



School Kidnapping in Nigeria and Routine Activity Theory: A Criminological Analysis

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Abstract

School kidnapping has become a recurring form of insecurity in Nigeria, particularly in parts of the North-East, North-West and North-Central regions. The abduction of school children has received considerable attention since the Chibok incident of 2014, yet subsequent attacks at Dapchi, Kankara, Jangebe, Birnin Yauri, Greenfield University, Kuriga and other locations show that the problem has not been confined to a single period or location. This paper examines school kidnappings in Nigeria through the lens of Routine Activity Theory (RAT). The paper adopts a qualitative documentary review design and draws on published studies, documented cases, policy materials and other secondary sources. The analysis focuses on the three central elements of RAT: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians. The paper argues that school kidnappings become possible where these elements converge in particular places and times. Schools may present suitable targets because they bring together large numbers of students and staff, while some rural and boarding schools are located in environments where physical protection, surveillance and rapid response are limited. At the same time, ransom-seeking criminal groups, armed bandits and insurgent organisations provide the offender component of the convergence. The paper further shows that attacks are often associated with identifiable situational conditions, including night-time operations, weak perimeter protection, limited security presence, poor intelligence sharing and delayed emergency response. RAT therefore helps to explain the immediate opportunity structure surrounding school kidnappings. The paper concludes that preventing school kidnapping requires stronger security around schools, better intelligence and early-warning systems, and security measures that address the specific risks faced by each school. These efforts should also be supported by broader measures to address the conditions that sustain kidnapping and armed criminal activities in Nigeria.

Keywords: School kidnapping, Abduction, Routine Activity Theory, Insecurity, Kidnapping for ransom

Introduction

Schools are expected to provide a stable environment in which children and young people can learn, develop social relationships, and prepare for adult life. In Nigeria, however, the security of some educational institutions has increasingly become part of the wider national insecurity problem. The abduction of 276 girls from the Government Girls Secondary School, Chibok, Borno State, in April 2014 brought international attention to the vulnerability of Nigerian schools. The Chibok attack was followed

by other incidents, including the abduction of schoolgirls from Dapchi in 2018 and mass kidnappings at Kankara, Jangebe, Birnin Yauri, and other locations from 2020 onward. Recent literature also documents the Kuriga abduction in Kaduna State in 2024 and other attacks involving pupils, students, and teachers. These incidents indicate that school kidnapping has developed into a recurring security concern rather than an isolated event (Ekwukoma, 2022; Verjee & Kwaja, 2021).



The changing pattern of kidnapping in Nigeria is important for understanding why schools have become targets. Kidnapping for ransom has developed into an important component of the country's insecurity landscape. Simeon (2021) describes kidnapping as a lucrative criminal activity in which schools, villages, highways and other locations may be targeted. The financial dimension is especially relevant to mass school abductions because one operation can produce a large number of captives and therefore create considerable pressure on families, communities and government authorities. Verjee *et al.* (2021) similarly situate school abductions within the wider political economy of kidnapping in Nigeria, arguing that the problem cannot be understood only as a series of unrelated criminal incidents.

The consequences of school kidnapping extend beyond the immediate seizure of students. When children are abducted, families experience uncertainty and financial pressure, while teachers and school administrators may also become victims or witnesses. Repeated attacks can lead parents to withdraw their children from schools, especially boarding schools, and can contribute to school closures and interruptions in learning. Studies reveal anxiety, fear, emotional distress, educational disengagement, and other psychosocial difficulties among students and affected communities (Aloku, 2022; Muhammad *et al.*, 2023; Ronke, 2024). Ekechukwu *et al.*, (2021) likewise describe kidnapping as a threat to educational institutions and social life in Nigeria. Thus, the problem is not limited to the question of how students are taken but it also concerns the conditions that make an attack possible and the wider consequences that follow.

A substantial part of the existing discussion has concentrated on the causes and consequences of insecurity, the profitability of kidnapping, weak

governance, poverty, banditry and the capacity of security agencies. These issues are important, however, a situational explanation is also needed. Routine Activity Theory (RAT) provides a useful way of examining this dimension because it focuses on the convergence of a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence of capable guardians in time and space (Cohen & Felson, 1979).

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine school kidnappings in Nigeria from the perspective of RAT. Rather than treating the theory as a complete explanation of kidnapping, the paper uses it to examine how offender motivation, target suitability, and guardianship interact in school environments.

Concept and Context of School Kidnapping in Nigeria

Kidnapping generally involves the unlawful seizure, movement or detention of a person against their will. In the Nigerian context, contemporary kidnapping takes several forms and may be motivated by ransom, political demands, personal disputes, ideological objectives or other criminal purposes. School kidnapping refers specifically to the forcible seizure and detention of students, teachers, or other school personnel from educational institutions or school-related environments by armed or criminal actors. This definition is deliberately focused on the setting in which the crime occurs viewing the school as a routine social environment in which students, teachers, support staff, and administrators assemble at relatively predictable times. Boarding schools may also provide residential arrangements that extend the period during which students remain within or close to the school environment.



These features are relevant to RAT because the theory asks how ordinary patterns of movement and interaction may bring offenders and targets together while guardianship remains weak.

The Nigerian experience has also changed over time. The Niger Delta was an important location for ransom kidnapping in the early 2000s, especially where militants targeted expatriate workers associated with the oil industry. Over time, kidnapping spread to other parts of the country and became increasingly associated with armed criminal groups and banditry. Simeon (2021) notes that kidnapping now affects highways, villages, communities, and schools. In the North-West and parts of the North-Central region, the growth of banditry has been accompanied by the use of kidnapping as a revenue-generating activity. Akinyetun and Bakare (2022) identify kidnapping, village raids, and attacks on schools among the activities associated with banditry in Nigeria. School kidnapping, therefore needs to be understood within this broader context. Some school attacks have been associated with insurgent groups, while others have been linked in the literature to armed bandits and criminal networks. The motivations and organisational structures of these actors are not necessarily identical. Nevertheless, the attacks share a common feature. Children and school personnel are placed in situations where offenders can gain access to a group of potential victims. Verjee *et al.* (2021) argue that the emergence of mass school abductions should be interpreted within the wider expansion and commercialisation of kidnapping in Nigeria.

Patterns of School Kidnapping in Nigeria

The documented cases show a movement from highly visible insurgent attacks in the North-East

towards repeated mass abductions in the North-West and North-Central regions. Chibok in 2014 remains a major reference point because of the number of girls abducted and the international attention generated by the incident. In February 2018, 110 girls were abducted from Government Girls Science and Technical College, Dapchi, Yobe State, with 104 later released according to contemporary reports. These incidents established schools as significant sites within Nigeria's wider insecurity problem (Simeon, 2021; Verjee *et al.*, 2021). From 2020, the pattern became particularly visible in the North-West. In December 2020, more than 300 students were abducted from Government Science Secondary School, Kankara, Katsina State. In February 2021, students of Government Girls Secondary School, Jangebe, Zamfara State, were abducted. Other attacks during the same period included the Federal College of Forestry Mechanisation in Afaka, Greenfield University and Federal Government College, Birnin Yauri. The recurrence of these incidents suggests that mass abduction had become an established tactic among some armed groups rather than an exceptional event (Aderinto *et al.*, 2025; Ekwukoma, 2022).

The Kuriga incident in Kaduna State in March 2024 further demonstrated the continuing vulnerability of schools. Ekechukwu & Osat. (2020) report continuing concern over school security and note that the effects of such incidents extend to parents, teachers and neighbouring communities. Another recurring feature is the timing and organisation of attacks. Aderinto *et al.* (2025) found that school attacks in Katsina State commonly occurred at night and involved groups operating in large numbers. The attackers reportedly exploited weak security arrangements, entered school premises, gathered victims, and



moved them towards remote areas. The significance of these patterns lies in their situational character. The attacks are not simply random encounters. They involve knowledge of the target environment, an assessment of security arrangements and an opportunity to leave the location. This makes a routine activity perspective particularly relevant.

Factors Associated with School Kidnapping

Economic Incentives and the Kidnapping Economy

One of the most frequently discussed factors in contemporary Nigerian kidnapping is the financial incentive created by ransom. Kidnapping can provide substantial financial returns where victims' families, communities or authorities are willing or able to negotiate. Simeon (2021) describes ransom kidnapping as a lucrative activity and discusses cases in which large sums were reportedly demanded or paid. Although individual ransom claims should be treated carefully because authorities and families do not always disclose payment arrangements, the repeated use of ransom demands indicates that financial gain is an important part of the kidnapping environment. Schools may be especially attractive in this context because they can contain many potential victims in one location. A single successful attack may therefore create a large number of captives and generate considerable public pressure. This does not mean that every school kidnapping is motivated solely by money. Verjee *et al.* (2021) note that school abductions can also have political and strategic dimensions. The financial and strategic motives may coexist, particularly where criminal groups operate within wider systems of violence.

Weak Security Infrastructure

The physical condition of many schools is another important issue. Recent research on school attacks in Katsina State found that some vulnerable schools lacked adequate perimeter fencing, surveillance systems, security personnel and emergency communication facilities (Aderinto *et al.*, 2025). In such circumstances, an offender may face fewer obstacles when entering a school and fewer immediate risks when leaving with victims. The problem is especially serious where schools are isolated or located close to large forest areas that provide possible routes of escape. Weak infrastructure should not, however, be reduced to the absence of a fence. Guardianship involves the capacity to detect, discourage and respond to an offence. A school may have a gate but still have weak guardianship if there is no reliable person monitoring entry, no functioning communication system, or no nearby security response. RAT is useful here because it directs attention to the actual protective capacity of the environment rather than the mere presence of a formal security arrangement.

Weak Intelligence and Delayed Response

Weak intelligence gathering and delays in responding to security threats can leave schools vulnerable to attacks, particularly where available warning information is not effectively acted upon. Aderinto *et al.* (2025) report that some attacks were preceded by surveillance or other observable warning signs, yet the absence of effective intelligence and response mechanisms meant that these signs did not always result in preventive action. Similarly, Oluku and Inimiesi (2024) identify weaknesses in intelligence gathering, information sharing and the timely use of intelligence as important problems in Nigeria's response to kidnapping. They note that intelligence passes through stages of collection, processing, analysis and dissemination, meaning



that the availability of information alone does not guarantee preventive action. They further identify poor information sharing between security agencies and failures to use supplied intelligence as factors that can undermine crime prevention. From a routine activity perspective, intelligence matters because it can strengthen guardianship before the offender reaches the target. Information about suspicious movement, unusual gatherings, threats or planned attacks can allow authorities and communities to change routines, increase surveillance or temporarily suspend activities. In contrast, where information is not shared quickly or acted upon, a school may remain exposed even when warning signs exist..

Rural Location, Forest Corridors and Limited State Presence

Location is also important. Many of the documented mass school abductions have occurred in rural or semi-rural areas where schools are separated from major urban centres and where forested terrain provides concealment and escape routes. Akinyetun *et al.* (2022) discuss the importance of large, poorly monitored forest spaces in sustaining banditry. Ojewale (2024) similarly connects insecurity in North-West Nigeria to weak rural security and the difficulty of protecting communities located close to forest areas. The relevance of location to school kidnapping is straightforward. A school surrounded by dense settlement, active surveillance and accessible security services presents a different opportunity structure from an isolated boarding school near a forest. RAT does not assume that the same target has the same level of vulnerability everywhere. Rather, the suitability of a target depends partly on the circumstances in which the offender encounters it.

Poverty, Unemployment and Criminal Recruitment

The literature also links insecurity to poverty,

unemployment and limited economic opportunities. These conditions may create an environment in which criminal organisations can recruit or maintain members. Ojewale (2024) argues that economic hardship and weak state presence have contributed to the wider insecurity affecting education in the North-West. Aderinto *et al.* (2025) also identify socio-economic conditions as part of the broader context of school attacks. These factors require some qualification when considered through Routine Activity Theory. Poverty or unemployment does not automatically turn an individual into a kidnapper. Many people experience economic hardship without participating in crime. RAT is therefore more useful for examining how an already motivated offender encounters a vulnerable target than for explaining where criminal motivation originally comes from.

Routine Activity Theory (RAT)

RAT was developed by Lawrence E. Cohen and Marcus Felson in 1979. The theory shifted attention from the characteristics of offenders alone to the circumstances in which criminal opportunities arise. Cohen and Felson (1979) argued that crime becomes possible when three elements converge in time and space: a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence of a capable guardian. The central idea is that everyday patterns of activity influence the opportunities available for crime. The theory also draws attention to routine activities. People move between homes, workplaces, schools, markets and other places as part of everyday life. These movements determine where potential offenders, targets and guardians are likely to be found.

Motivated Offenders

The first component of RAT is the motivated offender. In the context of school kidnapping, this may include armed bandits, insurgent groups or organised criminal networks that have the capacity



and willingness to abduct students or school personnel. The precise motivation may differ across cases. Some actors may seek ransom, while others may have political, ideological or strategic objectives.

Suitable Targets

The second component is the suitable target. In RAT, target suitability is situational and may depend on factors such as accessibility, visibility, value, proximity and vulnerability. Students can become suitable targets because they are often concentrated in groups and may have limited ability to resist armed offenders. Boarding schools can be particularly exposed because students remain on the premises for long periods, including at night. The school environment itself can also contribute to target suitability. Predictable timetables, boarding arrangements, assemblies and established entry and exit points may make the movement of students relatively predictable. Where offenders are able to observe these routines, they may identify periods when large numbers of students are present or when supervision is weaker.

Absence of Capable Guardianship

The third component of RAT is the absence of capable guardianship. A capable guardian may include school staff, security personnel, parents, community members, neighbourhood watch groups, surveillance systems or other people and arrangements capable of discouraging or interrupting offending. What matters is whether the guardian has the capacity and opportunity to prevent or respond to the offence. This component is particularly relevant to school kidnapping in Nigeria. Studies of vulnerable schools identify limited security personnel, poor fencing, inadequate surveillance, weak communication systems and delayed response as recurring problems (Aderinto *et al.*, 2025; Momoh, 2023). Where a school is located far from security installations and there is no effective early warning mechanism, an armed group may be able to enter, gather victims and leave before assistance arrives.

RAT and Major School Kidnapping Cases in Nigeria

The usefulness of RAT becomes clearer when the documented school kidnapping cases are examined as situations in which the three elements converged. The cases below illustrate recurring situational features that make school kidnapping possible.

Chibok

The Chibok abduction occurred on the night of April 14–15, 2014, when Boko Haram abducted 276 girls from a secondary school in Chibok, a small town in Borno State, northeastern Nigeria (Onah, 2024; Verjee *et al.*, 2021). The girls were at the school to sit for their final examinations, making the concentration of students in one location an important feature of the incident (Maiangwa & Agbiboa, 2014). The attack also occurred within a wider pattern of Boko Haram attacks on schools in northeastern Nigeria, including earlier attacks in Yobe and Borno States (Verjee & Kwaja, 2021). The attackers struck at night, when the students were within the school environment, and successfully removed a large number of them. The operation also took place within Boko Haram's established area of activity around northeastern Nigeria and the Nigeria–Cameroon border region (Zenn, 2014). From the perspective of Routine Activity Theory, the case brought together motivated offenders, suitable targets and limited capable guardianship. The large number of students gathered in one location, the timing of the attack and the existing insecurity around schools created conditions that facilitated the abduction.

Kankara

The December 2020 Kankara abduction provides another illustration of the convergence described by Routine Activity Theory. On 11 December 2020, more than 300 boys were abducted from Government Science Secondary School, Kankara, a boarding school in Katsina State. The attackers, described as armed men riding motorcycles, stormed the school at night after gunshots were heard. While some students escaped by jumping over the school fence, others were rounded up and



taken away from the school premises (Kankara & Abdullahi, 2024). Verjee *et al* (2021) similarly document the abduction of more than 300 boys from the school and their subsequent release about a week later. The geographical environment surrounding the school was also significant. The abducted students were reportedly moved towards the stony hills of Pauwa and Zango and subsequently into the Zamfara forest, while the hills were described as providing refuge for bandits, with camps located on the hilltops close to the school (Kankara *et al.*, 2024). More broadly, forests in northern Nigeria have been documented as spaces where kidnapping groups establish camps, hold victims and organise further attacks (Olaniyan, 2024). From the perspective of Routine Activity Theory, the Kankara case demonstrates the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets and inadequate capable guardianship. The concentration of students within a boarding school at night, the attackers' ability to enter the school and the surrounding hills and forest areas used by armed groups formed the immediate context in which the abduction occurred.

Jangebe

The abduction at Government Girls Science Secondary School, Jangebe, in Talata Mafara Local Government Area of Zamfara State, occurred on 26 February 2021, when 317 female students were abducted by armed bandits (Osimen *et al*, 2022; Verjee *et al.*, 2021). The incident occurred within a period of escalating mass abductions of schoolchildren across northern Nigeria. Indeed, the Jangebe attack took place only a few days after the abduction of students from Government Science College, Kagara, Niger State, while negotiations for the release of the Kagara students were still ongoing (Ibrahim, 2020). The attack occurred at about 1:00 a.m., when the students were at the school. and gunmen arrived in pickup vehicles and motorcycles and carried the girls away (Ibrahim, 2021). The school was therefore attacked at a time when the students were together within the school premises and were particularly vulnerable to a coordinated armed raid. The broader security conditions surrounding schools in northern Nigeria also provide important context for the Jangebe incident. Ibrahim (2021)

notes that many schools targeted by kidnappers were located on the outskirts of towns and villages and lacked adequate perimeter fencing and security personnel. The absence of electricity in many schools also meant that security around the premises was particularly limited at night. Ibrahim (2022) similarly identifies the vulnerability of boarding schools in remote areas and stresses the need for stronger security around such schools. From the perspective of Routine Activity Theory, the Jangebe incident demonstrates the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets and inadequate capable guardianship. The presence of a large number of students within the school at night provided a concentrated group of targets, while the ability of armed attackers to enter the school and remove the students points to limitations in the guardianship available at the time. Verjee *et al.* (2021) place Jangebe within the wider increase in mass school abductions in northern Nigeria, showing how attacks on schools became an important feature of the changing kidnapping landscape during this period.

Birnin Yauri and Greenfield University

The abduction at Federal Government College, Birnin Yauri, Kebbi State, on 17 June 2021, occurred within the wider wave of school kidnappings that affected northern Nigeria between 2020 and 2021. Reports place the number of abducted students at between 94 and 103 (Ibrahim, 2021; Osimen *et al.*, 2022). The incident is particularly relevant to the question of capable guardianship because intelligence had reportedly been received about a planned attack, leading to the deployment of 15 police officers to the school. When the attackers arrived, however, they were reportedly about 150 in number and overpowered the police personnel before abducting the students (Ibrahim, 2021). The case therefore demonstrates that the presence of security personnel did not necessarily provide effective protection where the available personnel were unable to match the scale of the attacking group. The Greenfield University abduction occurred on 20 April 2021 at the university in Kasarami village, Chikun Local Government Area of Kaduna State. About 20 students and two staff members were abducted by armed bandits, and three of the students were



subsequently killed (Ibrahim, 2022). The incident also became associated with ransom negotiations. The political economy literature identifies ransom as an important dimension of kidnapping in Nigeria, while reporting on the Greenfield case indicates that families negotiated with the abductors for the release of the students (Ogunnubi & Idowu, 2024).

Ibrahim (2021) further reports that parents paid ₦180 million and provided eight motorcycles for the release of some of the abducted students. The two cases demonstrate different aspects of school kidnapping during this period. At Birnin Yauri, prior intelligence and the deployment of police did not prevent the attack, while the Greenfield University case illustrates the use of kidnapping for ransom and the vulnerability of students in a tertiary institution. Both cases can therefore be examined through RAT in terms of the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets and inadequate capable guardianship. In Birnin Yauri, the imbalance between the number of attackers and available security personnel is particularly relevant to guardianship, while the Greenfield case demonstrates how students within educational institutions became targets within an increasingly established kidnapping economy.

Limits of RAT in Explaining School Kidnapping

Although RAT is useful, it has clear limitations when applied to school kidnapping in Nigeria. The first is that the theory largely takes offender motivation as given. It can identify the presence of a motivated offender but does not adequately explain why some individuals or groups become motivated to participate in kidnapping. This is important in Nigeria because the literature points to broader conditions such as poverty, unemployment, weak governance, armed conflict, criminal networks and the profitability of ransom kidnapping (Ojewale, 2024; Verjee *et al.*, 2021). Second, the theory can understate the importance of political and organisational structures. Some school attacks have occurred within wider insurgencies or organised criminal networks. Understanding those attacks requires attention to

territorial control, political conflict, access to weapons and the organisation of criminal groups, factors that are outside the central focus of RAT. Finally, RAT focuses strongly on the occurrence of crime and is less suited to explaining the long-term effects of kidnapping. The trauma experienced by survivors, the distress of families, teacher shortages, school closures and educational inequalities require additional perspectives.

Conclusion

School kidnapping has become an important dimension of Nigeria's insecurity problem. From Chibok in 2014 through Dapchi, Kankara, Jangebe, Birnin Yauri, Greenfield University, Kuriga, and other incidents, the evidence shows a recurring pattern in which educational institutions can become targets of armed and criminal groups. The problem is concentrated in some regions, but recent incidents and threats indicate that the vulnerability of schools should not be treated as exclusively Northern. RAT provides a useful framework for understanding the situational conditions surrounding these attacks. School kidnappings become possible when motivated offenders encounter suitable targets in environments where capable guardianship is weak. The concentration of students, predictable school routines, isolated locations, weak physical protection, poor surveillance, inadequate intelligence, and delayed response can combine to create opportunities for offenders. The theory is therefore particularly useful for identifying points at which prevention can interrupt the opportunity for crime.

Recommendations

1. Federal and state education authorities should conduct regular, school-specific security assessments, with particular attention to boarding schools, isolated schools, and institutions located near forest or other difficult-to-monitor areas.
2. Security infrastructure should be strengthened according to identified risks. Measures may include perimeter fencing, controlled access, lighting, secure communication systems and appropriate protection for student accommodation.



3. Schools, communities and security agencies should establish reliable early-warning and information-sharing arrangements. Reports from local residents should be verified quickly and communicated through clearly defined channels.
4. Security agencies should develop rapid-response arrangements for schools in high-risk areas and improve coordination among communities, police, military, civil defence organisations, intelligence services and education authorities.

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