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# The organised crime of kidnapping in Nigeria: a quantitative study of the factors influencing its severity

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The extant literature in the social sciences often employs qualitative methods to capture the contextual nuances of the nature, manifestations, and impacts of issues of importance today. This is the case for studies looking at kidnapping in Nigeria, where perception-based surveys are often neglected. We argue that these qualitative approaches alone are inadequate for thoroughly comprehending the structural factors and public opinions that explain the occurrence and severity of kidnapping in Nigeria. This study extensively analyses the seriousness of kidnapping as a critical security issue in contemporary Nigeria, seeking to explore the factors contributing to this phenomenon through a quantitative survey based on citizen perceptions, as they endure the impacts of kidnapping within their communities. Using logistic regression, this study examined the 2022 Afrobarometer data to determine the factors influencing kidnapping in Nigeria. The findings indicate that, as the frequency of kidnapping is rising, poor police handling of kidnapping cases, worsening economic conditions, community safety concerns, ethnic marginalization, and low ethnic trust significantly predict the perceived severity of kidnapping in Nigeria. In contrast, perceptions of government handling crime (although associated considerably at the bivariate level) and corruption were not statistically significant in the multivariate analysis. Highlighting the severity of kidnapping in Nigeria contributes to the body of knowledge in security studies, development studies, and governance by illustrating how economic hardship, institutional failure, and social crisis influence the frequency and perceived seriousness of kidnapping. It points to the need for more collaborative, networked governance that puts people at the centre of policies and actions to tackle kidnapping in Nigeria.

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## Introduction

Kidnapping as a criminal behaviour has been a persistent global social issue, exhibiting varying degrees and intensities across different geographies. Its manifestation occurs in both less and more fragile countries (The Global Economy, 2024), posing a transnational security challenge, particularly in the latter, where porous border regimes make them more vulnerable (Ojo et al., 2024). Countries that have faced the issue of kidnapping include Mexico, Pakistan, Canada, Germany, Russia, the United States of America, Iraq, India, the Philippines, Venezuela, Cameroon, and Nigeria, among others. Notably, Nigeria's recent history has been marked by various security threats that undermine societal civility, and the state has faced the monumental task of securing lives and property within its borders (Oyewole, 2016; Onuoha, 2019; Ojo, 2020; Adenuga, 2024).

This study explores the growing trend of kidnapping in Nigeria through a quantitative lens. Prior research, which focuses on elite narratives and structural explanations but rarely captures how ordinary Nigerians understand kidnapping, has found that kidnapping has become an effect of other forms of organized crime, such as terrorism or banditry, in addition to being a standalone crime of its own (Osumah and Aghedo, 2011; Onuoha and Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Ojo et al., 2024; Ojo and Ojewale, 2024). The varying toll that kidnapping imposes on the lived experiences of victims and other people in environments where it is commonplace, such as Nigeria, has shown that the phenomenon extends beyond isolated criminal acts. It reflects deeper structural issues tied to governance failures, socioeconomic inequality, and insecurity (Tade et al., 2019). These need to be addressed.

The growing epidemic of kidnapping in Nigeria, driven by various factors including political, economic, sociological, and psychological factors, has led to a heightened multidisciplinary approach to understanding the rise in its political economy (Omotola and Oyewole, 2024). This has spurred a significant increase in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research across various domains within the social sciences, as well as the development of transdisciplinary frameworks for deeper understanding and policy to tame the tide. For example, Morewitz (2019) explores how governments, paramilitary groups, and terrorist organisations use kidnappings as part of their foreign and domestic policies. Consequently, employing various social science research techniques in public health, the author underscored how these entities exploit kidnapping to achieve their psychological, social, religious, and political objectives. Similarly, the recent edited volume by Omotola and Oyewole (2024) presents various disciplinary perspectives from scholars across political science, international relations, business management, African studies, and geography. Omotola and Oyewole's (2024) qualitative book delves into the political and socioeconomic dimensions of kidnapping in Nigeria, including its causes, manifestations, and repercussions. It also examines various control measures implemented at different governance levels and assesses their effectiveness within the broader academic, public, and policy discussions.

Interdisciplinary studies, such as the 2009 study by Alexander and Klein, highlight the concerted endeavours to comprehend both the immediate and enduring consequences of kidnapping and hostage-taking, necessitating the insights of mental health experts regarding strategic and clinical approaches (Alexander and Klein, 2009). With a focus on media, the German television station Deutsche Welle, through its series, '77 percent DW Street Debate,' brought together a diverse group of individuals to discuss kidnapping in Nigeria (Deutsche Welle, 2024). This study takes a quantitative approach to complement extant scholarship on kidnapping in Nigeria.

## Nigeria and kidnapping: on the increase

Despite Nigeria's wealth of human and natural resources, there has been an alarming increase in the kidnapping of people, regardless of social status, by non-state actors who are ideologically averse to the current formal political arrangement. Ojo et al. (2024) argued that, in contrast to previous trends where the wealthy were the primary targets of criminal syndicates, kidnapping in Nigeria now impacts individuals across all socioeconomic classes, including the rich, middle-class, employed, unemployed, and impoverished. The inability of security agencies to thwart kidnappings in Nigeria or apprehend perpetrators in various cases has resulted in significant frustration and a deterioration of public confidence in the government. This issue has heightened security concerns, particularly amid escalating internal security challenges since 1999, when Nigeria returned to constitutional and civil rule (Okolie-Osemene, 2019).

The situation of broad insecurity and kidnapping reveals a paradox in which a resource-rich African country like Nigeria continues to face deep societal inequality and rising expectations for inclusive democratic governance and equitable resource distribution, particularly efforts to engage youth and prevent their exploitation by criminal gangs. This scenario suggests a complex interplay of post-/neo-colonial contradictions, state failures and weaknesses, neo-/patrimonialism, democratic inconsistencies, power struggles, and competition for limited resources (Omotola & Oyewole, 2024, p.1). It also encompasses the dynamics of costs and benefits, frustration and aggression, and greed and grievances, among various pertinent perspectives from the study of the political economy of insecurity. However, other research has pointed out that this kidnapping in Nigeria has persisted even during the military era (Ikezie, 2023).

The gradual transition from collective insecurity, exemplified by the secessionist movement during the Nigerian civil war, to the rise of kidnapping and other social crimes following the restoration of democracy highlights the interconnectedness of these phenomena. Following the abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls (276 girls who were abducted by the extremist group Boko Haram from Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Nigeria, in April 2014, becoming a global symbol of insecurity and the struggle for girls' education), which ignited the internationally acknowledged #BringBackOurGirls campaign, Nigeria has experienced a continuous increase in kidnapping occurrences. This trend has fuelled the emergence of a lucrative underground economy, as the abduction of students and citizens across rural and urban areas has become alarmingly routine. In response, successive governments have introduced various strategies, including changes in military leadership and the establishment of joint task forces. However, these efforts have proven largely ineffective (Adenuga, 2024).

Existing literature has shown a qualitative research design bias to the phenomenon of kidnapping in Nigeria (Afinotan & Ojatorotu, 2009; Akpan, 2010; Akinbi, 2012; Oyewole, 2016; Alumona et al., 2019; Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Campbell, 2020; Ojo et al., 2024; Omotola & Oyewole, 2024; Oyewole & Ekpo, 2024), predominantly emphasizing narratives, motives, and political-criminal dynamics, rather than systematically assessing public perceptions on the matter. This highlights the necessity for this present study's quantitative contribution to elucidating how citizens interpret and experience the escalation of kidnapping in Nigeria. Even quantitative analysis, which focuses on large-scale econometric analyses of ransom paid in exchange for the release of victims, as conducted by think tanks such as SB Morgen (SBM) Intelligence, has overlooked surveys of what larger numbers of Nigerians (larger samples) think about the issue. The existing evidence in the literature continues to be intricate and

debated, mainly because of its qualitative methodology, which has frequently struggled to represent the various factors contributing to kidnapping in Nigeria statistically. For example, among recent studies of kidnapping in Nigeria, Omotosho and Oyewale (2024) edited volume while providing a comprehensive overview of the evolution of the relationship between ungoverned spaces (insurgent and non-insurgent criminalities) and kidnapping in Nigeria, the emerging role of gender and transnationalism, responses of non-state actors to kidnapping as well as negotiations in hostage crisis management, quantitative computations or statistical tools were rarely utilized in any of the chapter for an attempt at a more objective generalization of their findings.

In any case, all the book's findings show how security breaches, economic conditions, and governance affect kidnapping in Nigeria. Against this backdrop, we acknowledge the paucity of large-sample, perception-based statistical studies examining the factors that drive kidnapping in Nigeria. Hence, this study asks the research question: To what extent do perceptions of economic hardship, institutional performance, and governance explain the severity of kidnapping in Nigeria? It aims to investigate the factors driving kidnapping in Nigeria through a quantitative lens using a citizen-perception-based survey. Citizens are at the centre of the trend of kidnapping as they are both the subject and object of kidnapping, and they live and experience the burden of this form of insecurity in their local communities.

This paper will proceed in six parts sequentially as stated below:

1. Literature review
2. Research methodology.
3. Result of the study.
4. Discussion
5. Implications
6. Conclusion.

## Literature review

**Definition and locational disparity of kidnapping.** The term kidnapping can be traced to 'kid,' which refers to a 'child,' while 'nap' or 'nab' signifies 'to snatch,' adopting its modern European connotation. While this is the etymological understanding of the term, its application in this study will include adult abduction or kidnapping, which is rampant in Nigeria. Kidnapping, as defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC n.d.), is an unlawfully detaining a person or persons against their will (including through the use of force; threat; fraud or enticement) to demand for their liberation an illicit gain or any other economic gain or other material benefit; or to oblige someone to do or not to do something.

Oyewole (2016) lays out that the act of kidnapping is defined in Section 364, Chapter 77 of the Nigerian Criminal Code Act of 1990 as "unlawfully imprisonment of any person in such a manner as to prevent him [or her] from applying to a court for his [or her] release or from discovering to any other person the place where he [or she] is imprisoned, or in such a manner as to prevent any person entitled to have access to him [or her] from discovering the place where he [or she] is imprisoned." Consequently, it can be characterized as illegal seizures, detentions, and the deprivation of an individual's liberty against their will (Oyewole, 2016). In this paper, we adopt the Nigerian statutory definition to guide the understanding of kidnapping.

Kidnapping remains a critical global security concern, exhibiting considerable differences in its occurrence among various nations. In 2017, the global average was recorded at 1.8 kidnappings per 100,000 individuals, underscoring the pervasive nature of this issue and its irregular distribution across different

regions. For example, Belgium reported the highest incidence at 10.3 per 100,000 individuals, while Bermuda noted no cases, highlighting the varied national contexts in which kidnapping occurs (The Global Economy, 2024).

**A brief history of kidnapping and its dimensions.** Nonetheless, obstacles persist in pursuing a comprehensive methodological history, as diverse scholars employ distinct genealogies and geographies, given that kidnapping is a human phenomenon that affects individuals globally. The history of kidnapping for ransom can be traced from Greek mythology through medieval bandit activities to the end of the 19th century (Moorehead, 1980). Academic discourse indicates that ancient writings refer to the abduction of Abram's nephew (Lot), Julius Caesar, and Richard the Lionheart. During the medieval era, knights showcased their noble lineage via heraldic symbols (Alexander & Klein, 2009). Scholars have reported that in medieval times, knights showcased their noble heritage through heraldic devices to enhance their perceived market value and improve their chances of survival through ransom rather than execution during captivity. Additionally, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, children were taken from their families for 'export' to the North American colonies as servants (Alexander & Klein, 2009).

Its evolution from the 1970s to the present, when kidnapping moved from mere symbolism to a more transactional trade that relies purely on monetary benefits, is instructive of the dynamism that kidnappers follow the trends of global economic downturns. In addition to the material benefits for the kidnapper(s), international media publicity plays a significant role in the broader psychological difficulties experienced by both victims and perpetrators during and after the event (Alexander & Klein, 2009). The 1973 Norrmalmstorg robbery became the first crime in Sweden to be covered by live television, associated with the psychological term 'Stockholm syndrome,' describing a situation where hostages develop positive feelings towards their captors.

Kidnappings can take place within domestic settings as well as in broader societal contexts, especially concerning large-scale cases, which is the primary focus of the current investigation. Kidnappings involving ex-partners, partners, and family members frequently result in police intervention (Bartol, 2002; Fitzgerald and People, 2006). In certain instances, former partners may hold their victim hostage (Lipsedge, 2004). Hostage-taking may manifest as hostage barricades or simple sieges (Morewitz, 2019). Offenders may abduct partners and spouses for instrumental reasons, while in hostage barricade situations, they may kidnap partners or ex-partners to express frustration and anger (Morewitz, 2019; Lipsedge, 2004). This demonstrates that the motivations behind small-scale kidnappings mirror those of large-scale kidnappings conducted by organized groups.

**Motivations of kidnapping in Africa and Nigeria.** Studies have also shown that kidnapping serves an economic function, financing the operations of gangs and organized crime groups that engage in transnational violence in developing regions like sub-Saharan Africa (Ojo, 2020; Olaniyan, 2024; Ojewale, 2024; Ojo et al., 2024). The occurrences of kidnapping appear to be a significant social crime. It has been present since ancient times, as no individual is immune to being kidnapped for various reasons. In the African context, Oyewole and Onuoha (2021) highlight various strategic motives driving the increase of kidnapping in Nigeria, especially by terrorist organizations and criminal networks. The factors encompass their capacity to attract public interest, serve as a bargaining tool in prisoner exchanges, secure broader concessions, raise funds through ransom, and reveal vulnerabilities within the state.

Kidnapping in Nigeria has been a part of most Nigerian communities' lives from the pre-colonial periods to the present (Odoemene, 2024). During the pre-colonial period, the practice of kidnapping served as a method for obtaining individuals to fulfil various demands, such as for sacrificial purposes and enslavement. The pre-colonial era exemplified the grim reality of enslavement as Africans were kidnapped at an alarming rate for export overseas to work in plantations of the 'new world' (Odoemene, 2016; Ikezue, 2023; Odoemene, 2024). In the colonial era, there was a deliberate initiative by colonialists to suppress and extinguish kidnapping, leading to the prohibition of both human sacrifice and the slave trade (Odoemene, 2024). This circumstance compelled the concealment of kidnapping for human sacrifice and the slave trade. They concurrently flourished in secrecy in the post-colonial era, eluding public awareness, and grew due to the individualism fostered by the political economy of capitalism (Odoemene, 2024). The efforts of colonial and post-colonial governments to eliminate societal vices associated with kidnapping have inadvertently contributed to the ongoing existence of an underground political economy characterised by transnational structures and actors, often operating in secrecy (Ojo & Ojewale, 2024).

Research indicates that, in addition to terrorism, armed banditry, clashes between farmers and herders, secessionist movements, and economic decline, the harsh impact of kidnapping as a criminal tactic is increasingly common among various criminal groups, including militias, gangs, ritualists, rebels, and terrorists in Nigeria, each pursuing different goals (Oyewole, 2016; Alumona et al., 2019; Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Oyewole & Ekpo, 2024). Research indicates that kidnapping can escalate into a range of additional criminal activities, such as physical violence, financial exploitation, political manipulation, and even homicide (Ibrahim & Mukhtar, 2017; Onyido & Akpan, 2018; Onyido, 2019).

To gain a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons or incentives behind the increase in kidnapping in Nigeria, some scholars have proposed that, like any legitimate business, the act of kidnapping individuals ultimately involves some transaction (Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Omotola & Oyewole, 2024). According to Okoli & Agada (2014), three forms of exchange in kidnapping in Nigeria exist. These are material, which is the payment of money or other valuables; political, which is granting policy/political concessions and strategic trade-offs; and symbolic, which is making public or media pronouncements. Nevertheless, its modus operandi is not subject to official government regulatory control.

Other forms of kidnapping are for spiritual purposes known as kidnapping for ritual (Oyewole, 2016; Odoemene, 2024; Oyewole & Ekpo, 2024). Ritual sacrifice and kidnapping for this purpose are anchored on a "faith strategy," serving as a means to acquire material or worldly things such as fame, favour, power, protection, success, and wealth (Oyewole, 2016). Furthermore, while it remains challenging to determine the underlying motive of ritual kidnapping, Oyewole (2016) postulates that three forms of faith form its teleology in Nigeria. Oyewole (2016) examines different viewpoints on this strategy, encompassing its religious, traditional, and superstitious foundations.

Further factors contributing to kidnapping in Nigeria include ongoing political and environmental issues, such as land degradation and river pollution from oil spills. These issues impact water bodies and soil nutrients essential for agricultural productivity and fisheries, which are vital to the livelihoods and commerce of the local population, especially in the Niger Delta region. The emergence of militancy in the Niger Delta, exemplified by the kidnapping of foreign workers in the oil sector, underscores the persistent political neglect and economic

exploitation that the region has endured since oil exploration began in 1956 (Akpan, 2010; Okolie-Osemene, 2019). This situation reveals a deeper motive, underscoring the symbolic significance of the challenges the local population faces and the environmental degradation associated with resource extraction. It primarily serves the Government's financial interests while decimating the sociocultural and economic livelihood of communities (Afinotan & Ojatorotu, 2009; Akpan, 2010; Akinbi, 2012; Bodo, 2019; Bodo & Gimah, 2019).

The broader dynamics of kidnapping in Nigeria illustrate patterns influenced by economic hardship, weak governance, and security lapses in existing literature. A particularly concerning trend within this crisis is the increase in school kidnappings, which target explicitly vulnerable student populations and highlight deeper fractures in the nation's security framework. The abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014 by *Boko Haram*, coupled with various governmental reactions, has elevated the issue of schoolchildren being kidnapped for ransom in Nigeria, while also underscoring how such kidnappings bolster terrorism.

Scholars admit this new, troubling trend has profoundly affected the nation's educational landscape (Onyido & Akpan, 2018; Onyido, 2019). Kidnapping in Nigeria is influenced by various factors, such as policy issues related to government-administered negotiations for release since the Buhari-led administration (Onyido, 2019; Adenuga, 2024). School kidnappings in contemporary Nigeria are not standalone occurrences; instead, they illustrate a multifaceted interplay of socio-political and economic aspects that have fostered their frequency and ongoing existence (Ayuba, 2020; Agba & Zubairu, 2021). From 2014 onwards, there have been reports of 1,500 students being kidnapped (Adebayo, 2024). Notably, in 2021, armed assailants abducted 136 children from an Islamic seminary located in Nigeria's central state of Niger (Olufemi, 2021). Additionally, over 700 children and students were taken by gunmen for ransom between December 2020 and June 2021 (New Delhi Television, 2021).

Economic and sociopolitical deprivations represent some of the fundamental factors that have led to the occurrence of the kidnapping of students and teachers. The interplay of poverty and sociopolitical deprivation significantly contributes to an environment conducive to criminal activities such as kidnapping. High levels of unemployment and insufficient youth empowerment significantly increase the vulnerability of young individuals, making them more likely to be recruited into kidnapping groups, who are likely to support their members financially through proceeds from their nefarious activities. However, this is not the only cause of the school kidnapping.

Studies show that the criminalization of ethnic identity, religious fanaticism, and conflicts significantly exacerbates societal issues and contributes to school kidnappings, as extremist groups like *Boko Haram* express a belief of intolerance that often incites violence, forced disappearances, and kidnappings (Ayuba, 2020; Olaniyan, 2024; Ojo & Ojewale, 2024). As accurately observed, employing Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations, Chilaka and Idika (2019, p. 90) aver that:

The ideology of the group [*Boko Haram*] is steeped in orthodox Islamic teaching akin to that of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which views anything Western as being evil and un-Islamic. It is essentially driven by the erroneous belief that Western influence has occasioned the weakness of Islam. Hence, all Western institutions and ways of life must be avoided by Muslims because they cause nothing but evil to a Muslim. This is the reason the sect is popularly known as *Boko Haram*, which means "Western education is evil." They are driven by the fact that the Nigerian state is

nothing but corrupt and evil, and the best thing for a devout Muslim to do is to extricate himself from this morally deficit state to a place of tranquility devoid of moral and political corruption.

In addition to these challenges, the emergence of a new threat of banditry in Nigeria has led to the alarming trend of student kidnappings from schools and dormitories, accompanied by demands for cash ransom as a prerequisite for their release.

**Media and data incoherence in reporting kidnapping in Nigeria.** Aside from the act of kidnapping, accounting for the kidnapped has been an unpalatable and challenging task for both the state and federal governments, and even the security agencies. The inconsistent and inaccurate allocation of victim counts across different news agencies and state governments further complicated the security situation in Nigeria. The mass abduction that occurred on March 7, 2024, at both the primary and secondary schools in Kuriga, Kaduna State, has sparked meaningful discussions regarding the accuracy of official accounts related to kidnapping incidents in Nigeria and the broader implications for security governance. Despite widespread reports from various media outlets claiming that 287 students were abducted, the Kaduna State Government has steadfastly asserted that only 137 students were taken and later rescued by security forces (Asadu, 2024). Governor Uba Sani rejected previous estimates indicating more victims, labelling those claims “a figment of people’s imagination” (Jeong et al., 2024). The discrepancy in figures is emblematic of the persistent opacity and contestation that often accompany high-profile security breaches in the country.

Overall, the extant literature on kidnapping in Nigeria illustrated above has predominantly employed qualitative approaches, offering in-depth contextual analyses and thorough narratives illuminating the instrumental (economic and material), expressive (symbolic), and ritualistic teleological aspects of kidnapping. Although these studies have enhanced our understanding of the structural foundations and lived experiences associated with kidnapping, they often do so at the expense of quantitative rigour, which can complement the qualitative nuances. Furthermore, extant studies that attempted to use a quantitative approach were primarily situated within the framework of descriptive statistics for economic and monetary assessments, using a macroeconomic design (SBM, 2020; 2023). The approach used in this and another study (Abbas et al., 2021) to measure kidnapping was inadequate because it was overly simplistic, relying exclusively on print news data to depict the trend of kidnapping while overlooking public perception, which is now crucial for guiding policy direction in Africa. The work of our study adds to existing information by exploring the factors influencing this trend through a regression analysis of a citizen-perception-based survey.

To understand the extent to which perceptions of economic hardship, institutional performance, and governance explain the severity of kidnapping in Nigeria, it is essential to qualify the qualitative data using perception-based measures. Based on the factors above that necessitate kidnapping in Nigeria, this paper will therefore empirically assess the roles of security governance, economic conditions, and sociopolitical influences as determinants of the severity of abduction in Nigeria and test these hypotheses:

*Security governance.* H1 (Community safety): Individuals who feel unsafe in their neighbourhoods are more likely to report kidnapping as a serious problem.

H2 (Government crime response): Negative perceptions of the government’s handling of crime are associated with higher seriousness of kidnapping.

H3 (Police effectiveness): Perceived ineffectiveness of the police in handling kidnapping cases is associated with increased seriousness of kidnapping.

*Economic conditions.* H4 (Economic hardship): Respondents who rate the national economy poorly are likelier to perceive kidnapping as a serious problem.

*Socio-Political Factors.* H5 (Ethnic group marginalization): Perceptions of unfair treatment of ethnic groups by the government are positively associated with the seriousness of kidnapping.

H6 (Corruption): Negative evaluations of the government’s handling of corruption are associated with higher perceived seriousness of kidnapping.

## Methodology

The results of this paper are based on the ninth round of Afrobarometer data. The Afrobarometer is a comprehensive, non-partisan research initiative spanning the African continent, dedicated to conducting public opinion surveys that evaluate citizens’ perspectives in various African countries. It is a comparative series of national public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, and civil society in Africa. Since the Afrobarometer data are collected in rounds, this study’s analysis is based on the ninth round, which covered up to 35 African countries between 2021 and 2022 (Afrobarometer, 2022). The data were collected using a national multi-stage sample design involving 1600 respondents aged 18 years or older, carefully selected from urban and rural areas across Nigeria’s 36 states and the capital, to create a representative cross-sectional dataset. The sampling error ranges between  $\pm 2.5\%$ . After excluding participants with missing responses on the variables, the final sample size for the analysis was 1,462 respondents. A binary logistic regression analysis was performed with a 95% confidence level. The IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was the statistical software used for data analysis.

Following the guidance on the Afrobarometer website regarding data sampling, we used weighted sampling (with the sampling weight variable) to achieve optimal data representativeness for the analysis while maintaining confidence in the sampling representativeness during data collection. The descriptive statistics table illustrates each variable’s frequency, in conjunction with the chi-squared test detailed in Table 1.

Table 2 displays the binary logistic regression analysis, which illustrates the multilayer interactions among the independent variables and their influence on the dependent variable (see Appendix A for a description of the variables). Two models were run, the partial and the full.

The two models aimed to display differences in the odds ratio; the partial model included all variables specified above, except for ethnic and religious trusts that participants feel towards people from other ethnic and religious affiliations in the country, which were included in the full model. There are two reasons for including ethnic and religious trust in the full model. First, scholars and analysts of identity politics have indicated that criminal non-state armed groups exploit religion and ethnicity to commit social vices like kidnapping, thereby criminalizing social identity (Ojo & Ojewale, 2024). Second, this division resulting from failing to build a national identity has led to the rise of non-state armed groups seeking recognition and succession. There is a public narrative that the more people feel ethnically and religiously affiliated, the more challenging it is to reflect on diversity

**Table 1 Descriptive Statistics.**

Characteristics	f	%	p-value	Characteristics	f	%	p-value
<i>Seriousness of kidnapping</i>				<i>Ethnic groups' treatment by the government</i>			
Serious	1240	84.1		Never	319	21.8	.001
Not serious	222	15.9		Sometimes	528	36.1	
<i>Frequency of kidnapping</i>				<i>Government handling of corruption</i>			
Increased	1107	75.7	<.001	Very badly	812	55.5	.396
Decreased	355	24.3		Fairly (medium)	631	43.2	
<i>Community safety</i>				<i>Government handling of income gap</i>			
Never	577	39.5	.876	Very well	19	1.3	<.001
Just once or twice	361	24.7		Very badly	982	67.1	
Several times	454	31.1		Fairly (medium)	448	30.6	
Always	70	4.7		Very well	32	2.3	
<i>Government handling of crimes</i>				<i>Religious trust</i>			
Very badly	796	54.4	.002	Do not trust people at all	218	14.9	<.001
Fairly (medium)	633	43.3		Somewhat level of trust	994	67.9	
Very well	33	2.3		A lot of trust	250	17.2	
<i>Police handling of kidnapping cases</i>				<i>Ethnic trust</i>			
Very badly	453	30.9	<.001	Don't trust people at all	216	14.8	<.001
Fairly (medium)	932	63.7		Somewhat level of trust	1020	69.7	
Very well	77	5.4		A lot of trust	226	15.5	
<i>Retrospective economic situation</i>							
Worse	1119	76.5	<.001				
Same	217	14.8					
Better	126	8.7					

Data source: Round 9 Nigeria dataset from Afrobarometer (2022).

as a source of strength. This challenges the idea of constructing a national identity beyond conventional boundaries into the sub-consciousness of being a Nigerian.

A collinearity diagnostic check, such as variance inflation factors (VIF), was performed on the variables to confirm the absence of multicollinearity in the regression results.

**Results**

Overall, both models' accuracy rates are high. For instance, the full model achieved 88.9% (full model). The model exhibits good sensitivity, as among respondents who affirmed the severity of kidnapping incidents in Nigeria, 95.4% were correctly predicted (Appendix B). VIFs were all below 10, with an average VIF of 1.57, indicating no multicollinearity. To answer the research question asked in this paper on the extent to which perceptions of economic hardship, institutional performance, and governance explain the prevalence and severity of kidnapping in Nigeria, the statistical measures of descriptive statistics, chi-square test, and binary logistic regression were used. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables. Although not a primary variable in this study, the gender and age distribution of the sample, as illustrated in Table 1, is a customary approach in numerous statistical analyses involving human participants in social sciences. The respondents' gender was almost evenly split (with 50.1 percent being female). 64.5% of the respondents were between 18 and 37 years, highlighting the views of a predominantly youthful demographic (those who endure the consequences of inadequate sociopolitical and economic governance in the country) within the survey.

The dependent variable, which is the severity of kidnapping, in Table 1, indicates a significantly rising perception regarding the issue of kidnapping in Nigeria, with 84.1% of respondents identifying it as a serious concern. In a similar vein, a significant 75.7% of respondents reported a high frequency of kidnapping in the country. All variables exhibit variation in their distributions.

Regarding the respondents' sense of safety walking within their neighbourhood, 24.7% reported having felt unsafe once or twice, 39.5% of the respondents indicated that they have never felt unsafe, 31.1% expressed that they have experienced such feelings multiple (three or more) times, and 4.5% reported feeling unsafe all the time while walking in their neighbourhood. Regarding government management of crime, 54.4% of participants assessed it as very bad, 43.3% as fair, and merely 2.3% as very well. Both variables reflect a low perception of street-level security and a lack of trust in the government's approach to crime in Nigeria. The data indicate that public perception of police handling of kidnapping cases is largely negative or indifferent, with 30.9% rating it very bad, 63.7% as moderate, and only 5.4% as very good.

When asked about the present state of the economy compared to 12 months earlier, 76.5% indicated that it has worsened, 14.8% stated it stayed the same, and only 8.7% think the economy has fared better. Perceptions of the government's handling of income gap or inequality—an issue linked to crime—were predominantly negative, with 67.1% rating it as very bad, 30.6% as moderate, and only 2.3% as very good, closely mirroring views on crime control. The findings indicate that most respondents perceive the government's approach to corruption negatively: 55.5% perceived it as very bad, 43.2% as medium, and merely 1.3% as very good. This indicates significant public discontent and a lack of trust in the government's initiatives to combat corruption. The findings regarding the perception of governmental treatment towards respondents' ethnic group indicate that 42.1% of participants feel the government consistently mistreats their ethnic group. Meanwhile, 36.1% believe this occurs occasionally, and 21.8% assert it never happens, highlighting a notable perception of ethnic bias in governmental actions among various groups in Nigeria.

The findings on trust among various ethnic groups reveal that 69.7% of participants exhibit moderate trust in individuals from other ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, 15.5% demonstrate a high level of trust, while 14.8% indicate a complete lack of trust.

**Table 2 Binary logistic regression of study variables—Round 9 Nigeria Afrobarometer.**

Predictors	Partial Model		Full model	
	Odds ratio	CI	Odds ratio	CI
<i>Frequency of kidnapping</i> (Ref=Decreased)				
Increased	16.82**	11.25-25.15	17.78**	11.82-26.74
<i>Community safety</i> (Ref = Never)				
Just once or twice	0.79	0.49-1.26	0.82	0.50-1.34
Several times	0.53*	0.35-0.82	0.53*	0.34-0.82
Always	1.04	0.41-2.61	1.07	0.41-2.75
<i>Government handling of crimes</i> (Ref = Very well)				
Very badly	1.25	0.46-3.37	1.63	0.57-4.63
Fairly (medium)	1.80	0.69-4.69	1.91	0.69-5.24
<i>Police handling of kidnapping cases</i> (Ref = Very well)				
Very badly	5.62**	2.58-12.24	5.36**	2.43-11.80
Fairly (medium)	2.39*	1.32-4.32	2.26*	1.23-4.13
<i>Retrospective economic situation</i> (Ref = Better)				
Worse	1.71	0.97-3.01	1.77*	0.99-3.14
Same	1.17	0.61-2.24	1.16	0.60-2.24
<i>Ethnic groups' treatment by the government</i> (Ref = Never)				
Sometimes	1.75*	1.10-2.76	1.96*	1.22-3.14
Always	1.78*	1.11-2.85	2.242*	1.37-3.64
<i>Government handling of corruption</i> (Ref = Very well)				
Very badly	0.57	0.14-2.26	0.81	0.19-3.38
Fairly (medium)	1.32	0.35-4.97	1.63	0.41-6.40
<i>Government handling of income gap</i> (Ref=Very well)				
Very badly	2.46	0.92-6.54	2.27	0.80-6.46
Fairly (medium)	1.98	0.76-5.16	1.70	0.61-4.74
<i>Religious trust</i> (Ref = A lot of trust)				
Do not trust people at all	-	-	0.59	0.23-1.51
Somewhat level of trust	-	-	0.75	0.39-1.44
<i>Ethnic trust</i> (Ref = A lot of trust)				
Do not trust people at all	-	-	0.25*	0.09-0.66
Somewhat level of trust	-	-	0.42*	0.21-0.84
Constant	0.09		0.16	

CI 95% confidence interval.  
 Ref = Reference category.  
 \*\*p < 0.01; \*p < 0.05.  
 Data source: Round 9 Nigeria dataset from Afrobarometer (2022).

This underscores a cautiously optimistic yet fragmented landscape of ethnic trust within the Nigerian society. Although 67.9% of respondents express a moderate level of trust in individuals of other religions, 17.2% report high trust, and 14.9% indicate no trust at all. The findings suggest that interreligious relations exhibit a cautious nature, characterized by areas of both confidence and scepticism.

In the third column of Table 1, we present the chi-square results, demonstrating the significant association between each independent variable and the dependent variable, the severity of kidnapping. The statistically associated or related independent variables are the frequency of kidnapping, government handling

of crimes, police handling of kidnapping cases, retrospective economic situation, ethnic group’s treatment by the government, government handling of income gap, religious trust, and ethnic trust.

Table 2 presents the logistic regression results for estimating the likelihood of kidnapping severity in Nigeria. Only significant results in the data are interpreted here. It is important to note that all the interpretations of the independent effect of each predictor are reported while holding other predictors constant. Additionally, the noun “times” is employed in a substitutive manner below to illustrate the adjusted odds ratio effect.

In the partial model, compared to those respondents who perceived the frequency to be decreasing, individuals who perceived an increase in the rate of kidnapping were 16.82 times (95% CI: 11.25–25.15) likely to indicate its severity. Similarly, in the full model, the perception of increased frequency of kidnapping increases to an odds ratio of 17.78 (95% CI: 11.82–26.74), indicating a 0.98 times increase when ethnic and religious variables enter the model, despite a strong correlation.

In the case of community safety, both in the partial and full model, respondents who experienced community safety concerns “several times” were 0.53 times (95% CI: 0.35/0.34–0.82) as likely to view kidnapping as a serious problem compared to those who “never” experienced such concerns.

In the partial model, respondents who assessed the police’s management of kidnapping as “very badly” were 5.62 times (95% CI: 2.58–12.24) likely to regard kidnapping as a serious concern than those who evaluated police performance as “very well.” Individuals who assessed the police’s management as “fair” exhibited a 2.39 times increased likelihood (95% CI: 1.32–4.32) of perceiving the severity of kidnapping in Nigeria. In the full model, the odds ratios exhibited similarity with those of the partial model, with values of 5.36 (95% CI: 2.43–11.80) for “very badly” and 2.26 (95% CI: 1.23–4.13) for “fair.”

In the full model, participants who perceived the economic climate as deteriorating were 1.77 times (95% CI: 0.99–3.14) likely to regard kidnapping as a significant concern than those who perceived the economic climate as improving.

In the partial model, respondents who perceived their ethnic group as experiencing unfair treatment “sometimes” were 1.75 times (95% CI: 1.10–2.76) likely to regard kidnapping as a significant issue in comparison to those who indicated no discrimination. Individuals who perceived unfair treatment by the government against their ethnic group were 1.78 times (95% CI: 1.11–2.85) likely to regard kidnapping as a severe concern. In the full model, the odds ratios exhibited a modest increase, recorded at 1.96 times (95% CI: 1.22–3.14) for the category of “sometimes” and 2.24 odds ratio (95% CI: 1.37–3.64) for “always,” thereby underscoring the robust association between perceived ethnic discrimination and the severity of kidnapping.

Regarding respondents’ trust in people from other ethnic groups, in the full model, individuals exhibiting a complete lack of trust in people from a different ethnic group were 0.25 times (95% CI: 0.09–0.66) likely to regard kidnapping as a significant concern in comparison to those possessing a high degree of trust in their fellow beings. Comparably, individuals exhibiting “somewhat” of a trust level were 0.42 times (95% CI: 0.21–0.84) less likely to perceive kidnapping as a serious matter. This suggests that elevated degrees of mistrust diminish the perceived gravity of kidnapping.

**Discussion on the result of the hypotheses**

The findings indicate that kidnapping has emerged as a critical security issue, prompting considerable apprehension among the Nigerian populace. This is associated with not only the physical

and psychological distress it inflicts on individuals, but also its economic repercussions in terms of the ransoms demanded by various kidnappers from victims, their families, or even the government, as evidenced during Buhari's administration when negotiations with perpetrators became a de facto state policy and approach (Aleyomi & Olajubu, 2024; Adenuga, 2024). Thus, we reject the null hypothesis on economic conditions and accept the one stated for this study. As a result, financial or macroeconomic difficulties that affect individual economic situations may exacerbate concerns about alternative sources of income for survival, leading to recruitment into criminal gangs involved in kidnapping and raising their severity in society.

As confirmed in this paper, due to community safety concerns, kidnapping is considered a serious problem. Thus, it is only logical to reject the null hypothesis by affirming that repeated safety concerns indicate a likelihood of kidnapping. In addition to kidnapping, other social crimes may also affect respondents' perceptions. The result could reflect normalization of insecurity including the threats to freedom of movement within the respondents' neighbourhoods—a repeated safety concerns might make individuals adapt psychologically, making them perceive kidnapping an accustomed threat over time compared to other concerns like community raids and outright killing of people by terrorists, bandits, or rioters, all of which is infamously common in certain parts of Nigeria.

Contemporary internal security challenges in Nigeria encompass a range of issues, including militancy, terrorist insurgency, herder–farmer conflicts, confrontations between Shiite groups and the military, as well as humanitarian crises, food insecurity, and diverse forms of criminality such as kidnapping, cult-related violence, and ritual killings (Oyewole, 2016; Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Oyewole & Ekpo, 2024). The resurgence of political and socioeconomic crises has resulted in the establishment of criminal entities, including Boko Haram/ISWAP, militants, herders, and bandits. These groups utilized various strategies—such as kidnapping—to establish control in local communities, advance their objectives, apply pressure on the government, and create a climate of fear among the public.

Furthermore, the ethnic group marginalization hypothesis was confirmed as the result aligns with the hypothesized direction. The perception or reality of marginalization among ethnic groups generates feelings of resentment, prompting some individuals to engage in kidnapping as a means of resistance or survival, as seen in instances like the Niger Delta militancy, often having a transnational nature. The transnationalization of criminal group operations has led to the increased prevalence of their methods, with kidnapping now being a component (Ojo et al., 2024). This highlights the significance of kidnapping as a critical international issue, extending beyond West Africa, as evidenced by the results.

On the socio-political and economic fronts, the people of the Niger Delta region have experienced a disproportionate impact due to negligence and marginalization resulting from the Nigerian government's and multinational oil companies' activities in the region. The attacks and kidnapping of government military forces and installations and workers of Multinational companies have disrupted exploration activities, reduced state revenues, and contributed to the proliferation of kidnapping (Bodo & Gimah, 2019). Bodo (2019) and Akinbi (2012) asserted that recent conflict history was marked by significant turmoil within the region and beyond. In this challenging period, criminal groups, including militants, effectively gathered over N90 billion through extortion and ransom from their abducted victims (Akinbi, 2012). But the question remains whether the money generated from kidnapping based on ethnic grievances is utilized for the development (such as the establishment of hospitals and schools) of a region by the ethnic militia. This seems like an abnormal question

to ask. Still, one can imagine that if kidnapping is justified based on ethnic marginalization, then proceeds should be enjoyed by the entire marginalized group.

For police effectiveness in handling kidnapping cases, our hypothesis was confirmed. The adverse perceptions of police effectiveness in responding to kidnapping cases markedly amplify the perceived severity of kidnapping. Thus, based on this result, we reject both null hypotheses and accept those stated above. Furthermore, the organizational frameworks of bandits have evolved, both inadvertently and intentionally (Ojewale, 2024), as each group has developed and operated in specific contexts, amid accusations of complicity by the security forces. In fact, following Trump's claim of a Christian genocide in Nigeria and an increase in insecurity, popular debate has been centred on the infiltration of criminal elements within the Nigerian government. Whether this claim is valid or not is not our focus, but what it implies is that concerns over low institutional effectiveness in responding or the lack of will lead to problems of either complicity or a lack of trust in institutions for security governance.

Additionally, a recent study has found that bandits employ economic (monetary) incentives and coercion to recruit members, leveraging existing social relationships based on religious and ethnic ties within communities (Ojewale, 2024; Ojo & Ojewale, 2024). This finding contextualizes our results regarding ethnic trust and the government's treatment of different ethnic groups, intersecting with economic conditions, in the severity of kidnapping and other forms of insecurity in Nigeria. Nevertheless, banditry is characterized by the deployment of considerable violence, underpinned by a criminal kidnapping economy that provides substantial support. This situation is evident in Nigeria, where our findings indicate that the public perceives government management of corruption, economic challenges, and police responses to kidnapping as inadequate and poorly managed.

Ironically, the multivariate analysis does not statistically associate any category of the government's handling of crime and corruption with the dependent variable, leading us to accept the null hypothesis as true. Based on the existing literature, one would expect that this will pan out differently. However, given the results, we believe they may be due to our conceptualization of the variables, and we do not necessarily think the results for this variable are exhaustive, as a different conceptual approach and survey methodology might yield different statistical results.

## Implications

The findings suggest that unfavourable macroeconomic conditions in Nigeria impact individual economic situations, potentially increasing anxiety regarding alternative income sources for survival, which may compel individuals to affiliate with criminal gangs involved in kidnapping, thereby fostering a burgeoning underground economy. This nascent profit-oriented paradigm centres on a new economy prioritizing kidnapping for ransom. Bandits and terrorist groups brandished in semi-military regalia, parading on social media, requesting ransom or displaying ransom paid for the release of hostages as if their act brings them legal funds without regard or fear of state authorities tracking them down. The government's inability in security governance and unfulfilled obligations toward development have resulted in the unrestrained increase of kidnapping, predominantly perpetrated by unemployed youth affiliated with criminal organizations (Ojo, 2020; Ojo et al., 2024). The government's ineptitude and corruption within security institutions have exacerbated this illegal economy.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the involvement of individuals, and at times criminal organizations, in unlawful economic

activities like illegal oil bunkering, highway road robbery, community or targeted school raids, where people are carted away, has generated substantial revenues in the black market of kidnapping for ransom. The omission of these earnings from official economic metrics such as the balance of payments and gross domestic product highlights the constraints present in formal economic evaluations and the symbolism of state-sanctioned economic activities. As such, the emergence of the underground economy highlights the significant impact of crime on society and its economy, as resources that could be allocated for legitimate productive purposes are diverted to rescue kidnapped victims, ultimately reinforcing the activities of the groups.

It is crucial to think economically of the impact of kidnapping in Nigeria, as the global estimates of kidnapping are huge, and the trend is worrying. According to reports from data firm SBM Intelligence (2020), between June 2011 and the end of March 2020, a total of \$18.34 million was disbursed to kidnappers, primarily bandits and Boko Haram, as ransom. Particularly alarming is that a significant portion (just under \$11 million) was disbursed between January 2016 and March 2020, suggesting that kidnapping has become increasingly profitable in recent years. Moreover, these unregulated funds serve as alternative financing sources for individuals engaged in organized criminal networks, thus enabling the growth of high-profit, high-risk crimes like kidnapping and other associated crimes across Nigeria.

Furthermore, SBM intelligence (2020) highlights Borno, Rivers, Delta, Kogi, Ondo, Kano, Lagos, and Katsina as key hotspots for kidnapping in Nigeria, underscoring the geographical spread and affirming respondents' concerns that it is both severe and frequent. The recent policy shift by the Buhari administration and state governments, which alters the approach from the militarization of the rescue of kidnapped victims to negotiating ransoms with kidnappers for the release of kidnapped victims in Nigeria, has further fuelled the emergence of this expanding illicit trend. This strategy employed in negotiating with kidnappers contributes to a rise in the number of kidnappers within the kidnapping enterprise in Nigeria (Bamidele et al., 2024; Adenuga, 2024).

The government's inability to establish a conducive environment for economic growth and the challenges of externally engineered political and economic constraints on Nigeria exacerbate unemployment, leading individuals to engage in kidnapping, followed by government ransom payments for the release of the abducted (Aleyomi & Olajubu, 2024). The rising prevalence of kidnapping in Nigeria is substantial and warrants attention, particularly due to the interaction of economic and social factors linked to these criminal activities (Bamidele et al., 2024). The insurrection in Nigeria by Boko Haram marks a significant milestone in two decades of insecurity, driven by the economic marginalization of a large youth population facing bleak socioeconomic prospects and the political exploitation of these issues. The public discourse surrounding insecurity has focused heavily on kidnapping and its relationship with facilitating other crimes.

Nigeria's struggle with the Boko Haram insurgency, coupled with failures in security and economic governance, creates a feedback loop that intensifies existing social conflicts and economic inequalities. This phenomenon is marked by the establishment or reemergence of organized criminal groups such as Lakarawa, bandits, Boko Haram, militants, and other kidnapping networks that deliberately enlist economically disadvantaged individuals for kidnapping for ransom, resulting in the devastation of impacted towns (Ojo & Ezenwa, 2024). This increase in criminal networks has unequivocally influenced the security landscape whenever a new group ushers itself into the insecurity domain through the orchestration of attacks, including

kidnapping, prompting essential inquiries regarding the efficacy of state solutions and the fundamental elements sustaining this violence.

The geopolitical dynamics of the country's northern regions, where violence and kidnapping have become rampant in the current decade, warrant thorough analysis, especially the intensifying confrontations between farmers and herders (Badiora, 2015; Ojo, 2020). The pervasive poverty in Nigeria's Northwest and Northcentral regions results in a heightened frequency of ransom demands associated with the kidnapping of school pupils and women. Armed banditry has encapsulated most parts of the northern regions and continues to grow, intricately showcasing the relationship between economic hardship and poverty. For example, in northwest Nigeria, approximately 30,000 bandits are organized into numerous factions, ranging in size from 10 to more than 1000 combatants (Adeyemi, 2022). In contrast, the southern regions are increasingly exhibiting signs of a rising trend in kidnapping, attributed to factors such as secessionist movements, ritualism, and armed attacks encroaching upon these areas (Nnam, 2014). Thus, future research can involve a comprehensive analysis of the underlying issues contributing to this phenomenon.

Furthermore, future research can look at the impact of kidnapping on gender and women in Nigeria, which is a significant issue that warrants attention, since this paper barely hinted at a connection. The economic landscape of Nigeria is significantly influenced by gender, with the dynamics of demand and supply closely linked, often resulting in the exploitation of women as either agents or victims of kidnapping and other forms of insecurity (Agara, 2024). The abduction of women or their exploitation by insurgent groups poses a significant risk to human security and obstructs the achievement of sustainable development goals. Women experience increased susceptibility to sexual exploitation during captivity as victims and often contribute to this dynamic when they assume the role of agents (Ibrahim & Mukhtar, 2017; Okolie-Osemene & Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Tade et al., 2019). It is the case that participation of women in arms trafficking is increasing in some parts of Nigeria, as law enforcement authorities in Zamfara State have apprehended several female individuals engaged in the illegal trade of firearms and ammunition to organized groups involved in kidnapping in Nigeria (Ahmed, 2022).

To address the growing problem of kidnapping in Nigeria, the federal and state governments must focus on thorough economic reforms that target poverty alleviation, corruption reduction, and low unemployment rates. Furthermore, a unified approach is essential to improving the capabilities and professionalism of law enforcement agencies, as these modifications are vital for rebuilding public confidence in the system, given the results of this study, which showed low public trust in both the government institutions and the policing actors. Advancing fairness and justice across diverse ethnic and regional communities, as well as promoting economic justice, through an enabling business climate that encourages engagement, is a crucial strategy that can significantly reduce societal weaknesses and foster a safer, more inclusive environment for everyone.

## Conclusion

This paper began with the following question: To what extent do perceptions of economic hardship, institutional performance, and governance explain the prevalence and severity of kidnapping in Nigeria? It aims to investigate the factors driving this trend through a quantitative lens using a citizen-perception-based survey, as they live and experience the burden of this form of insecurity in their communities. The evidence, based on the

statistical analysis of the ninth round of the Afrobarometer survey, points to a growing trend of kidnapping in Nigeria, as most respondents consider it both severe and frequent within Nigerian society—84.1% of respondents think it a serious issue, and 75.7% of respondents consider it a frequent issue. Hence, it is a crime in the consciousness of the populace.

Also, the chi-square test indicated that variables such as the frequency of kidnapping, police handling of kidnapping cases, government's treatment of ethnic groups, ethnic trust, religious trust, government's handling of crimes, and income gap (inequality) are significantly associated with the severity of kidnapping in Nigeria. However, the dynamics of kidnapping evolve when all variables are held constant in the multivariate logistic regression. Different categories within the variables show differences in their effect on kidnapping. One interesting finding is that religion does not play the same significant role it does on its own when all other variables are held constant at the multivariate level. But ethnicity does. This provides a cogent rationale to understand the kidnapping incidents in the Niger Delta and other southern areas, where the emblematic ethnic marginalization in oil resource exploitation by the government, tribal chiefs, and multinational corporations has ravaged agriculture and fishing. The decimation of the two vital economic pursuits for the local populace ultimately culminates in militancy for environmental and economic justice.

This paper has shown that kidnapping, studied through a quantitative methodological lens, provides a complementary and robust understanding of its qualitative trends, manifestations, and areas to be targeted (economic empowerment, government handling of crime and corruption, and police handling of kidnapping cases) to mitigate its impact in Nigeria. As the result indicates, the challenges that foster kidnapping, in the opinion of respondents, include poor economic conditions, the issue of safety within the neighbourhood, police handling of kidnapping cases, and ethnic marginalisation. What this tells us is that kidnapping, as a manifestation of social malaise, results from weak governance by state institutions to curb broader insecurity through both preventive and reactive measures.

To prevent kidnapping effectively, enhancing institutional responses by creating better economic opportunities and encouraging individuals to pursue legal employment, such as through small and medium-sized enterprises or positions in public and private sectors post-education, is essential. Job creation for the population is paramount and should become official state policy to combat crime and enhance Nigeria's strategic economic power in the global economy. It promises to reduce brain drain within the country among opportunistic youth who have flown abroad for greener pastures, and crime engagement among those who remain idle in the country. This approach aims to deter idleness and reduce the risk that individuals will be drawn into criminal organisations involved in kidnapping. Additionally, it is crucial to improve government accountability, reform policing practices, and guarantee fair treatment for all ethnic groups, as all these factors contribute to kidnapping in Nigeria. The role of a national identity is also crucial to reduce ethnic marginalisation and the feeling of alienation that impacts the severity of kidnapping. By addressing these structural weaknesses, we can mitigate the factors that facilitate kidnapping and help rebuild public confidence in the effectiveness of state institutions.

Proactively enhancing the capabilities and responsiveness of security agencies to investigate and dismantle kidnapping networks, alongside ensuring prompt rescue operations and the prosecution of offenders, will convey that Nigeria is an unfavourable environment for kidnapping and help reduce the trend. Furthermore, establishing dedicated anti-kidnapping units within

law enforcement, enhancing intelligence collection, and developing robust victim support frameworks can effectively mitigate immediate consequences and deter future occurrences. Similarly, removing security from the exclusive legislative list to the concurrent list to accommodate the creation of state police forces enables more effective measures to protect the population against the menace of kidnapping in Nigeria (Adenuga, 2024). A conscious shift in mindset among the policymakers, security operatives, and even the population on the long-term effects of kidnapping on the victim and society provides the understanding required to make necessary progress toward its prevention.

As a quantitative study using statistical techniques, an explicit limitation of our analysis is the inability to capture the nuanced contextual and experiential dimensions of kidnapping that qualitative methods typically uncover, including motivations, localised dynamics, and the psychosocial impact on victims and communities. However, this is precisely where the significance of complementarity in our research emerges, as qualitative studies have already been undertaken and highlighted in our literature review. The paper advances the literature in political economy, criminology, public policy, African studies, and security studies by providing a statistically robust, perception-based investigation of the structural and institutional determinants of kidnapping incidence and severity in Nigeria.

Subsequent studies may explore these aspects, shifting focus from public perception to a detailed statistical modelling and examination of the motivations of kidnapping by kidnappers and victims. This offers a complementary understanding of the findings established here.

#### Data availability

The datasets analysed during the current study are available in the Harvard Dataverse repository, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/DONIFA>.

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### Author contributions

Design of the study: CAE, JOO, and SAG. Introduction: CAE, JOO, and SAG. First part of literature review: JOO. Second part of the literature review: SAG. Methodology & results of the data: CAE. Discussion: CAE and JOO. Conclusion and finalising the article: CAE, JOO, and SAG.

### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

### Ethical approval

The Afrobarometer Round 9 survey (2021–2022) received continental ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Institute for Democracy, Citizenship and Public Policy in Africa at the University of Cape Town (South Africa) in October 2021. The review was conducted in accordance with the University of Cape Town Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) standards for research involving human participants. The study approval can be obtained from the Nigerian national partner of the Afrobarometer ninth round survey, NOIPolls Limited. However, we were unable to obtain the continental approval number online from either the Afrobarometer or NOIPoll Limited websites. Due to the researchers' location, it is challenging to go access the offices. Aside from continental approval, in each participating country, National Partners obtained any additional ethics approvals required by domestic legal, political, or traditional protocols. The authors also faced the issue of access to approval numbers, as these numbers or clearance documents are not available online. In Nigeria, fieldwork was conducted by NOIPolls Limited, in accordance with Afrobarometer's norms and standard procedures for informed consent, confidentiality, and respondent protection.

### Informed consent

The informed consent was collected from all participants aged 18 and above by the fieldworkers aged 18 and above, between 5 and 31 March 2022, when Round 9 was collected. The introduction of the survey questionnaire also secures the respondents' informed consent in written/verbal language that is easily understood by the prospective subjects, thereby meeting the ethical standards of Afrobarometer research. The introduction of the survey questionnaire also assures respondents that their responses will be kept confidential. National Investigator (Chike Nwangwu), who is the Chief Executive Officer of NOIPolls Limited (Afrobarometer national partner in Nigeria), was

responsible for instructing fieldworkers about the principles of informed consent and for ensuring that every fieldworker signs a research ethics agreement. For more information about the survey methodology and protocol approval, see: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/surveys-andmethods/>.

### Additional information

**Supplementary information** The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-06412-4>.

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