

THE CRIMINOLOGY OF KIDNAPPING FOR RANSOM ALONG THE ABUJA-KADUNA EXPRESSWAY

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Abstract: The Abuja-Kaduna Expressway, a critical artery connecting Nigeria's political capital with the Northern economic and political hub, has descended into a "corridor of terror," notorious for incessant kidnapping-for-ransom (KFR) activities. This paper examines the criminological dimensions of this phenomenon, analysing its evolution from opportunistic crime to a sophisticated, syndicated criminal enterprise between 2020 and 2024. Adopting a qualitative, desk-based methodology; the study synthesizes data from academic journals, security reports, and reputable media publications. The analysis is framed within a tripartite theoretical framework, integrating Merton's Anomie theory, Social Disorganization theory, and Cohen and Felson's Routine Activity Theory to provide a multi-layered explanation. The findings reveal that KFR along the expressway is driven by a confluence of factors: profound socio-economic pressures such as youth unemployment and poverty (Anomie); the erosion of state authority, institutional decay, and lack of collective efficacy in adjoining communities (Social Disorganization); and the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets (vulnerable commuters), and the absence of capable guardians in a geographically favourable environment (Routine Activity). The study dissects the kidnappers' modus operandi, highlighting their strategic use of terrain, military-style tactics, and sophisticated intelligence gathering. The March 2022 attack on the Abuja-Kaduna train serves as a pivotal case study, illustrating the escalating audacity and operational capacity of these criminal groups. The paper concludes that KFR on this route is not merely banditry but a complex security challenge symptomatic of state fragility. It recommends a paradigm shift from a purely kinetic security response to an integrated strategy that addresses the root socio-economic drivers, rebuilds state legitimacy through good governance, and fosters community-led security initiatives.

Keywords: Kidnapping for Ransom, Criminology, Abuja-Kaduna Expressway Nigeria, Banditry, Nigerian Security.

Introduction

Nigeria is confronting a complex security crisis, with kidnapping for ransom (KFR) emerging as one of its most pervasive and virulent manifestations. Once localized to the oil-rich Niger Delta region, where it was employed as a tool for political agitation, KFR has metastasized across the nation, evolving into a highly

lucrative and organized criminal industry (Omotola & Oyewole, 2023). No single stretch of road encapsulates this national affliction more starkly than the 186 kilometres Abuja-Kaduna Expressway. This highway, a vital economic and social link, has gained international infamy as a high-risk corridor where travellers journey with a palpable sense of dread. Its transformation into a hunting ground for criminal gangs represents a potent symbol of the Nigerian state's receding authority and its struggle to uphold its most fundamental responsibility: the protection of citizens' lives and property. Between 2020 and 2024, the frequency, scale, and brutality of abductions along this route escalated dramatically. The perpetrators, often generically labelled "bandits," have demonstrated increasing sophistication, organization, and impunity. Incidents range from the ambush of commercial vehicles, leading to the mass abduction of passengers, to targeted attacks on high-profile individuals. The climax of this wave of terror was the audacious attack on a passenger train running parallel to the expressway on March 28, 2022. This singular event, which resulted in multiple deaths and the abduction of over 60 passengers who were held captive for months, shattered the last vestiges of perceived safety in the corridor and underscored the gravity of the security collapse (Al Jazeera, 2022).

The consequences of this unabated criminality are profound. Economically, it has disrupted the flow of goods and services, increased transportation costs, and deterred investment. Socially, it has instilled a pervasive climate of fear, restricted freedom of movement, and eroded social trust, compelling many to abandon road travel in favour of expensive and often unavailable air or rail alternatives (Akinola, 2022). The psychological trauma inflicted on victims and their families, who are often forced to liquidate assets to pay exorbitant ransoms, leaves deep and lasting scars on the fabric of society.

Despite various security interventions ranging from the deployment of special military task forces and police squadrons to the temporary shutdown of telecommunication services the problem persists. This intractability suggests that the phenomenon is more than simple criminality; it is a complex socio-ecological problem rooted in deep-seated structural failures. Therefore, a purely tactical, security-focused approach is insufficient. A deeper, criminological analysis is required to understand the underlying drivers, motivations, and enabling factors that have turned the Abuja-Kaduna expressway into a KFR hotspot.

This study seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts of attacks to explore the "why" and "how" of this criminal enterprise. The central research question is: What criminological factors explain the prevalence and nature of kidnapping for ransom along the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway? To answer this, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To examine the socio-economic and political context that fuels KFR in Northwest Nigeria.
2. To analyse the modus operandi and organizational structure of the kidnapping gangs operating on the expressway.
3. To apply a hybrid theoretical framework of Anomie, Social Disorganisation, and Routine Activity theories to explain the persistence of KFR in this specific geographical corridor.
4. To evaluate the state's response and propose holistic, evidence-based recommendations.

By situating the problem within established criminological theories, this paper intends to contribute a nuanced understanding that can inform more effective and sustainable policy interventions to reclaim this vital national artery from the grip of terror.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Kidnapping in the Context of Northwest Nigeria's Banditry

Recent scholarship identifies the KFR epidemic in Northwest Nigeria, including Kaduna State, as a "critical discourse" on state failure (Ayuba, 2020). The criminals, often operating from vast, ungoverned forests that straddle state lines, have created a violent political economy. In this economy, human beings are the primary commodity, and ransom payments fuel the acquisition of more sophisticated weaponry, sustaining a vicious cycle of violence (Asuni, 2021). Studies have highlighted the socio-economic profile of the perpetrators,

who are often young, unemployed or underemployed pastoralist youths who feel marginalized and excluded from the state's social and economic frameworks (Mohammed, 2022). Their grievances, stemming from issues like cattle rustling, loss of grazing lands, and perceived injustices, have been co-opted and instrumentalized by criminal kingpins who orchestrate the KFR business.

Akinola (2022), specifically examines the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway, describing it as a "transportation corridor under insecurity." The study highlights how the poor condition of the road, which forces vehicles to slow down, coupled with the dense vegetation of the surrounding forests, creates an ideal operational environment for kidnappers. This geographical factor is a recurring theme, with geospatial analyses confirming a higher incidence of attacks in areas with thick vegetative cover and sharp bends, which provide natural cover for ambushes (Dangana, 2023).

Theoretical Framework While existing studies provide a rich descriptive and contextual understanding; a robust theoretical framework is necessary to explain the causal mechanisms at play. No single theory can fully capture the complexity of KFR on the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway. Therefore, this study adopts a synergistic framework that integrates three complementary criminological theories: Anomie, Social Disorganisation, and Routine Activity.

Anomie Theory Developed by Émile Durkheim and later refined by Robert Merton, anomie theory posits that crime arises from a disjunction between culturally prescribed goals and the legitimate institutional means available to achieve them (Merton, 1938). In the context of Nigeria, the society relentlessly emphasizes the cultural goal of material wealth and success. However, decades of economic mismanagement, corruption, and systemic inequality have blocked the legitimate pathways such as quality education and meaningful employment for a vast segment of the population, particularly the youth (Adebayo, 2024).

This creates a state of "anomie" or normlessness. According to Merton's typology of adaptations, individuals may resort to "innovation" accepting the cultural goal of success but rejecting the legitimate means and turning to illicit activities instead. KFR on the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway can be viewed as a stark manifestation of this innovative adaptation. For marginalized youths in communities adjoining the expressway, where state presence is minimal and opportunities are scarce, the multi-million Naira ransom payments from a single kidnapping operation offer a seemingly rational, albeit criminal, pathway to achieving the societal goal of wealth that is otherwise unattainable. The state's failure to provide viable alternatives makes the illicit economy of kidnapping an attractive proposition.

Social Disorganisation Theory Originating from the Chicago School of Sociology, this theory links crime rates to the ecological characteristics of neighbourhoods and communities (Shaw & McKay, 1942). It argues that crime is not a function of individual pathology but of a breakdown in the social institutions and structures that would otherwise inhibit it. Key indicators of social disorganisation include high population turnover, socio-economic deprivation, weak social networks, and a lack of collective efficacy and the willingness of residents to intervene for the common good.

This theory is highly applicable to the rural communities and ungoverned spaces surrounding the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway. These areas are characterized by a profound lack of state presence, dilapidated infrastructure, and widespread poverty. Traditional institutions of social control have been weakened, and the government's ability to provide basic services, from security to education, is severely compromised (Ugwuoke et al., 2020). This institutional collapse fosters an environment where criminal gangs can operate with impunity. They establish parallel structures of authority, extorting communities and using the surrounding forests as safe havens. The lack of collective efficacy, born from a deep-seated distrust of the state and fear of the heavily armed gangs, prevents the formation of effective local resistance, allowing the KFR industry to become deeply entrenched.

Routine Activity Theory This theory, proposed by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979), offers a more situational explanation for crime. It contends that for a predatory crime to occur, three elements must

converge in time and space: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. The Abuja-Kaduna Expressway presents a perfect storm where all three elements are consistently present.

- **Motivated Offenders:** As explained by anomie theory, the region has a large pool of economically marginalized and alienated youths who are motivated to engage in KFR for financial gain.
- **Suitable Targets:** The expressway provides a constant stream of suitable targets. Travelers are often perceived as being relatively affluent (able to afford cars or inter-state transport), making them valuable commodities. They are confined within their vehicles, rendering them vulnerable and easily overpowered during an ambush.
- **Absence of Capable Guardians:** This is the most critical element. The Nigerian state has demonstrably failed to act as a capable guardian on this corridor. Security presence is often sparse, inconsistent, and reactive rather than proactive. The vast, forested terrain makes effective surveillance difficult, and intelligence gathering has been largely inadequate (Akinola, 2022). This security vacuum allows offenders to operate with a low perceived risk of apprehension, making the expressway a reliable and low-risk hunting ground.

By integrating these three theories, this paper argues that KFR on the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway is a systemic problem. Anomie explains the motivation of the offenders, Social Disorganisation explains the environmental and communal breakdown that allows criminal enterprises to flourish, and Routine Activity Theory explains the specific situational dynamics that make the expressway such a frequent site of victimization.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a desk-based, non-doctrinal approach. Given the significant security risks associated with conducting primary fieldwork along the Abuja-Kaduna corridor, a methodology centred on the systematic analysis of secondary data is the most appropriate and feasible option. This approach allows for a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the criminological dimensions of KFR without exposing researchers to undue harm.

The research process involved the collection and thematic analysis of a wide range of existing data sources published between January 2020 and August 2024. This timeframe was deliberately chosen to capture the most recent escalation in KFR activities and to ensure the contemporary relevance of the findings. The data sources were systematically gathered from multiple reputable platforms and archives and can be categorized as follows; academic and scholarly literature: Peer reviewed journal articles, books, and edited volumes were sourced from academic databases such as JSTOR, ResearchGate, Google Scholar, and university repositories. Search terms included "kidnapping Nigeria," "Abuja-Kaduna Expressway security," "criminology of banditry," and combinations of the core theoretical concepts with "Nigeria." This literature provided the theoretical foundation and contextual background for the study. Security and intelligence reports; reports from national and international security think tanks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and risk analysis firms specializing in the Sahel region were analysed. These documents provided detailed insights into the operational tactics of criminal groups, conflict dynamics, and the proliferation of small arms. Reputable media publications; in-depth investigative reports, news analyses, and victim testimonies were collated from credible Nigerian and international media outlets (e.g., Premium Times, The Guardian, BBC, Al Jazeera, Reuters). Media reports were crucial for reconstructing the timelines of specific high-profile incidents, such as the 2022 train attack, and for capturing the social and economic impact of the KFR crisis.

The collected data were subjected to a process of thematic analysis. This involved identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The analysis was guided by the tripartite theoretical framework. Data were coded and categorized according to themes directly related to the core constructs of

Anomie (e.g., economic drivers, youth unemployment), Social Disorganisation (e.g., state absence, community relations, governance failure), and Routine Activity Theory (e.g., modus operandi, target selection, security response). This structured approach ensured that the analysis remained focused on the research objectives and allowed for a systematic integration of empirical evidence with theoretical explanation. By triangulating data from these diverse sources, the study sought to enhance the validity and reliability of its findings, providing a holistic and nuanced criminological account of the KFR phenomenon on the Abuja-Kaduna expressway.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the collected data reveals a clear and disturbing picture of the KFR phenomenon along the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway. It is not a series of random, disconnected acts of violence but a structured criminal market with identifiable patterns, actors, and enablers. The discussion integrates the empirical findings with the theoretical framework.

The Anatomy of an Abduction: Modus Operandi The operational tactics of the kidnapping gangs reflect a significant degree of planning, coordination, and adaptation, aligning with the principles of Routine Activity Theory where offenders exploit the absence of guardianship.

- **Strategic Location and Timing:** Attacks are not random. Gangs strategically select points on the expressway characterized by potholes, sharp bends, or inclines that force vehicles to reduce speed. As identified in geospatial studies, areas with dense forest cover close to the road are favoured, as they provide concealment for ambush and easy escape routes (Dangana, 2023). Attacks are often timed for the early morning or late afternoon when traffic is heavy, maximizing the pool of potential targets, but security patrols may be less frequent or stretched thin.
- **Military-Style Tactics:** The gangs often employ tactics that mimic military or paramilitary operations. They frequently use military-grade firearms, such as AK-47s, and have been known to don military or police uniforms to create confusion and deceive motorists into stopping at illegal checkpoints (NPF, 2022). They use a pincer movement, with one group ahead to halt traffic and another group emerging from the bush to surround the vehicles, preventing escape. This demonstrates a level of training and discipline that transcends petty criminality.
- **Intelligence and Target Selection:** While many abductions appear to be indiscriminate mass kidnappings from commercial buses, there is evidence of targeted operations against high-profile individuals. This suggests the presence of an intelligence network, possibly involving informants in urban centers or along the route who provide information about the movements of wealthy businesspeople, politicians, or their families. This aligns with the "suitable target" component of Routine Activity Theory; offenders actively seek out targets that promise the highest ransom yield.
- **Post-Abduction Process:** Once victims are abducted, they are marched deep into the forests of Kaduna, Niger, or Zamfara states. The negotiation process is a psychologically gruelling affair, conducted via mobile phone with the victims' families. The gangs have a well-defined system, often demanding that a specific family member act as the negotiator and dictating the location and method for the ransom drop-off. The entire process is professionalized, reflecting a mature criminal enterprise.

The Drivers: Anomie and Social Disorganisation in Action The constant supply of "motivated offenders" is a direct consequence of the structural failures explained by Anomie and Social Disorganisation theories.

- **Economic Desperation (Anomie):** The communities from which these kidnappers are recruited are epicentres of economic despair. Northwest Nigeria has some of the nation's highest rates of poverty

and youth unemployment (Mohammed, 2022). For a young man with no education and no job prospects, the "innovative" path of kidnapping offers a life altering economic reward. A single share from a ransom payment can exceed what he might earn in a lifetime of legitimate, but unavailable, work. The cultural pressure to achieve wealth, combined with the structural blockage of legitimate opportunities, creates an irresistible pull towards this violent economy.

- **Governance Vacuum (Social Disorganisation):** The Nigerian state is largely absent in the rural areas adjoining the expressway. This is not just a failure of security but a comprehensive failure of governance. There is a lack of schools, healthcare, roads, and any form of meaningful state support. This vacuum has been filled by criminal gangs who, in some cases, have become the de facto governing authority, levying taxes and adjudicating disputes (Asuni, 2021). This collapse of state institutions means there is no countervailing force no effective police, no trusted judiciary, no local leadership empowered to resist. The social fabric is shredded, and the "collective efficacy" required to prevent crime is non-existent. The local population is often caught between a predatory state and predatory criminals, with no one to turn to for protection.

Case Study: The Abuja-Kaduna Train Attack (March 28, 2022) This incident serves as the ultimate sketch of the convergence of all three theoretical elements and represents a significant evolution in the threat.

The attack was not a simple ambush; it was a complex, multi-stage terrorist operation. The perpetrators first used improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to bomb the railway track, immobilizing the train a tactic borrowed from insurgent groups like Boko Haram. This demonstrated a new level of technical sophistication. Following the explosion, gunmen surrounded the train and opened fire, breaching the carriages and abducting dozens of passengers (Al Jazeera, 2022).

- **Theoretical Implications:** The train attack stretched the boundaries of the "banditry" label. The use of explosives and the coordinated nature of the assault suggested collaboration between bandit groups and established terrorist organizations like Ansaru or Boko Haram splinter factions. This highlights how the socially disorganized spaces of the Northwest have become a melting pot for various violent non-state actors. From a Routine Activity perspective, the train, previously considered the only "capable guardian" against the dangers of the road, was itself neutralized and turned into a trap filled with "suitable targets." The state's failure to secure such a critical piece of infrastructure was a catastrophic lapse in guardianship. The prolonged captivity of the victims and the reported payment of massive ransoms reinforced the anomic reality that crime, on a grand enough scale, pays handsomely in Nigeria.

The State's Response: A Failure of Guardianship: The Nigerian government's response to the KFR crisis on the expressway has been overwhelmingly kinetic and reactive. The primary strategy has involved deploying military and police units under various operational banners like "Operation Puff Adder" and "Operation Thunder Strike." While these operations have occasionally resulted in the neutralization or arrest of some gang members, they have failed to sustainably secure the corridor.

The limitations of this approach are clear. The security forces are stretched thin, battling multiple insurgencies and conflicts across the country. They are often outgunned by the bandits, who possess sophisticated weaponry. Furthermore, corruption within the security agencies themselves has been alleged to undermine operations. The core issue is that a purely military response fails to address the root causes of the problem. It does nothing to alleviate the anomie driving youths to crime, nor does it repair the socially disorganized communities that serve as recruitment grounds and safe havens. It is a strategy that treats the

symptoms while ignoring the disease, a classic example of a failure to establish "capable guardianship" in a holistic sense.

Conclusion

The criminology of kidnapping for ransom along the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway is a story of state failure told through the lens of violence. It is a microcosm of Nigeria's broader security and developmental challenges. This study, through the integrated application of Anomie, Social Disorganisation, and Routine Activity theories, concludes that KFR in this corridor is not an anomaly but a logical, albeit tragic, outcome of a specific set of structural conditions. The relentless societal pressure for wealth, unmet by legitimate opportunities (Anomie), creates a vast reservoir of motivated offenders. These offenders operate within and from socially disorganized communities where the state is absent and social controls have collapsed. They prey upon the suitable targets traveling a route where the state has failed to provide capable guardianship.

The phenomenon has evolved from a low-level threat into a sophisticated, resilient, and highly profitable criminal market that poses an existential threat to the security and economic well-being of the nation. The 2022 train attack was a watershed moment, demonstrating the potential for collaboration between bandits and terrorist groups and exposing the vulnerability of critical national infrastructure. The state's reactive, security-heavy response has proven inadequate because it fails to address the underlying criminogenic structures that fuel the crisis.

To reclaim the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway and address the broader KFR epidemic, a fundamental strategic reorientation is imperative. Based on the findings of this analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recommendations:

1. **Adopt a Holistic, Socio-Economic Approach:** The long-term solution lies in tackling the root causes of anomie. The government must initiate a massive, targeted socio-economic intervention program in the rural communities of Kaduna, Niger, and Zamfara states. This should include investments in education, vocational training, agricultural support, and job creation initiatives specifically for at-risk youths. Addressing the structural drivers of crime is more sustainable than simply trying to eliminate the criminals.
2. **Re-establish State Presence and Rebuild Social Organization:** A "whole-of-government" approach is needed to reverse social disorganisation. This involves more than just deploying soldiers; it means rebuilding the social contract. It requires investing in rural infrastructure (roads, schools, clinics), restoring the functionality of local governance, and ensuring the impartial administration of justice. A visible, functional, and fair state presence is the most effective deterrent to criminality.
3. **Enhance Security through Intelligence and Technology:** While addressing root causes is paramount, immediate security improvements are necessary to enhance guardianship. The focus should shift from reactive patrols to proactive, intelligence-led operations. This requires investing in human intelligence (HUMINT) by building trust with local communities and signals intelligence (SIGINT). The deployment of surveillance technology, such as drones and CCTV, at strategic blackspots along the expressway can serve as a force multiplier and improve early warning and response capabilities.
4. **Strengthen the Criminal Justice System:** Impunity fuels crime. The government must strengthen the entire criminal justice chain—from investigation and arrest to prosecution

and conviction. Special courts could be established to expedite the trial of suspected kidnappers, and robust anti-corruption measures must be implemented within the police and judiciary to ensure that criminals cannot buy their freedom.

5. **Promote Community Policing and Local Security Initiatives:** Leveraging local knowledge is critical. Formalizing and integrating local vigilante groups (operating under strict legal and human rights frameworks) into a community policing architecture can enhance local guardianship. When communities feel they have a stake in their own security and trust the state to support them, collective efficacy can be rebuilt.

In conclusion, securing the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway is not merely a tactical challenge but a test of the Nigerian state's will and capacity to govern. Until the systemic dysfunctions that make kidnapping a rational choice for many are addressed, the corridor will remain a symbol of insecurity, and its travellers, pawns in a violent, criminal economy.

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