



FROM CRIME TO COMMERCE: EXAMINING THE EVOLUTION OF KIDNAPPING FOR RANSOM INTO A STRUCTURED CRIMINAL ECONOMY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The research examines the underlying elements that enable kidnapping for ransom (KFR) to evolve into a structured criminal economy in Nigeria and analyzes its effects on stability across the nation and surrounding regions while providing suggestions for security policy improvements. Secondary materials like books and online resources provided the data needed for this study using the Criminal Enterprise Theory. The study demonstrates that high poverty rates combined with unemployment among rural youth forces people into kidnapping because it presents a low-risk way to earn money. Corruption in judicial systems combined with ineffective law enforcement creates an environment where criminals face no consequences. The growth of banditry and insurgent activities in northern Nigeria has intensified organized kidnapping operations as groups like Boko Haram utilize them to generate income. Porous borders enable cross-border collaborations while economic disparities target wealthy people and widespread small arms availability compounds the problem. Corruption enables criminal organizations to function without consequences while the payment of ransoms has turned kidnapping for ransom into a profitable business. The collapse of traditional security structures alongside insufficient state intervention has exposed communities to risks which intensify both social conflicts and economic challenges. The current crisis has caused humanitarian disasters while breaking local economies apart and diminishing public belief in their government. To address these problems the study proposes the implementation of comprehensive policy frameworks that concentrate on poverty reduction while building law enforcement capabilities and community participation along with anti-corruption initiatives cross-border collaboration integrated security strategies and public awareness campaigns to build resilience against KFR

Keywords: Commerce, Crime, Economy, Kidnapping, and Ransom

Introduction

The transformation of kidnapping for ransom from a sporadic crime to a well-organized and profitable enterprise stands out as one of Nigeria's most pressing security issues. What began as acts driven by personal desperation or political grievances has now become a fundamental aspect of organized crime (Akogwu, Ezech, Sunday & Yildom, 2023). This evolution highlights deeper socio-economic and political dysfunctions, revealing weak governance, widespread poverty, high unemployment rates, and ineffective law enforcement (Aleyomi & Olajubu, 2024). Kidnapping for ransom has now turned into a transnational operation, benefiting both local criminals and international syndicates.

At the heart of this crisis is the diminishing ability of the state to ensure security in northern and central Nigeria (Yusufu, 2021). These areas, suffering from insurgency, banditry, and resource conflicts, have become breeding grounds for complex kidnapping networks. The crime has become indiscriminate, impacting farmers, traders, foreign nationals, and elites alike, which exacerbates insecurity, nurtures a parallel criminal economy, and disrupts social structures (Yusufu, 2021).

From July 2023 to June 2024, there were 7,568 reported abductions across 1,130 incidents nationwide, with kidnappers demanding ₦10.99 billion (\$6.87 million) but only managing to collect 9.5% of that amount (SBM Intelligence, 2024). This indicates a shift towards broader and less selective targeting. The states of Zamfara, Kaduna, and Katsina are the most affected, with 132, 113, and 119 incidents recorded, respectively, involving over 3,600 victims. These regions also report the highest civilian death tolls, with 1,056 deaths linked to kidnappings during this timeframe, averaging one fatality per incident (SBM Intelligence, 2024). Nigeria's ranking as sixth on the global kidnap index in 2018 underscores the severity of the crisis, placing it alongside countries like Venezuela and Mexico (Ezemenaka, 2018, cited in Agunbiade, 2024, p.3).

This study explores the transformation of kidnapping for ransom into a structured criminal economy and its implications for national and regional security.

Conceptual Literature

The Concept of Kidnapping for Ransom (KFR)

The definition of "kidnapping" can differ significantly depending on legal systems and cultural contexts (Asuguo, 2009, as cited in Udechukwu & Ofoke, 2024). Agunbiade (2024), referencing Dodo (2010), describes it as the act of forcibly taking or confining someone, which aligns with the broader definition provided by Mbam, Jacob, and Amira (2024) as the unlawful abduction of individuals, typically for financial or material gain. Kidnapping for ransom (KFR) is a particularly concerning form of this crime, where individuals are taken with the intent to demand money or other compensation for their release. KFR often involves coercion, threats, or violence, placing significant psychological and financial strain on the victims' families, employers, or governments (Ojo & Ojewale, 2024).

In areas suffering from instability, weak law enforcement, and socio-economic difficulties, KFR has become a major security issue. Ojo and Ojewale (2024) indicate that KFR has evolved into a complex operation with organized groups of criminals, supported by informants, arms dealers, and other accomplices. This network perpetuates kidnapping as a black market economy, undermining governance and disrupting social and economic

stability. Onuoha and Okolie-Osemene (2019) categorize kidnapping into four types-routine, invasion, highway, and insider models-highlighting how kidnappers adapt to exploit vulnerabilities in their environment. Adetutu and Iseoluwa (2024) contend that economic hardship and a lack of job opportunities have made kidnapping a normalized practice in certain communities.

The participation of neighbors and acquaintances in these crimes points to a deeper socio-cultural crisis, worsened by poverty and the decline of communal values. In the Niger Delta, Asanebi (2024) highlights how groups like MEND used kidnapping between 2006 and 2008 as a political bargaining tool, leveraging frustration-aggression and human needs theories. This perpetuated financial incentives for such activities, causing significant national security and economic challenges, including job losses and reputational damage.

Conceptualizing the Structured Criminal Economy

A structured criminal economy consists of well-structured networks engaged in illegal activities such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, kidnapping for ransom, and money laundering. These economies flourish in environments with weak governance, corruption, and socio-economic disparities, often operating across borders in ways that outstrip law enforcement capabilities. In Nigeria, the effects of organized criminal economies are especially severe in the northern region, where there is an increase in armed violence and widespread criminal behavior (Isgogo & Abdullahi, 2024).

This insecurity creates cycles of violence, undermines institutions, and hampers economic activities. These networks take advantage of governance failures and socio-economic weaknesses, further destabilizing the state and strengthening the influence of criminal groups. Such conditions instill fear, hinder development, and sustain systemic corruption, posing significant threats to national security (Yusufu, Idrees & Mamman, 2023).

Empirical Literature

Emmanuel (2024) discusses how drones can help prevent crimes like kidnapping, armed robbery, and communal violence in Nigeria. The research underscores the importance of security for national development while also addressing the challenges that security forces encounter. Utilizing data from 89 police officers, the study applies descriptive statistics and regression analysis to show that drones play a crucial role in enhancing crime prevention by providing proactive solutions to insecurity. Recommendations include the deployment of drones within security agencies, ensuring sufficient funding, training personnel, and utilizing intelligence gathered from drones. The study positions drones as vital components of Nigeria's security strategy for mapping, surveillance, and addressing insecurity.

Mohammed (2024) examines the issue of kidnapping and hostage-taking in Kaduna Metropolis through the lens of social learning theory, which connects learned behaviors to criminal activities. The study, based on a survey of 384 participants, indicates that kidnapping is a common occurrence, with many respondents noting weekly incidents in their neighborhoods. Victims of these crimes include men, women, and children, with certain areas of Kaduna being particularly vulnerable. The research highlights socio-economic factors, such as unemployment, as significant contributors to this problem. To address these issues, the study suggests establishing a dedicated anti-kidnapping agency, implementing government-led job creation programs, and promoting skills development initiatives to steer youth away from criminal behavior.

Ladan, Nadhrah, and Muhammed (2024) explore the widespread problem of kidnapping in Abuja and its impact on society. They identify several key factors contributing to this issue, including unemployment, poverty, corruption, weak governance, and socio-economic disparities. By applying Merton's theory of anomie, the study suggests that the erosion of societal norms is a driving force behind the rise in kidnapping. Through a qualitative approach, the research reveals the extensive effects of kidnapping on Nigeria's economy, security, tourism, and democratic processes. The authors propose several solutions, such as enhancing the judiciary, creating jobs, implementing community policing, promoting value reorientation, and fostering collaboration among security agencies. They also emphasize the importance of involving traditional leaders and raising public awareness through campaigns.

Gap in Literature

While studies have examined the increase of KFR in Nigeria, there is a lack of research on how it has evolved into a structured criminal economy. The development of KFR into a network-based industry with intricate logistical operations has not been thoroughly investigated. Furthermore, a more in-depth analysis is required to understand the economic factors, motivations, and institutional vulnerabilities that facilitate this transformation and its effects on national and regional security.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Criminal Enterprise Theory (CET) as its analytical framework. The theory was developed and popularized by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling in their influential work on crime and policing. While they did not create the theory in a strict sense, their research and writings, especially regarding The Broken Windows Theory (1982), played a significant role in shaping ideas about organized criminal enterprises.

Assumptions of CET

- **Organizational Structure:** CET suggests that criminal enterprises resemble legitimate businesses in their hierarchical structures, featuring clear divisions of labor and defined roles. The study shows that Nigerian kidnapping syndicates are well-organized, with leaders, intermediaries, and foot soldiers each fulfilling specific functions. This structure allows for efficient operations across different regions and complicates law enforcement's efforts to dismantle these groups. This professional approach supports ongoing operations, enabling kidnapping for ransom to thrive as a resilient criminal economy despite security measures.
- **Economic Motivation:** Criminal enterprises are mainly driven by the pursuit of profit, especially in environments where legitimate economic opportunities are limited. The study points out that factors like poverty, unemployment, and the absence of viable options are significant contributors to kidnapping for ransom (KFR) in Nigeria. Economic struggles, particularly in rural regions, lead individuals to see kidnapping as a low-risk, high-reward option. Victims are viewed as commodities, and abductions become a means to achieve financial gain. This perspective aligns with the Criminal Economic Theory (CET), which portrays criminal activities as economic ventures that take advantage of systemic socio-economic weaknesses.
- **Strategic Planning:** CET emphasizes that strategic planning is crucial for maximizing profits and minimizing risks. The study underscores the careful planning that goes into KFR operations, from choosing high-value targets to skillfully negotiating ransoms. Kidnapping groups focus on wealthy individuals or families, using logistical strategies to carry out abductions and avoid detection through coordinated efforts. This organized approach illustrates how KFR has transformed into a complex and sustainable economic activity, reflecting CET's idea that criminal enterprises adopt business-like strategies.
- **Internal and External Controls:** The concept of CET highlights how crucial internal discipline and external relationships are for maintaining operational stability. The research indicates that kidnapping syndicates implement strict internal rules and maintain discipline among their members, which helps ensure their operations run smoothly. On the outside, corrupt law enforcement and political figures offer protection, allowing these syndicates to function without fear of repercussions. These internal and external mechanisms strengthen the resilience of kidnapping for ransom (KFR) groups, enabling them to avoid detection and legal action. The study points out that corruption within the judicial and security systems contributes to the expansion of this criminal economy.
- **Adaptability and Innovation:** A fundamental principle of CET is that successful criminal organizations must adapt to their changing environments. The research reveals that Nigerian kidnapping syndicates have shown impressive adaptability by moving their operations from urban to rural areas to escape heightened security measures in cities. They also modify ransom demands according to the socio-economic status of their victims and utilize technology, such as encrypted communication, to negotiate and avoid law enforcement. This ability to adapt ensures their ongoing survival and supports CET's perspective of criminal enterprises as dynamic and innovative.

- **Profit Maximization:** Criminal enterprises strive to boost profits while keeping costs and risks low. The study shows that kidnapping syndicates in Nigeria implement distinct profit-maximization strategies, focusing on affluent individuals and taking advantage of inadequate security measures to lower operational expenses. Corruption plays a role in reducing risks, as corrupt officials protect these syndicates from facing consequences. Ransom payments have turned into a significant source of income, transforming KFR into a profitable industry. The syndicates' emphasis on profit maximization illustrates CET's claim that criminal organizations take advantage of systemic vulnerabilities to enhance their financial returns.
- **Specialization:** CET highlights the importance of specialization in improving operational efficiency within criminal organizations. The study reveals a notable level of specialization among kidnapping syndicates, with members assigned specific tasks, such as identifying potential victims, carrying out abductions, negotiating ransoms, or handling finances. This division of labor boosts operational efficiency, contributing to the overall success and durability of the syndicate. The organized specialization within these groups complicates law enforcement efforts to disrupt their operations, further reinforcing CET's portrayal of organized crime as a business-like structure.

The application of CET offers a solid framework for understanding how kidnapping for ransom (KFR) in Nigeria has shifted from being an opportunistic crime to a more organized criminal economy. Factors such as hierarchical structures, profit-driven motives, strategic planning, adaptability, and both internal and external controls have allowed kidnapping syndicates to flourish. Additionally, socio-economic vulnerabilities, ineffective law enforcement, and systemic corruption have further contributed to this change. This transformation carries significant implications for Nigeria's national and regional security, economy, and governance. By taking advantage of socio-economic disparities and institutional weaknesses, KFR syndicates have created a criminal economy with extensive repercussions.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology grounded in secondary data analysis to critically examine the transformation of kidnapping for ransom into a structured criminal economy in Nigeria. Ethical considerations centered on the rigorous citation of sources and the ethical use of secondary data, ensuring the preservation of academic integrity.

Results and Discussion

This section provides an analysis of the study's results and offers a critical discussion of the findings.

Socio-Economic Drivers of KFR

- **High Levels of Poverty and Unemployment:** The socio-economic landscape in Nigeria has played a significant role in the rise of kidnapping for ransom (KFR). Research conducted by Yusufu, Idrees, and Mamman (2023), Agunbiade (2024), and Ladan, Nadhrah, and Muhammed (2024) indicates a strong link between increasing poverty rates, high unemployment-particularly in rural areas-and the growing trend of engaging in criminal activities such as kidnapping. Factors like economic mismanagement, ineffective governance, and unequal distribution of resources have left many people, especially the youth, susceptible to the influence of criminal groups. This economic marginalization creates an environment where individuals may view kidnapping as a "low-risk" yet profitable option. Akogwu et al. (2023) highlight unemployment as a key factor driving this trend, aligning with Criminal Enterprise Theory (CET), which connects socio-economic challenges, inadequate law enforcement, and systemic corruption to the rise of organized crime.
- **Weak law enforcement and judicial corruption:** This plays a significant role in the rise of KFR in Nigeria. According to Mbam, Jacob, and Amiara (2024), the inefficiencies, corruption, and lack of resources within the criminal justice system foster an environment that allows KFR perpetrators to operate freely. Governance issues, along with failures in political and security institutions, hinder effective crime prevention (Ladan et al., 2024). Yusufu and Otaida (2024) point out that law enforcement agencies suffer from underfunding and inadequate training, which, combined with their vulnerability to bribery, emboldens criminals. As a result, KFR flourishes in a climate of impunity, leading to a cycle of insecurity, economic decline, and the strengthening of organized crime. CET illustrates how these institutional weaknesses further entrench the criminal economy, worsening socio-economic decline and insecurity.
- **Insurgency and banditry:** These have become significant drivers of kidnapping for ransom (KFR) in northern Nigeria. Groups like Boko Haram have adopted KFR as a means to generate income and exert political influence (Ilevbare & Yusufu, 2020). The security vulnerabilities in these northern areas enable widespread abductions, which serve both financial and strategic purposes. According to Agunbiade (2024), KFR is a complex issue with socio-economic, political, and cultural aspects that contribute to the destabilization of Nigerian society. The rise of banditry in the northwest has worsened the situation, as these criminals increasingly turn to mass kidnappings to extort ransoms. This connection between insurgency and organized crime highlights the theoretical insights of the Conflict and Economic Theory (CET), which explains how socio-economic and political elements work together to perpetuate KFR.
- **Porous Borders and Cross-Border Collaborations:** Nigeria's porous borders play a significant role in the transnational aspect of Kidnapping for Ransom (KFR), allowing cross-border criminal networks to thrive. The insufficient monitoring of borders with neighboring countries such as Niger, Chad, and Cameroon makes it easier for arms smuggling and collaboration among criminal groups, which complicates efforts to combat KFR (Adamu & Yusufu, 2020; Ladan et al., 2024). The spread of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) empowers these criminal enterprises, resulting in

increasingly bold and violent kidnappings (Abdulrahman & Yusufu, 2024). CET underscores how these transnational factors and weak border controls sustain KFR, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive regional security strategies.

- **Economic Disparities and Targeting of Wealthy Individuals:** Economic inequality has played a significant role in shaping the dynamics of KFR. Yusufu, Idrees, and Mamman (2023) highlight that kidnappers are increasingly focusing on wealthy individuals, such as politicians and business magnates, while also targeting those who are economically vulnerable. This uneven distribution of wealth encourages kidnappers to take advantage of the financial struggles faced by victims' families, making ransom payments a key aspect of Nigeria's criminal economy. The commercialization of kidnappings, with ransom demands often soaring into millions of naira, illustrates how criminal enterprises adapt their strategies to exploit socio-economic disparities, as discussed within CET
- **Corruption and the Entrenchment of KFR:** In Nigeria, corruption within political and security institutions has allowed KFR to become deeply rooted. Corrupt officials often turn a blind eye to criminal activities, accepting bribes in return (Yusufu, 2022a; Mbam et al., 2024). This complicity weakens law enforcement efforts, creating a situation where KFR syndicates can operate without fear of repercussions. Yusufu and Ilevbare (2022) highlight how systemic corruption continues to fuel this crisis, which aligns with CET's view on how corruption contributes to organized crime. By eroding effective governance, corruption not only maintains the profitability of KFR but also exacerbates instability in Nigerian society.

Implications KFR for National and Regional Security

The implications KFR in Nigeria are significant, impacting national security, regional stability, and socio-economic structures (Aleyomi & Olajubu, 2024). KFR has become a major destabilizing force in conflict-affected areas, especially in northern Nigeria, leading to humanitarian crises characterized by mass displacement, economic decline, and social fragmentation. Families escaping abductions have overwhelmed internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, while agricultural activities vital for rural livelihoods suffer due to insecurity (Omoraka, Ogoh, & Yusufu, 2022; Yusufu, Odaudu & Ilevbare, 2023). This disruption worsens poverty and increases vulnerability to exploitation, deepening socio-economic divides (Abdulrahman & Yusufu, 2024). KFR also erodes trust in state institutions.

Yusufu (2022b) points out that when the state fails to provide security, its legitimacy diminishes, leading to citizen alienation. The state's inability to effectively tackle KFR allows criminal networks and insurgent groups to exploit power vacuums, undermining governance and escalating violence. This situation weakens the social contract and destabilizes the foundations of democratic governance. The transnational aspects further complicate Nigeria's security situation. Porous borders enable kidnappers to move freely, facilitate arms trafficking, and allow ransom payments, spreading insecurity to neighboring

countries like Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. This regional spillover complicates security efforts, as weak institutional frameworks, corruption, and conflicting national interests impede cooperation. As a result, KFR exacerbates insecurity throughout West Africa, entrenching poverty and hindering development.

Long-term effects include changes in local power dynamics as criminal syndicates gain power, displacing both state and traditional authorities. Communities increasingly turn to criminal actors for protection and economic opportunities, further diminishing state legitimacy. Yusufu and Ilevbare (2021) caution that if organized crime goes unchecked, it can hasten the decline of the state, leading to greater instability and an increased risk of state collapse. Criminal Enterprise Theory points out that KFR acts as a catalyst for humanitarian crises, economic disparities, institutional distrust, and regional instability, while also creating an environment where organized crime and alternative governance structures can flourish throughout West Africa.

Conclusion

This study explores how KFR has evolved into an organized criminal economy in Nigeria and the effects it has on both national and regional stability. KFR is a reflection of significant socio-economic, political, and institutional issues, such as widespread rural poverty, high unemployment rates, ineffective law enforcement, and corruption within the judiciary. These factors have turned kidnapping into a low-risk, high-reward venture. Insurgent groups, especially in northern Nigeria, have institutionalized KFR, with organizations like Boko Haram leveraging it for financial gain.

The country's porous borders enable cross-border criminal partnerships, while rampant corruption and the availability of small arms allow criminal syndicates to operate without fear of repercussions. KFR disrupts local economies, worsens humanitarian crises, and undermines social cohesion. Communities are left vulnerable due to insufficient state responses, which further intensifies social tensions and economic instability. The human and economic costs are staggering, posing a significant threat not only to Nigeria's national security but also to the stability of the broader West African region.

Recommendations

To tackle the challenges arising from the shift of KFR into a criminal economy, the following recommendations are suggested:

- **Poverty Alleviation and Job Creation:** Implementing effective strategies to reduce poverty, particularly in rural areas, is vital. Prioritizing investment in education, vocational training, and job opportunities for young people can provide them with alternatives to engaging in criminal activities.

- **Strengthening Law Enforcement and Judicial Capacity:** It is essential to improve the capabilities of law enforcement agencies by providing better training, resources, and systems for sharing intelligence. Reforms in the judicial system are needed to ensure that offenders are prosecuted and networks of impunity are dismantled.
- **Anti-Corruption Measures:** A unified effort to fight corruption at all levels is crucial. Anti-corruption agencies should be empowered to target officials and law enforcement personnel who are complicit in facilitating or profiting from KFR activities.
- **Community Engagement and Local Security Initiatives:** Enhancing community-based security structures can bolster local resilience against criminal activities. Community leaders and civil society organizations should play an active role in the fight against kidnapping and other forms of organized crime.
- **Cross-Border Cooperation:** To address the transnational nature of KFR, Nigeria needs to enhance collaboration with neighboring countries to effectively monitor and secure its borders, disrupt cross-border criminal networks, and prevent arms smuggling.
- **Integrated Security Approaches:** A comprehensive security strategy that combines military, law enforcement, and intelligence efforts is essential to tackle both insurgency and organized crime, including KFR. This approach should be supported by thorough data analysis to adjust strategies in response to the changing criminal environment.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Nationwide campaigns should be initiated to inform the public about the risks associated with KFR and to foster resilience through community engagement and reporting systems. Additionally, ransom payment policies should be reassessed to diminish the economic incentives that fuel this crime.

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