



Banditry, Governance Failure and Human Security in Nigeria: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Public Perceptions

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Abstract

Insecurity remains a critical test of state capacity, territorial authority and social order in contemporary Nigeria, with banditry emerging as a destructive form of armed predation, criminal enterprise, rural vulnerability and institutional fragility. This study examined public perceptions of the drivers, consequences and possible responses to banditry in Nigeria using open-ended phone interviews and written chat-based responses from 40 adult respondents. A qualitative descriptive design was adopted, and the data were analyzed thematically. The analysis produced six major themes: governance failure, weak security and corruption; socioeconomic vulnerability and youth recruitment; farmer-herder conflict, revenge and rural grievance transformation; illegal arms, porous borders and criminal economies; disruption of everyday human security; and community roles and multi-level policy response. Findings show that respondents did not interpret banditry merely as episodic criminality, but as a systemic human-security crisis sustained by weak state protection, corruption, arms proliferation, criminal economies, rural livelihood collapse and declining confidence in formal institutions. The study contributes to the literature by foregrounding public narratives as interpretive evidence of how citizens connect insecurity to governance failure, livelihood disruption, institutional distrust and the erosion of everyday safety. It concludes that addressing banditry in Nigeria requires an integrated, rights-respecting and intelligence-led response that combines lawful security operations, border management, prosecution of perpetrators and collaborators, school and farm protection, victim support, youth livelihood interventions and accountable community policing.

Keywords: Banditry, Nigeria, Human Security, Governance Failure, Thematic Analysis, Rural Insecurity

INTRODUCTION

Banditry has become one of the most consequential security and human-security threats confronting Nigeria. Although the term is often used broadly to describe armed robbery, kidnapping, cattle rustling, village raids, extortion, illegal taxation, highway attacks and ransom-taking, its contemporary Nigerian form has evolved into a complex system of organized armed predation. The present crisis did not emerge in isolation. It developed from overlapping historical and structural conditions, including unresolved farmer-herder tensions, cattle rustling, rural vigilantism, illegal arms circulation, weak policing, porous borders, illicit mining, ransom economies and the progressive retreat of state authority from vulnerable rural spaces ([International Crisis Group, 2020](#); [Ojo, Oyewole, & Aina, 2023](#); [Osasona, 2023](#)). What was once interpreted mainly as rural criminality in parts of the North-West has expanded into a wider national security problem affecting highways, farms, schools, forest corridors, border communities and, increasingly, areas outside the traditional northern hotspots.

The definitional complexity of banditry is itself an analytical problem. [Osasona \(2023\)](#) argues that banditry in Nigeria does not fit neatly into a single legal or conceptual category because it combines organized crime, armed violence, kidnapping, cattle rustling, pillage and territorial intimidation. [Thompson \(2025\)](#) similarly notes that the absence of a uniform definition weakens data collection and policy response because the phenomenon includes multiple crime types and varying levels of organization. In everyday usage, communities describe bandits in different ways: as armed criminals, kidnappers, extortionists, cattle rustlers, informants, collaborators, terrorists or violent entrepreneurs. This variation is not merely semantic; it reflects the multiple ways Nigerians experience banditry through violence, fear, suspicion, economic disruption and declining confidence in state protection.

Available evidence shows that banditry and related armed-group violence have produced a severe death toll. [Amnesty International \(2025\)](#) reported that at least 10,217 people were killed in attacks by gunmen in Benue, Edo, Katsina, Kebbi, Plateau, Sokoto and Zamfara during the first two years of

the Tinubu administration, with Benue accounting for 6,896 deaths and Plateau 2,630 deaths. The same report noted that hundreds of villages had been sacked by bandits in affected states. The [European Union Agency for Asylum \(2026\)](#) also describes banditry in Nigeria as a multifaceted and increasingly widespread form of violence involving armed robbery, kidnapping, cattle rustling, rape, raids and attacks on local communities. These figures and patterns suggest that banditry is no longer a marginal rural-security concern; it has become a large-scale human-security emergency.

The lived realities of banditry are equally important. Beyond deaths and abductions, banditry changes how ordinary people live. Farmers abandon farmlands because cultivation has become dangerous. Parents hesitate to send children to school because classrooms have become potential abduction sites. Traders close early, travellers avoid certain roads, teachers avoid rural postings and displaced families relocate from once-lively communities. Human security, in its classical developmental sense, concerns freedom from fear, freedom from want and protection of human life from chronic and sudden threats ([United Nations Development Programme, 1994](#)). Banditry threatens all three dimensions. It exposes communities to violent death, kidnapping, displacement and sexual violence; it undermines farming and food access; it disrupts schooling and business; and it imposes a climate of anticipatory fear that constrains ordinary movement, worship, trade, education and social life. Recent studies have also shown that banditry has produced captive populations, coerced settlements, extortion regimes, forced displacement and quasi-governance by armed groups in parts of northern Nigeria ([Okoli, Aina, & Onuoha, 2025](#); [Musa, 2025](#)).

Recent incidents in Oyo State further show the geographical expansion and symbolic significance of the crisis. In May 2026, armed men attacked schools in Oyo State, including communities in Oriire Local Government Area, abducting pupils and teachers and killing at least one teacher during the attacks. Reports indicated that the victims were taken into forested areas linked to the Old Oyo National Park corridor, while affected communities experienced panic, school closures, displacement and renewed fear. The Oyo incidents are significant

because the South-West had often been perceived as relatively safer than northern and Middle Belt conflict zones. Their occurrence heightened public anxiety that kidnapping-for-ransom and armed predation are moving beyond their earlier regional concentration and becoming more nationalized forms of insecurity (Reuters, 2026; Salako, 2026).

The expansion of banditry has important implications for governance and public trust. When citizens believe that the state cannot protect schools, farms, roads, markets and rural settlements, insecurity becomes more than a criminal problem; it becomes a legitimacy problem. Banditry therefore challenges the state at two levels. First, it threatens the physical security of citizens through killings, kidnappings, displacement and extortion. Second, it weakens public confidence in formal institutions when communities perceive security responses as slow, inadequate, inconsistent or compromised. This is why banditry must be understood not only as armed criminality but also as a human-security crisis rooted in governance failure, socioeconomic vulnerability, rural grievance, criminal economies and institutional distrust.

Despite the growing literature on banditry in Nigeria, three gaps remain important. First, many studies emphasize state-level conflict dynamics, legal classification, military operations or policy response, while fewer studies foreground how ordinary citizens interpret the crisis through lived fear, livelihood disruption, school anxiety, religious and community expectations, and distrust of official response. Second, while existing scholarship increasingly links banditry to farmer-herder conflict, arms proliferation and weak governance, less attention has been paid to how public narratives connect these drivers to wider ecological, food-security and rural-livelihood pressures. Third, the role of community and moral institutions, including traditional and religious leadership, remains underdeveloped in many security analyses, even though these actors shape reporting behaviour, youth socialization, early warning, local trust and community-level resilience.

This study is guided by the following research question: How do public perceptions explain the drivers, consequences and possible responses to

banditry in Nigeria? Subsidiary questions are: What factors do respondents perceive as the major drivers of banditry? How do respondents describe the effects of banditry on human security, livelihoods and community life? How do respondents assess government and community responses to banditry?

This study responds to these questions by examining public perceptions of banditry in Nigeria. Specifically, it identifies perceived drivers of banditry, examines its effects on human security and livelihoods, assesses views on government response, and synthesizes community-based and policy-oriented solutions proposed by respondents. By foregrounding lived realities, fear, livelihood disruption and citizen interpretations of state failure, the study contributes to a grounded understanding of banditry as a multidimensional human-security crisis rather than a narrow criminal problem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Banditry in Nigeria

Banditry in Nigeria may be conceptualized as organized or semi-organized armed criminality involving kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, extortion, looting, village raids, highway attacks and violent territorial intimidation. Ojo et al. (2023) describe armed banditry in North-West Nigeria as a multidimensional security threat involving visible and hidden actors, including militias, armed pastoralists, communal armed groups, criminal networks, political thugs and illegal mining interests. This interpretation moves the concept beyond a simplistic farmer-herder frame and recognizes the multiplicity of actors, motives and opportunity structures involved.

Osasona (2023) stresses that banditry raises a difficult question of definition because some groups appear as organized criminal groups, some resemble terrorist actors in their effects, while others operate as loosely structured violent networks. Thompson (2025) also demonstrates that banditry includes multiple attack types, including village raids, kidnapping, extortion, sexual violence, cattle rustling and arson, making it difficult to design policy responses without precise conceptual boundaries. Thus, banditry is best understood in this study as a hybrid phenomenon: part organized crime, part governance failure, part rural conflict, part coercive economy and part human-security emergency.

Governance Failure, State Fragility and Ungoverned Spaces

A major explanation in the literature is that banditry flourishes where state authority is weak, contested or distrusted. Weak policing, inadequate intelligence, under-equipped security personnel, poor prosecution, corruption and political interference create spaces within which armed groups operate with impunity (International Crisis Group, 2020; Ojo et al., 2023). Alkali and Putter (2025) identify weak local government administration, porous borders, criminal justice impediments and inter-agency rivalry as major barriers to effective state response in North-West Nigeria.

Okunola and Ayodele (2026) advance this argument by showing that in Sokoto, armed groups have moved beyond mobile predation to stationary forms of coercive control in which they extract illegal taxes, appoint local administrators and replace state authority in some communities. This suggests that the problem is not merely criminality but a sovereignty crisis in which non-state armed actors occupy governance vacuums. Oyebanji and Omale (2025) further show how corruption, lack of accountability, godfatherism and public-sector moral decadence weaken institutional legitimacy; these governance failures may indirectly worsen insecurity by eroding public confidence and weakening enforcement systems.

Socioeconomic Vulnerability, Conflict Entrepreneurship and Criminal Economies

Socioeconomic vulnerability is frequently identified as a driver of banditry. Poverty, unemployment, poor education and limited livelihood opportunities may increase youth susceptibility to recruitment into criminal networks. However, poverty alone cannot explain the organization, weaponization and persistence of banditry. Rather, poverty interacts with arms availability, weak justice systems, political manipulation, ransom economies and criminal entrepreneurship (Aderayo et al., 2025; Ojo et al., 2023).

The idea of conflict entrepreneurship is particularly useful for interpreting the monetization of banditry. Aderayo et al. (2025) argue that banditry may persist because conflict entrepreneurs and conflict compradors benefit from insecurity through arms

supply, illicit sale of weapons, funding, food supply, intelligence leakage and mediation roles. This strengthens the interpretation of banditry as an economy of violence, not merely a survival response. Bukar, Batault, and Van Broeckhoven (2024) similarly report that local populations perceive banditry as mainly financially driven, with 83% of surveyed respondents identifying money as bandits' primary motivation.

Farmer-Herder Conflict, Political Ecology and Food Systems

Several studies trace the genealogy of banditry to unresolved farmer-herder tensions, rural land-use disputes, cattle rustling and cycles of retaliatory violence. The International Crisis Group (2018, 2020) links Nigeria's farmer-herder violence and North-West insecurity to competition over land and water, weak rural governance and poor conflict-resolution mechanisms. Omoyajowo, Omoyajowo, Bakare, Ogunyebi, and Ukoh (2022) further argue that climate change, food security and violent conflict are interconnected in the Nigerian experience, particularly through farmer-herder tensions and competition over shrinking productive resources.

Okunola and Ayodele (2026) use a political ecology lens to show how desertification, pastoral-agrarian stress, borderland vulnerability and governance collapse interact to produce violent ordering in Sokoto. This is important for the present study because several respondents connected banditry to farm abandonment, herder-farmer disputes, food scarcity and rural economic distress. Banditry therefore functions both as a cause and consequence of livelihood vulnerability: it destroys agricultural production while also exploiting the desperation created by poverty, displacement and rural neglect.

Captive Populations, Modern Slavery and Human Security

Recent literature has expanded the human-security interpretation of banditry by foregrounding captive populations and modern slavery. Okoli et al. (2025) argue that banditry in northern Nigeria has created captive populations exposed to complex existential threats in ungoverned and under-governed spaces. These populations may live under bandit control, pay levies, lose freedom of movement or remain trapped between absent state protection and armed predation.

Musa (2025) extends this argument by linking banditry to modern slavery through kidnapping, forced labour, extortion, violence and exploitation of vulnerable populations. This is useful for understanding respondent narratives of fear, ransom-taking, controlled movement and coerced survival. In this sense, banditry is not only a crime problem; it is a human-security crisis involving freedom, dignity, livelihood, bodily integrity and civic belonging.

State Response, Military Operations and the Limits of Force

Nigeria's response to banditry has combined kinetic and non-kinetic measures, including military operations, negotiations, vigilante support, telecommunications restrictions, border controls and community policing. Aina, Ojo, and Oyewole (2023) show that Operation Hadarin Daji represents a major internal security operation against armed banditry in North-West Nigeria, but they also argue that conventional military operations face difficulty against decentralized, mobile and unconventional armed groups.

Ogbozor (2026), although focused on counterinsurgency in Northeast Nigeria, offers a useful caution for banditry response: battlefield gains do not automatically translate into human-security outcomes. His analysis of Operation Lafiya Dole shows that force-centric approaches may recover territory while leaving civilians exposed to livelihood disruption, food insecurity and displacement. This insight supports the need to evaluate security response not only by the number of armed actors killed or camps cleared, but also by civilian protection, food access, school safety, justice delivery and public trust.

Human Security as Analytical Framework

This study is guided primarily by the human security framework. Human security shifts analysis from state survival alone to the protection of people, livelihoods, dignity and everyday life. In the classical formulation of the United Nations Development Programme (1994), human security involves freedom from fear, freedom from want and protection from chronic and sudden threats. This framework is useful for analyzing banditry because the consequences of armed violence extend beyond deaths, raids and kidnappings. Banditry also disrupts farming, schooling, mobility, markets,

food access, psychological wellbeing and trust in public institutions.

In this study, human security is used as an interpretive framework rather than as a statistical measurement model. Respondents' narratives were examined in relation to four connected dimensions. The first is freedom from fear, reflected in accounts of killings, abductions, road insecurity, school attacks and fear of movement. The second is freedom from want, reflected in farm abandonment, business decline, food insecurity and livelihood disruption. The third is community and institutional security, reflected in perceptions of weak policing, poor intelligence, corruption, informant networks and distrust of formal protection systems. The fourth is human dignity and agency, reflected in narratives of displacement, extortion, coerced survival and reduced freedom of movement. Through this framework, banditry is analyzed not only as a crime problem but also as a crisis of everyday safety, livelihood protection and state legitimacy.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design. Qualitative description is appropriate where the aim is to present participants' views in a direct, experience-near and practically interpretable manner (Sandelowski, 2000). The approach was suitable because the study sought to understand how Nigerians explain the causes, impacts and remedies of banditry, rather than to test a predetermined theory.

Study Participants, Recruitment and Sampling

The study population comprised adult Nigerians with awareness of, exposure to or informed opinion about banditry and insecurity. The available dataset consisted of 40 interview narratives with harmonized demographic information after data cleaning and regrouping. Demographic frequencies were computed for the full qualitative sample ($n = 40$), while all 40 narratives were included in the thematic analysis.

Participants were recruited through purposive and referral-based remote recruitment. Initial contacts were approached because they were adult Nigerians with awareness of insecurity or lived knowledge of communities affected by banditry. Some

participants referred other eligible respondents. A formal response rate was not computed because the study did not use probability sampling or a bounded recruitment frame. Recruitment continued until the available narratives provided sufficient thematic depth and later transcript review produced no substantially new themes.

Inclusion criteria were: being an adult Nigerian aged 18 years or above; having awareness of, exposure to or informed opinion about banditry and insecurity in Nigeria; and willingness to participate voluntarily. Exclusion criteria were: being below 18 years of age; unwillingness to provide consent; inability to participate in a phone or written interview; and responses that did not engage meaningfully with the interview questions.

Although the sample included respondents from multiple geopolitical zones, it was concentrated in the South-West and North-Central zones, while the North-West and North-East were less represented. This imbalance reflects the constraints of remote recruitment, participant availability and willingness to discuss a sensitive security issue. The study is therefore not presented as a representative national survey, but as a qualitative perception-based inquiry into how a group of Nigerian respondents interpreted banditry.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through open-ended phone interviews and written chat responses throughout May 2026. Two graduate research assistants supported the process by contacting respondents, administering the interview guide, recording responses where permission was granted and assisting with transcription.

The interview guide asked respondents to discuss the causes of banditry, strongest perceived drivers, effects on communities, farming, schooling, business and movement, government performance, community and leadership roles, practical solutions and urgent priorities at federal, state and local levels. Before analysis, the transcripts were reviewed to ensure that responses were aligned with the interview questions and that demographic details were separated from substantive answers. In addition to thematic coding, responses to the strongest perceived driver question were separately

categorized into six descriptive groups to produce Figure 1.

Interviews and written responses were conducted primarily in English. Where respondents used brief expressions in Nigerian Pidgin, the meanings were clarified during transcription and translated into standard English without altering the substantive meaning of the response. No full transcript required formal back-translation.

Data Cleaning and Analysis

The interview transcripts and chat-based responses were first reviewed for completeness, consistency, clarity and relevance to the interview guide. Each transcript was assigned an anonymous participant identifier from P01 to P40 before analysis. Phone numbers, names, chat handles, locations that could directly identify participants and other personal identifiers were removed from the working transcripts. Obvious typographical errors, repeated words and minor transcription slips were corrected only where such corrections did not alter the original meaning of participants' responses. Demographic variables were regrouped into age group, gender, religion, ethnic/tribal affiliation and geopolitical zone to support descriptive profiling.

Thematic analysis followed [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six-phase procedure: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Two graduate research assistants independently read the 40 interview narratives and conducted preliminary open coding. This first round generated 42 initial codes, including bad governance, weak security response, corruption, unemployment, poverty, poor education, illegal arms, porous borders, informants, ransom economy, farmer-herder conflict, revenge, farm abandonment, school closure, fear of movement, business disruption, community policing, traditional leadership, religious leadership, state police and intelligence gathering. After the first coding round, the principal researcher compared the independently generated codes, removed overlaps, merged closely related codes and developed a working codebook.

The codebook contained the code name, operational definition, inclusion criteria, exclusion criteria and example excerpts from the transcripts.

Coding differences between the two research assistants were resolved through iterative discussion with the principal researcher. Where disagreement occurred, the research team returned to the raw transcript to determine whether the excerpt supported the proposed code or required

reclassification. The final coding framework reduced the initial 42 open codes into 18 focused codes, which were later organized into six major themes. Table 1 summarizes the coding trail and theme-development process.

Table 1: Summary of coding trail and theme development

Analytical stage	Procedure followed	Output
Transcript preparation	Phone interviews and chat responses were reviewed, cleaned, anonymized and assigned participant codes P01-P40.	Cleaned and anonymized transcripts
Open coding	Two graduate research assistants independently reviewed the transcripts and generated preliminary codes.	42 initial open codes
Code comparison	The principal researcher compared codes, removed duplicates, merged overlapping codes and clarified definitions.	Working codebook
Focused coding	Related codes were grouped into higher-order categories.	18 focused codes
Theme development	Focused codes were clustered according to conceptual similarity and recurrence across transcripts.	Six major themes
Theme validation	Themes were checked against raw transcripts, with sensitive claims treated as perceptions unless independently supported.	Final thematic framework
Adequacy check	Later transcripts were reviewed to determine whether new themes continued to emerge.	Thematic adequacy reached

Trustworthiness and Researcher Reflexivity

Several steps were taken to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis. Credibility was supported through repeated reading of transcripts, comparison of independently generated preliminary codes and return to the raw narratives when coding disagreements occurred. Dependability was strengthened through a coding trail showing how 42 initial codes were reduced to 18 focused codes and later organized into six major themes. Confirmability was supported by preserving representative excerpts and treating sensitive claims as perceptions rather than verified facts. Transferability was addressed by describing the sample characteristics, recruitment limitations and geopolitical distribution of respondents.

Researcher reflexivity was also important because banditry is a politically and emotionally sensitive subject. The research team recognized that their own assumptions about governance failure, insecurity and public institutions could influence interpretation. To reduce this risk, the analysis privileged participants' wording, avoided converting perceptions into objective claims and

reviewed themes against the raw transcripts before final interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Because banditry is a sensitive security issue, the study prioritized voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and responsible reporting. Before each interview, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the nature of the questions and their right to decline participation or withdraw at any point without consequence. Verbal consent was obtained before data collection. Most interviews were conducted through phone calls, recorded only where permission was granted and later transcribed, while some responses were provided through written chat communication.

To protect participants' identities, phone numbers, names, chat handles, precise locations and other direct identifiers were removed during transcription and replaced with anonymous participant codes. The interview data were stored in a password-protected device and were accessible only to the research team. Sensitive claims involving ethnicity, religion, political sponsorship, informant networks

or security-sector complicity were treated as participant perceptions rather than independently verified facts.

No formal institutional ethical approval or exemption letter was obtained before the study. This is acknowledged as a methodological limitation, especially because the research involved human participants discussing a sensitive security topic. Nevertheless, the study followed core ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, non-maleficence and responsible reporting. Future studies on this subject should obtain formal ethical clearance or an institutional exemption letter before data collection, particularly where participants may discuss violence, state institutions, criminal networks, ethnicity, religion or security-sector conduct.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Table 2 presents the demographic profile of respondents (n = 40). The respondents were mostly young adults, with 60.0% aged 20-29 years. The gender distribution was fairly balanced, although males were slightly more represented (55.0%) than females (45.0%). Christianity was the dominant religious affiliation (65.0%), while Islam accounted for 32.5%, and others, including traditional religion/non-believers, accounted for 2.5%. Ethnically, Hausa respondents formed the largest group (32.5%), followed by Yoruba (25.0%) and Igbo (20.0%). Geographically, the sample was concentrated mainly in the South-West (35.0%) and North-Central (32.5%), indicating broad but uneven regional representation across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of respondents (n = 40)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	20-29 years	24	60.0
	30-39 years	10	25.0
	40-49 years	6	15.0
Gender	Male	22	55.0
	Female	18	45.0
Religion	Christianity	26	65.0
	Islam	13	32.5
	Others (Traditional religion/non-believers)	1	2.5
Ethnic/tribal affiliation	Hausa	13	32.5
	Yoruba	10	25.0
	Igbo	8	20.0
	Others/minority tribes (Ibibio, Ogbia, Anang and unspecified)	9	22.5
Geopolitical location	South-West	14	35.0
	North-Central	13	32.5
	South-South	7	17.5
	South-East	3	7.5
	North-West	2	5.0
	North-East	1	2.5

Thematic Findings

The themes should not be read as isolated categories. Rather, the interview narratives show that respondents understood banditry as a system of interacting pressures. Governance failure was frequently presented as the condition that allowed other drivers to mature: poverty created recruitment vulnerability; unemployment deepened frustration; illegal arms converted grievance into organized violence; weak intelligence enabled impunity; and

fear disrupted farming, schooling, business and movement.

Figure 1 should be read as a supplementary descriptive summary of responses to the specific strongest perceived driver question. It is not the basis of the full thematic framework, which was developed from the broader interview narratives.

Table 3 summarizes the six major themes generated from the interview narratives.

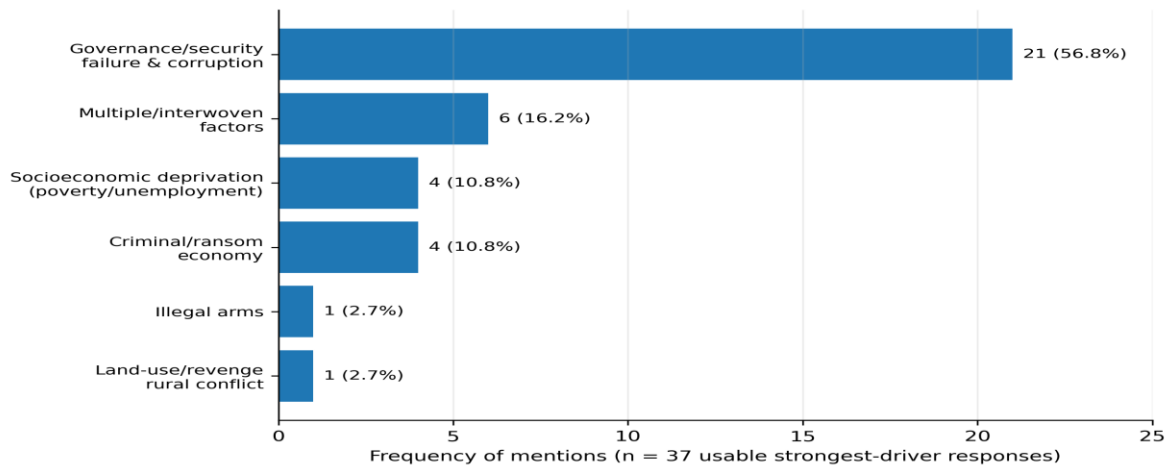


Figure 1: Primary perceived drivers of banditry in Nigeria based on interview responses

Note: Figure 1 is based on 37 usable strongest-driver responses; 3 responses were excluded because they did not clearly identify a single strongest driver or were too broad for reliable categorization. The chart is descriptive and should be interpreted as a qualitative frequency summary rather than a statistically representative estimate.

Table 3: Major themes, sub-themes and analytical interpretation

Major theme	Sub-themes/codes	Analytical interpretation
Governance failure, weak security and corruption	Bad governance; weak political will; under-equipped security agencies; poor intelligence; institutional distrust	Respondents perceived banditry as thriving where the state fails to secure citizens, prosecute offenders or close spaces of impunity.
Socioeconomic vulnerability and youth recruitment	Poverty; unemployment; poor education; misinformation; survival pressure	Participants linked youth entry into banditry to deprivation and lack of livelihood opportunities, while recognizing that poverty alone does not explain the crisis.
Farmer-herder conflict, revenge and rural grievance transformation	Land pressure; crop destruction; cattle-related disputes; retaliation; self-defense groups	Some respondents traced banditry to unresolved rural conflicts that became militarized after communities lost confidence in state protection.
Illegal arms, porous borders and criminal economies	Arms proliferation; ransom finance; illegal mining; informant networks; border weakness	Banditry was perceived as an organized economy sustained by weapons, ransom payments, forest corridors and hidden collaborators.
Disruption of everyday human security	Farm abandonment; school fear; business decline; restricted movement; trauma; food insecurity	Respondents emphasized fear, farm withdrawal, school closure, teacher withdrawal, early business closure and avoidance of road travel.
Community roles and multi-level response	Community policing; vigilantes; traditional rulers; religious leaders; youth groups; state police; intelligence gathering	Participants proposed grassroots intelligence and community policing, but stressed the need for state support, trust and lawful coordination.

To strengthen the evidential grounding of the thematic analysis, selected cleaned representative excerpts were matched with their corresponding analytical relevance, as shown in Table 4. These excerpts show that respondents did not interpret banditry as a single-cause security problem. Rather,

they associated it with state failure, socioeconomic deprivation, arms availability, disruption of farming and education, criminal economies, and the need for community-based intelligence and technology-enabled security response.

Table 4: Cleaned representative excerpts supporting thematic interpretation of banditry in Nigeria

Theme	Cleaned representative excerpt	Interpretation
Governance failure	“The strongest driver is bad governance, which directly breeds weak security. You cannot separate the two” (P01, male, South-West).	Banditry is interpreted as a crisis of state capacity and legitimacy.
Socioeconomic vulnerability	“Banditry is mainly caused by unemployment, poverty... corruption, weak security and the easy access of illegal weapon” (P02).	Poverty and unemployment interact with arms access and weak security.
Food insecurity and farming	“Farming is neglected and reduced... resulting in high cost of commodities in the market” (P03).	Insecurity disrupts agricultural production and household food access.
Education disruption	“Basic school attendance has become a high-risk gamble due to the continuous threat of raids and abductions” (P04).	Banditry produces fear-driven educational exclusion.
Community policing	“Informant to the security personnel and carry out the community policing” (P05).	Local intelligence is viewed as essential to security response.
Technology and intelligence	“Trace every terrorist using technology via social media handles, drones and military” (P06).	Respondents expect modern, intelligence-led security operations.
Criminal economy	“Banditry has become a multi-million Naira economy through ransom payments, illegal weapons trafficking, and resource exploitation” (P07).	Banditry is perceived as an organized political-criminal enterprise.

Governance Failure, Weak Security and Corruption

The most dominant theme was the perception that banditry is sustained by governance failure, weak security, corruption and weak political will. Respondents repeatedly argued that armed groups continue to operate because offenders are not swiftly apprehended or prosecuted, security personnel are under-equipped, intelligence response is weak and public institutions have not inspired confidence. As one respondent stated, “The strongest driver is bad governance, which directly breeds weak security. You cannot separate the two” (P01, male, South-West).

This theme captures a legitimacy crisis. Participants were not only afraid of bandits; they were also disappointed by the perceived inability of government to protect farms, schools, roads, markets and rural settlements. The language of the interviews frequently moved from criminality to governance, supporting [Okunola and Ayodele's \(2026\)](#) argument that banditry in some locations is evolving into territorial control and sovereignty erosion rather than ordinary crime.

Poverty, Unemployment, Poor Education and Youth Vulnerability

The second major theme concerned poverty, unemployment, poor education and youth

vulnerability. Many respondents argued that joblessness and deprivation make young people susceptible to recruitment, especially where criminal networks promise quick money or social relevance. One respondent summarized this interaction by linking unemployment, poverty, corruption, weak security and illegal weapons access as mutually reinforcing drivers (P02).

Participants also recognized that poverty becomes more dangerous when combined with illegal arms, corruption, political influence, ransom incentives and impunity. This supports the interpretation of banditry as a socio-political and criminal-economy problem rather than a simple poverty-crime relationship.

Farmer-Herder Conflict, Revenge and Rural Grievance Transformation

Some respondents traced the origin of banditry to farmer-herder clashes, crop destruction, cattle-related disputes and cycles of revenge. In this interpretation, communities initially formed local defence groups when they believed state protection was absent. Over time, however, some of these formations were perceived to have mutated into armed groups that extorted, kidnapped and terrorized the same communities they once claimed to defend.

This finding shows how unresolved rural grievances may become militarized when justice mechanisms fail. It also supports political ecology interpretations of banditry, especially the argument that land pressure, climate stress, pastoral mobility, farm insecurity and weak mediation can transform livelihood disputes into durable security threats (Okunola & Ayodele, 2026; Omoyajowo et al., 2022).

Illegal Arms, Porous Borders and Criminal Economies

A recurrent concern was the availability of illegal arms and the economic organization of banditry. Respondents spoke of sophisticated weapons, informant networks, forest hideouts, ransom finance, porous borders and the need for drones, surveillance and intelligence-led operations. One respondent described banditry as a “multi-million Naira economy through ransom payments, illegal weapons trafficking, and resource exploitation” (P07).

The data suggest that respondents perceived banditry as an organized criminal economy. Kidnapping and extortion were not seen as random events but as revenue-generating systems that allow armed groups to procure weapons, expand operations and bargain with communities or government. Aderayo et al. (2025) describe this as conflict entrepreneurship, while Bukar et al. (2024) show that communities overwhelmingly perceive financial gain as a major motivation for banditry.

Disruption of Farming, Schooling, Business, Movement and Psychological Wellbeing

Participants consistently described banditry as a direct assault on everyday human security. Farmers were said to have abandoned farmlands; parents were afraid to send children to school; teachers avoided rural postings; traders closed early; and road travel became a source of anxiety. One respondent observed that “farming is neglected and reduced,” resulting in higher commodity prices (P03). Another described basic school attendance as “a high-risk gamble” because of the continuous threat of raids and abductions (P04).

The impact on farming and schooling was particularly strong. Farm withdrawal implies reduced food production and higher prices, while school insecurity undermines education and

childhood development. This aligns with Bukar et al.'s (2024) findings that banditry disrupts mobility and work, especially farming and herding, and with Alkali and Putter's (2025) argument that armed banditry undermines education, economic activity and national security.

Community Roles and Multi-Level Policy Response

Respondents proposed community policing, vigilante groups, early-warning systems, traditional leadership involvement, religious moral guidance, youth sensitization and intelligence sharing. One respondent emphasized the need to serve as an “informant to the security personnel” and support community policing (P05). Another called for the use of technology, including social media tracking, drones and military intelligence (P06).

A small number of respondents expressed support for extrajudicial punishment of captured bandits. These statements should be read as evidence of fear, anger and distrust of formal justice rather than as lawful or ethical policy recommendations. A rights-respecting approach requires arrest, transparent prosecution, protection of victims and accountability for perpetrators, collaborators and security saboteurs.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that respondents perceived banditry in Nigeria not as a narrow criminal problem, but as a systemic human-security crisis rooted in the interaction of governance failure, weak security architecture, corruption, socioeconomic vulnerability, illegal arms circulation, farmer-herder tensions, porous borders and criminal economies. This interpretation is consistent with Ojo, Oyewole, and Aina (2023), who conceptualize armed banditry in North-West Nigeria as a multidimensional threat involving visible and hidden actors, including militias, armed groups, political thugs, criminal networks and illicit economic interests. The present study extends this argument by showing how ordinary respondents interpret these structural drivers through everyday experiences of fear, farm withdrawal, school insecurity, restricted movement, economic disruption and distrust of formal institutions.

An important caution is necessary. The findings should not be read as statistically representative of

all Nigerians or as independent verification of every claim made by respondents. The study is based on purposive qualitative data and is best interpreted as evidence of how a group of respondents understand, narrate and make meaning of banditry. Its value lies in analytical transferability rather than numerical generalizability.

The study's main contribution is its perception-driven human-security framing of banditry. Existing studies have explained banditry through state fragility, armed-group violence, political ecology, military response and criminal economies. This study extends that literature by showing how ordinary respondents connect these structural explanations to lived insecurity, farm withdrawal, school fear, restricted mobility, institutional distrust and demands for community-level protection. In doing so, it demonstrates that public perceptions are not merely opinions about insecurity; they are interpretive accounts of how citizens experience the erosion of state protection and everyday human security.

The governance-related findings are particularly important. Respondents did not only express fear of armed groups; they also voiced disappointment in state institutions, suspicion of hidden collaborators and frustration with slow or ineffective justice. This supports state-fragility arguments that armed groups expand where governance, justice delivery, rural administration and territorial control are weak or contested (Okoli, Aina, & Onuoha, 2025; Okunola & Ayodele, 2026). Okunola and Ayodele's (2026) analysis of Sokoto is especially relevant because it shows that banditry can move beyond episodic violence into territorial control, illegal taxation and the partial replacement of state authority. The present study confirms that this perceived erosion of state authority is also visible in public narratives, where respondents frame banditry as evidence of weak protection, impunity and loss of confidence in government.

The socioeconomic findings also deepen understanding of the conditions that enable banditry. Respondents repeatedly identified poverty, unemployment, poor education and youth vulnerability as recruitment conditions. However, they did not reduce banditry to poverty alone. Rather, their narratives suggest that deprivation

becomes dangerous when combined with arms availability, corruption, political protection, ransom incentives, informant networks and weak prosecution. This aligns with the conflict entrepreneurship perspective, which emphasizes that banditry persists partly because some actors profit from insecurity through arms supply, ransom payments, intelligence leakage, food supply, mediation roles and protection economies (Aderayo et al., 2025). Thus, the study reinforces the argument that banditry should be understood not only as a survival response by deprived youth, but also as an organized economy of violence sustained by those who benefit materially and politically from disorder.

The findings further support the growing human-security literature on banditry. Respondents described school fear, farm abandonment, business disruption, restricted travel, psychological anxiety, food insecurity and fear-driven changes in daily life. These themes correspond with Bukar et al.'s (2024) survey evidence that banditry is one of the leading community concerns in North-West Nigeria, that victimization is widespread, and that mobility and work are severely affected. They also align with Alkali and Putter's (2025) argument that armed banditry undermines education, economic activity, rural stability and national security. The implication is that the consequences of banditry extend beyond deaths, attacks and kidnappings; they include the gradual destruction of ordinary livelihoods, social confidence, market activity, schooling, agricultural productivity and psychological wellbeing.

The relationship between human security and state legitimacy is central to the study's argument. Banditry becomes a legitimacy crisis when citizens no longer trust the state to protect roads, schools, farms, markets and rural communities. In such contexts, insecurity is experienced not only as exposure to violence but also as a loss of confidence in public authority. This is why respondents' narratives repeatedly connected fear of bandits with disappointment in government, weak justice, poor intelligence and the perceived failure of institutions to protect everyday life.

The study also complements recent scholarship on captive populations and modern slavery. Okoli et al. (2025) argue that banditry has created captive

populations in parts of northern Nigeria, where communities live under conditions of coercion, fear, extortion and limited freedom of movement. Musa (2025) similarly links banditry to modern slavery through kidnapping, forced dependence, forced labour, extortion and exploitation of vulnerable populations. The present findings support these arguments by showing that respondents viewed banditry as a condition that restricts mobility, weakens freedom, disrupts farming and schooling, and exposes communities to coercive control.

Another important contribution concerns the limits of force. Respondents did not reject security operations, but they expected state responses to be lawful, intelligence-led, coordinated, technologically supported and accountable. This finding is consistent with Aina et al. (2023), who show that conventional military forces face major difficulties in responding to decentralized, mobile and unconventional armed bandit groups. It also resonates with Ogbozor's (2026) caution that force-centric security gains may fail to produce human-security recovery if civilian protection, livelihood restoration, food security and public trust are neglected. Therefore, counter-banditry effectiveness should not be measured only by raids, arrests, killings of armed actors or camps cleared; it should also be measured by school reopening, safe farm access, restored markets, reduced ransom economies, safe mobility, justice delivery, victim support and renewed community trust.

Overall, the study suggests that banditry in Nigeria is sustained by a chain of mutually reinforcing conditions. Weak state protection creates impunity; poverty and unemployment create recruitment vulnerability; illegal arms and porous borders create operational capacity; ransom payments and conflict entrepreneurship create financial incentives; and fear disrupts farming, schooling, mobility, markets and local economies. Breaking this chain requires integrated security, justice, livelihood and governance reforms.

Policy Implications

Table 5 presents the policy implications emerging from interview themes. The table organizes the proposed response across federal, state and local governance levels, while emphasizing that

community action must complement, not replace, lawful state responsibility.

Table 5: Policy implications emerging from interview themes

Governance Level	Priority Actions	Analytical Implication
Federal government	Intelligence coordination; border control; arms tracing; ransom-flow monitoring; security-sector reform; lawful prosecution.	Security response must be national, technology-enabled, rights-respecting and accountable.
State governments	School safety; community policing support; youth employment; victim support; regulated vigilante frameworks.	State action should connect local knowledge to formal security and social protection systems.
Local governments and communities	Early warning; reporting suspicious movements; local vigilance; youth engagement; peace messaging; farm and school protection.	Grassroots actors are indispensable but must not replace state responsibility or become unregulated armed actors.

The policy implication is that Nigeria's counter-banditry strategy should combine security enforcement with governance restoration. Federal authorities should prioritize arms tracing, cross-border intelligence, ransom-flow monitoring and prosecution of sponsors and perpetrators. State governments should strengthen school safety, regulated community-security structures and rural livelihood recovery. Local governments and communities should support early-warning systems and credible reporting, but without normalizing unregulated vigilantism or collective punishment.

Limitations of the Study

- The study relied on purposive sampling, so the findings are not statistically representative of all Nigerians.

- b. The sample was geographically uneven, with stronger representation from the South-West and North-Central zones than from the North-West and North-East, despite the centrality of these northern zones to the banditry crisis.
- c. The use of phone interviews and chat-based responses may have excluded people without phone access, stable connectivity or willingness to discuss sensitive security issues remotely.
- d. The study relied on perceptions and did not triangulate every claim with official crime data, field observation or security-agency records.
- e. Some demographic categories were regrouped to protect participant anonymity and improve analytical clarity.
- f. The absence of formal institutional ethical approval or an exemption letter is a methodological limitation, even though the study followed informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and responsible reporting principles.
- g. The findings reflect participant perceptions and should not be treated as independent verification of claims about political sponsorship, religious involvement, ethnicity, informant networks or security-sector complicity.
- h. As a qualitative interpretive study, the findings are more useful for thematic insight, analytical transferability and policy reflection than for statistical generalization.

CONCLUSION

This study examined public perceptions of banditry in Nigeria using open-ended phone interviews and written-response data. The findings show that respondents perceive banditry as a multidimensional human-security crisis driven by governance failure, weak security response, corruption, poverty, unemployment, illegal arms, farmer-herder tensions, porous borders, ransom finance and organized criminal economies. Respondents also described banditry as a direct disruption to farming, schooling, business, movement, psychological wellbeing and community life.

The study contributes to literature by foregrounding public narratives as an analytical lens for understanding banditry. It shows that citizens do not interpret banditry only as episodic criminality, but as evidence of weakened state protection, institutional distrust, livelihood insecurity and

declining confidence in formal justice. In this sense, banditry becomes both a security crisis and a legitimacy crisis, particularly when communities no longer trust the state to protect farms, schools, roads, markets and rural settlements.

The policy implication is that banditry cannot be addressed through militarization alone. A sustainable response requires lawful security operations, intelligence coordination, arms control, border management, prosecution of perpetrators and collaborators, school and farm protection, victim support, youth livelihood interventions and accountable community policing. Future research should compare perceptions across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, conduct deeper fieldwork in heavily affected North-Western states, include victims and security officials, and combine qualitative interviews with conflict-event data to strengthen triangulation.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

Authors declare that they have no known competing financial, personal, or professional interests that could have influenced the conduct, analysis, interpretation, or reporting of this study.

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