic deprivation, environmental degradation, and the proliferation of ungoverned spaces, particularly in northern Nigeria. The study demonstrates that banditry has systematically eroded national stability, leading to the closure of over 11,500 schools, a 70% reduction in agricultural productivity in conflict-affected areas, and the internal displacement of more than 3.7 million persons as of late 2025. Applying Failed State and Human Security theories, the study concluded that sustainable national security requires a paradigm shift from purely kinetic responses to comprehensive non kinetic governance strategies. Recommendations include formalizing community-based security programs, reclaiming forest reserves which were being used as criminal hideouts, and implementing targeted social and economic interventions to dismantle the survivalist incentives that also drive recruitment into banditry. Until these profound steps are taken, armed banditry may continue to undermine national security in Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS: Banditry, Security, Implications, Nigeria.



INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's security landscape has undergone a profound transformation, marked by the metamorphosis of armed banditry from localized rural skirmishes into a sophisticated, existential threat to national stability. While the 2023 Global Terrorism Index continues to rank Nigeria among the top ten countries most affected by violent crime, the nature of the threat has shifted. Banditry now accounts for a significant proportion of conflict-related fatalities and internal displacements, representing a multidimensional crisis that challenges state legitimacy and national cohesion (Akinola, 2020; Hassan, 2022).

The North-Western and North-Central geopolitical zones, specifically Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Niger, have become the epicenter of this volatility. Empirical data from ACLED (2024) and the Federal Ministry of Defence (2025) demonstrate a harrowing trajectory: conflict-related fatalities escalated from 10,350 in 2010 to an estimated 15,000 by 2025. This violence has catalyzed a staggering humanitarian crisis, with internal displacements surging from 300,000 to approximately 2.3 million persons. Beyond physical casualties, the disruption of agricultural value chains and the mass abandonment of farmlands have precipitated acute food insecurity across the federation (Musa, 2021; Adamu & Ibrahim, 2022).

The entrenchment of banditry is rooted in a confluence of structural vulnerabilities. Persistent youth unemployment and pervasive poverty create a vast recruitment pool for criminal syndicates (Olaosebikan, 2020; NBS, 2025). This domestic fragility is exacerbated by transnational factors, including porous borders and the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) from the wider Sahel region (Ezeani, 2023; UNODC, 2023). Consequently, a transnational political economy of violence has emerged, where fighters and arms traverse borders with relative ease (Soufan Center, 2025).

A critical anomaly in Nigeria's security architecture is the "expenditure-outcome gap." Despite a 220% surge in defense allocations rising from ₦878 billion in 2018 to over ₦3.1 trillion by 2025, the security situation remains precarious (Ministry of Finance, 2025). This paradox is fueled by the institutionalization of a "ransom economy," where trillions of naira are paid to kidnappers annually (SBM Intelligence, 2025). Furthermore, the emergence of "ungoverned spaces" in forest belts like Kamuku and Rugu has allowed bandit groups to supplant state authority, imposing illegal taxes and protection levies a hallmark of contested sovereignty and state fragility (Isah & Garba, 2022; Rotberg, 2003). The complexity of the crisis is further deepened by an evolving "crime-terror nexus," characterized by transactional cooperation between bandit groups and jihadist factions such as ISWAP and Boko Haram (CTC Sentinel, 2022). This synergy enhances the lethality and organizational sophistication of attacks, rendering traditional kinetic interventions, such as Operations *Hadarin Daji* and *Puff Adder*, largely unsustainable (Adejumobi, 2020; Lawal & Ahmed, 2021).

Against this backdrop, the central problem is the resilience and adaptability of armed banditry in the face of escalating military expenditure. This study, therefore, interrogates the socio-economic and institutional drivers of the crisis and evaluates the effectiveness of current government strategies. By analyzing the disconnect between resource inputs and security outcomes, the



research seeks to propose a more robust and sustainable national security architecture for the Nigerian state.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

The study on armed banditry and its implications on Nigeria's national security requires a clear conceptual understanding of the two central variables: armed banditry and national security.

Armed Banditry: According to Okoli and Ugwu (2019), armed banditry refers to the use of sophisticated weapons by non-state actors to commit acts of violence and dispossession against individuals, communities, and the state, usually for economic or political gain. They argue that, in Nigeria, it has taken a communal dimension, with entire rural populations subjected to violent raids and forced displacements. Similarly, Hassan (2021) defines armed banditry as a form of organized predation carried out by armed groups who exploit weak state presence and porous borders to engage in illicit activities such as cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and extortion. Hassan emphasizes that the phenomenon thrives in regions where governance structures are fragile and where poverty and unemployment create fertile grounds for recruitment.

In another scholarly view, Ibrahim (2023) describes armed banditry as a manifestation of criminal entrepreneurship characterized by the commodification of violence and the establishment of alternative power structures in ungoverned spaces. He posits that bandit groups in Nigeria operate within complex networks that include local collaborators, arms dealers, and political patrons, making the crisis not only a criminal issue but also a governance problem.

From these perspectives, it is clear that armed banditry is not merely an issue of law enforcement but a broader reflection of structural weaknesses in state capacity, economic inequality, and social exclusion. For the purpose of this study, armed banditry is defined as the organized use of armed violence by non-state actors to achieve economic, territorial, or political control in contexts of weak governance and limited state authority.

National Security: Eze (2020) defines national security as the condition in which a state ensures the safety and well-being of its citizens by protecting them from internal and external threats through the maintenance of law, order, and socio-political stability. He argues that national security in developing states like Nigeria must be understood beyond defense capabilities to include human development and institutional effectiveness. In a similar vein, Olagunju (2021) views national security as the ability of a nation to preserve its sovereignty, maintain internal peace, and promote the welfare of its population through effective governance and social justice. He stresses that insecurity in any of these areas threatens the survival of the state.

Furthermore, Usman (2023) conceptualizes national security as a dynamic and multidimensional process that involves safeguarding citizens' lives, maintaining economic stability, protecting democratic institutions, and ensuring societal resilience against both human and natural threats. He maintains that in the Nigerian context, the erosion of national security is often linked to weak governance, corruption, and the inability of the state to enforce the rule of law.



National security extends beyond the defense of borders to encompass the protection of citizens, institutions, and the overall stability of the state. For this study, national security is defined as the capacity of the Nigerian state to safeguard its territorial integrity, protect lives and property, and ensure socio-political stability through effective governance and the rule of law.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts a dual theoretical framework, thus: Human Security Theory and Failed State Theory

Human Security Theory: The Human Security Theory emerged in the 1990s as an alternative to the traditional state-centric notion of security that prioritised territorial integrity and military defense over individual welfare. Its earliest and most influential articulation came from the 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report, which emphasized that “the security of people, not just the security of territory,” should be the central concern of governments (UNDP, 1994). Proponents such as Amartya Sen (1999) and Sabina Alkire (2003) further developed the concept, arguing that true security involves freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the protection of human dignity. Human Security Theory, therefore, broadens the meaning of security beyond political and military dimensions to include economic stability, access to food, health care, education, and protection from violence and environmental hazards.

The main thrust of the theory is that security challenges must be analyzed through the lens of human vulnerability rather than merely state sovereignty. It assumes that when individuals and communities experience insecurity, whether through poverty, displacement, or violence, the state’s stability is equally threatened (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007).

Despite its wide acceptance, the Human Security Theory has faced criticism for its conceptual ambiguity and breadth. Critics like Paris (2001) argue that the theory’s inclusive scope makes it difficult to operationalize in policy or measure empirically. However, its enduring relevance lies in its capacity to illuminate complex, multidimensional threats such as armed banditry that transcend traditional security boundaries. In the context of Nigeria, the theory remains vital because it situates the problem of banditry within a wider socio-economic and developmental crisis. Applying Human Security Theory enables this study to interpret armed banditry not only as a law enforcement issue but as a manifestation of human deprivation, youth unemployment, and loss of livelihood, thereby emphasizing the need for human-centered interventions.

Failed State Theory: Failed State Theory gained prominence in the early 2000s through the works of authors such as William Zartman (1995) and Rotberg (2003), who examined how states collapse when they lose control over their territory, monopoly of violence, and ability to deliver basic services. The theory posits that a state fails when it can no longer perform its fundamental functions of ensuring security, maintaining law and order, and providing public goods (Rotberg, 2003). It assumes that state failure is both a cause and consequence of internal insecurity, leading to the emergence of non-state actors, armed groups, and criminal networks that fill governance vacuums.



The core thrust of this theory is the interconnection between governance failure and insecurity. A failed state is characterized by weak institutions, widespread corruption, poor governance, and loss of legitimacy. According to Zartman (1995), once the state loses its authority, power becomes fragmented, allowing violent groups to assert control. In Nigeria, these characteristics manifest vividly in regions plagued by armed banditry, where local governance structures have broken down, and non-state actors regulate local life through violence and coercion. The assumptions of the theory highlight that governance deficits, if left unaddressed, breed conditions conducive to criminality and violent extremism.

One general criticism of the Failed State Theory is that it has sometimes been applied too rigidly or pejoratively to African contexts, portraying complex governance challenges as absolute collapse (Call, 2008). Critics argue that the label “failed” overlooks the adaptive and hybrid governance mechanisms that emerge in fragile settings. Nonetheless, the theory remains pertinent to this study because it offers a structural explanation for the persistence of banditry in Nigeria. It helps clarify how weak institutions, corruption, and poor state presence have created fertile ground for armed groups to flourish. By linking insecurity to institutional fragility, the theory provides a valuable framework for understanding why conventional military responses alone have not been sufficient in restoring stability.

Analysis of Armed Banditry and National Security in Nigeria

Scholarly inquiry into armed banditry in Nigeria has transitioned from viewing the phenomenon as mere rural criminality to analyzing it as a sophisticated threat to state sovereignty. Olaosebikan (2020) investigated the socioeconomic drivers of banditry in Northwestern Nigeria, utilizing a mixed-methods design across Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna. The findings revealed that 68% of respondents linked the escalation of violence to systemic youth unemployment and the collapse of traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms. The study concluded that the absence of effective state presence in peripheral regions has facilitated the transformation of localized disputes into organized predation, thereby undermining rural stability.

Similarly, Abubakar and Mohammed (2021) explored the political economy of this violence in Sokoto and Niger States, highlighting how competition over dwindling natural resources, aggravated by elite complicity and perceived marginalization, has intensified the crisis. They argued that security responses remain palliative as long as the underlying structural inequalities and governance failures are ignored.

The humanitarian and human security dimensions of the crisis have been further substantiated by Musa (2021), whose qualitative analysis in Katsina and Niger States documented over 300,000 displacements and the systemic disruption of education and healthcare. Musa concluded that national security is unattainable without addressing the “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear” among rural populations. Expanding on this, Odalonu (2023) documented the escalation of attacks on agrarian hubs, noting that banditry has evolved into a national security emergency that overstretches state capacity and erodes territorial control. This is echoed in the work of Aderayo (2025), who introduced the concept of “conflict entrepreneurship” to explain how bandit actors profit from institutional voids. Aderayo demonstrated that the resulting humanitarian emergencies



and destruction of property in states like Kebbi and Sokoto pose a significant risk to Nigeria's long-term regional stability.

Critical evaluations of the state's response mechanisms highlight a persistent policy-outcome gap. Lawal and Ahmed (2021) evaluated operations such as *Hadarin Daji* and *Puff Adder*, finding that while kinetic interventions achieved temporary reductions in violence, the gains were neutralized by poor inter-agency coordination and a lack of complementary socio-economic reforms. Furthermore, Ojo and Hassan (2022) examined the role of community-based security responses, warning that while vigilante groups improve local surveillance, the absence of regulatory oversight often leads to human rights abuses and revenge cycles, creating a "double-edged sword" for national security. Ibrahim and Yusuf (2023) reinforced this by identifying strategic failures in policy coordination, suggesting that overlapping mandates and a lack of intelligence-led policing allow bandit networks to adapt and expand.

Despite these contributions, the existing literature remains largely fragmented, often isolating socioeconomic drivers from institutional failures or focusing on specific regional clusters. There is a discernible lack of an integrated national-level analysis that systematically links the structural causation of banditry with its multidimensional security implications and the strategic coherence of government responses. This study seeks to bridge this empirical gap by providing a holistic analysis of armed banditry as a multifaceted threat to Nigeria's national security architecture.

The contemporary crisis of armed banditry in Nigeria represents a qualitative shift from traditional rural criminality to a sophisticated, transnational criminal economy. Historically, banditry in Northern Nigeria was characterized by localized cattle rustling and sporadic skirmishes over grazing rights, primarily between pastoralist and farming communities (Aliyu & Mustapha, 2019). However, between 2017 and 2024, the phenomenon underwent a radical professionalization, transitioning into an organized paramilitarized threat that challenges the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

Armed Banditry and Sources of Finance: The primary financial engine of modern banditry is the Kidnapping for Ransom (KFR) industry. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024) Crime Experience and Security Perception Survey, an estimated ₦2.23 trillion was paid as ransom to kidnappers and bandits between May 2023 and April 2024 alone. This "shadow economy" is most entrenched in the North-West, which accounted for approximately 63.5 percent of these incidents (NBS, 2024). While household self-reporting suggests a staggering trillion-naira economy, verified payment data from SBM Intelligence (2025) indicates that at least ₦2.57 billion was confirmed to have reached bandit hands in the 2024-2025 cycle, often paid in bulk cash to avoid the digital trails monitored by the Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit (NFIU). This capital is systematically reinvested into the recruitment of foot soldiers and the acquisition of military-grade hardware, creating a self-sustaining cycle of violence.

Sources of Weaponry and Cross-Border Proliferation: The lethality of bandit groups is sustained by a robust arms trafficking network linked to the wider Sahelian conflict. Empirical evidence suggests that the 2011 collapse of the Libyan state remains a primary driver, as diverted stockpiles have flooded illicit markets in West Africa (Small Arms Survey, 2023). Bandits in states



like Zamfara and Sokoto now possess sophisticated hardware, including Rocket-Propelled Grenades (RPGs) and General-Purpose Machine Guns (GPMGs), which are trafficked through porous borders from Niger and Mali (UNODC, 2023). These weapons are often exchanged for stolen cattle or proceeds from illegal artisanal gold mining in the North-West, further complicating the security landscape (The Soufan Center, 2025).

International Involvement and the "Mercenary" Dimension: A defining and unsettled dimension of the crisis is the involvement of foreign actors. Empirical studies and security reports highlight that many bandit cells are comprised of cross-border "mercenaries" recruited from neighboring Sahelian countries who exploit Nigeria's poorly managed 4,000 km land border (Ezeani, 2023; Ogbonna et al., 2023). Former President Muhammadu Buhari and various security analysts have noted that these fighters, often more brutal than local gangs, are attracted by the high financial yields of the Nigerian ransom market (Adejo and Olalere, 2024).

Ungoverned Spaces and Parallel Governance (The "Taxation" System): Under the framework of Failed State Theory, the emergence of "ungoverned spaces" in forest reserves like Kamuku, Rugu, and Kuyanbana has allowed bandits to supplant state authority. In these areas, bandit groups have evolved from predatory raiders into de facto sovereigns who provide a perverted form of "protection." One of the most critical indicators of this is the bandit taxation system. In Zamfara and Katsina, bandits impose mandatory "harvest taxes" and protection levies on rural communities. Individual farmers are ordered to pay between ₦10,000 and ₦600,000 or surrender up to 50 percent of their harvest to access their fields (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2022). Failure to pay these levies results in the burning of farms or the mass abduction of villagers, effectively creating a parallel tax regime that delegitimizes the Nigerian state.

Banditry and Jihadist Convergence: Recent empirical data suggests a "jihadization" of banditry, where the lines between economic crime and religious extremism are blurring. Jihadist groups such as ISWAP, Ansaru, and the newly emerged Lakurawa network (a Fulani-rooted group with links to the Islamic State Sahel Province) have been documented providing tactical training and mediation services to bandit cells in Sokoto, Kebbi, and Kaduna (CTC Sentinel, 2025; The Soufan Center, 2025). This transactional cooperation, often called the "crime-terror nexus," grants jihadist actors' territorial sanctuary while upgrading the organizational sophistication of bandit groups, thereby transforming a rural security threat into an existential national security emergency.

Taken together, these dynamics show that armed banditry in Nigeria is not merely a localised criminal problem but a multidimensional national and regional security challenge. Key features that define the contemporary phenomenon include the institutionalisation of kidnapping for ransom as a core revenue source, the rapid reinvestment of proceeds into weapons and logistics, the consolidation of weakly governed territorial enclaves, transnational facilitation through Sahelian networks, and episodic convergence with jihadist actors. These features interact to produce persistence, adaptability, and resilience among bandit groups, and they explain why conventional, kinetic security responses alone have repeatedly failed to produce durable reductions in violence.



Major Factors Driving the Rise of Armed Banditry in Nigeria

The entrenchment of armed banditry in Nigeria is not a random manifestation of criminality but a systemic consequence of deep-seated structural vulnerabilities. Between 2010 and 2025, banditry transitioned from localized rural skirmishes into a sophisticated national security crisis. This escalation was propelled by a "tripod" of drivers: socio-economic deprivation, environmental collapse, and institutional fragility.

The Socio-Economic Catalyst: The primary driver of banditry is an acute deficit in human security. Data from the 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) survey produced by the NBS in collaboration with the UNDP, UNICEF, and OPHI revealed that 63 percent of Nigeria's population, equivalent to approximately 133 million people, live in multidimensional poverty. In rural northern Nigeria, where poverty rates frequently exceed 70 percent, banditry has evolved into a "survivalist economy." High youth unemployment, which stood at 5.0 percent by 2024 under revised national methodologies, remains significantly higher in the informal rural sectors, providing a continuous recruitment pool for criminal entrepreneurs (Alkali & Putter, 2025). As traditional livelihoods in farming and pastoralism collapse under economic pressure, the "ransom economy" emerges as a viable, albeit violent, alternative for marginalized youth.

Environmental Degradation and Resource Competition: Environmental stressors act as a potent threat multiplier. The southward expansion of the Sahara Desert, advancing at an estimated 0.6 kilometers annually, has decimated traditional grazing lands (Ojo et al., 2023). This ecological crisis has triggered "climate-induced migration," forcing pastoralists into violent competition with crop farmers over dwindling water and arable land. As traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms failed, communal disputes were weaponized, leading to predatory predation as groups sought to secure resources through force (United Nations, 2018).

Institutional Fragility and the Ungoverned Space Paradox: Aligned with Failed State Theory, the rise of banditry is inextricably linked to the withdrawal of state authority from its peripheral territories. Vast forest reserves, such as Rugu, Kamuku, and Kuyanbana, have morphed into "ungoverned spaces" where formal security presence is non-existent. These vacuums have allowed bandit groups to establish parallel governance structures and illegal taxation regimes. Furthermore, the "Crime-Terror Nexus" has facilitated transactional cooperation between bandits and jihadist factions like ISWAP and Ansaru, who provide tactical training to bandit cells in exchange for territorial sanctuary (Okwuwada, 2023).

Criminal Networks and Arms Proliferation: The professionalization of banditry into organized, financially driven networks is further enabled by the uncontrolled proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW). Illicit arms flow from neighboring Sahelian conflict zones have significantly increased the lethality and operational capacity of these groups (Rufus & Ogbe, 2025). Kidnapping for ransom has become the principal revenue stream, incentivizing continued recruitment and violence. This self-reinforcing criminal economy creates a cycle of reinvestment, where ransom proceeds are used to acquire superior weaponry, thereby strengthening group resilience against state countermeasures.



Impacts of Armed Banditry on Nigeria's National Security

The evolution of armed banditry from localized rural criminality into a primary threat to the Nigerian state's sovereignty represents a critical inflection point in the nation's security history. Unlike the ideologically driven insurgency in the Northeast, banditry in Nigeria is characterized by a "survivalist economy" and predatory criminality that targets the foundational pillars of national stability: human capital, agrarian productivity, and state legitimacy. By early 2026, the cumulative impact of these activities has shifted from being a regional disturbance to a systemic crisis that undermines the socio-economic and territorial integrity of the Federation.

Degradation of Human Capital: The strategic targeting of educational institutions for mass abductions has introduced a "pedagogical insecurity" that threatens the long-term human capital development of the Nigerian state. This phenomenon has weaponized the educational sector as a primary revenue stream for non-state actors through "ransom entrepreneurship." Verified data from UNICEF and institutional security reports indicate that as of late 2025, approximately 20 million children remain out of school across Nigeria, with the Northwest accounting for a disproportionate share of this figure due to persistent threats of abduction (UNICEF, 2025; UNESCO, 2026). The psychological trauma associated with mass kidnappings, such as the November 2025 abduction of 25 schoolgirls in Kebbi State and the 303 students from St. Mary's School in Niger State, has prompted the indefinite closure of over 11,500 schools since 2020. This systemic collapse of rural education is not merely a humanitarian issue but a profound national security threat, as it fosters a "lost generation" of uneducated youth who become increasingly susceptible to recruitment by criminal syndicates, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violence.

Documented Mass School Abductions in Nigeria (2020–2025):

Institution	Abducted Students	Period	Full Address / Location	Status (as of 2025)
Government Science Secondary School, Kankara	344	December 11, 2020	Government Science Secondary School, Kankara, Kankara LGA, Katsina State, Nigeria	All abducted students were rescued/released days after the incident
Government Girls Science Secondary School, Jangebe	279	February 26, 2021	Government Girls Science Secondary School, Jangebe, Talata-Mafara LGA, Zamfara State, Nigeria	All abducted students released following negotiations
LEA Primary and Secondary School, Kuriga	287	March 7, 2024	LEA Primary and Secondary School, Kuriga, Chikun LGA, Kaduna State, Nigeria	Majority of abducted students released; most freed unharmed
Government Girls Comprehensive	25	November 17, 2025	Government Girls Comprehensive	24 of the 25 abducted students



Institution	Abducted Students	Period	Full Address / Location	Status (as of 2025)
Secondary School, Maga			Secondary School, Maga, Wasagu/Danko LGA, Kebbi State, Nigeria	were released by late November 2025
St Mary's Catholic School, Papiri	303	November 21, 2025	St Mary's Catholic Primary and Secondary School, Papiri, Agwara LGA, Niger State, Nigeria	All abducted pupils and staff were released by late December 2025

Source: *Author's Synthesis (2025) from ReliefWeb, UNICEF, and Al Jazeera (2025).*

Food Insecurity: Perhaps the most enduring impact of banditry on national security is the disruption of the agricultural value chain in Nigeria's traditional "breadbasket." The emergence of a "protection levy" economy, where bandits impose illegal taxes on farmers as a prerequisite for land access, has effectively crippled rural livelihoods. Recent empirical studies suggest that in states like Zamfara and Sokoto, over 80% of arable land remained uncultivated in the 2024 and 2025 seasons due to the threat of kidnapping and farm-gate killings (NBS, 2025; FAO, 2026). This displacement has triggered acute food inflation and a looming famine in northern regions, with nearly 33 million Nigerians projected to face "Crisis" levels of food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or higher) (ACAPS, 2025; World Food Programme, 2025). Given that farming and animal rearing are the mainstay of the economy in the northwest, cattle rustling has significantly impaired animal rearing. Moreover, the attacks on rural villagers and farmers, and the consequent displacement of many more, have made farming, cultivation, and harvest impossible. These developments increase the chances of food insufficiency, food insecurity, poverty, hunger, and malnutrition (ACAPS, 2020).

Humanitarian-Insecurity: The humanitarian consequences of armed banditry are characterized by mass internal displacement and the erosion of social cohesion. The proliferation of armed banditry in Nigeria has fundamentally compromised the state's obligation to protect lives and property, as enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution (Constitution of the FRN "as amended," 1999), 2019. The human cost of banditry has escalated beyond traditional criminal benchmarks, with verified data from ACLED and Amnesty International indicating that over 10,200 fatalities were recorded nationwide between mid-2023 and mid-2025, largely concentrated in the Northwest and North-Central zones (Amnesty International, 2025). The lethality of these attacks is increasingly intensified by the emergence of the "Lakurawa" faction, an extremist group with links to the Islamic State Sahel, which has established operational bases along the Sokoto and Kebbi borders, complicating the regional security landscape through more sophisticated tactical maneuvers (ACAPS, 2025).

The humanitarian impact is further characterized by a staggering displacement crisis that has reached institutional breaking points. As of May 2025, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) documented 1,252,042 internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the Northwest



and North-central regions, a figure representing millions of disrupted livelihoods and fragmented social structures (IOM Round 17, 2025). Approximately 77% of these individuals reside within host communities, placing unsustainable pressure on urban infrastructure in cities like Kaduna and Gusau, while over 35,000 refugees remain in the Maradi region of the Niger Republic (UNHCR, 2025). This mass movement of people has facilitated a "slum sociology" in urban peripheries, increasing the risk of secondary criminal recruitment among displaced and unemployed youth.

Economic-Insecurity: Armed banditry has inflicted severe structural damage on Nigeria's economy by destabilizing regional trade, deterring investment, and eroding the fiscal base of state governments. The cumulative impact of these criminal acts is evident in the degradation of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Empirical data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) 2024 and World Bank 2025 indicate that insecurity, specifically in the agrarian Northwest, remains a primary driver of food inflation, which surged beyond 40% in late 2024. The institutionalization of "protection levies," where bandits extort between ₦70,000 and ₦100,000 from farmers as a prerequisite for land access, has effectively established a parallel taxation system that drains rural household wealth and redirects millions of naira into the criminal economy (SBM Intelligence, 2024; ASSRJ, 2025).

The agricultural sector, which provides the livelihood for over 80% of the rural population in the Northwest, has borne the brunt of this insecurity. In states such as Zamfara and Sokoto, persistent raids and the threat of abduction have led to a decline in agricultural productivity by over 70% in high-risk local government areas (FAO, 2024). Recent field studies in Sokoto East and Zamfara confirm that thousands of hectares of arable land have been abandoned, as farmers are forced to choose between physical safety and economic survival. This systemic abandonment of farmlands has not only spiked the cost of staple crops like maize and rice but has also triggered a "food emergency," with approximately 33 million Nigerians projected to face acute hunger by the 2025 lean season (ReliefWeb, 2025; World Food Programme, 2025).

Beyond agriculture, the disruption of regional trade networks has decimated state revenues. Markets in Sabon Birni, Isa, and Batsari, which once served as vital hubs for trans-border commerce with the Niger Republic, have either been closed or operate at significantly reduced capacity due to the risk of ambush along major transit corridors. Between May 2023 and April 2024, it was estimated that over ₦2.2 trillion was lost to ransom payments and associated criminal extortions, further depleting the disposable income of citizens and intensifying the cycle of poverty and unemployment in the region (NBS, 2024; Ademola *et al.*, 2025).

Comparative Trends in Displacement, Education, and Fatalities (2010–2025):

Indicator	2010 Baseline	2021 Update	2025
National IDP Population	300,000	2,147,000	3,700,000+
Out-of-School Children	10.5 million	13.2 million	20 million
Conflict-Related Fatalities	~10,000	~10,500	~15,000+
Defense Budget (₦)	299.1 billion	1.78 trillion	3.10 trillion

Source: Author's Synthesis (2026) based on SIPRI, NBS, UNICEF, and ACAPS data.



The data presented in Table 4.3 provides a longitudinal perspective on the alarming deterioration of Nigeria's national security over a fifteen-year period. A comparative analysis of the 2010 Baseline and the 2025 Current Data reveals a staggering 1,133% increase in the National IDP population, moving from 300,000 to over 3.7 million. This surge signifies the transition of banditry from localized rural skirmishes to a pervasive humanitarian catastrophe. Similarly, the escalation of conflict-related fatalities to over 15,000 annually underscores the increasing lethality of non-state actors, despite a massive expansion in the Defense Budget from ₦299.1 billion to ₦3.10 trillion. The failure of increased military spending to curb the rise of out-of-school children now at a critical 20 million suggests that the crisis is no longer merely a kinetic military problem but a structural failure of the state to provide basic human security and social stability.

Effectiveness of Government Interventions in Addressing Armed Banditry: On the efficacy of the Nigerian government's strategic responses to armed banditry data were drawn from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2024), the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), and the Federal Ministry of Defense (2025), the analysis examines military operations, peace initiatives, and community-security frameworks. These interventions are assessed based on their capacity to achieve sustained reductions in attack frequency, fatality rates, and displacement trends. Evidence suggests a pattern of kinetic success followed by structural relapse. Large-scale deployments, such as Operation Hadarin Daji (2019) and Operation Thunder Strike (2020), achieved immediate tactical gains, yet these were often neutralized by the high adaptability of bandit groups and the porous nature of the Rugu and Kamuku forests. The sharp resurgence of violence in 2020 (a 22.5% increase in attacks) is partially attributed to COVID-19 lockdowns, which constrained troop mobility while allowing non-state actors to consolidate power in ungoverned spaces. Conversely, the transition toward the Joint Task Force North West (JTF-NW) in 2023 and the scaling of community-based security programs in 2024 have demonstrated that integrating local intelligence with federal kinetic force yields more consistent results than isolated military offensives.

Trend Analysis of Banditry Incidents and Government Interventions, 2017 to 2025:

Year	Major government intervention	Recorded incidents	Approximate fatalities	Change in attacks (year on year)	Change in fatalities (year on year)	Remarks
2017	Pre intervention baseline	2,150	3,780	Baseline	Baseline	Escalation in Zamfara and Katsina
2018	Operation Sharan Daji (enhanced)	2,010	3,450	Decrease 6.5 percent	Decrease 8.7 percent	Initial military pressure produced modest gains
2019	Operation Hadarin Daji launched	1,845	3,120	Decrease 8.2 percent	Decrease 9.6 percent	Short term success from coordinated air and ground operations



Year	Major government intervention	Recorded incidents	Approximate fatalities	Change in attacks (year on year)	Change in fatalities (year on year)	Remarks
2020	COVID 19 restrictions and lockdowns	2,260	3,980	Increase 22.5 percent	Increase 27.6 percent	Mobility gaps and constrained operations led to a sharp spike
2021	Operation Thunder Strike	2,030	3,590	Decrease 10.2 percent	Decrease 9.8 percent	Temporary suppression in the Kaduna Niger axis
2022	Bandit re-strategization and expansion	2,410	4,080	Increase 18.7 percent	Increase 13.6 percent	Groups expanded into new territories; earlier gains reversed
2023	JTF NW coordinated deployment	2,265	3,720	Decrease 6.0 percent	Decrease 8.8 percent	Improved inter agency cooperation reduced core state attacks
2024	Community security programmes scaled up	1,975	3,250	Decrease 12.8 percent	Decrease 12.6 percent	Intelligence led local initiatives produced clearer results
2025	National Security Service intelligence integration	1,890	3,010	Decrease 4.3 percent	Decrease 7.3 percent	Fragile progress constrained by logistics and governance gaps

Source: Author's synthesis (2026) using ACLED (2024), Federal Ministry of Defence (2025), and NBS security statistics (2025). Percent changes are calculated relative to the previous year.

The data in Table 4.4 underscores a significant "policy-outcome gap." While the 2024-2025 period shows a downward trend in fatalities (-12.6% and -7.3% respectively), the absolute numbers remain high, indicating that banditry has been suppressed rather than eradicated.



SUMMARY

The findings of this study demonstrate that the entrenchment of armed banditry in Nigeria is a multifaceted crisis driven by the intersection of socio-economic marginalization, ecological collapse, and institutional fragility. The analysis reveals that the transition of banditry from rural skirmishes to a sophisticated "ransom economy" is primarily fueled by a profound human security deficit, where over 63% of the population exists in multidimensional poverty. This reality aligns with the Human Security Theory, which posits that when individuals are deprived of "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear," they become highly susceptible to recruitment by criminal syndicates as a means of survival. Previous studies by Alkali and Putter (2025) reinforce this finding, suggesting that in the absence of viable livelihoods, kidnapping for ransom becomes a rationalized economic alternative for marginalized youth. Furthermore, environmental stressors, such as the southward expansion of the Sahara at 0.6 kilometers per annum, have decimated traditional grazing lands, weaponizing communal resource competition and undermining the national food supply chain.

The study further highlights the devastating impact of banditry on Nigeria's human capital and agrarian productivity. The weaponization of education through mass student abductions has led to the closure of over 11,500 schools and pushed the out-of-school children population to a staggering 20 million by late 2025. This systemic erosion of the educational sector reflects a core tenet of Failed State Theory, where the state loses its capacity to provide essential public goods and protect its most vulnerable citizens. The findings show that agrarian productivity in the Northwest has declined by over 70% in high-risk areas due to "protection levies" and farm-gate killings, a situation corroborated by Ojo et al. (2023) and the World Food Programme (2025). This institutionalization of criminal taxation regimes signifies a direct challenge to state sovereignty, as non-state actors fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of formal government authority in "ungoverned spaces" such as the Rugu and Kamuku forests.

Finally, the assessment of government interventions reveals a persistent "policy-outcome gap," where kinetic military successes are frequently neutralized by the high adaptability of bandit groups and the lack of sustained social investment. While large-scale operations like *Operation Hadarin Daji* achieved short-term tactical gains; the data shows that the most consistent reductions in fatalities occurred only when community-based security programs were scaled up in 2024. This finding is justified through the lens of Failed State Theory, which argues that military force alone cannot restore order if the state fails to regain the trust of local populations or reoccupy peripheral territories. As Okwuwada (2023) suggests, the "Crime-Terror Nexus" between bandits and jihadist factions necessitates a shift from purely kinetic responses to a holistic approach that integrates local intelligence with structural reforms.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study shows that armed banditry in Nigeria is a product of layered structural drivers rather than isolated criminality. Deep poverty, youth unemployment, environmental stress, and institutional fragility have combined to create a survivalist and ransom-driven economy in which armed violence becomes a rational, if destructive, livelihood option for marginalised groups, particularly in the North-West. The findings further demonstrate that banditry has evolved into a systemic national security threat: it undermines human capital through school attacks and mass abductions, disrupts agricultural production and food systems, fuels large-scale displacement, and erodes both economic stability and state legitimacy, even as defence spending continues to rise. Government responses have achieved only partial and temporary success. Kinetic operations and ad hoc peace deals produce short-term reductions in incidents and fatalities, but violence repeatedly resurges due to bandit adaptability, weak border control, ungoverned spaces, and limited integration of security, justice, and development measures. Interpreted through Human Security Theory and Failed State Theory, these outcomes suggest that Nigeria's challenge is not merely to suppress armed groups but to restore human security, close governance vacuums, and re-establish an effective, accountable monopoly of legitimate force in affected regions.

Recommendations

To mitigate the threat of armed banditry and restore national stability, the following measures are recommended:

- i. **Formalize Community-Based Security Frameworks:** The Federal Government should transition from temporary Joint Task Forces to a formalized, state-regulated community policing model. This involves integrating local hunters and vigilantes into a structured intelligence-sharing network with the Nigerian Police to close the "last-mile" security gap in rural hinterlands.
- ii. **Establish Secure Educational Corridors:** In collaboration with UNICEF and state governments, the Ministry of Education must implement the "Safe Schools Initiative" by perimeter-fencing rural schools and establishing rapid-response military outposts within 5km of high-risk educational clusters to deter mass abductions.
- iii. **Incentivize Agrarian "Safe Zones":** To combat food insecurity, the government should deploy "Agro-Rangers" to protect major farming belts in the Northwest. Simultaneously, a debt-relief and input-subsidy program should be launched for farmers who have suffered from the "protection levy" economy to encourage the reclamation of abandoned farmlands.
- iv. **Strengthen Sahelian Border Surveillance:** The Ministry of Interior should deploy advanced geospatial technology and drones for the continuous monitoring of the 4,000km porous borders. This is essential to disrupt the illicit flow of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) from conflict zones in the Sahel.



- v. **Targeted Poverty Alleviation in "Recruitment Hotspots":** The National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) must be specifically redirected toward the local government areas (LGAs) with the highest banditry recruitment rates, providing vocational training and micro-credit to youth to offer a viable alternative to the "ransom economy."
- vi. **Reclaim Ungoverned Forest Reserves:** The government should initiate a multi-agency "Forest Reclamation Project" to convert vast reserves like Rugu and Kamuku into controlled economic zones, such as regulated ranches or eco-tourism sites, thereby denying criminal elements the sanctuary of "ungoverned spaces."

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