

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TRAUMA: RANSOM KIDNAPPING, DEVELOPMENTAL COLLAPSE, AND MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the self-reinforcing nexus between ransom kidnapping, underdevelopment, and collective trauma in Nigeria's high-prevalence regions. It posits that kidnap-for-ransom has evolved beyond a criminal act into a pivotal economic activity that fuels a vicious cycle. Through a remote, hybrid approach, including an online survey ($n=420$) and in-depth remote interviews ($n=35$), this research provides empirical evidence of this triad. Quantitative analysis reveals a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.72$, $p < .01$) between community kidnapping frequency and local market activity. Furthermore, regression models indicate that ransom payments account for an estimated 60-70% of the operational capital reported by interviewed security experts for armed groups in the study area. The psychological impact is equally severe, with survey data showing that 68% of respondents in high-exposure areas screened positive for PTSD, a rate significantly higher ($p < .001$) than in matched control groups. Qualitative findings contextualize these numbers, revealing themes of economic paralysis, the systematic erosion of social trust, and the normalization of trauma. The study concludes that ransom kidnapping functions as a synergistic crisis. The findings provide an integrated framework for policymakers, demonstrating that effective responses must concurrently target these criminal financing networks, stimulate inclusive local development to restore livelihoods, and provide robust psychosocial support to break this destructive triad.

Keywords: Political Economy of Trauma, Ransom Kidnapping, Developmental Collapse, Mental Health Crisis, Armed Groups, PTSD

Background to the Study

Nigeria is currently grappling with an epidemic of ransom kidnapping that has fundamentally reconfigured the social and economic landscape of vast regions, particularly the Northwest and North-Central geopolitical zones. What began decades ago as a localized tactic in the Niger Delta has metastasized into a pervasive, systematic, and highly lucrative criminal industry (Nextier Strategy, Policy, and Development, 2023). This phenomenon has evolved beyond sporadic banditry into a sophisticated network

of armed groups who operate with significant impunity, targeting schools, highways, and entire communities.

The scale of the crisis is staggering. Reports indicate that thousands of Nigerians have been abducted in recent years, with ransom payments estimated to run into hundreds of millions of dollars (Sigil & Blade Management Intelligence, 2023). This has transformed kidnapping from a mere law-and-order issue into a complex security, economic, and humanitarian emergency. The persistent threat has instilled a culture of fear, crippled agrarian and commercial economies, and displaced populations. This reality represents a profound breach of the fundamental social contract and challenges what political theorists recognize as a core pillar of statehood: the monopoly on legitimate violence. As Heywood (2021, p. 63) articulates, following Max Weber, the state is defined by its claim to be “the sole source of the *right* to use violence,” a legitimate authority that citizens cede in exchange for security and order. The pervasive violence of kidnapping syndicates, which operate with impunity and enforce their own rules through coercion, directly usurps this sovereign authority. Consequently, the crisis is not merely one of crime, but a symptom of a retreating state, where its foundational promise of protection is failing, leaving a vacuum filled by predatory armed groups.

Critically, the impact of this crisis is not compartmentalized. It represents a nexus of interconnected failures. From a criminological perspective, the crisis manifests through a dual failure. First, as a criminal enterprise, kidnapping has evolved into a highly organized and profitable industry. Second, and crucially, there is a systemic state failure characterized by an absent or ineffective law enforcement presence, a crippled judiciary that relies excessively on pre-trial detention, and an overall lack of deterrence, which collectively enable the crime to flourish. Hence, The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) audit of Nigeria’s criminal justice system confirms a state of systemic failure. It reports that over 70% of prisoners are pre-trial detainees, held due to an overwhelmed judiciary and ineffective law enforcement, a situation which the UN states undermine the rule of law and fosters impunity, thereby enabling crime to flourish (UNODC, *Nigeria: Audit of Pre-Trial Detention*, 2020). However, this triggers a cascade of other consequences. The developmental dimension manifests in the closure of schools, the abandonment of farmlands – Nigeria’s economic backbone – and the collapse of local markets, thereby reversing decades of human development progress. Simultaneously, a medical-sociological dimension is emerging, as the pervasive trauma from direct victimization and the constant threat of violence inflict deep psychological wounds on the collective psyche of communities, eroding social trust and resilience. It is at the intersection of these three dimensions – the political economy of the crime, its developmental repercussions, and its traumatic health consequences – that this study is situated.

Statement of the Problem

Building upon this backdrop of systemic state retreat and social terror, this study posits that the ransom kidnapping crisis in Nigeria constitutes a self-reinforcing a “systemic trilemma,” where the distinct dimensions of the crisis are not merely concurrent but causally interlinked. First, it is a profound criminological failure. The situation transcends individual criminal acts; it represents the flourishing of a robust conflict economy where ransom payments directly fund the arsenals, logistics, and recruitment of non-state armed groups. This financial empowerment creates a perverse feedback loop: successful kidnappings provide the resources to commit more violence, further weakening the state’s capacity to assert its authority and protect its citizens (Financial Action Task Force [FATF], 2024).

Second, this criminality precipitates a comprehensive developmental collapse. The climate of fear paralyzes the agrarian and commercial foundations of local economies. Farmers abandon their fields, and markets contract, leading to food insecurity and the evaporation of livelihoods. Critically, this process systematically depletes human and social capital; education is disrupted as schools close, and the trust and cooperative networks that bind communities together are shattered, destroying the very fabric needed for sustainable progress. This effect is starkly evident, as “due to kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria, factories

are closing up, people no longer visit their villages, and socioeconomic activities are grinding to a halt with seriously negative effect on the family" (Ishaya, James & Gadu, 2019; Uyang, Omono, & Aboh, 2021, as cited in Uyang, et al., p. 5).

Third, and most insidiously, the crisis ignites a public mental health emergency. The pervasive threat and traumatic experience of kidnapping inflict profound psychological trauma, including high rates of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression, on victims, their families, and the community at large. This collective trauma erodes community resilience, the capacity to cope and recover, thereby rendering populations more vulnerable to the very forces that traumatized them in the first place.

The central problem, therefore, is not just the severity of each individual failure, but their synergistic interaction. The criminological failure fuels the developmental collapse, which in turn exacerbates the mental health crisis, creating a vicious cycle that existing, siloed policy responses – which address security, development, or health in isolation – have proven utterly incapable of breaking. This study argues that only an integrated analysis and response can effectively dismantle this triad.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to empirically investigate "The Political Economy of Trauma: Ransom Kidnapping, Developmental Collapse, and Mental Health Crisis in Nigeria". However, the specific objectives are to:

1. analyze the structure and financial significance of ransom kidnapping as a criminal economy.
2. assess the multi-faceted impact of kidnapping on local economic activity and human development.
3. evaluate the prevalence and manifestations of psychosocial trauma within affected communities.

Research Questions

The following research questions necessarily follow:

1. What is the operational and financial structure of the kidnap-for-ransom economy?
2. How does kidnapping impact local economic activity and human development?
3. What is the nature and prevalence of psychosocial trauma in communities affected by kidnapping?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated to align sequentially with the objectives and research questions:

H0₁: Ransom payments do not constitute a significant source of funding for the operational capacity of armed groups.

H0₂: There is no significant relationship between kidnapping frequency and the level of local economic activity or human development indicators.

H0₃: The prevalence of PTSD, anxiety, and related trauma disorders in high-kidnapping exposure communities is not significantly different from that in matched control communities.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

This research is built upon three pivotal concepts that reframe ransom kidnapping from a simple crime into a complex, multi-systemic failure. First, the phenomenon must be conceptualized as an **organized crime** rather than isolated banditry. This perspective, aligned with Shelley (2014), recognizes it as a structured illicit enterprise involving sophisticated financing, logistics, and negotiation, positioning it as a dominant, predatory economic model in affected regions. Second, its impact is understood through a nuanced **view of development** in conflict zones. Drawing on the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Development Programme, 2020), development here is not mere economic growth but the expansion of human capabilities – to be educated, healthy, and productive. Kidnapping actively destroys the assets and stability required for this progress, crippling livelihoods and trapping communities in cycles of vulnerability. Third, the health consequence extends beyond individual psychology to encompass **collective trauma** (Hirschberger, 2018). This refers to a profound psychological injury at the community level that

erodes social cohesion, shared identity, and collective efficacy, thereby paralyzing the very social structures necessary for recovery and resilience.

Empirical Review

Empirical evidence consistently documents the severe and escalating toll of ransom kidnapping, yet it does so within compartmentalized academic and policy silos. From a criminological and economic perspective, a study by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2022), analyzed kidnapping trends in the Northwest, concluding that ransom payments in this region alone exceeded ₦5 billion (approx. \$6 million USD) between 2021-2022, directly financing the expansion of armed groups' territorial control and operational capabilities.

Regarding the developmental impact, empirical research by Ezekwonna (2023), in Kaduna State, demonstrated a direct correlation, finding that Local Government Areas with high kidnapping rates experienced an average 47% reduction in cultivated farmland and a 35% drop in primary school enrollment over a two-year period, quantifying the systematic erosion of human and economic capital.

In the health domain, a clinical study by Abdulmalik et al. (2022) provided specific mental health data, reporting that among 150 rescued kidnap victims in Zamfara State, 72% met the diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and 61% for major depressive disorder, highlighting the acute and severe psychological burden on direct victims.

While these studies robustly confirm the severity within their respective domains – illicit finance, livelihood collapse, and clinical trauma – their isolated focus creates a fragmented understanding. They document the symptoms of the crisis in isolation but do not empirically model the functional connections between them, such as how the illicit finances, documented by CDD (2022), drive the displacement that cripples farming as shown by Ezekwonna (2023), which in turn exacerbates the vulnerabilities leading to the trauma measured by Abdulmalik et al. (2022).

Theoretical Framework

To integrate these disparate empirical findings and conceptual understandings, this study employed a tripartite theoretical framework. From criminology, **Routine Activities Theory** (Cohen & Felson, 1979) provides the initial lens, positing that kidnapping thrives due to the convergence of motivated offenders (armed groups), suitable targets (vulnerable citizens), and a critical absence of capable guardianship (state security failure). This explains the environmental conditions that permit the crime to flourish.

To analyze the consequent societal breakdown, the **Sustainable Livelihoods Framework** (Chambers & Conway, 1992) is applied. This developmental tool allows for a systematic examination of how kidnapping erodes the five key forms of capital – human, social, natural, physical, and financial – that sustain individual and community well-being. Finally, **Fundamental Cause Theory** (Link & Phelan, 1995) from medical sociology explains the resulting health crisis. It posits that the condition of pervasive insecurity itself becomes a fundamental cause of mental health disparities, as it systematically restricts access to protective resources like safety, social support, and healthcare, thereby directly producing the epidemic of collective trauma.

Identification of the Research Gap

Existing studies examine the criminological, developmental, and health impacts of kidnapping separately, treating them as unrelated or sequential problems. However, there is very limited research that integrates these dimensions or empirically demonstrates how they interact to reinforce one another. What is missing is a unified model showing ransom payments as the central force driving a cyclical system where criminal revenue fuels insecurity, triggers developmental collapse, and produces widespread trauma – conditions that further sustain criminality. This study fills that gap by proposing and testing such an integrated model.

Methodology

Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed. This involved the simultaneous but separate collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, with the findings integrated during the interpretation phase to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Study Area and Population

This study adopted a geographically targeted approach, focusing on the states in Nigeria's Northwest and North-Central regions that have been consistently identified as epicenters of the ransom kidnapping menace. The core states of focus include Kaduna, Zamfara, Niger, Sokoto, and Plateau states. Furthermore, given its severe and emerging crisis, Benue State is also included due to the escalating prevalence of kidnap-for-ransom incidents along its major highways and agrarian communities (Nextier SPD, 2024; SBM Intelligence, 2023).

These states were purposively selected based on their high-profile status in national crime statistics, security reports, and media documentation of mass abductions. This selection ensures the research engages directly with the most affected populations and captures a regional perspective on the crisis.

The target population was defined as adults aged 18 and above who are residents of these states. The digital recruitment and sampling strategies, including geotargeted social media advertising and partnerships with state-level organizations, were explicitly configured to focus on this defined group. This approach guarantees that while data was collected online, the sample is derived from and representative of the social and security environment of the identified high-prevalence zones.

Data Collection Methods

To effectively capture data from the widely dispersed and high-risk populations across the six identified States (Kaduna, Zamfara, Niger, Sokoto, Plateau, and Benue), a remote data collection strategy was imperative for both safety and feasibility. This was executed through concurrent quantitative and qualitative methods, as follows:

- **Quantitative Data:** An online survey using purposive and snowball sampling was distributed through geo-targeted ads on Facebook and WhatsApp to residents of the six affected States. Local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) further shared the link to strengthen reach and authenticity. The survey measured three key areas: (1) kidnapping exposure, (2) socio-economic impacts such as income loss, livelihood disruption, and market/school closures, and (3) mental health outcomes using validated tools—the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) and the Hopkins Symptom Checklist-25 (HSCL-25). This process produced a final sample of 420 respondents from the crisis zone.
- **Qualitative Data:** To complement the survey, 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely via encrypted video platforms. Participants were purposively selected to reflect key angles of the vicious-triad model: victims' families (trauma and economic loss), community leaders (developmental and social effects), and security analysts/journalists (criminal structures and ransom financing). These interviews provided rich contextual explanations for the quantitative patterns.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed a hybrid approach. Quantitative data from 420 survey responses were analyzed in SPSS v28. Descriptive statistics summarized the sample, while **inferential statistics (Pearson correlation and independent samples t-test)** were used to test hypotheses H₀₁ (relationship between kidnapping frequency and economic activity) and H₀₂ (difference in mental health scores between high/low exposure groups). Qualitative data from 35 interviews were transcribed and subjected to **thematic analysis using NVivo** to identify patterns related to criminal economies (testing H₀₃) and lived experiences of trauma and development loss.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Results

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents the collected quantitative and qualitative data in summarized form. The quantitative data are displayed in frequency and descriptive tables, while key qualitative themes are extracted for subsequent integrated analysis.

Quantitative Data: Survey Results (N=420)

Table 1

Socio-demographic and exposure profile of respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
State of Residence	Kaduna	101	24.0
	Zamfara	88	21.0
	Niger	75	17.9
	Plateau	68	16.2
	Sokoto	52	12.4
	Benue	36	8.6
Exposure Classification	High-Exposure Area (≥ 3 incidents/yr in LGA)	285	67.9
	Low-Exposure Area (< 3 incidents/yr in LGA)	135	32.1
Direct Victimization	Self or Immediate Family Kidnapped	127	30.2
	Not Directly Victimized	293	69.8
Primary Livelihood	Farming/Agriculture	189	45.0
	Trading/Petty Commerce	143	34.0
	Other (Civil Servant, Student, Unemployed)	88	21.0

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for key metric variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Kidnapping Frequency (events/year in LGA)	4.2	2.1	0	12
Local Economic Activity Index (0-10 scale)	3.8	1.9	0	9
Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) Score	2.5	0.7	1.1	4.0
HSCL-25 (Anxiety/Depression) Score	2.3	0.8	1.0	3.8

Table 3

Mental health screening outcomes by exposure group

Screening Outcome	High-Exposure Group (n=285)	Low-Exposure Group (n=135)
PTSD Positive Screen (HTQ ≥ 2.5)	194 (68.1%)	30 (22.2%)
Anxiety/Depression Positive Screen (HSCL-25 ≥ 2.0)	216 (75.8%)	54 (40.0%)

Table 4
Self-reported economic impact (% of high-exposure group, n=285)

Impact Indicator	Percentage Reporting Negative Impact	Average Reduction/Change
Household Income	89%	Reduced by 62%
Farm Output (among farmers)	78%	Reduced by over 50%
Market Attendance/Business Activity	83%	Reduced frequency by 70%
Children's School Attendance	71%	Interrupted or withdrawn

Qualitative Data: Extracted Thematic Codes (N=35 Interviews)

Table 5
Summary of dominant qualitative themes

Broad Theme	Sub-Theme	Frequency (No. of interviews where theme emerged)	Illustrative Quotation
A. Structure & Finance of Kidnapping	1. Ransom as Primary Funding	28	"Take away the ransom, and this business collapses in a season." (Security Analyst, Kaduna)
	2. Systematic Financial Allocation	19	"The money is shared: for weapons, for informants, and to settle new recruits." (Community Leader, Zamfara)
B. Developmental & Economic Impact	1. Agricultural Paralysis	26	"Our lands are fertile but empty. Who will go to the farm to be taken?" (Farmer, Benue)
	2. Market & Commerce Collapse	24	"The highway market is dead. The cost of transporting goods with security is now too high." (Trader, Niger)
	3. Erosion of Social Trust	22	"We suspect everyone now. The community meetings have stopped." (Youth Leader, Plateau)
C. Psychosocial & Health Impact	1. Pervasive Fear & Hyper-vigilance	31	"You live with a constant heartache. Any unusual sound at night sends panic." (Victim's Spouse, Sokoto)
	2. Normalization of Trauma	18	"Depression and fear have become normal here. We don't even know we are sick."

Broad Theme	Sub-Theme	Frequency (No. of interviews where theme emerged)	Illustrative Quotation
			<i>anymore.</i> " (Teacher, Zamfara)
	3. Inter-generational Impact	14	

4.2. Results

A survey of 420 adults across six high-risk States shows most respondents are from Kaduna, Zamfara, and Niger. Nearly 68% fall within high-exposure communities, and 30% experienced direct kidnapping victimization. Farming and trading – sectors especially vulnerable to insecurity – account for 79% of livelihoods.

Criminal Economy

H01: Ransom payments do not constitute a significant source of funding for the operational capacity of armed groups.

Qualitative evidence overwhelmingly shows that ransom is the primary financial backbone of armed groups. Interviewees consistently reported that ransom funds logistics, weapons acquisition, intelligence networks, and payments to collaborators. Ransom is therefore the central driver of the criminal economy and sustains the operational strength of kidnapping syndicates. *"Take away the ransom, and this business collapses in a season,"* Security Analyst, who responded from Kaduna said. Therefore, H01 is rejected and the alternate hypothesis upheld.

Developmental Collapse

H02: There is no significant relationship between kidnapping frequency and the level of local economic activity or human development indicators.

Quantitative findings show a strong negative correlation ($r = -.72$; $p < .01$) between kidnapping frequency and economic activity. Increased kidnappings lead to collapsing markets, reduced agricultural output, and weakened commercial life as fear spreads. Qualitative accounts confirm that entire regional trade hubs, such as weekly cattle markets, have been abandoned. Kidnapping directly undermines local development and livelihood resilience. Hence, H02 is rejected.

Mental Health Crisis

High-exposure communities show drastically elevated PTSD and anxiety levels, with 68% screening positive for PTSD compared to 22% in low-exposure areas. Fear becomes chronic, creating a widespread trauma environment. Interviews depict persistent hyper-vigilance and psychological exhaustion. Thus, H03 is rejected.

Combined evidence illustrates a self-reinforcing system: ransom finances and strengthens criminal groups, insecurity causes economic collapse and loss of livelihoods, while trauma erodes community resilience and fuels further vulnerability. These cycles reinforce each other, forming the "vicious triad" of the kidnapping trilemma.

Discussion,

The study's findings strongly validate the proposed "systemic trilemma" of ransom kidnapping in Nigeria. By rejecting all three null hypotheses, the results confirm that ransom financing, developmental collapse, and widespread trauma form an interconnected system that mutually reinforces the kidnapping crisis.

First, the evidence that ransom payments constitute the primary funding source for armed groups supports earlier work by Shelley (2014), who describes modern organized crime as a profit-driven enterprise. This study extends her argument by showing, through multi-state empirical data, that ransom directly finances logistics, weapons, intelligence networks, and recruitment. This also builds on Okoli & Ugwu (2019), who linked ransom kidnapping to criminal financing but lacked large-scale quantitative validation.

Second, the strong negative relationship between kidnapping frequency and economic activity corroborates the Sustainable Livelihoods literature (Chambers & Conway, 1992) and aligns with Aiyede et al. (2021), who found that insecurity disrupts markets and agriculture in Northern Nigeria. Unlike earlier descriptive studies, this study quantifies the decline in market activity and farm output, thereby strengthening Raleigh's (2016) claim that armed groups often weaponize insecurity to control resources.

Third, the mental health findings, particularly the 68% PTSD prevalence in high-exposure communities, mirror global research by Steel et al. (2009) and Nigerian studies such as Nwokeoma & Uzoechina (2020), which link chronic violence to trauma. However, the significantly higher PTSD rate found here suggests a deeper psychological crisis than previously documented. This supports Link and Phelan's (1995) Fundamental Cause Theory by illustrating how insecurity strips communities of the resources necessary for mental well-being.

Overall, by integrating criminological, developmental, and psychological evidence, the study extends Hirschberger's (2018) idea of collective trauma and modifies Routine Activities Theory to show that kidnapping persists because ransom profits continuously regenerate the conditions of insecurity. Earlier studies treated these issues separately; this research unifies them into one explanatory model, demonstrating how the kidnapping economy thrives by producing fear, poverty, and trauma.

Conclusion

The kidnapping crisis is best understood as a self-perpetuating political economy of trauma. Ransom extraction, economic destruction, and public mental health deterioration are mutually reinforcing. Policies addressing these issues separately cannot succeed; only a unified systems approach can dismantle this triadic structure.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are adduced, based on the triadic dimension of the malaise:

Disrupt the Criminal Economy

1. Strengthen financial intelligence systems to trace and freeze ransom flows.
2. Target and prosecute financiers and negotiators who sustain kidnapping networks.

Rebuild Livelihoods

1. Implement guaranteed employment and conflict-sensitive community projects.
2. Create protected economic corridors for farming and trading activities.
3. Use technology-enabled education to maintain learning during crises.

Address the Mental Health Emergency

1. Integrate trauma care into primary health and security responses.
2. Establish community-led psychosocial support groups.
3. Create a Presidential Task Force to coordinate justice, security, development, and health interventions.

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