

Ungoverned Borderlands: Banditry and Crisis of Human Security in Nigeria's North West, 2018-2025

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Abstract

Banditry has become a major security issue in Nigeria's North West Border States, especially Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto, and Kebbi, given the porous borderlands. This study explores banditry and human security in these states from 2018 to 2025. It is guided by four objectives: to analyze the link between banditry and human security, identify key drivers of banditry, evaluate its impact on human security, and examine the challenges in combating it. Theoretical insights draw on Rational Choice Theory, viewing banditry as a rational response to limited legitimate economic opportunities, with insecurity as a rational reaction to threats of violence. The study used a qualitative approach, relying on secondary data from journals, reports, policy papers, government publications, and credible media. Results show that banditry and human security are closely linked and reinforce each other. Factors fueling banditry include poverty, youth unemployment, environmental damage, governance failure, and porous borders. Banditry threatens personal, economic, food, health, community, and political security through abductions, livelihood destruction, trade disruptions, decreased agriculture, health facility closures, displacement, and weakened institutions. Efforts are hampered by border vulnerabilities, armed groups, a self-sustaining kidnapping economy, governance issues, corruption, overreliance on security measures, financial constraints, and difficulties in protecting civilians and services. The findings suggest a need for a comprehensive human security approach. Recommendations involve combining security measures with poverty alleviation, youth employment efforts, border cooperation, disrupting financing of violence, restoring essential services, boosting food system resilience, and promoting accountable governance.

Keywords: *banditry, human security, insecurity, North-West Nigeria, ungoverned borderland*

1. Introduction

Banditry has become a major security challenge in Nigeria, chiefly in the North West region. While armed violence, cattle rustling, kidnapping, and rural criminality have long existed in various parts of the country, the scale and persistence of banditry since 2015 have posed substantial threats to the safety and wellbeing of communities in the North West Border States. Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto, and Kebbi, which share international boundaries with the Republic of Niger, have experienced repeated attacks, abductions, cattle rustling, destruction of property, displacement,

and disruption of economic and social activities. These developments have undermined physical safety, livelihoods, access to basic services, food production, healthcare, and community stability (Ojewale, 2024; Ofoma, 2024).

The concept of human security offers an all-encompassing framework for analysing banditry's broader consequences. Introduced by the United Nations Development Programme in 1994, the human security approach shifts the focus from state-centric protection to protecting people and communities. Human security encompasses freedom from fear and freedom from want, including protection from violence and access to economic opportunities, food, healthcare, and other essential conditions for human wellbeing (United Nations Development Programme, 1994). Within this system, banditry is not only a form of armed criminality but also a major threat to individuals' and communities' ability to live safely, sustain livelihoods, secure food, access healthcare, and sustain stable social relations.

The emergence and expansion of banditry in the North West since 2015 are linked to both domestic and regional factors. Historically, many communities in the region have faced poverty, unemployment, poor infrastructure, restricted economic opportunities, and insufficient public services. These conditions have generated vulnerabilities that armed groups have exploited, particularly among youth with restricted access to legitimate income. The interaction of economic marginalisation, limited state presence, and insecurity has thus generated an environment conducive to the proliferation of banditry (Mashi, 2024; Avong & Magaji, 2025).

The regional security environment has also influenced the changing nature of armed violence in the North West. The collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 and the subsequent proliferation of weapons and armed networks across the Sahel have produced major security consequences for countries including Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria. The increased circulation of weapons and combat experience has strengthened armed groups' capacity to conduct organised violence and has increased the availability of sophisticated weaponry among criminal networks operating throughout the Sahel (Mark et al., 2024; Zachariah, 2023). Consequently, the international borders between Nigeria and Niger constitute a critical context for the development of banditry.

Before banditry, rural communities in Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto, and Kebbi relied heavily on agriculture, livestock production, local trade, artisanal activities, and international trade. Farming and herding served as primary sources of household income and food production, while traditional and religious institutions played important roles in managing community disputes. Although ongoing development challenges, residents generally could cultivate their farms, participate in markets, send children to school, and access basic health services (Mashi, 2024; Abga et al., 2023). The rise in banditry has disrupted these recognized patterns of social and economic life. Armed groups increasingly attacked rural communities in the affected states. Villages were raided, residents were abducted for ransom, livestock were stolen, properties were destroyed, and communities were subjected to intimidation. In some areas, armed groups imposed levies on farmers and restricted access to farmland and other economic activities. Using forested areas and border communities as operational spaces also enabled armed groups to sustain attacks, while the availability of weapons and the exploitation of difficult terrain and cross-border routes increased the complexity of the security challenge.

A primary consequence of banditry has been deteriorating physical security. Repeated attacks, killings, abductions, and destruction of property have generated widespread fear. Farmers have had difficulty accessing their farmlands, traders have faced movement restrictions, and pastoralists have faced threats to their livestock and livelihoods. Persistent violence has compelled many residents to abandon their communities, resulting in increased numbers of internally displaced

persons and placing additional strain on host communities and humanitarian services (Ugwuoke, 2022; Targba, 2022).

Banditry has also produced major economic consequences. Agriculture, a primary source of rural livelihood, has been adversely affected by attacks, restricted movement, farmland abandonment, and livestock theft. Markets and commercial activities have been disrupted because traders and shoppers often cannot travel safely. Households impacted by kidnapping may incur major financial losses through ransom payments. These conditions diminish household income and weaken economic activities in affected communities (Yusuf, 2023; Adekoya et al., 2025). The resulting loss of livelihoods can further worsen poverty and increase reliance on humanitarian assistance. Food security has been compromised because of disruptions in agricultural and commercial activities. Farmers' inability to cultivate land and pastoralists' livestock losses have reduced local food production. Disrupted transportation routes and markets hinder food distribution, while reduced household income limits families' ability to purchase enough food. Consequently, banditry undermines food availability, access, and affordability, thereby increasing vulnerability among affected populations (Olanrewaju & Balana, 2023; Umar, 2025).

Health security is another critical dimension of the issue. Ongoing insecurity can prevent health workers from remaining in rural communities, while attacks and threats may disrupt health facilities. Insecurity can also impede the transport of medicines, medical equipment, and patients. Pregnant women, children, older adults, and individuals needing continuous medical care are especially vulnerable when healthcare facilities become inaccessible. Disruptions to health services thus add to the human security consequences of banditry (Sani et al., 2024; Ojeleke, 2022). The persistence of banditry is linked to factors, including poverty, youth unemployment, weak governance, natural pressures, competition over land and water resources, and challenges in securing extensive international borders. Environmental degradation can increase competition between farmers and herders, while limited state presence in certain rural areas provides opportunities for armed groups to recruit and operate. The international border with Niger complicates security efforts, as criminal groups use border routes to transport people, weapons, livestock, and other resources (Mashi, 2024; Avong & Magaji, 2025).

Government responses have encompassed military and police operations, community-based security initiatives, negotiations with armed groups, and other security measures. Traditional rulers and community institutions have contributed to conflict mediation and local security efforts. Nevertheless, ongoing violence shows the limits of addressing banditry through security operations alone (Ojewale, 2024; Mashi, 2024). Although traditional rulers have historically played key roles in dispute management and community mobilisation, persistent violence has diminished their capacity to perform these functions effectively.

The media has played a role in developing public understanding of the crisis by documenting attacks, abductions, displacement, and government responses. However, coverage frequently prioritises major incidents, while the gradual decline of livelihoods, food security, healthcare, and community institutions receives comparatively less attention. Academic and institutional sources are therefore essential for comprehending the broader, long-term consequences of banditry.

Although the literature on insecurity in Nigeria is expanding, studies are still needed that specifically investigate the relationship between banditry and human security in the North West Border States over a defined period. Existing research often addresses individual aspects of insecurity or examines the issue at the national level, which may not fully capture banditry's interconnected effects on economic security, food security, health security, and the overall wellbeing of frontier communities. A focused study on Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto, and Kebbi from

2015 to 2025 offers an opportunity to analyse the development of banditry, its underlying drivers, and its consequences for human security. This research also provides a springboard for understanding the broader economic, food, health, and social circumstances shaping human security in the North West Border States.

2. Conceptual Review

Ungoverned borderland

An ungoverned borderland refers to a geographic region along international boundaries where state authority, law enforcement, and institutional control are weak, contested, or absent (Stanislawski, 2008). These regions are not entirely without order; rather, alternative non-state authorities frequently assume governance roles (Mugamba, 2026). The designation "ungoverned" can be misleading, as these spaces seldom devolve into chaos but instead display hybrid governance structures (Felbab-Brown, 2010). Armed non-state actors commonly establish predictable rules to ensure their survival and safeguard economic interests (Felbab-Brown, 2021). Such groups exploit both the geographic remoteness from national capitals and the grievances of marginalized border populations who perceive neglect by the central government (Walther & Radil, 2026).

Across many regions of the African continent, borders remain porous, enabling people to cross for family visits and economic activities such as herding, farming, fishing, hunting, and trading (Walther, 2022). These borderlands also facilitate illicit activities, including human smuggling, human trafficking, arms trafficking, terrorism, and money laundering (Ogunniyi, 2021). Political vacuums and weak state governance mark ungoverned spaces (Mitchell, 2010). These borders enable undocumented migrants to move between countries (Aniche et al., 2021). Various terrorist and militant groups often contest large expanses of these borderlands, while some areas fall under the control of trans-border criminal networks and international or transnational terrorist organizations (Russell & Walther, 2026). Notable groups operating in these regions include Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghred, Boko Haram, Movement for Unity Jihad in West Africa, Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, Ansar Al-Din, Ansaru, the Tuareg National Movement for Liberation of Azawad, and Islamic States of West African Province (Council on Foreign Relations, 2011). The insurgency along the Malian borderlands and the Sahara Desert has intensified as a result of weak state control, leading to increased undocumented migration and terrorist incidents. Irregular migration remains prevalent along the ungoverned borders of Niger and Nigeria (Onota et al., 2024). Furthermore, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, which move across borders with minimal restriction and are often sold at low prices, exacerbates the security challenges in the region. An estimated 8 million small arms circulate in West Africa, with Nigeria accounting for about 70 per cent (Vanguard, August 14, 2025). Consequently, militant and criminal groups have ready access to these weapons, contributing to a rise in armed robbery, banditry, maritime piracy, natural resource smuggling, kidnapping, terrorism, militancy, and communal conflicts.

Banditry

Banditry constitutes organized armed predation in which groups employ violence or the threat of violence to extract resources from civilian populations. The concept has a longstanding presence in academic literature and popular discourse; however, its relevance to the current situation in North West Nigeria necessitates consideration of both its general features and the specific attributes that differentiate the present crisis from previous or less severe forms of rural criminality. Broadly, banditry encompasses the activities of armed groups operating at the periphery of state

authority, exploiting weak state control over certain territories to prey on resident populations (Ojewale, 2024). Key characteristics that distinguish banditry from other forms of armed violence include its primary motivation of material gain, its focus on civilian economic activities and property, and its tendency to operate where state power is ineffective.

Banditry has been documented across societies and historical periods, from rural bandits in early modern Europe, as examined by historians such as Eric Hobsbawm, to armed groups targeting trading caravans in pre-colonial West Africa. Contemporary banditry in North West Nigeria differs from these historical examples in scale, organizational complexity, and the intensity of violence. Earlier manifestations typically involved small, opportunistic groups. In contrast, since 2015, armed groups in the North West Border States have evolved into organizations comprising hundreds or even thousands of fighters, with defined command structures, territorial jurisdictions, and the capacity for large-scale coordinated operations (SBM Intelligence, 2025).

Contemporary banditry in North West Nigeria exhibits features shaped by both the Nigerian context and the broader Sahelian environment. Armed groups in the region possess weapons of greater quality and quantity than those available to earlier rural criminal groups, largely due to the proliferation of arms following the Libyan conflict and other Sahelian wars since 2011. These groups have established sophisticated organizational structures, including formal command hierarchies, defined territorial jurisdictions, and systematic intelligence gathering and operational coordination. The expansion of the kidnap economy has significantly increased their financial resources, with ransom payments funding weapons acquisition, recruitment, and the maintenance of informant and local collaborator networks (SBM Intelligence, 2025; Ojewale, 2024). For instance, the ransom from a single mass abduction, such as the 2020 kidnapping of schoolchildren from Kankara, can sustain a substantial armed group for several months.

The social foundation of contemporary banditry in the North West is embedded in the region's structural conditions. Recruitment primarily targets young men from impoverished rural communities who lack access to employment, formal education beyond the primary level, or alternative economic opportunities that would make lawful livelihoods more attractive than joining armed groups. Even junior members of bandit groups often earn more than they could through the limited lawful activities available in their communities. Beyond income, these groups offer status, belonging, and masculine identity otherwise unattainable because of the lack of productive economic roles (Mashi, 2024; Ojewale, 2024). For instance, a young man in rural Zamfara without access to formal employment may earn more from a single cattle-rustling raid than his father earns from a year of farming. The combination of material incentives and social belonging constitutes a compelling recruitment strategy for young men excluded from both the formal economy and the informal opportunities available to previous generations.

The relationship between contemporary banditry and the longstanding phenomenon of farmer-herder conflict in the North West warrants recognition, though it should not be exaggerated. Some analysts interpret banditry as an evolution of farmer-herder conflict, suggesting that armed groups exploit existing communal tensions for predatory purposes and grievance-based recruitment. Others view the two phenomena as analytically distinct, with contemporary banditry functioning as an independent criminal enterprise that exploits, rather than embodies, communal conflict. This study focuses on banditry, treating farmer-herder conflict as a structural context that has facilitated the rise of armed groups rather than a synonymous phenomenon. This distinction matters because it shapes policy responses: if banditry is merely a continuation of farmer-herder conflict, land-use reform and inter-community dialogue are appropriate; if it is an autonomous criminal enterprise

exploiting communal grievances, it requires a combination of security intervention and structural economic and governance reform.

Human Security

The United Nations Development Programme formally introduced the concept of human security in its 1994 Human Development Report. This report argued that the prevailing state-centric model of security, which prioritized protecting national territory from external military threats, failed to address the most pressing threats to the well-being of most of the global population. The report advocated for a reconceptualization of security centered on the individual rather than the state, asserting that genuine security requires freedom from both fear and want. It identified seven interconnected dimensions of human security: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security (United Nations Development Programme, 1994). This shift fundamentally challenged the realist tradition that had dominated security studies during the Cold War and enabled a more comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing the security challenges confronting most of the world's population.

Economic security is defined as the condition in which individuals have reliable access to sustainable livelihoods and sufficient income to meet their basic needs. According to the United Nations Development Programme (1994), economic security entails an assured basic income, derived from either productive employment or a publicly financed safety net. In the North West Border States, where the formal economy is severely limited and social protection systems are virtually absent, economic security depends almost entirely on agricultural and pastoral production, as well as small-scale trade that connects rural producers to regional markets. Banditry disrupts these activities, thereby undermining the economic security of those involved (Adekoya *et al.*, 2025; Yusuf, 2023). For instance, a cattle-herding family in Zamfara State may lose the productive capital accumulated over a lifetime in a single bandit raid, as livestock represent not only current income but also the primary asset for future earnings.

The Food and Agriculture Organization defines food security as the condition in which all individuals consistently have reliable physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food necessary for an active and healthy life. It encompasses four dimensions: availability, access, utilization, and the stability of the food supply over time. In the North West, banditry has threatened all four dimensions. Food availability declined as farmers abandoned unsafe fields and herders limited their movements to avoid attacks. Market closures, insecure transportation routes, and impoverishment from lost livelihoods and ransom payments compromised household access to food. Disruptions to health and education services undermined food utilization, which relies on adequate nutrition knowledge and safe preparation conditions. The stability of the food supply was jeopardized by the persistent and unpredictable nature of violence, rendering food production and marketing arrangements uncertain (Olanrewaju and Balana, 2023; Umar, 2025). Together, these factors have produced a food security crisis of such depth and complexity that simple measures of food availability or caloric intake cannot capture its full extent.

Health security is the condition in which individuals and communities have reliable access to essential health care services necessary to protect and maintain physical well-being. This includes protection from infectious diseases, access to maternal and child health services, emergency care, and access to medicines and trained personnel. In the North West Border States, banditry undermined health security through two primary mechanisms: the destruction of the health system's supply side, via the departure of health workers and closure of facilities, and the

deterrence of health-seeking behaviour due to the dangers associated with traveling through insecure areas (Sani *et al.*, 2024; Ojeleke, 2022). The health system in the North West was already characterized by severe shortages of trained personnel and basic equipment prior to the banditry crisis. Consequently, even minor disruptions had significant consequences for dependent communities. Unlike better-resourced systems that might absorb such shocks, the North West health infrastructure lacked resilience, so losing even a few personnel often left entire communities without formal health services.

Environmental security is defined as freedom from environmental degradation and the threats posed by resource depletion and ecological change to livelihoods and survival. In the North West Border States, environmental insecurity—manifested as desertification, land degradation, and water scarcity—has intensified competition over scarce resources, contributing to the structural drivers of banditry. The encroachment of the Sahara Desert into northern districts of Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto has progressively reduced land available for crop cultivation and livestock grazing, heightening competition between settled farmers and nomadic herders. Although this environmental pressure predates the current banditry crisis, it has served as a critical background condition by fostering communal tensions over land and water, which armed groups have exploited for recruitment and justification of violence. While environmental security is not one of the four dimensions directly assessed in the empirical chapters of this study, it remains a relevant component of the human security framework and intersects with the drivers of banditry addressed under the second objective (Mashi, 2024).

The interrelated nature of these dimensions of human security is central to this study's analytical framework. The United Nations Development Programme (1994) emphasized that the seven dimensions of human security constitute an integrated system, where deterioration in one area often precipitates declines in others. This interconnectedness was clearly demonstrated during the banditry crisis in the North West Border States, as the erosion of physical security led to cascading effects, including economic, food, and health insecurity. For example, a farmer unable to access his field because of insecurity lost not only physical safety but also economic stability, household food security, and the financial means to obtain health care. When these losses multiply across millions of households, they culminate in widespread regional crises, as documented in the empirical literature. This cascading dynamic underscores the suitability of the human security framework for analyzing complex, multi-dimensional crises such as the one addressed in this study.

3. Theoretical framework

This study employed Rational Choice Theory as its theoretical framework. While Rational Choice Theory originated in classical and neoclassical economics, its application to social behaviour, crime, and collective violence has developed through interdisciplinary scholarship over the past five decades. The theory assumes individuals are purposive actors who act to further their goals, making their behaviour explicable and predictable by identifying their objectives and the constraints they face. This foundational premise has proven highly productive across diverse areas of social science research, ranging from consumer choice analysis to the study of revolutionary violence, and has established Rational Choice Theory as one of the most influential and widely applied frameworks in the modern social sciences (Coleman, 1990; Scott, 2000).

Becker (1968) offered a foundational economic analysis of crime, demonstrating that engagement in illegal activities can be understood as a rational calculation in which offenders weigh the expected returns of crime against the probability and severity of punishment. Becker contended

that offenders are not fundamentally different from other economic agents; they are rational actors who respond to incentives, and their decisions to commit crimes can be influenced by altering the costs and benefits associated with criminal activity. This perspective carries significant policy implications. If crime is a rational response to incentive structures rather than a manifestation of psychological pathology or moral failure, it can be mitigated by increasing the expected costs of offending or enhancing the expected returns of lawful alternatives. Although Becker's framework originated in economics, criminology, sociology, and political science rapidly recognized its relevance and explored it extensively.

Ehrlich (1973) expanded Becker's framework by empirically showing that participation in illegitimate activities depends on the relative returns of lawful versus unlawful alternatives, as well as on the perceived risk of detection and sanction. Ehrlich found that individuals with limited prospects in the legitimate labour market are more likely to engage in criminal activity, as the opportunity cost of crime is lower for those with fewer lawful alternatives. This finding links the rational choice framework to the structural conditions of communities where crime is concentrated, indicating that elevated crime rates in impoverished and marginalized areas can be attributed to objective incentive structures created by a lack of economic opportunity, rather than to the moral failings of residents.

Coleman (1990) advanced the rational choice framework by applying it to collective phenomena in his influential work on the foundations of social theory. He argued that large-scale social outcomes can be explained by aggregating the purposive choices of rational individuals. Coleman showed that macro-level social facts, such as the emergence of organisations, the development of trust, and the maintenance of social norms, ultimately result from micro-level individual decisions. He further asserted that a comprehensive social theory must coherently integrate both micro and macro levels of analysis. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study, as it offers conceptual tools for understanding how the individually rational decisions of young men in the North West border states to join bandit groups, and the rational decisions of farmers, traders, and health workers to withdraw from activities exposing them to violence, collectively contribute to the macro-level crisis of human security under investigation.

Applying Rational Choice Theory to this paper helps to explain how communities and institutions respond to the banditry crisis beyond just withdrawing from risky activities. Farmers, traders, and community leaders in affected Border States have developed adaptive strategies aligned with the theory's predictions. Some communities form informal self-defense groups, accepting risks because they see inaction as more costly. Traders create informal intelligence networks to monitor bandit movements and lower individual trip risks through pooled information. Farmers nearby their villages plant lower-yield crops to reduce attack exposure. These responses reflect calculated decisions balancing risk reduction with productivity benefits (Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Coleman, 1990). Recognizing these strategies and their conditions is vital for designing community-based security and livelihood programs that leverage communities' rational responses.

4. Methodology

This study relied exclusively on qualitative secondary data. The use of secondary data was justified as it provided access to detailed, reliable, and historically grounded information collected by credible institutions, researchers, government agencies, and media organizations. This approach enabled analysis of the nature, drivers, and consequences of the banditry crisis over the decade under review without necessitating primary fieldwork in areas that remained highly insecure. Secondary data facilitated triangulation across multiple categories of evidence, thereby enhancing

the reliability and comprehensiveness of the assembled data. Data sources included published research articles in peer-reviewed journals, books and edited volumes, policy documents from national and state governments, government reports from Nigerian federal and state agencies, media reports from reputable national newspapers and broadcast outlets, and institutional publications from international organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, the International Organization for Migration, the Institute for Security Studies, and SBM Intelligence. National media sources, including Nigerian newspapers and broadcast outlets, provided contemporaneous accounts of specific events and developments during the period under review, complementing the analytical perspectives offered by academic and institutional sources. Integrating academic, institutional, policy, and media sources enabled triangulation across multiple categories of evidence, strengthening the reliability and comprehensiveness of the data and supporting confidence in the study's findings. The study employed content analysis as the method of data analysis.

Study Area

The study examined the North West border states of Nigeria, specifically Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto, and Kebbi, as well as the relevant border districts of Kaduna State. These states were selected due to their significant exposure to the banditry crisis between 2015 and 2025 and their shared frontier with the Niger Republic, which provided common geographical and security characteristics. Katsina State experienced frequent and large-scale bandit attacks on rural communities, particularly in local government areas near the Rugu Forest complex (Yusufu, 2022). Zamfara State was the most severely affected, with armed groups establishing territorial control over extensive rural areas (Umar et al., 2024). Sokoto State encountered cross-border banditry from groups operating through its international frontier (Okunola & Ayodele, 2026). Kebbi State faced substantial banditry in its border regions and was impacted by displacement from neighbouring states (Ladan, 2025). The inclusion of frontier districts of Kaduna State, especially those adjacent to Zamfara and Katsina, was justified by their involvement in the crisis and their functional connection to the banditry dynamics of the other Border States.

Focusing on these states ensured that the study addressed communities most affected by the banditry crisis and enabled the findings to inform policy responses to the human security emergencies confronting these populations. The study included both rural and urban communities within the Border States, acknowledging that the human security impacts of banditry extended from rural areas at the center of the crisis to urban centers receiving displaced populations, where secondary effects such as increased pressure on housing, food supplies, and public services were most pronounced.

Inclusion of both rural and urban communities was essential to capture the full spectrum of human security consequences resulting from the banditry crisis. The most severe and immediate impacts, such as direct physical attacks, agricultural disruption, and closure of primary health facilities, were concentrated in rural communities within the frontier zone (Kleffmann et al., 2024). Urban centers, including Gusau in Zamfara, Dutse in Jigawa, Katsina and Daura in Katsina State, Sokoto and Tambuwal in Sokoto State, and Birnin Kebbi in Kebbi State, were significantly affected by secondary consequences, particularly the large-scale displacement of rural populations (Okorn, 2026). This displacement placed considerable pressure on housing, food supplies, water, sanitation, and public services in recipient towns (Okorn, 2026). The economic effects of banditry also extended from rural areas, where agriculture and trade were directly disrupted, to urban

economies reliant on rural production and commerce (Muhammed et al., 2026). Limiting the analysis to rural communities would have overlooked critical aspects of the human security crisis most evident in urban areas.

Focusing on the North West Border States as a group, rather than a single state or a sample of communities within one state, was both a methodological choice and a substantive analytical decision. Methodologically, it allowed the study to draw on a broad and growing body of evidence on the banditry crisis at the regional or multi-state level, including institutional reports from bodies operating across the whole of the North West, alongside state- and community-level evidence from primary studies of individual states. As a substantive analytical decision, it reflected the argument that the border states shared sufficient common characteristics, in terms of their frontier location, their structural human security deficits, and their exposure to the same cross-border dynamics of armed group movement and weapons proliferation (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025), to justify their treatment as a coherent analytical unit whose collective experience of the banditry crisis could be understood and documented in a way that the experiences of individual states in isolation could not fully reveal.

5. Data presentation and analysis

The data presented below were compiled from peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, policy documents, institutional publications, and media reports concerning banditry and human security in Nigeria's North West Border States between 2015 and 2025. The inclusion of diverse evidence types, encompassing peer-reviewed journal articles that utilize methodologies such as quantitative surveys, econometric analysis, difference-in-differences studies, qualitative interviews, and documentary reviews, as well as institutional reports, humanitarian assessments, policy analyses, and media documentation, underscores the multi-dimensional and complex nature of the phenomenon under investigation. No single source type could provide the comprehensive breadth and depth of evidence necessary to address all four research objectives with the required rigour.

i. Relationship between Banditry and Human Security

Source	Nature of Source Evidence Type		Key Finding
Eze (2025)	Journal article	Documentary review	Banditry produced multi-dimensional human security deterioration across the North West; all dimensions of human security threatened simultaneously and interconnectedly.
Ojewale (2024)	Institute for Security Studies report	Qualitative investigation	Banditry exploits and deepens human security deficits; poverty and unemployment generate recruits while violence destroys livelihoods and services that might sustain peaceful life.
Mark <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Journal article	Qualitative Key informant interviews	Border porosity enables continuous armed group movement, making it impossible for border communities to achieve even temporary physical

			security and degrading all associated human security dimensions.
Idris and Umaru (2024)	Journal article	Field evidence and documentary sources	Banditry produced widespread forced displacement, humanitarian crisis, and loss of homes and livelihoods, demonstrating comprehensive human security failure in Zamfara State.
Ugwuoke (2022)	Journal article	Secondary review	Insecurity, including North West banditry, produced comprehensive human security failure affecting economic life, food supply, community cohesion, and social services simultaneously.
Nigerian Tribune (2023)	Newspaper report	Media documentation	Reports of village raids in Zamfara and Katsina displacing thousands documented the physical security and community security dimensions of the banditry crisis in real time.
ACLED (2024)	Institutional database	Conflict data	Armed conflict data for Nigeria showed concentrated event frequencies in the North West border states, providing quantitative documentation of the scale and persistence of the security crisis.
World Bank (2023)	Policy report	Institutional analysis	Addressing insecurity in Northern Nigeria requires integrated development and security approaches; insecurity and development failure are mutually reinforcing in the North West.
Ofoma (2024)	Journal article	Survey of 500 residents	Banditry simultaneously disrupted farming, health care access, and community stability in Katsina, Zamfara, and Sokoto, demonstrating comprehensive multi-dimensional human security failure.
Idris and Umaru (2024)	Journal article	Field evidence and documentary review	Forced displacement produced by banditry in Zamfara destroyed livelihoods, severed community bonds, and generated a humanitarian crisis across all dimensions of human security.
Mashi (2024)	Journal article	Documentary analysis	Socio-economic inequalities underlying banditry in the North West sustained the human security crisis by continuously reproducing the

structural conditions driving armed group recruitment.

SBM Intelligence report (2025) Intelligence report Event data and financial analysis The kidnap economy generated revenues sustaining the banditry crisis, systematically deepening the economic and food security dimensions of human security failure in the border states.

Source; Authors compilation 2025

ii. Drivers of Banditry in the North West Border States

Source	Nature of Source	Evidence Type	Key Finding
Avong and Magaji (2025)	Journal article	Documentary analysis	Poverty and governance failure create the reservoir of recruits and the permissive conditions sustaining banditry; regions most affected by insecurity are also among the poorest.
Mashi (2024)	Journal article	Documentary analysis	Poverty, youth unemployment, uneven development, and environmental degradation are primary structural drivers; purely kinetic responses fail because they leave these conditions intact.
Abga et al. (2023)	Journal article	Primary and secondary sources	Poverty is both a root cause and deepening consequence of banditry in a self-sustaining cycle; governance absence in rural areas is an enabling structural driver.
Zachariah (2023)	Journal article	Documentary analysis	Border porosity rooted in colonial boundary demarcation is a primary enabling condition for banditry; frontier communities are doubly vulnerable as sources of recruits and primary targets.
Aniche et al. (2021)	Journal article	Literature review	Ungoverned frontier spaces and governance failures of the colonial border legacy are structural drivers of cross-border criminality and banditry across the Sahelian frontier.
SBM Intelligence report (2025)	Intelligence report	Event data and financial analysis	The kidnap economy generates revenues that fund weapons acquisition and recruitment, making the financial structure of banditry self-sustaining and resistant to disruption.
United Nations Development	Policy report	Institutional analysis	Poverty, inequality, and weak governance in Northern Nigeria are

Programme (2023)			identified as structural drivers of insecurity requiring socio-economic as well as security interventions.
Premium Times Newspaper report Nigeria (2023)	Media documentation		Reporting on government attempts at negotiation with bandit leaders documented the organisational structure of armed groups and the political and economic incentives sustaining their activities.
Charlton (2022)	Journal article	Comparative primary and secondary sources	Proximity to forested bandit strongholds determined the depth of structural vulnerability in Katsina communities, revealing how geography interacted with poverty as a driver of sustained insecurity.
Ugwuoke (2022)	Journal article	Secondary data review	Structural deprivation, governance failure, and absence of economic alternatives in Northern Nigeria created the permissive conditions enabling armed group formation and sustained banditry.
Ojewale (2024)	ISS report	Qualitative investigation	Internal dynamics of bandit organisations showed that recruitment exploited poverty, unemployment, and identity grievances in structurally marginalised frontier communities.
Mark et al. (2024)	Journal article	Qualitative key informant interviews	Cross-border ethnic and kinship networks, combined with colonial frontier demarcation, provided the social infrastructure that enabled sustained cross-border armed group operations.

Source; Authors compilation 2025

iii. Impact of Banditry on Human Security

Source	Nature of Source	Evidence Type	Key Finding
Eze (2025)	Journal article	Documentary review	Personal and community security: banditry sustained a climate of fear across the region, displaced large proportions of the rural population, forced the closure of schools and health facilities, and destroyed the social fabric on which collective resilience depended.
Ugwuoke (2022)	Journal article	Secondary data review	Personal, economic and community security: repeated violence, mass abduction, and displacement eroded physical safety and social cohesion, and damage to any one dimension deepened damage to the others.
ACLED (2024)	Institutional database	Conflict event data	Personal security: attack events were concentrated in the North West border states and persisted across the decade, documenting the scale of the exposure of residents to violence.
SBM Intelligence (2025)	Intelligence report	Event data and financial analysis	Personal and economic security: the kidnap economy exposed residents to abduction and generated ransom revenues that drained household resources while financing further violence.
Nigerian Tribune (2023)	Newspaper report	Media documentation	Community security: reports of village raids in Zamfara documented the displacement of residents and the loss of homes and community stability as the raids occurred.
Adekoya et al. (2025)	Journal article	Multiple regression analysis	Economic security: a strong negative correlation between insecurity and economic growth; agricultural output fell, markets were disrupted, investor confidence diminished, and unemployment rose across the North West.

Source	Nature of Source	Evidence Type	Key Finding
Faruk (2022)	Journal article	Survey of 430 respondents	Economic security: persistent fear kept farmers from their land and traders from markets, while ransom payments forced households to sell land, livestock, and tools and to borrow heavily.
Iliya and Achoja (2024)	Journal article	Survey of cattle herders	Economic security: cattle rustling, the killing of animals, and bandit levies depleted herds and forced herders off traditional grazing routes, destroying the productive capital of pastoral households in Katsina State.
Charlton (2022)	Journal article	Comparative primary and secondary sources	Economic security: the severity of disruption to farming, markets, and household incomes rose with proximity to bandit strongholds, as the contrast between Batsari and Kankia showed.
Usman and Jibrin (2021)	Journal article	Documentary and field evidence	Economic and food security: farmland abandonment, reduced cultivation, and the loss of agricultural labour cut rural incomes and reduced the supply of food from a major producing zone.
Yusuf (2023)	Journal article	Documentary analysis	Economic and political security: banditry produced a structural economic decline that reduced the internally generated revenues of state governments and their capacity to fund public services.
The Punch Nigeria (2024)	Newspaper report	Media documentation	Economic security: market closures in Zamfara and Sokoto during periods of heightened insecurity showed the direct effect of banditry on trade and livelihoods.
World Bank (2023)	Policy report	Institutional analysis	Economic and political security: persistent insecurity reduced investment flows and economic activity in the North West, and insecurity and development failure were mutually reinforcing.

Source	Nature of Source	Evidence Type	Key Finding
Olanrewaju and Balana (2023)	Journal article	Mixed methods; 450 household surveys plus FAO and ACLED data	Food security: attacks on farms, theft of livestock, and market disruption reduced output; households skipped meals and paid higher prices; children's nutrition and school attendance deteriorated.
Igbokwe et al. (2025)	Journal article	Documentary analysis	Food security: fear of abduction forced farmers to abandon distant fields and herders to restrict movement, while ransom payments impoverished households and reduced their ability to buy available food.
Umar (2025)	Journal article	Documentary analysis	Food security: reduced cultivation, livestock theft, and market disruption combined with household impoverishment to deny adequate nutrition, and shortages persisted where produce was available elsewhere in the region.
Food and Agriculture Organization (2023)	Institutional report	Institutional analysis	Food security: food insecurity in North West Nigeria was a direct consequence of conflict, with agricultural disruption and displacement among the primary drivers of household hunger.
Sani et al. (2024)	Journal article	Documentary review	Health security: health workers were displaced, facilities closed, and medicine supply chains disrupted, contributing to a malnutrition crisis and denying communities access to primary care.
Ojeleke (2022)	Journal article	Difference-in-differences quantitative analysis	Health security: insecurity significantly reduced health care utilisation through supply disruption and through the danger of travelling to facilities, and antenatal attendance fell in affected districts of Zamfara.

Source	Nature of Source	Evidence Type	Key Finding
United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2024)	Humanitarian report	Institutional data	Health and humanitarian security: the North West was reported as one of the areas of highest humanitarian need in the country, with food insecurity and health service collapse among the principal drivers.
Ofoma (2024)	Journal article	Survey of 500 residents	Food, health and community security: banditry disrupted farming, closed markets, forced health workers out of insecure areas, and stripped displaced families of access to both food and health care.
Idris Umaru (2024)	Journal article	Field evidence and documentary sources	Community security: repeated attacks forced families from homes and farms into camps and host communities with inadequate shelter, water, sanitation, health care and schooling, with women, children, and the elderly most exposed.
Mark et al. (2024)	Journal article	Qualitative key informant interviews	Community security: constant and unpredictable threats from cross-border groups broke down social trust and community cohesion and collapsed local economies in Sokoto and Kebbi.
Premium Times Nigeria (2023)	Newspaper report	Media documentation	Political security: armed groups positioned themselves as alternative governance structures in the areas under their influence, displacing the authority of the state.

Source; Authors compilation 2025

vi. Challenges in Curbing Banditry in the North West Border States

Source	Nature of Source	Evidence Type	Key Finding
Ojewale (2024)	Institute for Security Studies report	Qualitative investigation	Armed groups became entrenched, with command structures, tactical capacity to resist or evade operations, networks of informants, and financial interests in continued disorder, which made the restoration of security harder than it would have been at an earlier stage.
Mashi (2024)	Journal article	Documentary analysis	Security operations since 2015 produced only temporary and localised reductions in violence because they addressed symptoms and left poverty, unemployment, inequality, and environmental pressures intact.
Zachariah (2023)	Journal article	Documentary analysis	The long and inadequately monitored frontier gave armed groups a permanent operational advantage; coordination between Nigerian and Nigerien authorities failed; and a border closure would have damaged the livelihoods of frontier communities.
Mark et al. (2024)	Journal article	Qualitative key informant interviews	Nigerian agencies could not control or effectively monitor the frontier; groups expelled from one area withdrew across the border and returned; and kinship networks supplied informants and safe houses on both sides.
Aniche et al. (2021)	Journal article	Literature review	Weak governance, corruption among border control officials, and limited state presence in ungoverned border spaces allowed armed groups to move freely and made operations against them difficult to sustain.

Source	Nature of Source	Evidence Type	Key Finding
SBM Intelligence (2025)	Intelligence report	Event data and financial analysis	Ransom revenues funded weapons acquisition, recruitment, and networks of collaborators, making the financing of banditry self-sustaining and resistant to disruption.
Premium Times Nigeria (2023)	Newspaper report	Media documentation	Attempts at negotiation with bandit leaders exposed organised structures with political and economic incentives to continue, and showed groups acting as alternative governance where the state was absent.
Eze (2025)	Journal article	Documentary review	The retreat of governance allowed territorial control and near-impunity; state resources were diverted from development to security operations, weakening service delivery; and purely military responses were insufficient.
Avong and Magaji (2025)	Journal article	Documentary analysis	Weak governance and the failure to deliver basic services left deprived communities less able to resist or report criminal activity, and state retreat created permissive conditions without accountability.
Abga et al. (2023)	Journal article	Primary and secondary sources	The poverty and banditry cycle in Katsina was self-sustaining, so that external interventions, whether military operations or development programmes delivered from outside, struggled to interrupt it.
Adekoya et al. (2025)	Journal article	Multiple regression analysis	Government funds were diverted from productive investment to security operations while the erosion of the tax base reduced the capacity of state governments to fund public services.

Source	Nature of Source	Evidence Type	Key Finding
Yusuf (2023)	Journal article	Documentary analysis	Falling internally generated revenues limited the capacity of state governments to respond, and security and economic recovery were interdependent, so that neither could be achieved without the other.
Charlton (2022)	Journal article	Comparative primary and secondary sources	Proximity to the Rugu Forest complex, the operational base of armed groups, determined the intensity of attacks, and interventions needed to be targeted according to the vulnerability of each community.
Faruk (2022)	Journal article	Survey of 430 respondents	Persistent fear of attack continued to keep farmers and traders from farms, markets, and routes, and the study called for stronger and better coordinated security operations alongside livelihood support.
Ofoma (2024)	Journal article	Survey of 500 residents	Formal security operations needed to be complemented by community policing, improved rural infrastructure, and the integration of conflict prevention into regional development planning.
Sani et al. (2024)	Journal article	Documentary review	Health facilities and workers in insecure areas lacked protection, and the study called for security for health facilities and for mobile and telemedicine services to reach communities that fixed facilities could not safely serve.
Idris Umaru (2024)	Journal article	Field evidence and documentary sources	Displaced populations required urgent humanitarian assistance while insecurity continued to drive families from their homes, placing dual pressure on state institutions and humanitarian agencies.

Source	Nature of Source	Evidence Type	Key Finding
World Bank (2023)	Policy report	Institutional analysis	Addressing insecurity in Northern Nigeria required integrated development and security approaches, since force alone could not resolve the structural conditions sustaining the crisis.
United Nations Development Programme (2023)	Policy report	Institutional analysis	Poverty, inequality, and weak governance were structural drivers of insecurity that required socio-economic as well as security interventions.
United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2024)	Humanitarian report	Institutional data	The North West was reported as one of the areas of highest humanitarian need, indicating the scale of the demands placed on response capacity.

Source; Authors compilation

Discussion

The research addressed the relationship between banditry and human security in Nigeria's North West Border States, revealing a comprehensive, multi-dimensional, and mutually reinforcing dynamic. Banditry threatens not only residents' physical safety but also undermines economic, food, health, and community security in ways that extend beyond the immediate physical impact. This outcome aligns with Rational Choice Theory at the aggregate level, as individually rational decisions to avoid violence collectively lead to economic contraction, food insecurity, and healthcare collapse, constituting a broad human security crisis. Coleman (1990) showed that large-scale social outcomes result from aggregated individual choices. In the context of banditry, each farmer who refrains from planting, each trader who avoids unsafe routes, each health worker who declines insecure postings, and each patient who forgoes necessary care are making rational decisions that, in aggregate, undermine the economic, food, and health security of entire communities (Yusuf, 2023; Olanrewaju & Balana, 2023; Sani *et al.*, 2024).

The cross-border aspect, as documented by Mark *et al.* (2024), introduces a structural challenge that renders the crisis particularly resistant to security interventions. The porous border with Niger Republic reduces the expected cost of punishment for armed group members, as easy cross-border movement provides a reliable means of evading security operations and diminishes the deterrent effect of military deployment. This response aligns with Becker (1968) and Ehrlich (1973), who argued that a lower probability of punishment increases participation in criminal activity. The findings indicate that any response to the banditry crisis that fails to address the cross-border dimension through enhanced border surveillance and regional security cooperation will remain

incomplete. The structural advantage provided by the porous frontier will continue to undermine the deterrent effect of security operations conducted solely within Nigerian territory.

The displacement and humanitarian crisis dimension, as documented by Idris and Umaru (2024) and corroborated by Nigerian Tribune (2023), adds a critical layer to the analysis of the banditry-human security relationship. Mass displacement and the destruction of social bonds exacerbate economic, food, and health security challenges by removing affected populations from productive activities, healthcare facilities, and markets that could otherwise support them. The self-reinforcing nature of this cascading human security failure explains the crisis's persistence and resistance to conventional security responses in the North West Border States. Therefore, any effective intervention must address all dimensions of the human security crisis simultaneously, rather than treating sectoral issues in isolation.

Eze (2025) identified structural damage inflicted on the Border States. The destruction of schools, health facilities, and market infrastructure over years of violence and neglect has diminished the capacity of communities to provide essential educational, medical, and economic services, resulting in a persistent human security deficit. This deficit is likely to endure even after security improves, as institutions and trained personnel needed to restore these services cannot be quickly reestablished. The study contends that banditry has not only disrupted but also structurally degraded human security, requiring years of sustained investment to recover. This structural dimension, highlighted by Eze (2025) and supported by evidence of health system collapse (Sani et al., 2024) and economic decline (Yusuf, 2023), is a critical feature the present study illuminates. The mutually reinforcing nature of the banditry-human security has significant implications for policy design, indicating the need for approaches that extend beyond purely security-focused or developmental strategies. Since banditry both results from and contributes to human security failure, addressing only security concerns without considering the underlying human security factors will yield only temporary improvements. Similarly, development programs implemented without establishing adequate physical security are likely to be disrupted by ongoing violence, preventing meaningful structural change. These findings support the integrated approach advocated by Eze (2025), Ojewale (2024), and Ugwuoke (2022), which calls for simultaneous and complementary security and development interventions.

7. Conclusion

The study found that banditry constitutes a comprehensive and self-reinforcing threat to human security in Nigeria's North West Border States, which security measures alone cannot adequately address. Interlocking challenges have consistently undermined efforts to curb this threat. The evidence demonstrated a mutually constitutive relationship between banditry and human security: deficits in human security, rooted in poverty, unemployment, governance failure, and border porosity, create conditions conducive to the emergence and recruitment of armed groups. In turn, banditry exacerbates these deficits by eroding personal safety, destroying livelihoods, disrupting food production and markets, dismantling health care delivery, displacing families, and weakening state institutions. Rational Choice Theory served as the analytical framework for understanding this dynamic. Young men's decisions to join armed groups, and the choices of farmers, traders, herders, health workers, and patients to withdraw from activities that expose them to violence, are rational responses to incentive structures shaped by the region's structural conditions and the threat of banditry. Collectively, these individually rational decisions have produced the comprehensive human security crisis documented in the study.

The study further found that the crisis's multi-dimensional, self-reinforcing nature, combined with interlocking challenges, makes it resistant to single-sector interventions. Military operations that suppress armed groups without addressing underlying structural drivers are likely to result in the reconstitution of these groups from the persistent pool of impoverished and unemployed young men. Border control measures that fail to address corruption, weak cooperation with the Niger Republic, and cross-border social ties will be circumvented by the same networks that sustain armed groups. Interventions that do not dismantle the kidnap economy will leave financial incentives for banditry intact. Economic initiatives that restore livelihoods without ensuring physical security will be undermined by the ongoing threat of violence, while food, health, and education programs will be disrupted in areas where violence prevents their effective delivery. Therefore, durable improvement in human security in the North West Border States requires an integrated and sustained response that addresses the structural drivers of banditry, the challenges that have hindered previous efforts, and all dimensions of human security affected by the crisis.

8. Recommendations

The Federal Government and state partners should adopt an integrated human security strategy to combat banditry. This includes military actions and initiatives to restore access to farms and markets, support displaced families, rebuild health and education facilities, and reestablish government services. This holistic approach tackles the broader human security issues caused by banditry, moving beyond just military solutions.

The Federal and State Governments should implement targeted programs to address the structural factors sustaining banditry in the North West Border States. Priority areas include youth employment, rural livelihoods, poverty reduction, environmental rehabilitation, and improved access to basic services in vulnerable communities. The government should also enhance its presence in remote border areas by establishing security posts, schools, health facilities, agricultural support, and administrative institutions. These measures will reduce recruitment into armed groups and strengthen community resilience.

The Federal Government, through the Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Customs Service, security agencies, and relevant ECOWAS institutions, should enhance security along the Nigeria-Niger border. This effort should include improved border surveillance, intelligence sharing, coordinated patrols, and increased cooperation with Nigerian security authorities. Communities should establish intelligence systems that enable residents to report suspicious movements and activities. Enhanced cross-border cooperation will help restrict the movement of armed groups, weapons, and other resources that sustain banditry.

Security agencies and governments in the affected states should review current counter-banditry strategies to integrate security operations with civilian protection, accountability, and development initiatives. Security operations must be supported by enhanced intelligence gathering, decisive action against the financing of kidnapping and arms trafficking, and measures to safeguard farms, markets, schools, health facilities, and displaced populations. Transparent resource management is essential to reduce corruption and ensure that security expenditures do not undermine critical development programs. These actions will increase the effectiveness of counter-banditry efforts while mitigating the conflict's humanitarian and developmental impacts.

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