



# **A nation on the edge: Nigerians' views on kidnapping**

Daniel Tuki<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Although much research has examined armed banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria, they focus primarily on the causes of these forms of insecurity and often rely on secondary sources or single local case studies. As a result, there is a notable lack of nationally representative evidence on how Nigerians perceive kidnapping. Using large-N *Afrobarometer* survey data collected in Nigeria in 2024, this study provides a descriptive analysis of public attitudes toward kidnapping and trust in security providers. The findings show that kidnapping is Nigerians' leading security concern, with nearly one in three people reporting that they personally know someone who has been kidnapped in the past five years. The analysis further reveals limited trust in the police: when faced with security threats, Nigerians are most likely to turn to community leaders or traditional authorities, followed by neighborhood vigilante groups, with the police ranking third. These results highlight the central role of public trust in shaping civilian responses to kidnapping and armed banditry. They also suggest that state efforts to address insecurity in Nigeria depend not only on expanding security capacity but on restoring confidence in formal security institutions, especially the police.

## **Keywords**

Nigeria; Armed banditry; Kidnapping; Ransom-driven abductions; Insecurity

## **JEL Classification**

D74; D78

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<sup>1</sup> Independent Researcher, Berlin, Germany (Correspondence: [d.tuki@outlook.com](mailto:d.tuki@outlook.com))

# 1. Introduction

Nigeria has been in the global spotlight lately—and not for good reasons. The persistent violence sweeping across the country, coupled with the inability of the government and security agencies to protect citizens' lives, has led to allegations of an ongoing genocide against Christians and accusations of government complicity stemming from its failure to end the crisis (Alo et al. 2025; Jamiu 2025; Princewill 2025; Jones et al. 2025). Among the various forms of violence plaguing Nigeria, ransom-driven abduction—commonly referred to as kidnapping or armed banditry—has been particularly devastating (Ojo et al. 2023; Akinyetun 2022; Okoli & Abubakar 2021). In recognition of the destructive impact of armed bandit groups, the government has proscribed them as terrorist organizations (Ochojila 2022; The Nation 2021; Musa & Folorunsho-Francis 2025). Yet, despite these measures, banditry continues to fester, inflicting widespread hardship on Nigerians (Okoli et al. 2025; Musa 2025; Monday et al. 2025).

Public perceptions reflect this grim reality. Data from a recent *Afrobarometer* survey conducted in 2024 show that 70% of Nigerians believe the country has become less safe to live in compared to five years ago.<sup>2</sup> The same survey indicates that one in three Nigerians (33%) personally knows someone who has been kidnapped during the past five years. When asked to assess the government's efforts at preventing conflict nationwide, 82% reported that the government has performed badly. Similarly, 88% believe the government has performed badly in terms of crime prevention. These widespread perceptions of insecurity raise important questions about the underlying drivers of kidnapping and armed banditry—questions that existing scholarship seeks to address.

This literature identifies three key drivers: poverty and deprivation, institutional weakness, and porous borders. The poverty argument rests on the idea that economic hardship lowers the opportunity cost of joining armed groups (Ejiofor 2025, 2022; Ojewale et al. 2025; Ojewale 2024;

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<sup>2</sup> To access the *Afrobarometer* survey dataset and questionnaire visit: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/>

Olasupo et al. 2024; Ojo et al. 2023). Individuals with limited livelihood opportunities—those who are unemployed and face bleak future prospects—may find it difficult to resist the financial incentives offered by kidnapping gangs, particularly when they perceive they have little to lose. In addition, deprivation can generate frustration that culminates in violence. Focusing on nomadic Fulani pastoralists who have abandoned livestock rearing and embraced armed banditry as a means of survival, Ejiofor (2022) argues that relative deprivation—grievances arising from the gap between pastoralists’ material conditions and their perceived entitlements—has driven this shift.

Beyond economic explanations, another dominant strand of research emphasizes institutional weakness, particularly the state’s limited capacity to project authority (Nwankwo 2024; Ojo et al. 2023; Ojo 2020; Okoli & Abubakar 2021; Olaniyan 2018). Inadequate numbers of security personnel, poor training, and insufficient equipment—combined with Nigeria’s vast landmass and extensive forested terrain—have contributed to the emergence of ungoverned spaces with minimal state presence. These institutional vacuums create fertile ground for terrorist and armed groups to operate with relative impunity.

Related scholarship highlights the rise of parallel governance arrangements in which communities pay militias or armed groups for protection (Ejiofor 2025a; Buba 2023). However, such arrangements are inherently unstable. Buba (2023) argues that they often escalate rather than reduce violence through two mechanisms. First, *acquiescence* occurs when militias become increasingly predatory, demanding higher protection payments that impose severe economic strain on local communities. Second, *resistance* emerges when armed groups carry out violent reprisals against communities that fail or refuse to pay, both to punish defiance and to deter other communities from withholding payments.

Closely linked to arguments about weak institutions is a focus on the porosity of Nigeria’s borders (Adesola & Akerele 2025; Ojewale et al. 2025; Onoto et al. 2024; Ojo et al. 2023). This literature underscores the transnational nature of kidnapping and armed banditry by highlighting spillover effects from insecurity in neighboring countries. Weak border enforcement has facilitated

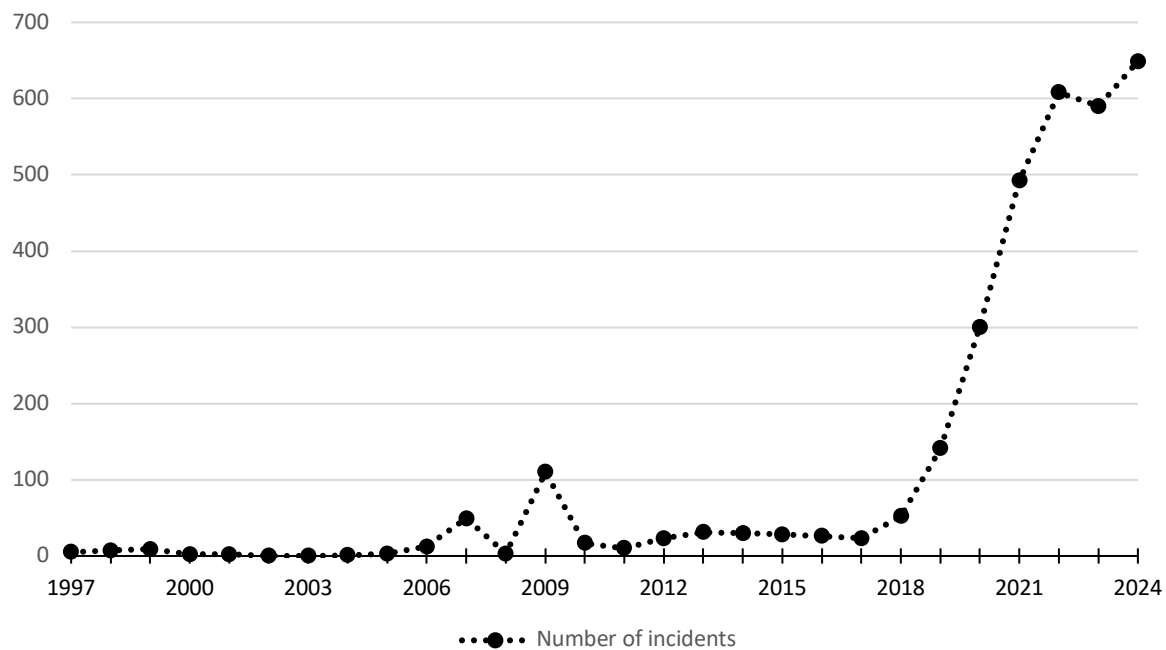
the inflow of small arms and light weapons (SALW), increasing the risk of violence. Moreover, porous borders enable terrorists and other armed groups to operate across international boundaries, making it more difficult for governments to curtail violence.

While much existing research focuses on the causes of armed banditry and kidnapping (Madueke 2025; Ojo et al. 2023; Ejiofor 2022), state responses to these attacks (Idris et al. 2024; Aina et al. 2023; Oyewole et al. 2022), and their effects on citizens' well-being (Okoli et al. 2025; Monday et al. 2025; Ojo et al. 2023; Ebonine et al. 2022), the present study adopts a different approach. Rather than examining these themes directly, it investigates Nigerians' attitudes toward kidnapping and insecurity. Moreover, prior studies are often based on qualitative interviews focusing on specific localities (e.g., Monday et al. 2025; Buba 2023; Aina 2024; Saminu et al. 2023) or rely heavily on secondary sources such as journal articles, official reports, and news coverage (e.g., Ejiofor 2025a; Onyia et al. 2025; Madueke 2025; Aina et al. 2023). As a result, there remains a notable gap in research using large-N, nationally representative survey data.

This study seeks to fill that gap using data from Round 10 of the *Afrobarometer* survey conducted in Nigeria in 2024. Adopting a descriptive approach, it examines Nigerians' perceptions of major security threats, the institutions they rely on when confronted with insecurity, their personal exposure to kidnapping through social networks, their assessments of security agencies' performance in addressing the problem, and their proposed solutions to the crisis.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: Section 2 presents trends in kidnappings across the country. Section 3 introduces the data. Section 4 documents stylized facts on Nigerians' views about kidnapping. Section 5 discusses the results, and Section 6 concludes by summarizing the findings and outlining key policy implications.

## 2. Annual trend of kidnapping in Nigeria



**Figure 1: Annual trend of kidnapping in Nigeria (1997–2024)**

**Note:** The line graph illustrates the annual trend of kidnapping incidents across Nigeria from 1997–2024. The horizontal axis shows the years, while the vertical axis shows the number of incidents. Based on data from the *Armed Conflict Location and Events Data Project* (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010), I define a kidnapping incident as any sub-event classified as “abductions/forced disappearances.”

The problem of kidnapping is not confined to Nigeria, as many African countries are also grappling with this challenge. Data from the *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project* (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010) indicate that between 1997 and 2024, a total of 15,498 incidents across Africa were classified as abductions or forced disappearances (see Table A1 in the Appendix).<sup>3</sup> With 3,123 recorded incidents, Nigeria accounted for approximately 20 percent of all such incidents on the continent, making it the most affected country. The Democratic Republic of Congo followed in second place with 2,158 incidents, while Cameroon ranked third with 2,062 incidents. Sudan and Mali ranked fourth and fifth, with 904 and 875 incidents, respectively.

To better understand the trajectory of kidnapping in Nigeria, I plot the annual trend of abductions and forced disappearances within the country. As shown in Figure 1, kidnappings were

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<sup>3</sup> To access the ACLED dataset visit: <https://acleddata.com/>

rare between 1997 and 2005. However, from 2006 onward, the number of incidents began to rise. In 2006, only two incidents were recorded, increasing to 49 in 2007. Although the number dropped sharply to three incidents in 2008, it surged to 110 in 2009. Most incidents during this period were concentrated in the oil-rich Niger Delta in Southern Nigeria, where armed groups—claiming grievances related to the environmental degradation caused by oil extraction—began abducting expatriate oil workers for ransom (Murdoch 2013; Aljazeera 2013; Adetunji 2009).<sup>4</sup>

A closer examination of the notes associated with incidents between 1997 and 2009 reflects this pattern. For instance, a note describing an incident in 1998 reads, “Two employees of the Chevron Corporation were taken hostage by Ijaw militants who demand 250,000 naira for their release.” Another in 2007 reads, “Militants seize 10 oil workers off platform in Niger Delta region.” Yet another from the same year states, “MEND [Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta] group takes 24 foreigners hostage.” One from 2008 reads, “Militants outside Port Harcourt kidnap six Filipino workers on an oil service vessel.”

Notably, these grievances initially manifested in peaceful protests; however, the government responded with military force and, in extreme cases, executed activists on trumped-up charges. A notable example is the execution of human rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, along with his comrades, by the military regime (Chibelushi 2025; Campbell 2002). The combination of unresolved grievances and the government’s heavy-handed response eventually escalated the conflict into a full-scale armed insurgency that emerged around 2004, with militants vandalizing oil installations and taking expatriate oil workers hostage for ransom (Watts & Ibaba 2011; Obi 2010; Watts 2004). At the peak of the violence, it was estimated that Nigeria was losing over 650,000 barrels of crude oil daily (Watts & During 2020). The violence subsided in 2009 when the federal government launched an amnesty program, offering militants incentives such as employment, educational training both within Nigeria and abroad, and monthly stipends. Leaders

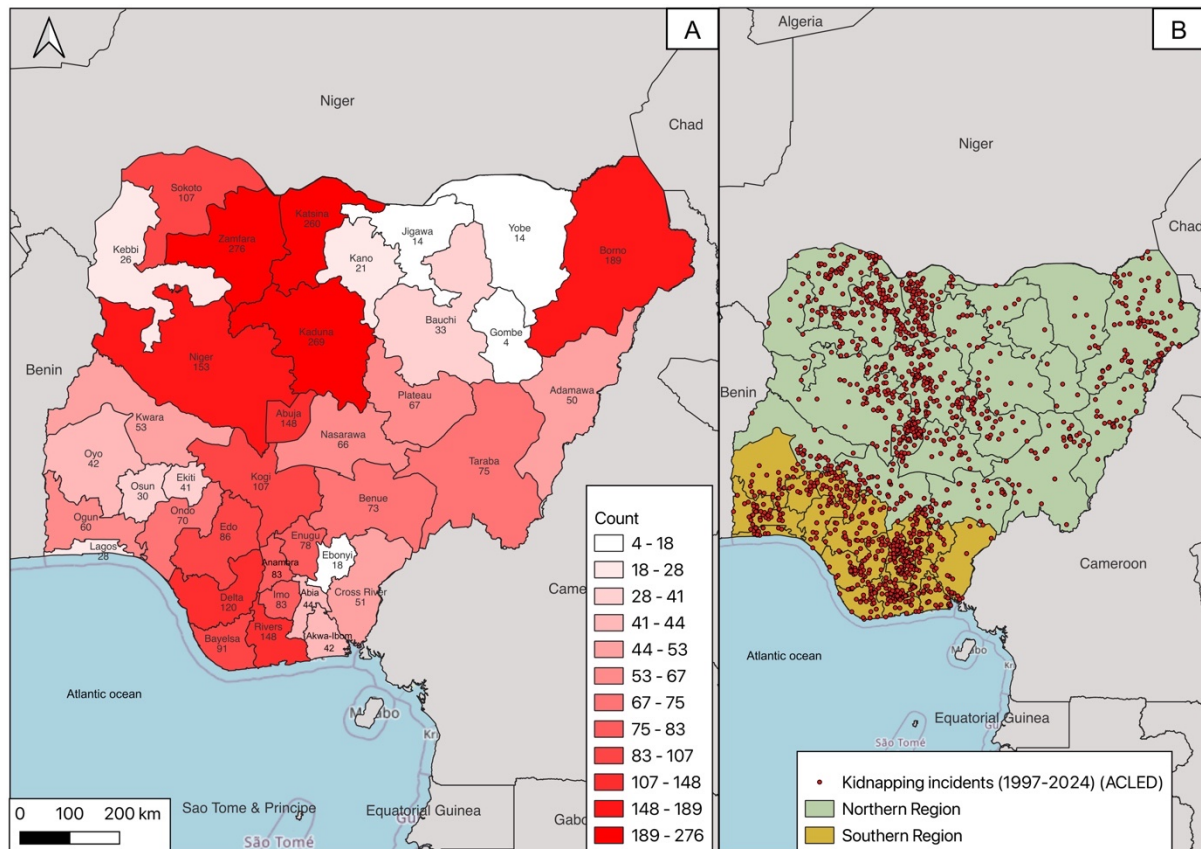
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<sup>4</sup> The Niger Delta in southern Nigeria comprises the states of Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers.

of the militant groups were also offered lucrative oil pipeline protection contracts in exchange for laying down their arms (Eke 2016, 2015; Obi 2014; Agbiboa 2013).

Between 2010 and 2017, the maximum number of kidnapping incidents recorded in a single year did not exceed 31. However, in 2018, the number rose to 52, increasing steadily until 2022, when 608 incidents were recorded. The number dropped slightly to 590 incidents in 2023 before reaching a peak of 649 in 2024—the highest recorded since 1997. Although Figure 1 plots incidents only between 1997 and 2024, it is also important to note that between January 1, 2025, and May 16, 2025, a total of 243 incidents were recorded. This translates to an average of 1.79 kidnappings per day. At this rate, the number of incidents in 2025 may reach approximately 654, slightly exceeding the number recorded in 2024.

By contrast, the majority of kidnapping incidents from 2017 onward are concentrated primarily in Nigeria's northern region, involving the radical Islamist group *Boko Haram* as well as armed bandit groups. A major difference between these incidents and earlier ones concerns the targets of abduction. While kidnappings in the Niger Delta were directed mainly at expatriate oil workers, those occurring in northern Nigeria are directed largely at ordinary citizens such as school pupils, farmers, religious worshippers, and travelers (Jones et al. 2025; Akote 2025; Aramide 2025). The notes associated with these incidents in the ACLED dataset reveal this pattern. For example, one incident from 2019 reads, "28 August. Suspected Fulani militia abducted women from Wurma. Information on the number of abductees range from 15 to 50." Another from 2020 reads, "Around 21 October 2020 (week of), *Boko Haram* militants abducted no fewer than 30 farmers in Njimtilo and Moromti communities (Konduga LGA, Borno). Reason for abduction unknown." A 2024 incident reads, "On 6 August 2024, a Kaduna militia abducted an unspecified number of Islamic students and their cleric in Zaria (Zaria, Kaduna)."



**Figure 2: Distribution of kidnapping across Nigeria's states (1997–2024)**

**Note:** The figure illustrates the distribution of kidnapping incidents across Nigeria's states from 1997–2024. Based on data from the *Armed Conflict Location and Events Data Project* (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010), I define a kidnapping incident as any sub-event classified as “abductions/forced disappearances.” The figure was developed by the author using QGIS software.

Next, I illustrate the spatial distribution of kidnappings in Nigeria between 1997 and 2024 using a shapefile containing the administrative boundaries of the country's 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). As shown in Figure 2, Panel A presents a graduated map in which states shaded in darker red record higher incidences of kidnapping. The map also displays state names and the total number of incidents recorded in each. A glance at the figure shows that Zamfara records 278 incidents, making it the most affected state. Kaduna and Katsina record 271 and 260 incidents, respectively, ranking as the second and third most affected states. Borno—the state most affected by the *Boko Haram* insurgency—ranks fourth with 189 incidents, while Abuja and Niger State are jointly fifth, with 149 incidents each. Notably, all these states are in Northern Nigeria.



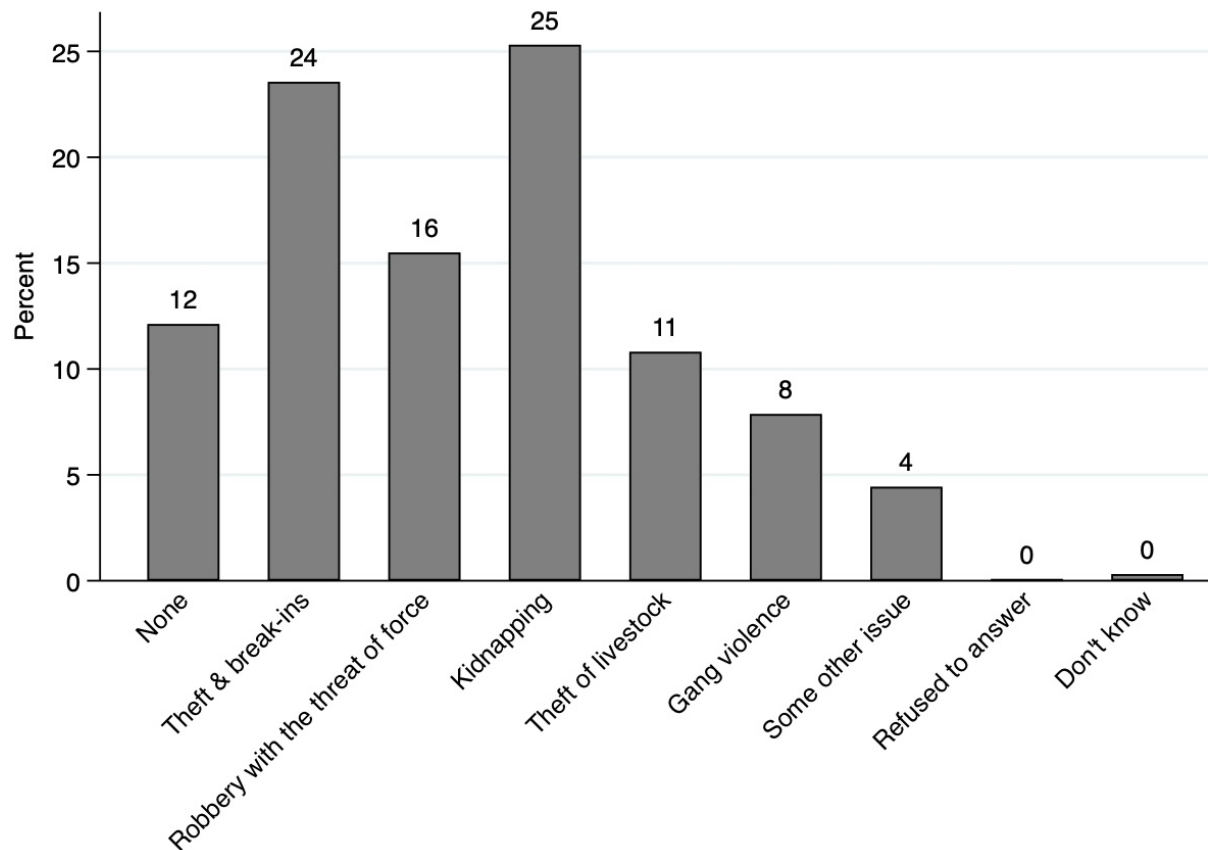
Interestingly, the three states with the lowest incidence of kidnapping are also in the Northern Region, with Gombe recording only 4 incidents, making it the least affected state. Jigawa and Yobe jointly take second place, with each recording 14 incidents. Ebonyi in Southern Nigeria records 18 incidents, making it the fourth least affected state. Panel B in Figure 2 shows the geolocations of the kidnapping incidents across the states that constitute Nigeria’s Northern and Southern Regions.

### **3. Data**

This study relies on data from Round 10 of the *Afrobarometer* survey, conducted in Nigeria from June to July 2024. The survey collected responses from 1,600 individuals across Nigeria’s 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). All respondents were at least 18 years old, with men and women represented in an equal ratio of 50:50. Because *Afrobarometer* employs probabilistic sampling, the data are nationally representative.

The survey was implemented by NOI Polls, a local survey firm based in Abuja. Interviews were conducted in English as well as in local languages, including Pidgin English, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. The descriptive analysis presented in Section 4 draws entirely on the *Afrobarometer* dataset.

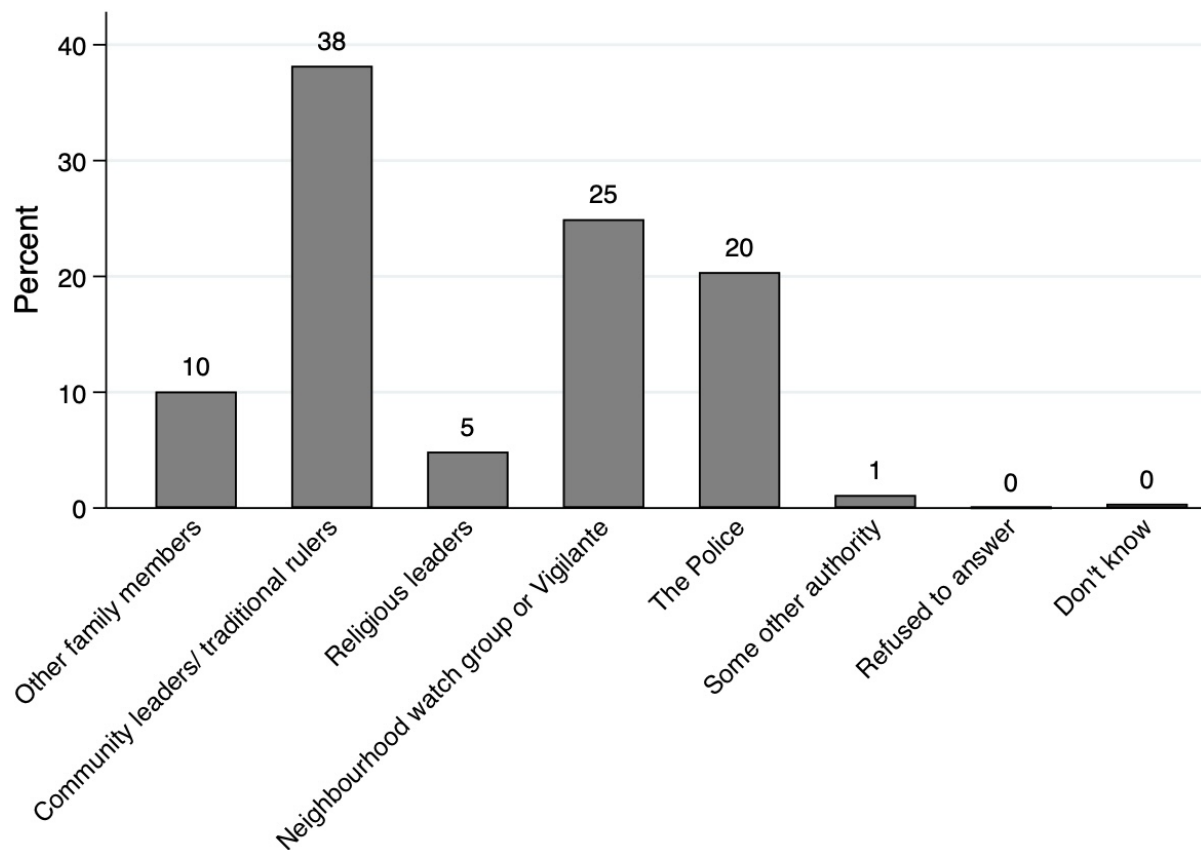
#### 4. Nigerians' views on kidnapping



**Figure 3: Most important safety threat in Nigerians' local communities**

**Note:** The figure plots Nigerians' responses to a question asking about the main security threat they face in their communities. The horizontal axis displays the various threats, while the vertical axis shows the percentages associated with each threat. The figure is based on data from Round 10 of the *Afrobarometer* survey conducted in Nigeria in 2024.

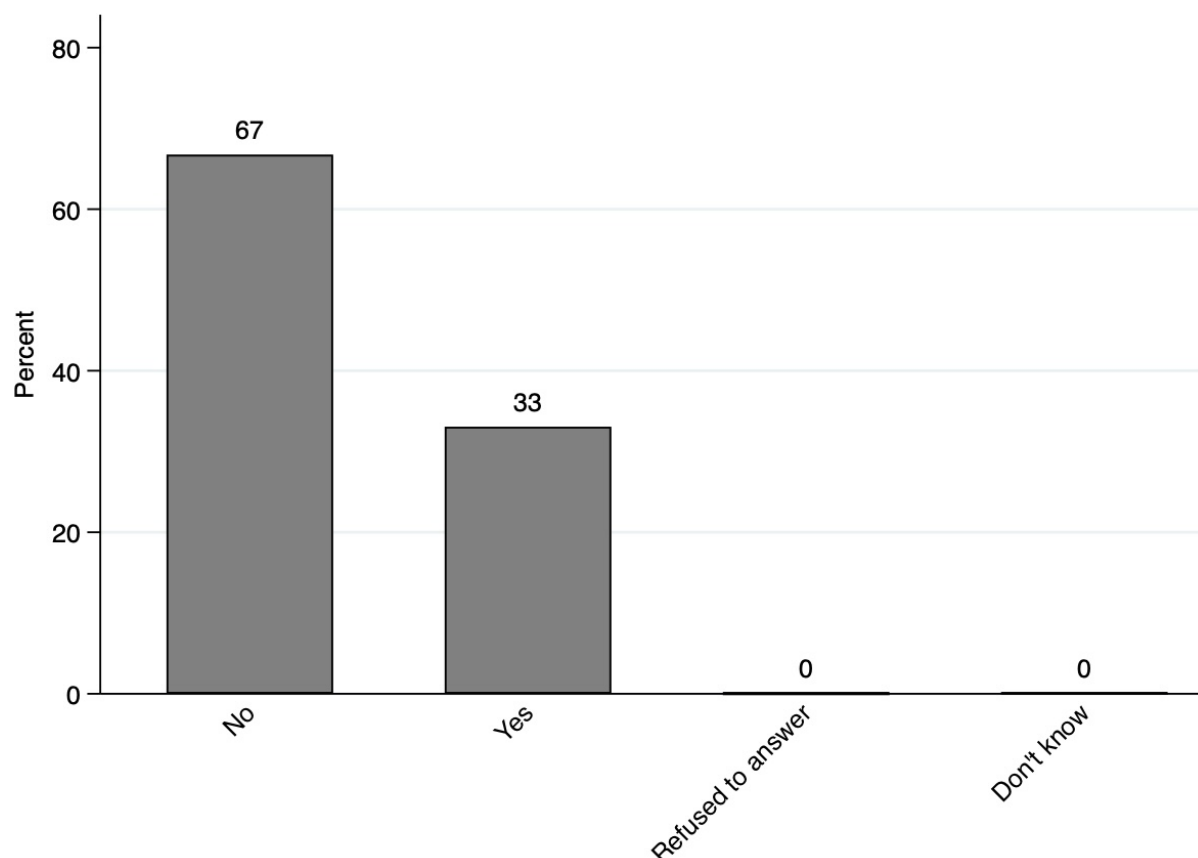
To understand Nigerians' views on kidnapping, I conduct a descriptive analysis using simple bar charts to illustrate their responses to relevant questions. I begin with a question asking Nigerians to identify the main security concern in their local communities. As shown in Figure 3, only 12% of respondents report having no security concerns, indicating that the vast majority (88%) are affected by one form of insecurity or another. Kidnapping emerges as the most frequently cited concern, with 25% of the population listing it. Theft and break-ins follows closely at 24%, while robbery with the threat of force ranks third at 16%.



**Figure 4: First institution of contact when Nigerians have security concerns**

**Note:** Respondents were asked, “If you have a serious concern about the safety and security of your family, who among the following institutions would you first go to for assistance?” The horizontal axis displays the listed institutions, while the vertical axis shows the percentage of respondents selecting each one. The figure is based on data from Round 10 of the *Afrobarometer* survey conducted in Nigeria in 2024.

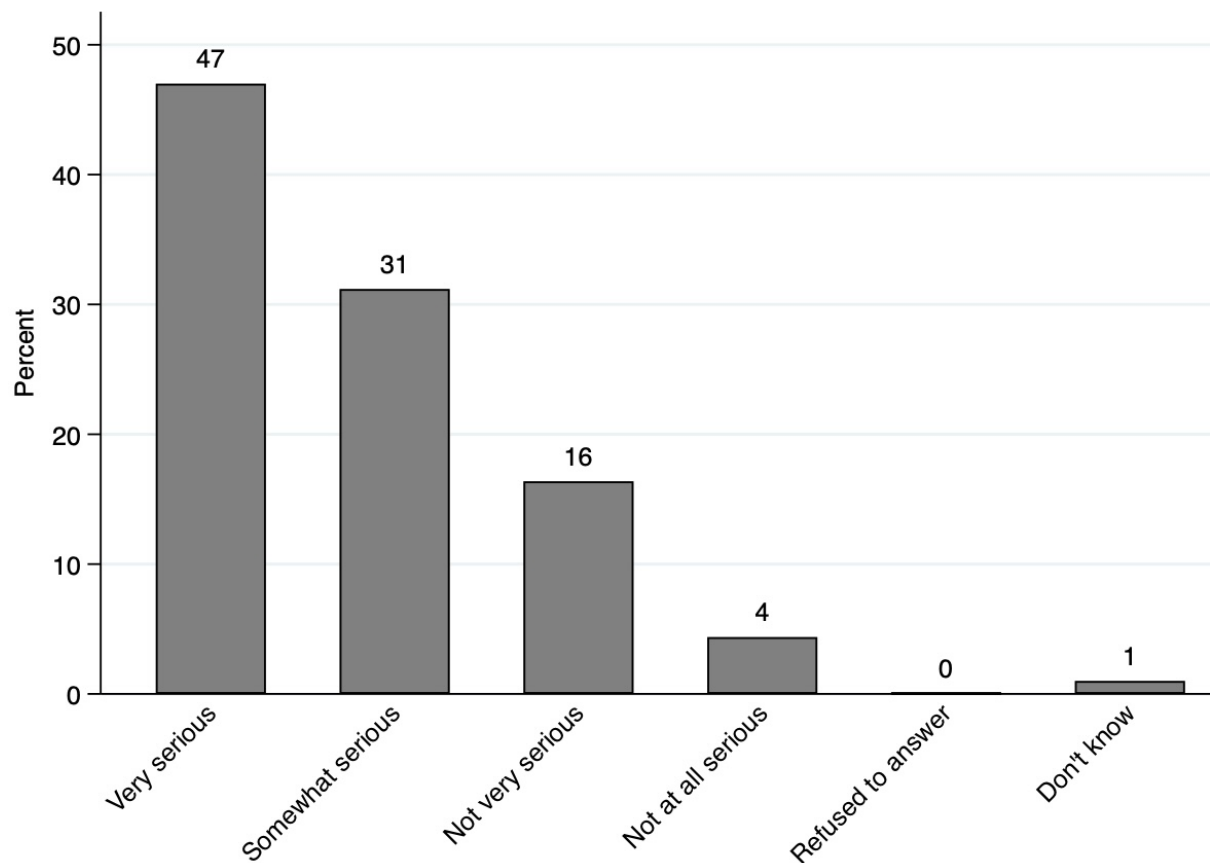
Next, I examine Nigerians’ trust in institutions, using a survey question asking respondents whom they would contact first when faced with a security threat. As shown in Figure 4, Nigerians tend to rely primarily on informal institutions: 38% identify community leaders or traditional rulers as their first point of contact when they need security assistance, and another 25% mention neighborhood watch groups or vigilante groups. The police rank third, with only 20% of respondents stating that the police would be their first point of contact in the event of a security concern.



**Figure 5: Nigerians who personally know someone who was kidnapped**

**Note:** Respondents were asked, “Nigeria has recently experienced a number of kidnappings and abductions. Do you personally know anyone who has been abducted or kidnapped in the past five years?” The horizontal axis lists the various responses to the question, while the vertical axis shows the percentage of respondents associated with each response. The figure is based on data from Round 10 of the *Afrobarometer* survey conducted in Nigeria in 2024.

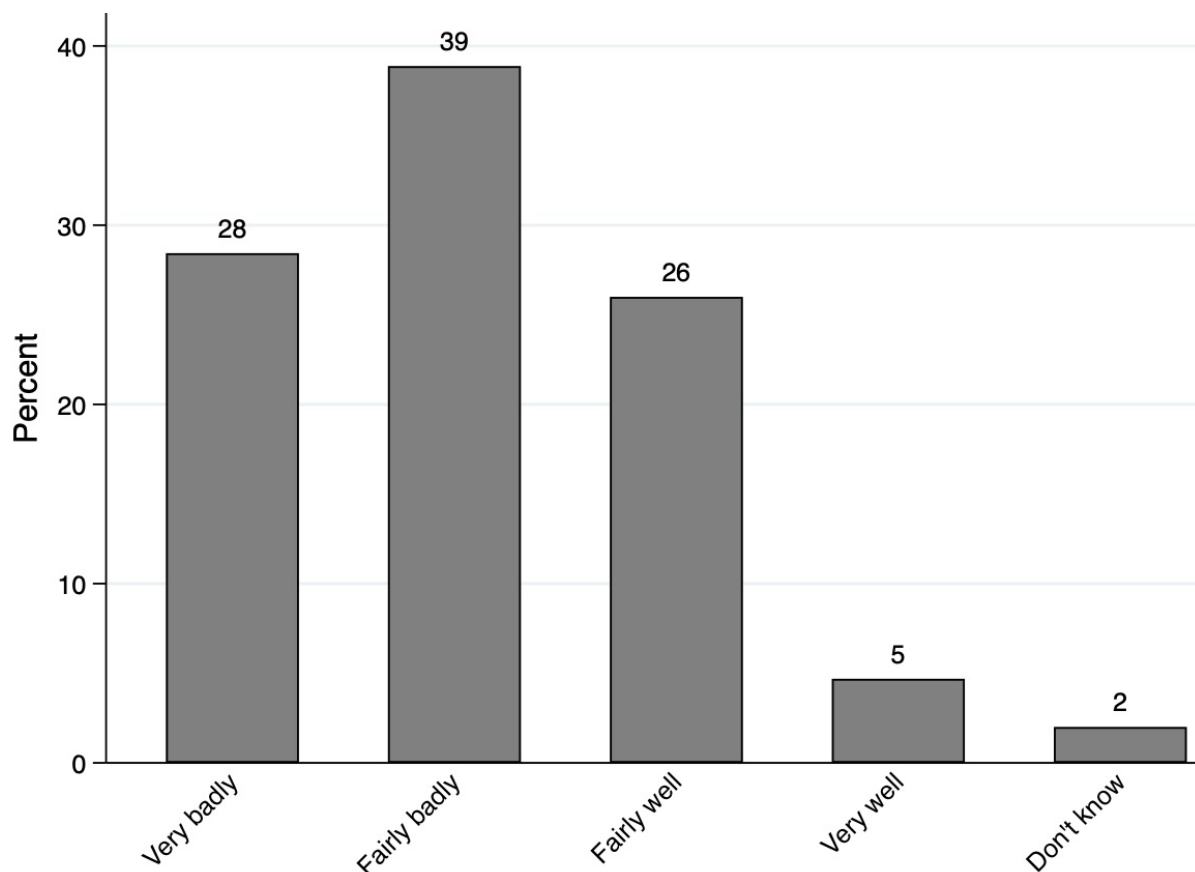
To assess Nigerians’ proximity to kidnapping, I rely on a survey question asking whether respondents personally know someone who has been kidnapped in the past five years. As shown in Figure 5, 33% of the population—approximately one in three Nigerians—answer yes. This high proportion underscores the widespread nature of the kidnapping menace across the country.



**Figure 6: Seriousness of abductions and kidnappings**

**Note:** The figure is based on a question asking respondents to assess how serious the problem of kidnapping is across the country. The horizontal axis shows the various levels of seriousness, while the vertical axis shows the percentage of respondents corresponding to each level. The figure is based on data from Round 10 of the *Afrobarometer* survey conducted in Nigeria in 2024.

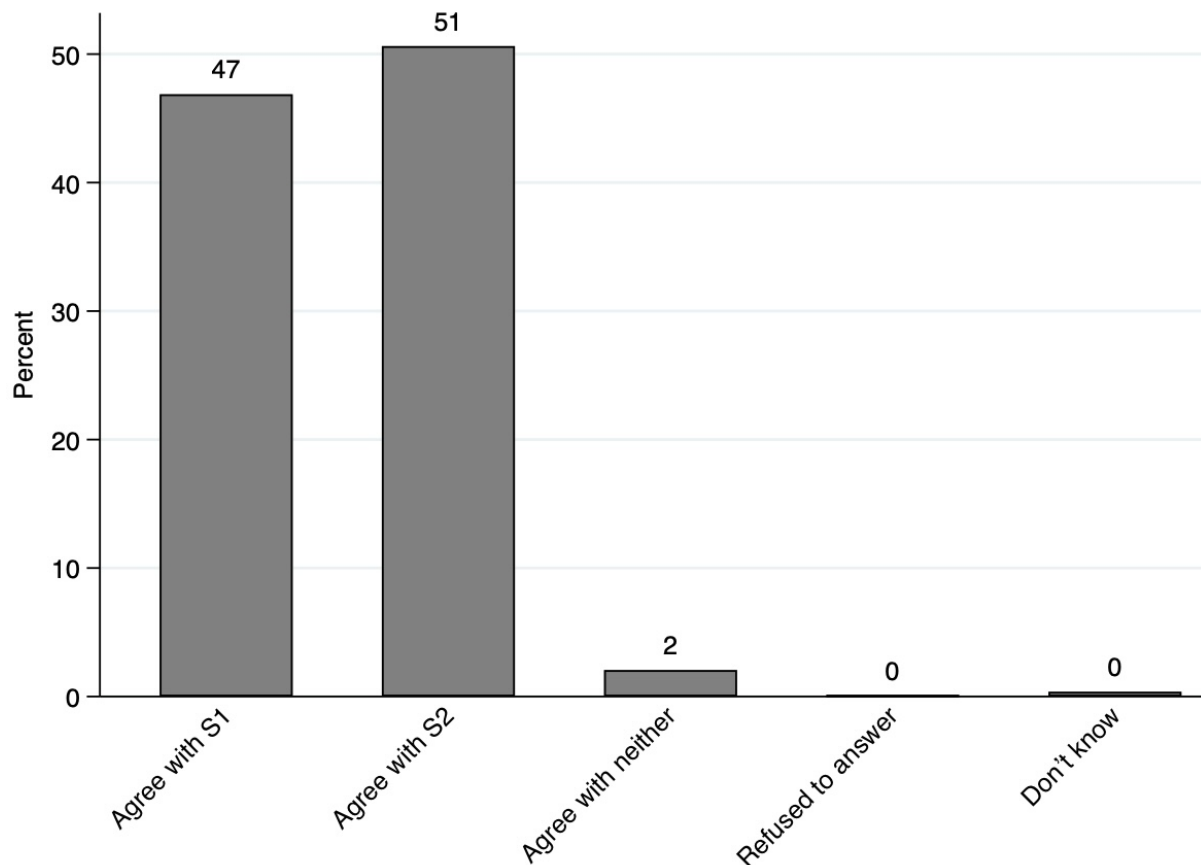
Regardless of whether respondents personally know someone affected by kidnapping, I examine the extent to which Nigerians are concerned about the issue. As shown in Figure 6, 78% believe kidnappings and abductions are a serious problem in the country, compared to a mere 20% who believe otherwise.



**Figure 7: Assessment of security agencies' handling of kidnapping across the country**

**Note:** Respondents were asked, “How well or badly would you say the security agencies are handling the kidnapping or abductions of Nigerian citizens?” The horizontal axis shows the different assessment categories, while the vertical axis shows the percentage of respondents corresponding to each category. The figure is based on data from Round 10 of the *Afrobarometer* survey conducted in Nigeria in 2024.

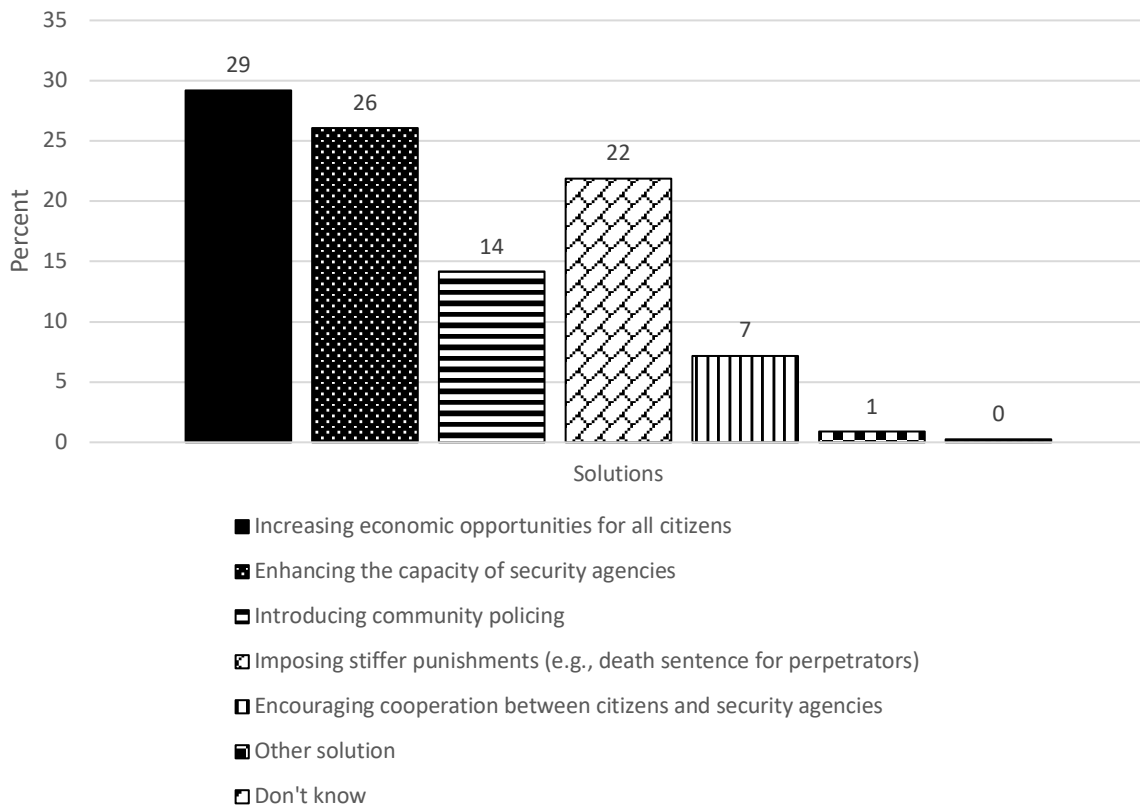
To assess Nigerians' evaluation of security agencies' efforts to address the problem of kidnapping across the country, I draw on a related survey question, the responses to which are plotted in Figure 7. A glance at the figure reveals that most Nigerians rate these efforts poorly, with 67% indicating that security agencies have performed either very badly or fairly badly. In contrast, 25% believe they have performed fairly well, while only a mere 5% say they have performed very well.



**Figure 8: Trusting law enforcement vs. alternatives for rescue.**

**Note:** Respondents were asked, “Which of the following statements is closest to your view? **Statement 1 (S1):** *It is better for families to rely on law enforcement agencies for the rescue and safe return of kidnapped persons.* **Statement 2 (S2):** *Since law enforcement agencies have had limited success in dealing with abductions and kidnappings, it is better for citizens to find other ways to rescue their abducted relatives.*” The horizontal axis shows the levels of agreement with the statements, while the vertical axis shows the percentage of respondents corresponding to each level. The figure is based on data from Round 10 of the *Afrobarometer* survey conducted in Nigeria in 2024.

To assess the degree to which Nigerians believe security agencies are capable of rescuing kidnapped individuals, I rely on a related question. This question presents respondents with two statements. The first (Statement 1) expresses the view that families should rely primarily on security agencies to rescue members or relatives who have been kidnapped. The second (Statement 2) asserts that families should seek alternative means of rescuing kidnapped relatives rather than relying on security agencies, which have been ineffective. As shown in Figure 8, most Nigerians prefer alternative means of rescue (51%) rather than depending on security agencies (47%). Just 2% agree with neither statement.



**Figure 9: Suggested solutions to the problem of kidnapping**

**Note:** The figure displays respondents’ suggestions regarding the main approach to tackling the problem of kidnapping. The different fills in the bars correspond to the respective solutions, while the vertical axis shows the percentage of respondents corresponding to each solution. The figure is based on data from Round 10 of the *Afrobarometer* survey conducted in Nigeria in 2024.

Finally, I examine Nigerians’ recommendations for addressing the problem of kidnapping and abduction. As shown in Figure 9, 29% believe that increasing economic opportunities for citizens would be the most effective approach. This reflects widespread concerns about unemployment and poverty, persistent problems across the country (World Bank 2025; Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics 2021, 2020). Ranked second is enhancing the capacity of security agencies (26%), which may involve better training and equipment. Ranked third is the recommendation that the government impose harsher punishments, such as the death penalty (22%). Ranked fourth and fifth are the introduction of community policing (14%) and encouraging cooperation between citizens and security agencies (7%), respectively.



## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Trust and capacity of security agencies

A major finding from the analysis is the widespread incidence of kidnapping across the country, with one in three Nigerians reporting knowing someone who has been kidnapped. This trend has left many Nigerians deeply concerned about the crisis and eroded their trust in formal security institutions, such as the police. Distrust in the police is compounded by routine demands for bribes, as shown in the 2024 *Afrobarometer* survey. Although only 7% report approaching the police for help, 71% of those who did had to pay a bribe to receive assistance. The survey also shows that 71% of Nigerians had some form of contact with the police during the same period, and among this group, 52% reported paying a bribe to avoid a problem with the police.

These patterns of corruption correspond with widespread distrust in law-enforcement institutions: 52% of Nigerians say they have no trust at all in the police. Distrust in the army is somewhat lower, with 18% reporting no trust at all. High levels of distrust extend to political institutions as well: 44% of respondents express no trust in the president, and 45% report the same about the national assembly. In contrast, Nigerians exhibit considerably higher trust in informal institutions: only 17% express no trust in traditional rulers, and just 12% report similar attitudes toward religious leaders.

The high levels of distrust in both government and security institutions are particularly concerning given the Nigerian government's recent proposals to recruit additional security personnel into the police and military as part of its strategy to address rising insecurity (Muhammad 2025; Oloja 2025). Beyond longstanding concerns about the welfare of existing security personnel—such as poor working conditions, inadequate training, and insufficient equipment (Madueke 2025; Ugwuoke et al. 2024; Ojewale 2023; Ojo 2014)—the strained relationship between security agencies and the public, driven by the perceived corruption of these institutions (Tiwa 2024; Ike et al. 2022; Oluwaniyi 2021; Arisukwu et al. 2021), requires urgent attention. Effective

intelligence gathering is crucial for tackling insecurity. Security agencies depend heavily on information provided by civilians. However, in a context where trust in security institutions is low, public cooperation is likely to be severely undermined.

Furthermore, people will seek assistance from security agencies only if they believe these institutions are staffed by individuals committed to public safety rather than by those who exploit citizens' desperation and helplessness for financial gain. When Nigerians hesitate to request help—whether because they cannot afford to pay bribes or because they lack confidence in security personnel—simply hiring more officers is unlikely to reduce insecurity.

A related concern is the widespread perception that some government officials and security personnel may enable or collaborate with terrorist groups for personal financial benefit. A recent example is the November 21, 2025 kidnapping of 25 schoolgirls from a secondary school in Kebbi State, where soldiers stationed at the school reportedly withdrew from their posts just before the abduction, prompting calls for an investigation into actions that may have facilitated the operation (Atungwu 2025; Uthman et al. 2025).

To better understand Nigerians' tendency to associate government officials and security personnel with insecurity, I draw on related questions from Round 8 of the *Afrobarometer* survey, conducted in 2020. Respondents were specifically asked about the extent to which they believe senior federal government officials and members of the military are involved in supporting terrorist groups responsible for kidnappings across the country. While 67% of respondents believe that at least *some* senior government officials support these groups, the estimate is slightly lower for members of the military (64%). Previous reports suggest that some political elites dissatisfied with the government may have fomented violence as a strategy to undermine the incumbent administration (This Day 2025; BBC 2012). Together, these stylized facts indicate that the challenge of building public trust extends beyond the security agencies themselves to the federal government more broadly.

## 5.2. Poverty and restitution

The descriptive analysis also shows that increasing opportunities for all citizens is the main solution Nigerians believe would help resolve the problem of kidnapping. This view likely stems from the high level of poverty in the country and the widespread inability of citizens to meet basic needs—conditions that culminated in the #EndBadGovernance protests in 2024 (Amnesty International 2024; Tuki & Kwari 2024). Nigerians' poor socioeconomic conditions are further reflected in the 2024 *Afrobarometer* survey: 61% of respondents reported going without food at least several times during the past year. When asked to assess their present living conditions relative to 12 months earlier, 75% said their situation had worsened. Evaluations of the national economy were even more pessimistic, with 90% stating that the economy had deteriorated. When asked about the government's performance in creating jobs, 94% rated its performance as poor. Beyond lowering the opportunity cost of joining violent groups (Collier 2008; Collier & Hoeffler 2004), poverty is also a critical issue in its own right, requiring urgent government action.

While the second- and fifth-most suggested solutions (see Figure 9) relate to the capacity of security agencies and their relationship with citizens—issues already discussed in Section 5.1—the third most recommended solution, imposing stiffer punishments (e.g., the death penalty for perpetrators), also warrants further attention. Over 22% of Nigerians believe harsher penalties are necessary for perpetrators, indicating that many are of the opinion that the government has not been sufficiently tough on those who have inflicted immense suffering on citizens. To fully understand this preference for stricter punishment, it is necessary to briefly examine the politics of amnesty in Nigeria.

In his comparative study of insurgents in the oil-rich Niger Delta, *Boko Haram*, and secessionist groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) movement in the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region, Agboga (2022, p. 573) poses an important question: “How then is it the case that Boko Haram, an internationally recognised terrorist group, has been able to attract more state forgiveness than IPOB? Should justice as well as forgiveness not be dished out

according to the extent of wrongs committed?” This question is grounded in the fact that *Boko Haram* is the deadliest group Nigeria has encountered in its history, perpetrating indiscriminate violence against security institutions, government agencies, and civilians. By contrast, although the insurgency in Eastern Nigeria began as peaceful protests and escalated into violence around 2015—mostly directed at security personnel (Tuki 2025, 2024)—the scale of violence remains minimal compared to *Boko Haram*.

Agboga (2022) argues that ethnic politics and the distribution of economic power have shaped the selective offer of amnesty to some groups but not others. The Northern-led Nigerian government displayed considerable restraint in its handling of *Boko Haram* by offering amnesty to members of the group (Ugwueze et al. 2022; Owonikoko 2022; Ogunnubi & Aja 2024), a move attributed to their Northern and Islamic identity. Indeed, former President Muhammadu Buhari, in advocating amnesty for *Boko Haram* members, questioned why such forgiveness could be extended to insurgents from the oil-rich Niger Delta but not to insurgents of Northern extraction (The Nation 2013). In the Niger Delta case, the government offered amnesty due to the militants’ ability to damage oil infrastructure, threatening Nigeria’s primary source of revenue (Eke 2015; Ajayi & Adesote 2013; Davidheiser & Nyiayaana 2011). As noted earlier, Nigeria was losing over 650,000 barrels of crude oil daily (Walls & During 2020) due to attacks by militants in the Niger Delta Region, when the conflict was at its peak. This capacity to cripple the economy granted the insurgents significant leverage, incentivizing the government to negotiate.

By contrast, amnesty was not extended to separatists in the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region because the Igbo do not occupy political power at the federal center, nor is the region endowed with lucrative oil resources. Put differently, unlike the other two insurgent groups, the militias in the Eastern Region lack the leverage to make state forgiveness a strategic option. This pattern of selective justice is reflected in the recent life imprisonment sentence handed down to Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of IPOB, which seeks the secession of Nigeria’s Eastern Region to create an independent state of Biafra (Abubakar 2025). It is important to note that, beyond longstanding

grievances about the political marginalization of the Igbo ethnic group, IPOB has also cited persistent violence perpetrated by *Boko Haram* insurgents and nomadic Fulani pastoralists as further justification for its separatist demands (IPOB n.d.). Notably, Kanu's sentence has sparked protests across Nigeria, accompanied by calls for his release and allegations of selective application of the law (Opejobi 2025; Nnachi 2025). It is therefore unsurprising that, writing three years before Kanu's sentencing, Agboga (2022) observed: "At this point, it is difficult to ignore the ethnic undertone of the security strategy of the Nigerian government, which seems in a hurry to compromise with criminal elements from the north and crush those in the south" (p. 574).

Turning to the case of armed banditry and kidnapping, it is important to note that the government has engaged in negotiations with bandits and even offered amnesty to some of them, despite the scale of their atrocities (Hassan-Wuyo 2025; Onyia et al. 2025; The Guardian 2024; Ajibola 2021; Anyadike 2018). However, Mohammed (2025) questions the effectiveness of amnesty as a tool for addressing the kidnapping crisis, arguing that "the pursuit of poorly structured amnesty deals has emboldened armed groups; deepened community mistrust of the state; and perpetuated impunity. These peace deals are not a path to stability—they are a dangerous illusion." Similarly, Musa (2022) notes that negotiations with bandits have been ineffective in halting repeated attacks. Agboga (2022) also criticizes the government's amnesty programs for prioritizing the needs of "repentant" perpetrators while neglecting victims: "Victims of the insurgency continue to languish in IDP camps while the government throws big 'graduation' parties for the de-radicalised fighters" (p. 574).

## **6. Conclusion**

Using survey data from *Afrobarometer*, this study examined Nigerians' attitudes toward the rising trend of kidnapping across the country. The analysis reveals that most Nigerians have been exposed to kidnapping incidents, with one in three individuals personally knowing someone who has been kidnapped in the past five years. In addition to identifying kidnapping as the primary

security threat facing them, the study also finds that a majority of Nigerians believe the problem has worsened over time. Furthermore, the analysis shows that most Nigerians assess the efforts of security agencies in tackling the kidnapping crisis as insufficient and express a lack of confidence in their ability to rescue kidnapped family members or relatives. As a result, many prefer to seek alternative methods to rescue their loved ones.

This lack of trust in security agencies is further reflected in the institutions people turn to for help when facing security concerns: community leaders and neighborhood vigilante groups rank first and second, while the police come in third place. The study also reveals that Nigerians believe the creation of economic opportunities, enhancing the capacity of security agencies, improving relationships between security agencies and citizens, and implementing stiffer punishments for perpetrators would be effective measures in reducing kidnappings across the country.

These findings have important policy implications. Although the Nigerian government has responded to the kidnapping crisis by declaring a security emergency and ordering the recruitment of additional security personnel, this approach is unlikely to yield substantial results unless the underlying issue of distrust in security agencies—particularly the police—is addressed. While fostering more dialogue between the police and citizens is critical to building trust and improving public attitudes toward law enforcement, attention must also be given to combating corruption among security personnel, especially with regard to the solicitation of bribes. This could be mitigated by improving salaries and welfare measures for security personnel.

Gaining public trust is essential because effective security relies on cooperation between citizens and security agencies, such as in intelligence sharing. Without trust, this cooperation is undermined, making it harder for security agencies to function effectively. Notably, the problem of distrust extends beyond law enforcement to the political sphere, with many individuals expressing a lack of confidence in the government and associating some officials with the violence

plaguing the country. Consequently, the goal of rebuilding public trust should be pursued not only by security institutions but also by the central government.

The government must also address the root causes of insecurity, particularly poverty and lack of opportunity, as these factors increase the likelihood of individuals joining violent groups. People with little to lose are more vulnerable to recruitment by violent organizations. This issue is especially pronounced in Northern Nigeria, where poverty levels are significantly higher than in the South. To address this, the government should focus on job creation programs and pursue initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty. Additionally, the government must strengthen the capacity of the police by providing adequate training and necessary equipment to combat insecurity. Ensuring justice for victims of kidnapping and other crimes is also critical. The persistence of kidnappings, despite the government's amnesty programs, has created widespread grievances among the population, who view these measures as rewarding perpetrators of violence while neglecting the victims. Therefore, the government must give greater attention to the needs and rights of victims of crime, ensuring that they receive the support and justice they deserve.

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## Appendix

**Table A1: Distribution of kidnapping across African (1997–2024)**

Country	Frequency	Percent
Algeria	29	0.19
Angola	21	0.14
Benin	172	1.11
Burkina Faso	804	5.19
Burundi	689	4.45
Cameroon	2062	13.30
Central African Republic	530	3.42
Chad	78	0.50
Comoros	3	0.02
Democratic Republic of Congo	2158	13.92
Egypt	169	1.09
Eritrea	4	0.03
Ethiopia	239	1.54
Gabon	6	0.04
Gambia	7	0.05
Ghana	7	0.05
Guinea	11	0.07
Guinea-Bissau	4	0.03
Ivory Coast	40	0.26
Kenya	235	1.52
Liberia	10	0.06
Libya	398	2.57
Madagascar	193	1.25
Malawi	7	0.05
Mali	875	5.65
Mauritania	6	0.04
Mayotte	1	0.01
Morocco	1	0.01
Mozambique	154	0.99
Namibia	7	0.05
Niger	561	3.62
Nigeria	3123	20.15
Republic of Congo	11	0.07
Rwanda	28	0.18
Senegal	11	0.07
Sierra Leone	254	1.64
Somalia	620	4.00
South Africa	20	0.13
South Sudan	574	3.70
Sudan	904	5.83
Tanzania	33	0.21
Togo	4	0.03
Tunisia	12	0.08
Uganda	255	1.65
Zambia	7	0.05
Zimbabwe	160	1.03
eSwatini	1	0.01
<b>Total</b>	<b>15,498</b>	<b>100.00</b>

**Note:** The figure shows the distribution of kidnapping incidents across all African countries from 1997 to 2025. Based on data from the Armed Conflict Location and Events Data Project (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010), I define a kidnapping incident as any sub-event classified as “abductions/forced disappearances.”

