

Kidnapping for Ransom as Political Violence: A Criminological Study of Governance Gap and Criminal Entrepreneurship in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: Kidnapping for ransom has become one of the most pervasive forms of political violence and organized crime in Nigeria, with Taraba State emerging as a focal point for this criminal activity. This study explores the intersection between governance failures, criminal entrepreneurship, and the socio-economic and political consequences of kidnapping for ransom in the region. Through a combination of semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and case studies, the research identifies key factors that enable the growth of kidnapping syndicates, including weak law enforcement, corruption, and limited political will. Findings reveal that governance gaps have created an environment conducive to the emergence of professional criminal networks, which exploit kidnapping as a lucrative business model. Additionally, the study highlights the profound impact of kidnapping on local economies, political stability, and public trust in government institutions. The paper concludes by offering comprehensive recommendations to address the root causes of kidnapping for ransom, focusing on improving law enforcement capabilities, strengthening anti-corruption measures, enhancing community-based security initiatives, and promoting economic revitalization programs. The study contributes to criminological literature by providing a nuanced understanding of how governance deficiencies perpetuate the criminal economy of kidnapping, with implications for both policy and practice in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Criminal Entrepreneurship, Governance Gap, Kidnapping, Nigeria, Political Violence, & Ransom.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Kidnapping for ransom has emerged over the last three decades as a significant form of political violence and organised crime across diverse geopolitical contexts. Globally, kidnappings for pecuniary gain and political leverage have been documented not only in conflict zones but also in contexts of weak governance and porous security environments (Osegboun & Oladipo, 2023). While traditional criminological frameworks associated kidnapping with insurgent demands or criminal opportunism, recent scholarship underscores its evolution into a highly organised, profit-driven enterprise that blurs the boundaries between political violence, organised crime, and criminal entrepreneurship (Osegboun & Oladipo, 2023). The strategic deployment of abduction as both a source of revenue and coercive leverage has been increasingly recognised as a marker of governance deficits and market incentives exploited by non-state actors. While this paper cannot confirm any dataset attributing global totals, but region-specific analyses indicate that states with weak rule of law and limited state capacity have disproportionately borne the burden of abduction-related violence.

In the African context, and particularly in West Africa, Nigeria has come to dominate recorded incidents of kidnapping for ransom within organised political violence. Data maintained by monitoring organisations indicate that Nigeria accounted for the majority of abductions in the West African sub-region between 2019 and 2023, underscoring its position at the epicentre of this phenomenon in West Africa. This pattern reflects broader structural conditions such as chronic socio-economic inequality, high youth unemployment, limited economic opportunities, and the inability of the state to extend security across its territory have created fertile conditions for criminal entrepreneurs to monetise abduction.

In Nigeria, kidnapping has undergone a historical transformation. While early instances were tied to political leverage such as militant groups in the Niger Delta leveraging abductions for political concessions the phenomenon has diversified and proliferated nationwide into a hybrid form of criminal entrepreneurship that intersects with banditry, terrorism and organized crime networks. Kidnapping for ransom now affects civilians, travellers, business operators, and educational institutions, with high-profile mass abductions of schoolchildren in multiple states illustrating both the reach and severity of the crisis. This shift is often attributed to governance gaps, whereby weakened institutions, fragmented intelligence apparatuses, and reactive security responses have

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enabled criminal actors to operate with impunity, extracting economic rents through ransom payments and leveraging insecurity as a business model.

Scholarly discourse on Nigeria has increasingly framed kidnapping as more than isolated criminal incidents; instead, it is conceptualized as a criminal economy embedded within broader patterns of insecurity and governance failure (Wycliff, 2025). Criminal entrepreneurship manifests not only in armed groups' capacity to organize abductions but also in the systemic incentives that reward such behaviour limited prosecutions, high ransom yields, and lucrative informal networks that connect criminals to illicit markets. This convergence of economic rationality and violent enterprise underscores the need for criminological interrogation that bridges political violence scholarship with organized crime theory.

Taraba State, located in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, exemplifies how these national processes materialise at sub-national levels. Empirical studies within the state report a high prevalence of kidnapping incidents and significant socio-economic consequences for affected communities, particularly in local government areas such as Takum. The phenomenon in Taraba has been linked to both debilitating losses in productivity and household welfare, reflecting how criminal abduction has become a destabilising force that exacerbates poverty, disrupts livelihoods, and perpetuates cycles of vulnerability. Compounding the challenge is the presence of high-profile criminal networks; for example, notorious kidnap kingpins originating from Taraba have been implicated in nationwide abduction rings that bridge armed banditry and criminal syndicates, illustrating the trans-local dimensions of organised kidnapping as political violence.

Given these dynamics, Taraba State's experience offers an instructive site for criminological analysis. It captures the interplay between governance gaps such as limited state presence and weakened security enforcement and the emergence of criminal entrepreneurship that utilises kidnapping as an economic strategy. This aligns with broader global and national trends wherein states exhibiting governance deficits and socio-economic exclusion are disproportionately affected by the commodification of violence.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria has escalated from a sporadic form of criminal activity to a pervasive issue, deeply intertwined with political violence, organised crime, and criminal entrepreneurship. This transformation has been driven by various socio-political factors, most notably governance gaps, which have created a fertile environment for the proliferation of this crime. As an emerging criminal economy, kidnapping for ransom has grown to involve a wide range of perpetrators, including local bandits, transnational criminal syndicates, and even political actors who exploit the instability for financial and political leverage. While previous studies have examined kidnapping as a form of political violence, there remains a significant gap in understanding its criminological dimensions particularly in how it functions as a sustainable business model that thrives in contexts of weak governance and institutional incapacity.

In Taraba State, located in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, the problem has become particularly acute. The state has witnessed a sharp rise in kidnapping incidents, impacting communities, businesses, and government agencies. Despite efforts to combat this phenomenon, the state's governance structures remain ineffective in curbing the crime, further exacerbating the region's socio-economic instability. This governance gap, marked by weak security infrastructure, poor law enforcement, and limited economic opportunities, has allowed criminal entrepreneurs to flourish, turning kidnapping for ransom into a lucrative business that perpetuates violence and insecurity. The widespread occurrence of abductions in Taraba not only threatens the physical safety of its inhabitants but also undermines the rule of law and the state's capacity to foster economic development.

Despite the significance of the problem, there is a lack of comprehensive criminological research that addresses the nexus between political violence, governance gaps, and criminal entrepreneurship in the context of kidnapping for ransom. Existing literature often overlooks the intricacies of how these factors intersect and sustain a criminal economy. Furthermore, there is little research on how governance failures at the local level, such as those in Taraba, contribute to the escalation of kidnapping for ransom and the perpetuation of criminal networks.

This study, therefore, seeks to fill these gaps by examining how the governance failures in Nigeria, particularly in Taraba State, contribute to the rise of kidnapping for ransom as a form of political violence and organised crime. The research aims to offer a criminological perspective on the problem, focusing on the roles of governance deficits, institutional weaknesses, and criminal entrepreneurship in fostering this growing threat to public safety and political stability. By doing so, it hopes to provide a theoretical framework that can guide policy development and intervention strategies to mitigate the impact of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria.

Research questions

1. How do governance gaps in Taraba State contribute to the rise of kidnapping for ransom as a form of political violence and criminal entrepreneurship?

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2. What are the socio-economic and political consequences of kidnapping for ransom in Taraba State, and how do these consequences reinforce the perpetuation of criminal networks?

Research objectives

1. To establish the role of governance gaps in Taraba State in fostering an environment conducive to kidnapping for ransom as a form of political violence and criminal entrepreneurship.
2. To assess the socio-economic and political impact of kidnapping for ransom in Taraba State, focusing on its effect on community security, economic stability, and the growth of criminal enterprises.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Governance Gaps and the Emergence of Kidnapping for Ransom as Political Violence and Criminal Entrepreneurship

The relationship between governance gaps and the emergence of criminal enterprises has been extensively documented in criminological literature. Governance gaps, characterized by weak state institutions, poor law enforcement, corruption, and limited social services, create an environment conducive to various forms of criminal activity, including kidnapping for ransom. According to Bayley (2001), weak governance in many developing countries contributes directly to the rise of non-state actors who exploit these deficiencies to pursue political and economic objectives. Similarly, Kofi & Owusu (2021) assert that in countries with fragmented institutions, such as Nigeria, criminal groups often capitalize on poor policing and judicial inefficiencies to secure financial gains through activities like kidnapping.

In Nigeria, kidnapping for ransom is increasingly seen as a business model that thrives in the absence of effective state control. Recent research by Irele (2022) highlights how the failure of governance mechanisms in the Middle Belt region, including Taraba State, has contributed to a rise in kidnappings. He posits that as security agencies struggle to maintain control, criminal entrepreneurs step into the power vacuum, turning violence into an economic opportunity. These entrepreneurs, often linked to larger criminal syndicates, use abduction as a tool to generate revenue, manipulating insecurity for profit (Gusau, 2020).

Further, in the context of Nigeria, scholars have connected the rise of kidnapping to the lack of institutional capacity to address social and economic inequalities. Nwanze and Udo (2019) argue that regions like Taraba, with historically weak political structures and limited public investment, become prime locations for the flourishing of criminal activities such as kidnapping. As governance gaps widen, these regions become more susceptible to the exploitation of criminal networks, as local authorities struggle to maintain order.

Moreover, political violence in the form of kidnapping has evolved as a method of exerting political leverage, particularly in areas with weak governance structures. Onuoha (2021) notes that militant groups and armed bandits often use kidnapping to destabilize governments, demand ransoms, and strengthen their political bargaining power. The combination of poor governance, systemic corruption, and inadequate political oversight allows these actors to flourish unchecked.

Socio-economic and political consequences of kidnapping for ransom in taraba state

The socio-economic and political consequences of kidnapping for ransom are particularly severe in regions like Taraba State, where governance challenges intersect with the proliferation of criminal activities. According to Olanrewaju (2022), the impact of kidnapping on local economies is substantial, disrupting businesses, deterring investment, and generating fear among the population. In Taraba, as in other states affected by kidnapping, the constant threat of abduction has contributed to economic stagnation. Business owners and traders, particularly those operating in rural areas, face severe economic disruption due to frequent kidnappings, with victims often forced to pay substantial ransoms.

In addition to the economic implications, kidnapping for ransom in Taraba has exacerbated political instability. As political leaders and security officials remain either unwilling or unable to address the issue, it has fostered a sense of distrust in government institutions. Ojo and Adebayo (2021) argue that the failure of governance in curbing kidnapping contributes to the erosion of state legitimacy, as citizens lose confidence in the state's ability to provide security and maintain the rule of law. This, in turn, fuels the growth of informal and often violent power structures, which further destabilize local governance and undermine political authority.

A key consequence of kidnapping in Taraba is its effect on social cohesion. Abductions not only cause direct harm to victims and their families but also instil widespread fear within communities. As observed by Nyong and Yakubu (2020), such fear leads to social fragmentation, with communities becoming more isolated and less willing to cooperate with authorities. In many instances, communities resort to self-defensive measures, which may lead to an increase in vigilantism and the militarisation of civilian life, further complicating the security situation.

Scholars also point to the long-term consequences of kidnapping for ransom on human capital development, especially in education. The kidnapping of students, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, has disrupted the educational system in Taraba, with many parents unwilling to send their children to school for fear of abduction. The 2020 school abductions in the state provide

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a stark example of how kidnapping for ransom has become a barrier to education (Akinlolu, 2021). This disruption in education limits opportunities for future generations, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and underdevelopment.

The rise of kidnapping for ransom also has significant social implications, contributing to the disempowerment of local populations. As criminal enterprises grow in influence, they often co-opt local leaders, reducing the ability of traditional governance structures to act as mediators or maintain social order (Olawole, 2020). In the context of Taraba, where traditional institutions are already under strain, the expansion of criminal networks exacerbates the challenges of governance.

Finally, the criminalisation of kidnapping for ransom has profound legal consequences. While the Nigerian government has made efforts to pass legislation and enact policies aimed at curbing the practice, the enforcement of these laws remains weak, particularly in regions such as Taraba. Research by Adamu (2022) suggests that law enforcement agencies in these areas are either underfunded, poorly equipped, or compromised, which limits the state's ability to bring perpetrators to justice. Consequently, kidnappers and their networks continue to operate with relative impunity, perpetuating the cycle of violence and criminal activity.

Theoretical framework: rational choice theory (rat)

Rational Choice Theory (RAT) is a criminological and social theory that assumes individuals are rational actors who weigh the potential costs and benefits of their actions before making decisions. In the context of crime, RAT suggests that perpetrators engage in criminal activity when the perceived benefits outweigh the potential risks or punishments. This framework emphasizes decision-making, strategic calculation, and individual agency in explaining why people commit crimes.

APPLICATION TO KIDNAPPING FOR RANSOM

Applying RAT to kidnapping for ransom allows the study to conceptualize perpetrators as criminal entrepreneurs who carefully evaluate the economic, political, and social environment before engaging in kidnapping. For instance:

- a. **Cost-Benefit Analysis:** Kidnappers assess potential financial gains from ransom against the likelihood of capture, prosecution, or violent retaliation.
- b. **Opportunistic Behavior:** Governance gaps, corruption, and weak law enforcement reduce perceived risks, increasing the attractiveness of kidnapping as a profitable criminal venture.
- c. **Strategic Targeting:** Kidnappers select victims based on social visibility, economic status, and family networks to maximize ransom while minimizing risks.

RAT emphasizes that crime is purposeful and calculated, rather than merely the result of social disorganization or poverty. In Nigeria's context, especially in Taraba State, weak policing, political inaction, and socio-economic vulnerability create conditions that rational actors exploit for financial and strategic advantage. By framing kidnapping as rational, strategic behavior, RAT allows the study to connect individual criminal choices to broader structural and institutional weaknesses, providing a comprehensive criminological explanation.

RAT has strength in the area that it explains Criminal Decision-Making directly accounting for the planning, organization, and calculated nature of kidnapping syndicates. It links Micro and Macro Factors: as it focuses on individual decisions, it can be integrated with analysis of systemic issues like governance gaps and socio-economic inequalities; and supports policy implications by understanding the rational motivations behind kidnapping, policymakers can design interventions that increase perceived risks, reduce incentives, and disrupt the profitability of kidnapping.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the criminological dimensions of kidnapping for ransom as political violence and criminal entrepreneurship in Taraba State, Nigeria. A descriptive case study design was used, focusing on the unique governance gaps in the region and their impact on the rise of kidnapping as a profitable criminal enterprise.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and case studies. Key informants, including law enforcement officers, government officials, community leaders, victims, and criminology experts, were purposively sampled to provide insights into the issue. Documents such as government reports, media articles, and official security publications were analyzed to understand the broader context of kidnapping for ransom in Taraba. High-profile kidnapping cases were examined to illustrate the dynamics of criminal networks operating in the region.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to governance failures, criminal entrepreneurship, and the socio-economic and political consequences of kidnapping. The study adheres to ethical guidelines ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of participants, particularly victims of kidnapping.

This methodology aims to provide a detailed criminological understanding of kidnapping for ransom in Taraba State, shedding light on the governance gaps that facilitate this crime and its impact on local communities and state legitimacy.

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was conducted to examine the data collected from semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and case studies, focusing on three key themes namely governance failures, criminal entrepreneurship, and the socio-economic and political consequences of kidnapping for ransom in Taraba State, Nigeria. The analysis process involved identifying, coding, and categorizing patterns across the data, which provided insights into the ways these themes interconnect and contribute to the rise of kidnapping as a form of political violence and criminal enterprise.

1. **GOVERNANCE FAILURES:** The theme of governance failures emerged strongly throughout the analysis. Multiple respondents highlighted weaknesses in both state and local governance structures, which have contributed to the prevalence of kidnapping for ransom in Taraba State. Key governance issues identified include:
 - a. **WEAK LAW ENFORCEMENT:** Interviews with law enforcement officials and security experts revealed that the police and military in Taraba are inadequately equipped to address the increasing frequency of kidnapping incidents. The lack of resources, poor training, and low morale among security personnel were cited as major factors hindering effective intervention. One police officer mentioned, “We lack the basic tools to track and apprehend kidnappers effectively, and the state often faces budget constraints that prevent us from deploying personnel to high-risk areas.”
 - b. **CORRUPTION AND IMPUNITY:** Governance failures were also linked to corruption within both law enforcement and local government agencies. Some respondents noted that security agencies and local authorities often collude with criminals, either by failing to report crimes or directly benefiting from ransoms. This was particularly evident in interviews with community leaders who spoke of local government officials turning a blind eye to kidnapping incidents. As one community leader stated, “There are certain people in power who protect the kidnappers. The state is more focused on the big cities, and the rural areas are left vulnerable.”
 - c. **Inadequate Political Will:** Several government officials and community members expressed frustration over the lack of political will to address the problem. Despite public promises to combat kidnapping, state responses have been largely reactive rather than proactive. This gap in governance allowed criminal groups to operate with near impunity, further eroding public trust in the state's ability to govern effectively.
2. **Criminal Entrepreneurship:** The second major theme identified was criminal entrepreneurship, which involves the strategic use of kidnapping for ransom as a lucrative business model. The analysis revealed that kidnapping for ransom has evolved from isolated criminal acts to a well-organized criminal economy, with key patterns emerging:
 - a. **Organized Networks and Syndicates:** The data showed that kidnapping in Taraba is often perpetrated by criminal syndicates that operate with a high degree of organization and coordination. These groups employ sophisticated methods, such as the use of safe houses, informants, and communication networks, to plan and execute kidnappings. A criminologist noted, “Kidnappers are no longer lone wolves; they form networks that operate across multiple states, coordinating efforts and sharing intelligence.”
 - b. **Monetary Incentives and Profit Motive:** Criminals view kidnapping as a high-reward venture, often seeing it as a way to bypass traditional economic opportunities. Interviewees, particularly from the business community, reported that kidnappers target wealthy individuals, business owners, and professionals because of the high ransoms they can demand. One business owner shared, “Kidnapping for ransom is seen as a business investment. The risk is high, but the return is even higher.”
 - c. **Kidnapping as a Sustainable Business Model:** The thematic analysis showed that kidnapping for ransom has become a sustainable economic model for certain criminal groups. Many perpetrators have shifted from committing occasional crimes to engaging in frequent abductions as a primary source of income. Some interviewees described kidnappers as operating almost like business entrepreneurs, planning operations carefully and investing in the supply chain of criminal activities (e.g., weapons, vehicles, and logistics). The emergence of professional kidnappers was noted, with one expert remarking, “It’s not just criminals; it’s a thriving business where you have specialists in different areas: negotiators, transporters, and money launderers.”
3. **Socio-economic and Political Consequences:** The third key theme, socio-economic and political consequences, highlighted the widespread impact of kidnapping for ransom on the community, the economy, and political stability in Taraba State. The thematic analysis revealed the following key consequences:
 - a. **Economic Disruption:** Kidnapping for ransom has had a severe impact on the local economy. Business owners, particularly those in rural areas, reported significant financial losses due to kidnappings. One business owner explained, “I had to shut down my store for months because kidnappers threatened my family. It’s hard to do business when you’re living in fear.” The analysis also pointed out that kidnappings lead to a reduction in investment, as potential investors are deterred by the risk of abduction.
 - b. **Displacement and Loss of Human Capital:** The socio-economic impact extended to the displacement of families who had fallen victim to kidnappers. Many families reported moving to safer areas, away from the high-risk zones, leading to a loss of

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local labor and human capital. One interviewee noted, “We have seen many people leave the state because of the constant threat. Farmers, teachers, and businesspeople leave, and it is hard to get skilled workers back.”

- c. **Political Instability:** Kidnapping for ransom has contributed to political instability in Taraba State, particularly by undermining the legitimacy of state and local governments. The state’s inability to effectively curb kidnapping has led to widespread disillusionment with political leaders. Community members voiced concerns over the government’s inaction, with one respondent stating, “Our leaders don’t care about us. They just make promises, but nothing ever changes.”
- d. **Erosion of Trust in Government:** The failure to address the issue of kidnapping has led to a loss of trust in governmental institutions. Citizens no longer view the government as a reliable source of security, which has, in turn, weakened the social contract between the state and its citizens. As a community leader expressed, “People no longer trust the government. We don’t feel safe, and we don’t see any changes. The government is failing us.”

The thematic analysis of the data revealed three interrelated themes: governance failures, criminal entrepreneurship, and the socio-economic and political consequences of kidnapping for ransom in Taraba State. Governance gaps, such as weak law enforcement, corruption, and inadequate political will, have created a conducive environment for the rise of criminal entrepreneurship in the form of organized kidnapping networks. These networks, motivated by profit, have turned kidnapping into a sustainable business model. The socio-economic and political consequences of this criminal activity are profound, including economic disruption, displacement, political instability, and the erosion of public trust in the state. The findings highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to address the governance failures and criminal networks that drive kidnapping for ransom in Taraba State, and the broader implications for national security in Nigeria.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Governance failures

The weakness of law enforcement in Taraba State is a critical factor in enabling kidnapping for ransom. The findings suggest that law enforcement agencies are ill-equipped to handle the rising tide of abductions, which aligns with existing literature on the relationship between weak state institutions and organized crime. According to Bayley (2001), weak governance, particularly in developing countries, allows criminal networks to thrive, as state institutions lack the capacity to enforce laws effectively. In the case of Nigeria, studies by Irele (2022) indicate that law enforcement in rural and under-resourced regions, such as Taraba, faces significant challenges, including insufficient funding, corruption, and inadequate training, all of which undermine the ability to prevent and respond to kidnapping incidents.

Corruption and impunity within local law enforcement and government agencies were also identified as a significant enabler of kidnapping. Respondents highlighted instances where local authorities colluded with kidnappers, either by accepting bribes or deliberately ignoring abductions. This is consistent with research by Onuoha (2021), who found that corruption within Nigerian security agencies often contributes to the growth of criminal enterprises, as criminals exploit the lack of accountability in law enforcement.

The lack of political will and limited state presence further exacerbate the problem. The findings show that despite public rhetoric about tackling kidnapping, responses have been largely ineffective due to insufficient political commitment and resource allocation. Nwanze and Udo (2019) suggest that the political elite’s indifference to security issues in areas outside of major cities has allowed criminal actors to exploit these regions. Moreover, Ojo and Adebayo (2021) argue that when state governments fail to address the root causes of insecurity, such as inadequate policing and governance, it creates an environment where criminal entrepreneurship flourishes.

Criminal entrepreneurship

The findings of criminal entrepreneurship support the view that kidnapping for ransom has become a professionalized criminal enterprise, and not merely an opportunistic crime. Organized criminal networks in Taraba are increasingly sophisticated, with roles such as negotiators, transporters, and money launderers, which reflects the broader trend of criminal groups operating like business organizations. Gusau (2020) asserts that organized crime, including kidnapping for ransom, thrives in regions where governance failures allow criminals to operate without significant interference from the state. In Nigeria, criminal networks have increasingly adopted a business model approach to their operations, particularly in rural areas like Taraba, where they can exploit the relative lack of security.

The profit-driven model of kidnapping, as identified in the findings, supports the idea that for many perpetrators, kidnapping is viewed as an economic opportunity rather than a criminal act motivated solely by political aims. Wycliff (2025) notes that kidnapping in Nigeria is increasingly seen as a lucrative business, with criminals motivated by high monetary returns rather than purely political leverage. This perspective is corroborated by interviews in the study, where respondents noted that wealthy individuals and business owners are frequent targets due to the high ransoms they can demand. This reinforces the argument that, for many criminals, kidnapping has become a rational business strategy, as opposed to an impulsive criminal act.

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The emergence of sustainable criminal enterprises in kidnapping for ransom, where criminal groups plan frequent abductions and view them as a recurring source of income, reflects similar patterns observed in other countries facing organized criminal threats. Irele (2022) also highlights that the frequency of abductions in Taraba has turned the act of kidnapping into a recurrent business model for many criminal groups, making it a regular part of the criminal economy. These organized criminal groups are no longer opportunistic but operate with the sophistication of professional criminals, who plan operations and maintain well-structured hierarchies within their networks.

Socio-economic and political consequences

The economic disruption caused by kidnapping for ransom in Taraba State is profound. Business owners, particularly in rural areas, experience significant financial losses, with some forced to shut down their businesses due to repeated threats of kidnapping. This finding aligns with the work of Olanrewaju (2022), who found that kidnapping severely disrupts economic activity, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions where businesses are smaller and more vulnerable to extortion. The direct costs associated with ransom payments, along with the opportunity costs of businesses being closed or fleeing from the region, compound the economic strain on affected communities.

The displacement of human capital due to fear of kidnapping also reflects broader trends identified by Nyong and Yakubu (2020), who discuss how insecurity in the form of kidnapping can cause significant population shifts, with skilled workers moving to safer regions. This loss of human capital further exacerbates the socio-economic challenges in Taraba State, as skilled professionals, including teachers and health workers, are crucial for local development. This issue is not unique to Taraba; similar patterns have been observed in other regions of Nigeria, where displaced populations contribute to further underdevelopment (Wycliff, 2025).

The political instability and erosion of trust in government identified in the findings are significant consequences of the prevalence of kidnapping in Taraba. Respondents noted that the failure of government authorities to address the issue has led to widespread disillusionment, which is consistent with the findings of Olawole (2020). Political leaders' inability to protect their citizens from kidnapping is seen as a sign of governance failure, undermining the legitimacy of the state. This contributes to a cycle of political disengagement, where citizens feel less compelled to cooperate with or trust government institutions. According to Adamu (2022), such political instability weakens democratic processes and creates a power vacuum, which criminal networks often exploit to gain more influence over local communities.

Moreover, the erosion of social trust and the fragmentation of communities as a result of kidnapping for ransom is a widely documented consequence in conflict and high-crime areas. Studies by Osegboun and Oladipo (2023) demonstrate how kidnapping, particularly when left unchecked, can fragment communities, fostering environments of fear and self-preservation that undermine community solidarity. In Taraba, as in other conflict-prone regions, such fragmentation leads to social breakdown and greater difficulty in maintaining community resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the complex dynamics of kidnapping for ransom as a form of political violence and criminal entrepreneurship in Taraba State, Nigeria. The findings reveal that the governance gaps in the state characterized by weak law enforcement, corruption, and inadequate political will have created a fertile ground for the proliferation of organized criminal networks that utilize kidnapping as a highly profitable enterprise. These governance failures, in turn, have exacerbated the socio-economic and political instability in the region, disrupting local economies, displacing skilled human capital, and eroding public trust in government institutions.

Through the thematic analysis, this study identified key patterns of criminal entrepreneurship, illustrating how kidnapping has evolved from isolated criminal acts to a well-organized business model. The emergence of professional criminal networks, with specialized roles such as negotiators and money launderers, underscores the growing sophistication of criminal enterprises involved in kidnapping for ransom. Furthermore, the research highlights the profound socio-economic consequences of this crime, including financial losses for business owners, economic stagnation due to the threat of abduction, and the displacement of families and workers. Politically, the inability of the state to effectively address this issue has led to widespread political instability, with citizens losing confidence in the government's ability to protect them.

The study also underscores the synergistic relationship between governance failures and the growth of criminal networks. As governance gaps widen, they directly contribute to the growth and sustainability of criminal enterprises, which, in turn, further destabilize the political and economic environment. The erosion of social trust and the fragmentation of communities in the face of widespread insecurity further exacerbate the crisis, leaving the state struggling to regain control.

In conclusion, addressing the problem of kidnapping for ransom in Taraba State and by extension, in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach that tackles the root causes of governance failures while disrupting the criminal networks that profit from this violence. This includes strengthening law enforcement, ensuring better resource allocation, tackling corruption, and addressing the socio-economic factors that fuel criminal entrepreneurship. Ultimately, the findings of this study contribute to the

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growing body of criminological literature on the nexus between governance, criminal enterprises, and political violence, offering valuable insights for policymakers and security agencies seeking to address the persistent issue of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussions of this study, the following recommendations are made to address the pervasive issue of kidnapping for ransom in Taraba State, Nigeria.

1. **Strengthening Law Enforcement and Security Frameworks:** The Nigerian government should enhance law enforcement in regions like Taraba through better funding, training, and intelligence capabilities. Promoting community policing will help rebuild trust and improve information-sharing. Strengthening collaboration between local, state, and national agencies is vital for tackling cross-border criminal networks, with specialized task forces for high-profile kidnapping cases.
2. **Addressing Corruption and Governance Gaps:** The government should implement stronger anti-corruption measures within law enforcement and local governance, with independent bodies such as EFCC, ICPC, and CCB to oversee and hold corrupt officials accountable. Increased transparency and public reporting will help restore trust. Additionally, empowering local governments in Taraba to take a more active role in security management will ensure quicker responses to kidnappings and better resource allocation.
3. **Disrupting Criminal Networks and Entrepreneurship:** Law enforcement should conduct targeted operations, including covert intelligence, undercover work, and raids on kidnapping syndicates. Community-based programs should offer alternative livelihoods to reduce involvement in crime, while youth employment and vocational training can prevent future recruitment into criminal networks.
4. **Socio-Economic Development and Public Awareness:** The government should invest in economic revitalization through job creation, infrastructure development, and support for SMEs to reduce the economic incentives for kidnapping. A national public awareness campaign should educate citizens about the risks of kidnapping, encourage reporting, and promote collaboration with law enforcement to combat crime.
5. **Strengthening Legal and Judicial Frameworks:** The legal framework for kidnapping for ransom should be reformed to ensure swift justice. This includes establishing fast-track courts and specialized kidnapping units for timely trials and appropriate sentences. Deterrent penalties, such as life imprisonment or the death penalty, should be enforced. Witness protection programs must be implemented to ensure victims and witnesses feel safe to testify and cooperate with law enforcement.
6. **Supporting Victims of Kidnapping:** The government and NGOs should establish support programs for kidnapping victims, offering psychological support, financial assistance, and legal aid. Released victims should receive community reintegration programs that include counseling, educational support, and vocational training to help them recover and regain independence.

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