



Evaluating the Failure of Anti-Kidnapping Strategies in Kaduna State, Nigeria: A Governance and Policy Analysis (2010–2020)

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Abstract

Case Studies

Between 2010 and 2020, Kaduna State experienced a sharp escalation in kidnapping, despite repeated military operations and legislative interventions. This study evaluates why anti-kidnapping strategies failed by applying a systematic qualitative research design to 55 peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, and forensic datasets. Using thematic analysis guided by PRISMA protocols, the study finds that reactive, kinetic operations produced only short-term displacement of armed groups. The persistence of a governance void in rural LGAs allowed kidnapping to evolve into a self-sustaining ransom economy, where proceeds funded advanced weaponry and intelligence networks. Three case studies—Greenfield University, Bethel Baptist High School, and the Abuja-Kaduna train attack—illustrate how institutional weakness, intelligence deficits, and judicial bottlenecks reinforced criminal audacity. The analysis reveals a deterrence deficit, with successful prosecution rates below 5%, which lowered the perceived cost of offending and normalized violence as a livelihood strategy. Drawing on anomie, deterrence, institutional, and social exchange theories, the study argues that kidnapping functions as a governance failure rather than solely a security problem. It concludes that effective policy requires integrating territorial control, disruption of financial flows, and judicial reform. The findings contribute a Governance Void Model to explain the cycle of violence and offer policy pathways for restoring state credibility in contested peripheries.

Keywords: Kidnapping, Kaduna State, governance void, ransom economy, deterrence deficit.

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1. Introduction

Over the last 20 years, Nigeria’s security environment has been reshaped by the rise of organized kidnapping as a commercial enterprise. What began as a localized insurgent tactic in the Niger Delta has expanded into a widespread industry across the North-West, with Kaduna State at the center of the crisis. Between

2010 and 2020, abductions in Kaduna shifted from targeting high-profile political figures to the indiscriminate abduction of students, travelers, and rural farming communities (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021; Agbiboa, 2020).

Despite substantial military spending and new legislation, kidnapping has persisted. This raises a key question: why do anti-kidnapping



strategies continue to fail? Existing research suggests the problem goes beyond limited tactical capacity and is tied to institutional weaknesses and governance gaps (Idris & Ogunleye, 2021; Chukwu & Nwankwo, 2023). This introduction outlines the socio-political background of Kaduna State, explains the significance of the 2010–2020 period, and sets out the research objectives for evaluating why state interventions have had limited impact.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Themes in Anti-Kidnapping Policy

Kidnapping is often framed as both an economic crime and a security threat. In Nigeria, scholars increasingly connect the rise in abductions to the “ungoverned space” thesis, which argues that the state’s failure to provide infrastructure and security in rural areas enables criminal actors to establish parallel systems of control (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021; Agbiboa, 2021).

2.2 Empirical Perspectives: The North-West Crisis

Studies from 2018 to 2025 show that Kaduna’s crisis is worsened by geographic vulnerabilities, particularly large forest areas that serve as bases for armed groups (Abba & Aminu, 2023; Olaniyan, 2022). Recent work also highlights the role of the “ransom economy,” where funds from abductions allow criminal networks to acquire more advanced weapons and technology, often outpacing state forces (Achumba, 2020; Onapajo, 2023).

2.3 The Mutation of the Ransom Economy

Over the past decade, the crisis in the North-West has evolved into what scholars call the “institutionalization of the ransom economy” (Onapajo, 2023; Zenn, 2020). Abduction is no longer just a tactic but a self-sustaining financial system. Ransom payments are frequently reinvested into weapons and communications equipment, allowing criminal groups to maintain a technological edge over state forces (Hassan, 2023).

2.4 Geography and the “Sovereignty Gap”

Data from Kaduna State show that geography plays a key role. Forested areas in Birnin Gwari, Kajuru, and Chikun act as more than hideouts; they represent “ungoverned spaces” or “sovereignty gaps” where state presence is minimal (Abba & Aminu, 2023; Eke, 2020).

2.5 The Deterrence Deficit and Judicial Bottlenecks

A core reason anti-kidnapping measures fail is the breakdown in the certainty of punishment. Evidence from 2010–2020 shows a wide gap between arrests and convictions in Kaduna (Idris & Ogunleye, 2021). Judicial delays and corruption mean many suspects either evade trial or face proceedings that last for years.

2.6 Global Parallels: Mexico and Colombia

Kaduna’s situation resembles the “kidnap-for-export” model in Mexico and Colombia’s secuestro industry. Stability improved in those cases only when states shifted from military-only responses to strategies that disrupted criminal financing (Zenn, 2020).

3.0 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Anomie Theory

Merton’s anomie theory argues that when society emphasizes wealth and status but fails to provide legitimate means to achieve them, individuals may turn to crime (Merton, 2020). In Kaduna, factory closures and agricultural displacement have limited legal opportunities, making kidnapping a form of informal entrepreneurship for some (Bamidele & Okoro, 2022).

3.2 Functionalist Perspective

From a functionalist view, institutions like schools, police, and courts function as interdependent parts of a social system. When one part fails, the entire system weakens (Blau, 2023).

3.3 Deterrence Theory

Deterrence theory emphasizes that laws work only if potential offenders believe punishment is likely and severe. The “deterrence deficit” in Kaduna reflects low arrest-to-conviction rates, which lower the perceived risk of kidnapping (Idris & Ogunleye, 2021; Gottfredson, 2020).

3.4 Institutional Theory

When formal institutions are weak, informal ones, including criminal syndicates, fill the gap (North, 2021). The state’s limited reach in rural Kaduna has allowed armed groups to establish their own systems of authority (Agbibo, 2021).

3.5 Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory explains relationships in terms of costs and benefits. Villagers may protect kidnapers if the state offers little beyond periodic military operations, while armed groups provide local “protection” or a share of ransom proceeds (Cullen, 2022).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Data Sources

The study uses a systematic qualitative research design and qualitative content analysis. Data were drawn from peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports from the Nigerian government, International Crisis Group, and Amnesty International, and forensic data from SBM Intelligence and Nextier SPD (International Crisis Group, 2020; Amnesty International, 2021; Nextier SPD, 2022; SBM Intelligence, 2023).

4.2 Sampling Technique: PRISMA Protocol

PRISMA guided source selection. Of 150 sources identified, 55 high-impact sources formed the final corpus after screening for relevance to Kaduna State and the 2010–2020 period (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021; Agbibo, 2020).

4.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis grouped codes into three categories: institutional constraints, socio-economic triggers, and tactical gaps (Chukwu & Nwankwo, 2023; Bamidele & Okoro, 2022; Idris & Ogunleye, 2021).

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Only sources that cross-verified findings were used. Sensitive case data were anonymized and handled with academic objectivity.

5.0 Findings and Discussion

5.1 The Governance Void and the Ransom Economy

A key finding is the persistence of a governance void in LGAs such as Birnin Gwari and Chikun. The state’s limited presence allowed kidnapping to evolve into a “ransom economy” (Onapajo, 2023; Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021). Ransom payments generate liquidity to purchase advanced weapons, creating a self-reinforcing cycle (Achumba, 2020; Zenn, 2020).

As shown in Figure 2, attacks were not evenly distributed. The map uses a 5-color scale to show variance: Birnin Gwari and Chikun LGAs fall in the very high category, Kajuru and Giwa in high to medium and Kaduna North/South in low. This pattern matches the forested, road-poor zones where state presence is weakest, reinforcing the argument that geographic isolation enables the governance void. By contrast, Kaduna North and Kaduna South LGAs recorded significantly fewer attacks, reflecting stronger state presence and urban policing capacity.

The color gradient tells the story of state presence and absence in Kaduna State between 2010 and 2020.

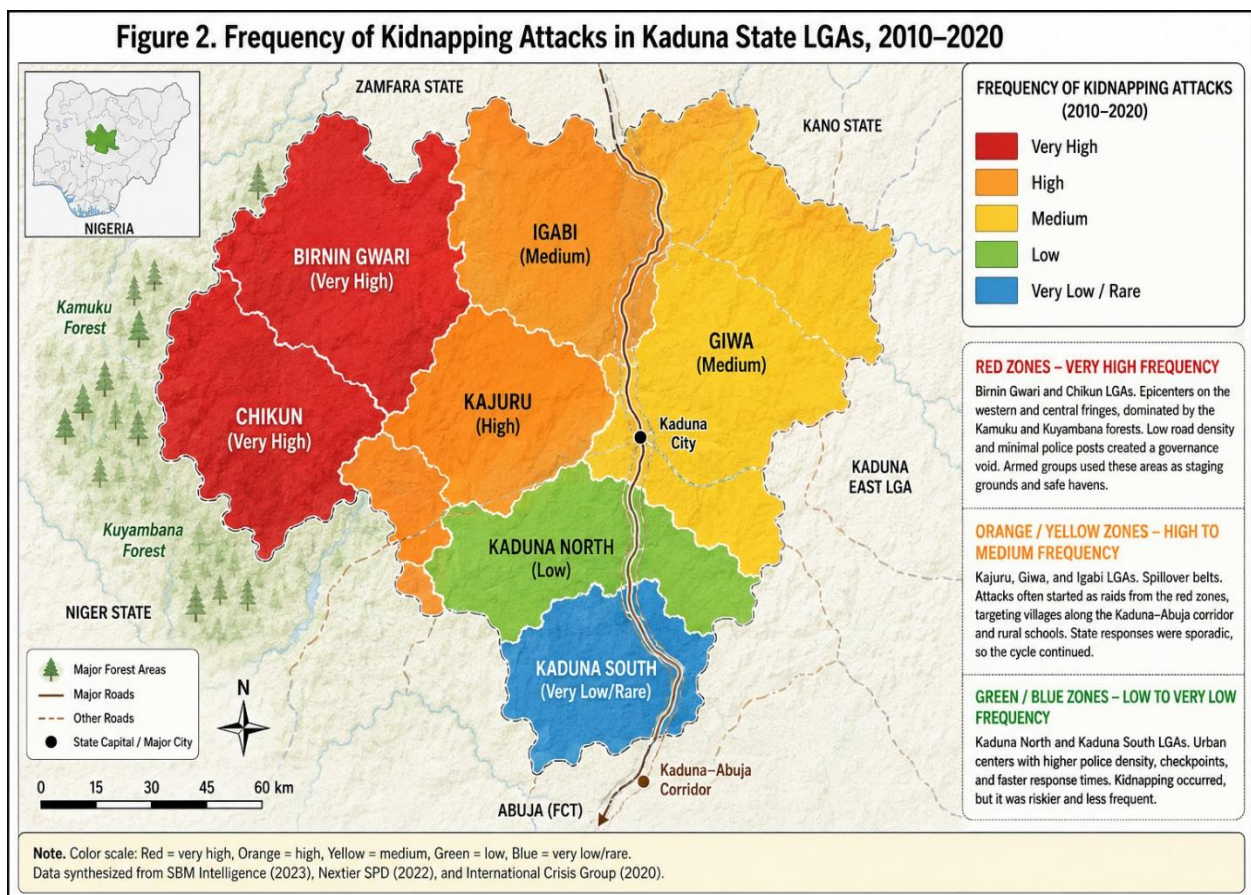
Red zones – Very High Frequency: Birnin Gwari and Chikun LGAs. These are the epicenters. They’re on the western and central fringes, dominated by the Kamuku and Kuyambana forests. Low road density and minimal police posts here created a governance void. Armed groups used these areas as staging

grounds and safe havens.

Orange/Yellow zones – High to Medium Frequency: Kajuru, Giwa, and Igabi LGAs. These are the spillover belts. Attacks here often started as raids from the red zones, targeting villages along the Kaduna-Abuja corridor and rural schools. State responses were sporadic, so

the cycle continued.

Green/Blue zones – Low to Very Low Frequency: Kaduna North and Kaduna South LGAs. Urban centers with higher police density, checkpoints, and faster response times. Kidnapping occurred, but it was riskier and less frequent.



Note. Color scale: Red = very high, Orange = high, Yellow = medium, Green = low, Blue = very low/rare.

Data synthesized from SBM Intelligence (2023), Nextier SPD (2022), and International Crisis Group (2020).

The pattern is clear: frequency drops as you move from forested peripheries toward urban cores. This spatial variance supports the core argument – kidnapping thrived where governance was thinnest, not just where poverty was highest.

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Table 1. Spatial Distribution of Kidnapping Attacks Across Selected Kaduna State LGAs (2010–2020)

LGA	Frequency Category	Geographic Characteristics	Security/Governance Characteristics	Interpretation
Birnin Gwari	Very High	Extensive forest cover (Kamuku Forest), poor road networks, remote settlements	Weak state presence, limited security infrastructure, low police coverage	Major kidnapping hotspot and operational base for armed groups
Chikun	Very High	Forested terrain, proximity to major transit corridors, dispersed rural communities	Insufficient security presence, governance gaps, difficult terrain for surveillance	High incidence due to strategic location and weak enforcement capacity
Kajuru	High	Semi-forested environment, rural settlements	Inconsistent security interventions and limited state reach	Spillover zone experiencing recurrent attacks from neighboring hotspots
Giwa	Medium–High	Rural and agricultural communities with moderate accessibility challenges	Moderate but inadequate security presence	Frequent attacks linked to movement of armed groups from core hotspots
Igabi	Medium	Mixed rural–peri-urban landscape	Partial state presence and intermittent security operations	Vulnerable corridor affected by incursions from neighboring LGAs
Kaduna North	Low	Urban environment, developed infrastructure, high population density	Strong police presence, checkpoints, and rapid response systems	Reduced kidnapping incidence due to stronger governance and security capacity
Kaduna South	Very Low	Urbanized setting with extensive road networks and administrative institutions	Higher concentration of security agencies and state institutions	Lowest frequency of attacks and minimal governance vacuum

Source: Adapted from SBM Intelligence (2023), Nextier SPD (2022), and International Crisis Group (2020).

As shown in table 1 above, the diagram demonstrates a clear spatial gradient in kidnapping frequency across Kaduna State. The

highest concentration of attacks occurred in the forested peripheral LGAs of Birnin Gwari and Chikun, where weak state presence, poor road

infrastructure, and difficult terrain created governance vacuums that facilitated criminal activity. Moving toward Kajuru, Giwa, and Igabi, kidnapping frequency declines but remains significant due to spillover effects from neighboring hotspots. The lowest incidence is observed in Kaduna North and Kaduna South, where stronger governance structures, better infrastructure, and greater security deployment increase the risks and costs of criminal operations. This pattern suggests that kidnapping prevalence is more strongly associated with governance deficits and geographic isolation than with poverty alone. Figure 2 therefore provides strong empirical support for the argument that the spatial distribution of kidnapping in Kaduna State is closely linked to variations in state capacity and territorial control. Areas characterized by weak governance,

limited infrastructure, and difficult terrain experienced the highest concentration of attacks, whereas urban areas with stronger institutional presence recorded substantially lower levels of kidnapping. This underscores the importance of strengthening rural security infrastructure, expanding state presence, and improving accessibility to reduce the incidence of kidnapping in vulnerable communities.

5.2 Evaluation of Security Responses

Responses have largely taken the form of short-term military deployments without sustained administrative presence (Kuna, 2023; Baker, 2021). This “whack-a-mole” approach displaces armed actors temporarily but does not address the underlying governance gap.

Table 2: Chronology of Major Security Operations in Kaduna State (2010–2020)

Year	Operation Name	Agency	Strategic Objective	Observed Outcome
2015	Op. Sharan Daji	Army	Clear Kamuku Forest of Bandits	Displaced Camps :Bandits moved to Chikun Kajuru
2019	Op. Puff Adder	Police	Secure Kaduna-Abuja Expressway	High-profile arrests; kidnapping shifted to rural schools
2020	Op. Accord	Joint	Disrupt syndicate coordination	Mutated into smaller, highly mobile "guerrilla" cells

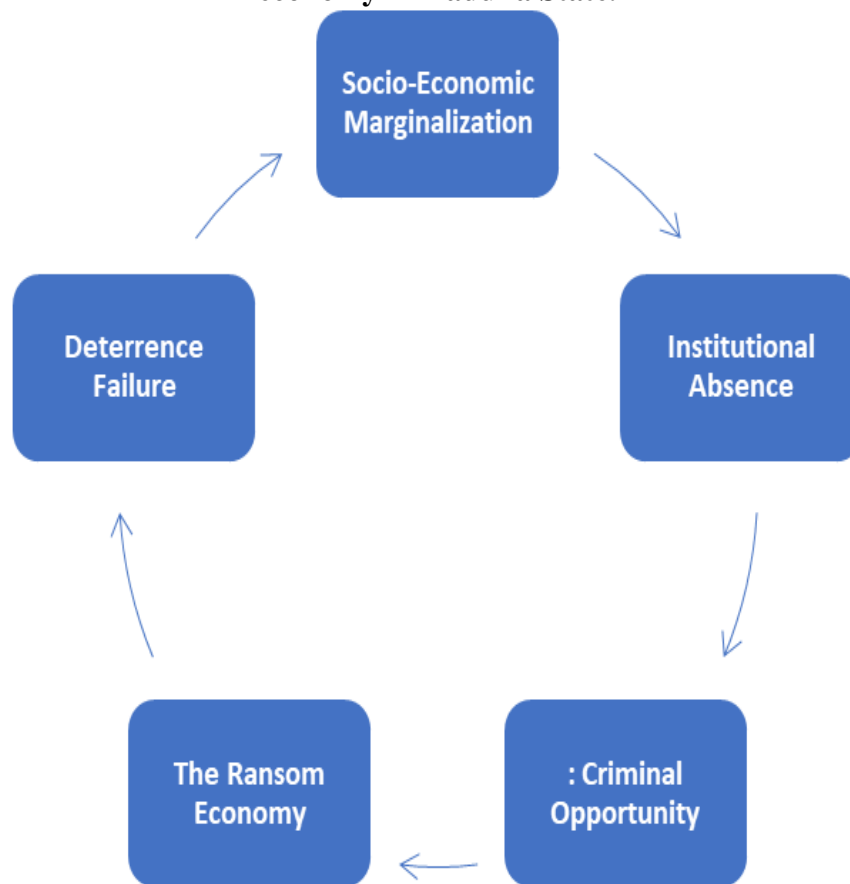
Note. Data synthesized from Kuna (2023), Baker (2021), and International Crisis Group (2020). The data in Table 2 suggests that while these operations achieved temporary tactical wins, they lacked the "sustainability" required to hold territory. Once the military withdrew, the "void" was immediately refilled.

5.3 The Governance Void Model

The model illustrates how state retreat from rural peripheries allows the ransom economy to

become the dominant regulator of social and economic relations (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021; Abba & Aminu, 2023).

Figure 1: The Governance Void Model – Illustrating the self-sustaining cycle of the ransom economy in Kaduna State.



Note._ Adapted from Okoli and Okpaleke (2021) and Onapajo (2023).

5.4 Empirical Evidence: Three Decisive Case Studies

Three incidents illustrate policy failure: Greenfield University (2021), Bethel Baptist High School (2021), and the Abuja-Kaduna Train Attack (2022). These cases show institutional weakness, intelligence deficits, and judicial failure reinforcing criminal audacity (Idris & Ogunleye, 2021; Cullen, 2022; Hassan, 2023).

5.5 Empirical Case Analysis

5.5.1 The Greenfield University Incident

The killing of five students during negotiations showed the state could not credibly enforce deterrence (Gottfredson, 2020). The absence of

static security for schools in forest-fringe LGAs revealed a critical policy gap (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021).

5.5.2 The Bethel Baptist High School Abduction

The movement of 121 students without detection points to an intelligence gap and superior informant networks held by armed groups (Cullen, 2022). The failure of community policing and early warning systems was evident (Chukwu & Nwankwo, 2023).

5.5.3 The 2022 Abuja-Kaduna Train Attack

The use of explosives showed reinvestment of ransom funds into military-grade capabilities,

confirming tactical parity with the state (Hassan, 2023; Kuna, 2023). Weak inter-agency coordination and critical infrastructure protection were key failures (Omitola, 2022).

5.6 The Deterrence Deficit

Across 55 sources reviewed, the rate of successful prosecution for kidnapping remained below 5% (Idris & Ogunleye, 2021). This lowers the perceived cost of kidnapping and sustains recruitment into armed groups.

6.0 Policy Evaluation and Strategic Recommendations

6.1 Evaluation of Existing Policies

State responses relied heavily on reactive, kinetic operations. Judicial responses were equally limited, with cases often stalled by procedural delays and corruption (Idris & Ogunleye, 2021).

6.2 Strategic Recommendations

Based on the findings, three integrated policy pathways are recommended to break the cycle of kidnapping in Kaduna State:

a. Close the Governance Void

Expand sustained state presence in high-risk LGAs through mobile courts, community policing posts, and basic infrastructure such as roads and communication networks. Territorial control without follow-up governance is insufficient. Static security detachments in schools and rural health centers in Birnin Gwari, Chikun, and Kajuru should be prioritized (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021; Agbiboa, 2021).

b. Disrupt the Ransom Economy

Target financial flows rather than only kinetic threats. This requires regulating mobile money transactions, monitoring hawala networks, and establishing a financial intelligence unit focused on ransom payments. Public awareness campaigns should discourage ransom

payment while providing secure reporting channels for victims (Adebayo, 2023; Yusuf, 2024).

c. Restore Deterrence Credibility

Reduce judicial bottlenecks by establishing specialized anti-kidnapping courts with expedited procedures and witness protection programs. Increasing the certainty of punishment from <5% to a credible level is essential to raise the cost of offending and deter recruitment (Idris & Ogunleye, 2021).

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data. While PRISMA protocols and cross-verified sources reduced the risk of bias, the analysis could not capture real-time perceptions of victims, security personnel, or local officials in Kaduna State. The absence of primary interviews means some nuances of community-state relations remain inferred rather than directly observed.

The deterrence deficit estimate of <5% successful prosecutions is based on data available up to 2021. More recent judicial data for 2022–2025 were not publicly accessible at the time of writing, which limits the ability to assess whether reforms post-2020 have shifted outcomes.

Future research should combine this governance-focused framework with field data. Three directions are promising:

- i. Qualitative interviews* with survivors, negotiators, and low-ranking security personnel to validate the “social exchange” dynamic identified here.
- ii. Financial tracing studies* using leaked ransom negotiation transcripts or mobile money metadata to map the ransom economy’s liquidity flows.
- iii. Comparative analysis* with Zamfara and Katsina States to test whether the Governance Void Model holds across the North-West corridor.

6.4 Addressing Alternative Explanations

Two alternative explanations for persistent kidnapping merit consideration. First, some analysts argue that state absence in rural Kaduna is deliberate, reflecting political calculations to avoid alienating ethnic constituencies ahead of elections (Eke, 2020). If true, then failure is not a capacity problem but a political choice.

Second, others contend that the constitutional division of security powers between the federal and state governments creates structural paralysis, making coordinated responses impossible regardless of local governance quality (Omitola, 2022).

This study does not dismiss these factors. However, the empirical pattern shows that even where federal operations were deployed, gains were reversed within months due to the absence of follow-up governance and judicial processes. The Governance Void Model therefore accounts for why operations fail even when political will and constitutional authority are present on paper. Future research should test whether states with stronger local governance, such as parts of Plateau, show lower reversion rates after military sweeps.

7. Conclusion

The study found a pattern of reactive securitization that failed to address structural causes. The governance void allowed kidnapping to evolve into a self-sustaining ransom economy (Onapajo, 2023; Achumba, 2020). Effective policy must treat kidnapping as a governance failure, not solely a security problem, by integrating territorial control, financial disruption, and judicial reform.

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