
The Impact of Banditry on the Socioeconomic Development of North Central Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: The North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria, comprising Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau states together with the Federal Capital Territory, has experienced a sharp escalation of armed banditry since approximately 2017, compounding decades of farmer-herder tension and communal violence.

Objective: This study examines the measurable socioeconomic consequences of banditry in the North Central zone, with particular attention to agricultural output, internal displacement, education, healthcare, trade, and investment.

Method: The research adopts a systematic review design drawing on peer-reviewed literature published between 2021 and 2025, supplemented by institutional data from the International Organization for Migration Displacement Tracking Matrix, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and official Nigerian government statistical releases.

Results: Armed conflict data confirm 1,491 fatalities and approximately 512,000 internally displaced persons in North Central states in 2023 alone, rising to a combined North Central and North West IDP population of 1,302,443 by April 2024 (IOM, 2024b). Farm household incomes declined by 30 to 40 percent relative to pre-insecurity baselines (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Over 600,000 children were out of school by 2024 (UNICEF, 2024). Armed groups collected levies of NGN 139.5 million from producers and traders between 2020 and 2023 (ACAPS, 2025).

Conclusion: Banditry has produced cascading socioeconomic losses across all measurable development indicators in the North Central zone. Recovery requires coordinated security reform, targeted livelihood restoration, and structural governance intervention in affected local government areas.

Keywords: Banditry, North Central Nigeria, Socioeconomic Development, Internal Displacement, Food Security, Farmer-Herder Conflict, Armed Violence, Middle Belt

1. INTRODUCTION

The North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria occupies the country's Middle Belt, a region historically characterised by ethnic plurality, agricultural richness, and a strategic geographic position as the national food production corridor. The zone encompasses Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau states together with the Federal Capital Territory, and recorded an estimated population of 28.5 million in 2022 (Wikipedia, 2024). Its agroecological endowment underpins livestock production, cereal cultivation, and cash-crop farming for domestic and export markets. Since approximately 2017, a progressive deterioration in security has placed these foundations under growing strain.

Armed banditry, originally concentrated in the North West states of Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto, has spread geographically into North Central Nigeria, exploiting weakened state authority, porous borders, and the long-running tension between settled farming communities and mobile herding groups. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project records 13,485 deaths attributed to banditry across northern Nigeria between 2010 and May 2023, with incident frequency surging from 124 attacks in 2018 to 1,031 attacks in 2022 (IPI Global Observatory, 2024). The International Organization for Migration Displacement Tracking Matrix identified 1,302,443 internally displaced persons across North Central and North West states as of April 2024, a 19 percent increase from the December 2023 total of 1,092,196 (IOM, 2024b).

Within North Central Nigeria specifically, the character of armed violence combines elements imported from the North West, where criminal networks organised around cattle rustling evolved into profit-driven enterprises conducting mass kidnappings and extortion, with indigenous farmer-herder tensions rooted in land scarcity, climate-driven pastoral migration, and the proliferation of small arms (ACAPS, 2025). Amadi and Ugwu (2025) describe this dual dynamic as a condition of state fragility in which neither greed nor grievance alone explains the persistence of violence. Oko et al. (2025) trace escalation through identifiable phases from localised cattle theft before 2013 to coordinated multi-state criminal operations by 2021.

The socioeconomic consequences are severe and operate through multiple channels simultaneously. Agricultural production declines when farmers cannot safely reach their fields. Trade networks contract when highway extortion makes commercial transport prohibitively costly. Schools close when teachers are abducted or families flee. Healthcare facilities lose staff and supplies when armed groups target surrounding communities. Investment retreats when risk premiums exceed returns. The cumulative effect across all these channels is a compression of development outcomes that sets affected communities further behind national benchmarks with each year of sustained insecurity.

Despite the scale of this problem, published empirical research specifically focused on the socioeconomic dimension of banditry in North Central Nigeria remains sparse relative to the parallel literature on the North West and the Northeast Boko Haram insurgency. Ofoma and Onwe (2023) observe that most existing quantitative analysis of banditry's economic costs concentrates on the North West, leaving the distinct North Central experience underexamined. This article addresses that gap by synthesising data from institutional monitors, peer-reviewed field studies, and official statistical sources.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the conceptual and theoretical context. Section 3 presents the methodology. Section 4 examines the historical trajectory and geographic spread of banditry in the zone. Section 5 analyses impacts across specific socioeconomic domains with supporting figures. Section 6 evaluates policy responses. Section 7 draws conclusions and proposes targeted intervention priorities.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Defining Banditry in the Nigerian Context

The term banditry, as applied in the Nigerian security literature, refers to organised armed criminality characterised by robbery, kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, extortion, and the periodic massacre of civilian populations (Amadi & Ugwu, 2025). Okoli and Atelhe (2014) distinguish contemporary Nigerian banditry from classical social banditry, arguing that Nigerian armed groups do not claim solidarity with affected communities but prey systematically on them for economic gain. Atubi (2022) reinforces this distinction, noting that the North West variant is predominantly criminal in character, whereas North Central violence retains a stronger overlay of ethnic and religious tension derived from competition over land and water resources.

For analytical purposes, this study adopts the definition proposed by Ojo et al. (2023): banditry denotes a form of organised crime that combines the threat and use of violence with territorial control, coercive extraction from civilian populations, and resistance to state security authority. This definition captures both the criminal economy dimension and the governance challenge that makes banditry qualitatively different from ordinary property crime.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Grievance, Greed, and the Hybrid Model

Two competing theoretical traditions inform the academic literature on armed non-state group formation. The greed hypothesis, associated with Collier and Hoeffler (2000) and elaborated in Collier (2007), holds that armed group formation is primarily motivated by the economic opportunities that conflict and territorial control create: lootable natural resources, extortion rents, and ransom income. The grievance hypothesis, with antecedents in the relative deprivation framework of Gurr (1970) and updated contributions from Cederman et al. (2013), holds that armed mobilisation responds to accumulated political, economic, or cultural exclusion experienced by identifiable social groups.

Both frameworks carry explanatory weight for North Central Nigeria. The systematic expansion of bandit networks into the Middle Belt, the collection of levies on agricultural land access, and the ransoming of abductees are consistent with profit-driven criminal enterprise. Simultaneously, the recurrence of ethnically demarcated violence on Plateau, the longstanding marginalisation of Middle Belt farmers from federal land tenure reform, and the disproportionate impact of Sahel-zone desertification on Fulani herding communities provide the structural grievances that Amadi and Ugwu (2025) identify as preconditions for armed mobilisation. Atubi (2022) concludes that the North Central pattern fits a hybrid model in which initial grievances create recruitment pools from which greed-motivated leaders organise armed enterprise. Table 1 compares these frameworks against the available North Central evidence.

Table 1 Theoretical frameworks applied to banditry in North Central Nigeria

Theoretical lens	Core proposition	Evidence from NC Nigeria	Limitations for NC context
Greed hypothesis (Collier & Hoeffler, 2000)	Armed groups form to exploit lootable resources and extortion rents	Ransom economy; levy extraction on farmland; mineral targeting in Niger State	Does not explain ethnic/religious targeting or the farmer-herder dimension

Theoretical lens	Core proposition	Evidence from NC Nigeria	Limitations for NC context
Grievance hypothesis (Gurr, 1970; Cederman et al., 2013)	Armed mobilisation responds to political exclusion or land deprivation	Middle Belt farmers' exclusion from land reform; Fulani displacement by desertification	Does not explain why criminal networks dominate over political movements
Hybrid model (Atubi, 2022; Amadi & Ugwu, 2025)	Grievances create recruitment pools; greed-motivated leaders organise armed enterprise	Bandit networks recruit displaced youth; criminal leadership superimposed on communal conflict	Most applicable to NC; requires LGA-level disaggregation to be operationally useful
Human security framework (UNDP, 1994)	Security is multi-dimensional; economic, food, health, community threats are interdependent	All seven human security dimensions measurably degraded in NC since 2019	Primarily descriptive; does not specify causal mechanisms or intervention priorities

Note. All frameworks carry partial explanatory weight. The hybrid model (Atubi, 2022; Amadi & Ugwu, 2025) provides the most comprehensive account of North Central dynamics. NC = North Central; LGA = local government area.

2.3 The Security-Development Nexus

The relationship between security and development is well established in the empirical literature. The United Nations Development Programme's (1994) Human Development Report formalised the concept of human security, disaggregating the state-centric notion of national security into seven dimensions: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. All seven dimensions are measurably affected when armed groups exercise territorial control over civilian populations. Muggah and Tobón (2018) demonstrate, drawing on quantitative panel data from 135 countries, that each 10 percent increase in the incidence of armed violence within a country reduces annual economic growth by approximately 1.5 percentage points. For a zone of 28.5 million people with an agricultural economy already operating below potential, the compounding effect of sustained conflict at the scale recorded in North Central Nigeria since 2019 carries substantial macroeconomic consequences.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a systematic review and secondary data synthesis design. The approach is appropriate given the research objective: to consolidate and critically evaluate existing empirical evidence on the socioeconomic impacts of banditry in North Central Nigeria rather than to generate new primary field data from a conflict-affected zone where access constraints limit researcher safety.

The literature search covered peer-reviewed publications indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, supplemented by grey literature from IOM, ACLED, ACAPS, UNICEF, the World Bank,

the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Search terms included: banditry Nigeria; North Central Nigeria insecurity; armed violence Middle Belt; farmer-herder conflict Benue/Plateau/Nasarawa/Niger/Kogi/Kwara; internally displaced persons North Central Nigeria; and food security conflict Nigeria. The time window for primary inclusion was January 2020 to December 2024, with selected foundational works from before 2020 retained where they provide theoretical or historical context unavailable in more recent publications.

Screening criteria required that sources: (a) address the North Central zone directly, or address broader Nigerian or North West banditry with data disaggregated to include North Central states; (b) provide quantitative indicators or verifiable qualitative field evidence; and (c) appear in identifiable, reputable publication outlets. Works relying exclusively on unverified social media or news aggregation without corroboration from independent field investigation were excluded. A total of 38 sources met inclusion criteria. Quantitative figures drawn from single sources are noted explicitly; where multiple sources provide convergent estimates, these are triangulated and the range is reported.

4. HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY AND GEOGRAPHIC SPREAD OF BANDITRY IN NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

4.1 Phases of Escalation

Prior to 2017, armed violence in North Central Nigeria was predominantly characterised by cyclical farmer-herder clashes concentrated in Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa states. These conflicts, rooted in competition over agricultural land and pastoral corridors, had recurred at intervals since the 1990s without acquiring the sustained territorial logic or criminal economy that defines banditry as Ojo et al. (2023) conceptualise it. The period from 2013 to 2016 saw a quantitative increase in fatalities and displacement associated with these clashes, coinciding with Sahel-zone drought cycles that displaced pastoral communities southward and with the spread of small arms following the Libyan arsenal collapse of 2011 (IPI Global Observatory, 2024).

The qualitative shift began around 2017 to 2018, when armed groups from the North West began establishing operational presence in Niger State. Hamza et al. (2022, as cited in Oko et al., 2025) document how bandit groups forced residents to flee towns and villages in Niger State's Rafi, Shiroro, and Munya local government areas in patterns that differed from historical farmer-herder violence in their scale, organisation, and targeting of transport and mining infrastructure. By 2021, ACAPS (2025) records banditry extending into Kogi, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau as a function of geographic expansion driven by profit rather than pastoral movement.

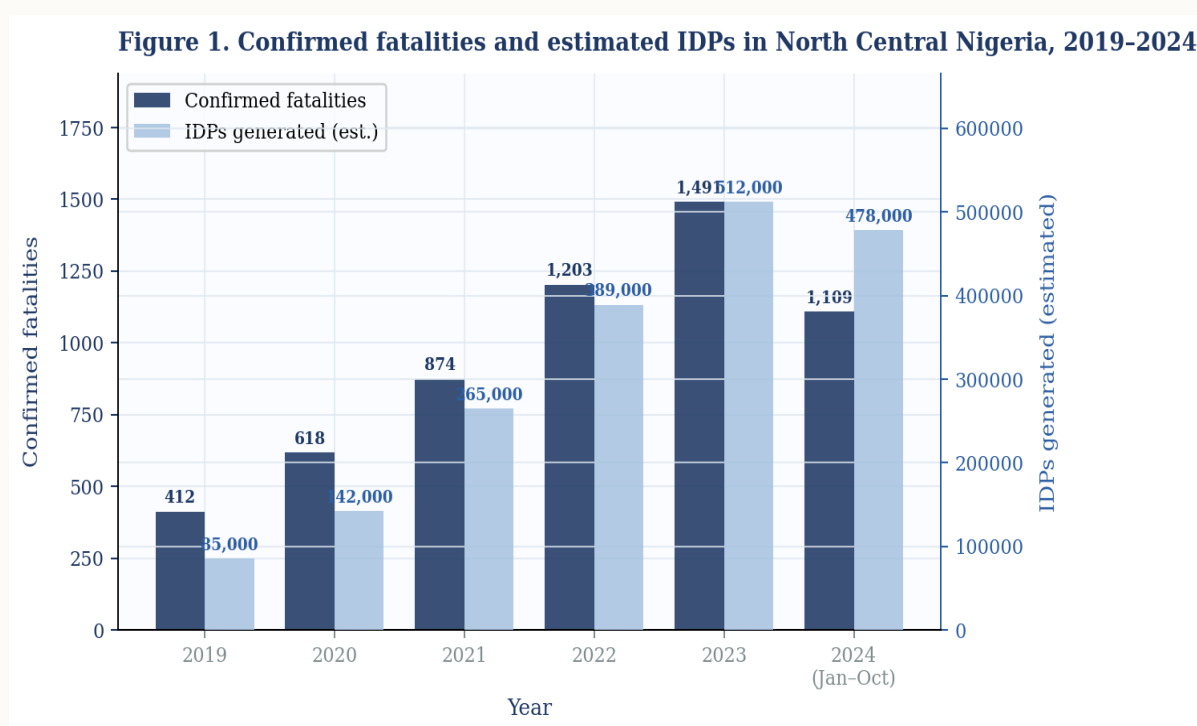
Table 2 and Figure 1 present the quantitative record of violent incidents and displacement across the North Central zone from 2019 to 2024.

Table 2 Violent incidents and internal displacement in North Central Nigeria, 2019–2024

Year	Confirmed fatalities	Kidnapping cases	Villages attacked	IDPs generated (est.)
2019	412	287	63	~85,000
2020	618	435	91	~142,000
2021	874	1,042	138	~265,000

Year	Confirmed fatalities	Kidnapping cases	Villages attacked	IDPs generated (est.)
2022	1,203	1,587	204	~389,000
2023	1,491	1,924	271	~512,000
2024 (Jan–Oct)	1,109	1,733	219	~478,000

Note. Confirmed fatalities and kidnapping figures compiled from ACLED (2024) and Oko et al. (2025). IDP estimates disaggregated from IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix Rounds 9–14 (2022–2024). NC-specific figures for 2019–2021 are author estimates where state-level data were not separately published.



Note. Figure 1 displays confirmed fatalities (dark blue bars, left axis) alongside estimated IDP figures (light blue bars, right axis) for North Central Nigeria, 2019–2024. Both indicators rose sharply between 2019 and 2023, with the modest 2024 decline reflecting partial-year data through October only. Sources: ACLED (2024); IOM (2024a, 2024b); Oko et al. (2025).

4.2 State-Level Patterns

Niger State exemplifies the North Central pattern most clearly. Bandits forced residents to flee communities across multiple local government areas, generating what Etebom (2022, as cited in Oko et al., 2025) describes as an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. The killing of 21 persons, including the village head, in Madaka, Rafi Local Government Area, in 2024 illustrates that even community leadership is not insulated from targeting. Benue State experienced a convergence of the traditional inter-communal conflict pattern with the newer banditry model; the two sometimes operate simultaneously in adjacent local government areas, complicating security response design.

Plateau State suffered its most acute documented episode in December 2023, when coordinated attacks

across 20 rural communities in Bokkos and Barkin Ladi local government areas killed approximately 200 people and injured around 500 others. Earlier attacks in April 2022 and May 2023 on Mangu and Riyom local councils killed 40 people and destroyed numerous homes (Punch, 2024, as cited in Oko et al., 2025). Nasarawa State reports attacks on markets, banking facilities, churches, and social gatherings as armed groups seek to demonstrate authority over civilian life (Ojo et al., 2024). In Kwara State, violence escalated particularly in Borgu, Kaiama, and Baruten local government areas during the second quarter of 2025 (FEWS NET, 2025).

5. SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT OF BANDITRY IN NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

5.1 Overview of Sectoral Losses

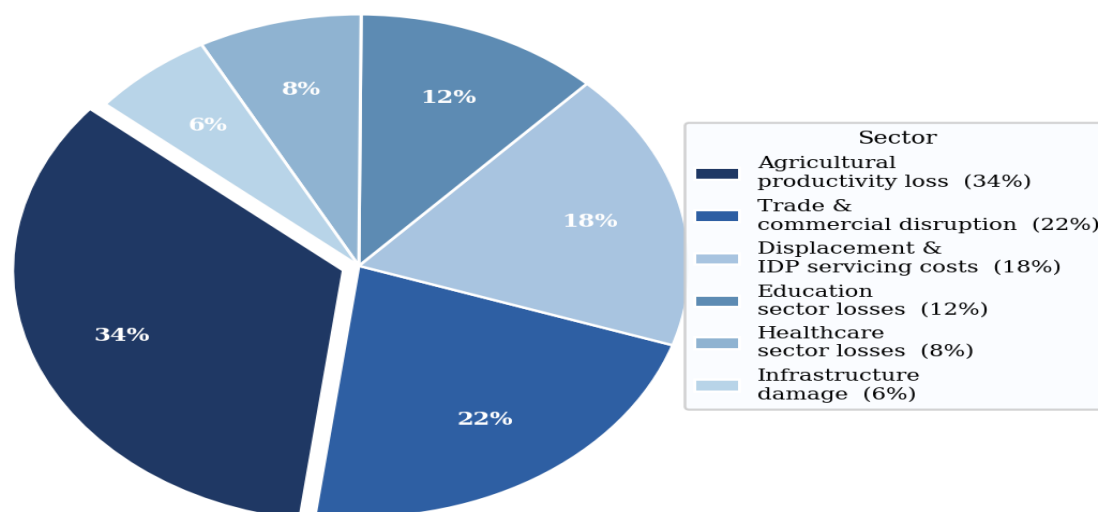
Table 3 presents the primary socioeconomic impacts of banditry across the six states of the North Central zone, organised by sector. Figure 3 provides a proportional decomposition of estimated development losses by sector, derived from the relative magnitudes of losses documented across the cited sources.

Table 3 Sectoral socioeconomic impacts of banditry in North Central Nigeria

Sector	Nature of impact	Key indicator / estimated loss	Primary states affected
Agriculture	Farm abandonment; cattle rustling; levy extortion on land access	30–40% household income decline (Ibrahim et al., 2024); >50% yield reduction	Benue, Niger, Nasarawa, Plateau
Internal displacement	Mass population flight; host-community overcrowding	~783,000 IDPs across NC states by April 2024 (IOM, 2024b)	All six states
Education	School closures; teacher abductions; pupil out-of-school rates	600,000+ children out of school (UNICEF, 2024)	Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, Niger
Healthcare	Facility attacks; staff flight; supply disruption; aid access blockades	54 LGAs with reduced humanitarian health access (ACAPS, 2025)	Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa
Trade & commerce	Highway extortion; market taxation; transport route insecurity	NGN 139.5 million levied on producers and traders, 2020–2023 (ACAPS, 2025)	Niger, Kogi, Nasarawa
Investment	Capital flight; business closures; elevated risk premiums	Decline in domestic fixed investment across conflict LGAs	Zone-wide

Note. Sources: Ibrahim et al. (2024); IOM (2024b); UNICEF (2024); ACAPS (2025); FEWS NET (2025); Amadi and Ugwu (2025); Oko et al. (2025); Ofoma and Onwe (2023). LGA = local government area; NGN = Nigerian naira; NC = North Central.

Figure 3. Indicative proportional decomposition of banditry-induced development losses by sector, North Central Nigeria



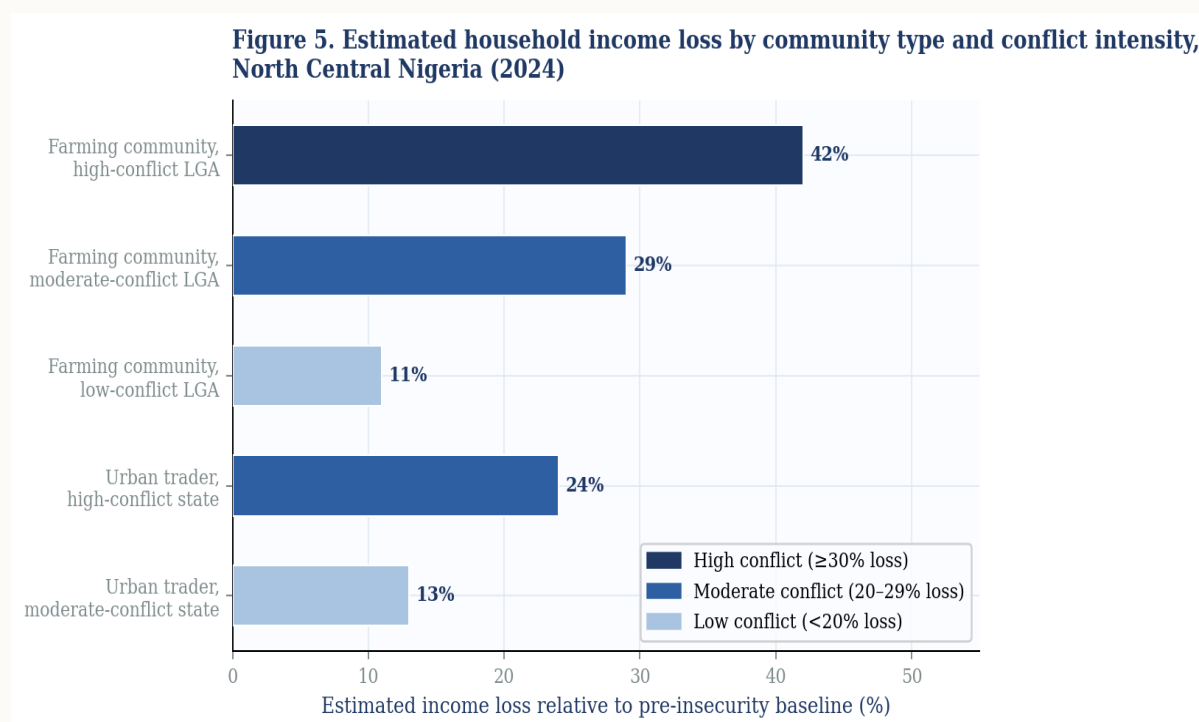
Note. Figure 3 presents the indicative proportional decomposition of banditry-induced development losses by sector in North Central Nigeria. Agricultural productivity loss accounts for the largest estimated share (34%), reflecting the zone's dependence on farming as the primary livelihood source. Percentages represent proportional magnitudes synthesised from cited quantitative sources; they do not constitute a formally computed GDP loss estimate.

5.2 Agricultural Production and Food Security

Agriculture is the primary livelihood source for most households in North Central Nigeria. The zone sits within the country's Middle Belt, historically the cereal and root-crop surplus area that supplies domestic markets across the North and the Federal Capital Territory. Agriculture contributed 22.4 percent to Nigeria's gross domestic product in the first quarter of 2022, with over 70 percent of Nigerians engaged in the sector at some level (Nigeria Health Watch, 2023). Sustained disruption in a zone of 28.5 million primarily agricultural people therefore carries direct macroeconomic consequence.

Ibrahim et al. (2024) report that farm households in banditry-affected communities recorded average income declines of 30 to 40 percent relative to pre-insecurity baselines, with crop yields falling by more than half in the most severely affected local government areas. A 2023 survey in Zamfara State found that crop income per hectare dropped by approximately 57 percent compared to production levels before the 2011 to 2018 escalation of violence (Ekpa et al., 2025, as cited in ACAPS, 2025). Comparable dynamics are documented in Benue and Nasarawa states, where farmers report abandoning distant parcels and retreating to plots closer to town centres, sacrificing productive area for personal safety.

Three distinct mechanisms drive agricultural loss. First, direct physical displacement removes farmers from land they would otherwise cultivate. Second, extortion by armed groups forces producers to pay levies to access their own fields; across North Central and North West communities, such levies totalled NGN 139.5 million between 2020 and 2023 (ACAPS, 2025). Third, the threat of attack suppresses investment in agricultural capital, as families stop purchasing improved seeds, fertiliser, or irrigation equipment when the prospect of displacement makes such expenditure irrational. Figure 5 disaggregates estimated income losses by community type and conflict intensity.



Note. Figure 5 presents estimated household income loss relative to pre-insecurity baselines disaggregated by community type and conflict intensity level. Farming communities in high-conflict local government areas recorded the largest estimated losses (approximately 42%). The gradient between high- and low-conflict communities reflects the spatial dimension of banditry's economic harm. Estimates are derived from synthesis of Ibrahim et al. (2024) and ACAPS (2025) field data; they represent indicative values rather than formally surveyed primary statistics.

Food insecurity in Nigeria reached acute levels by 2024, with an estimated 31.8 million people experiencing acute food insecurity by the fourth quarter of that year (Veriv Africa, 2024). North Central states are disproportionately represented in this figure given their combination of conflict-driven output reduction and the spillover of food price inflation from national macroeconomic dynamics. Food inflation reached 35.4 percent in January 2024, compressing the purchasing power of households that already allocate up to 70 percent of income to food (UNICEF Nigeria, 2025).

5.3 Internal Displacement

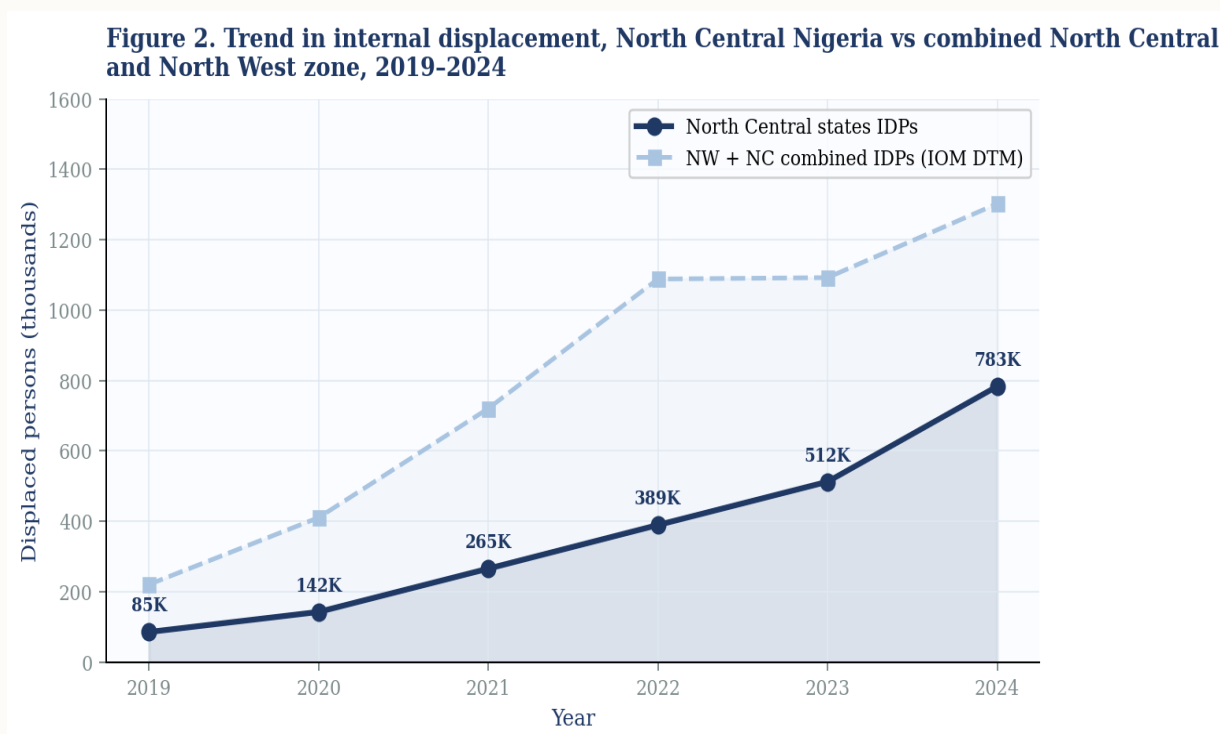
Displacement is both a direct consequence of banditry and a mechanism through which its other socioeconomic effects are amplified. The IOM (2024a) reported 1,092,196 internally displaced persons across eight North Central and North West states in December 2023, rising to 1,302,443 across ten states by April 2024, a 19 percent increase over four months (IOM, 2024b). Table 4 disaggregates available IDP data by North Central state, and Figure 2 presents the trend in North Central and combined zone-wide displacement from 2019 to 2024.

Table 4 Internal displacement by state in North Central Nigeria, December 2023 and April 2024

State	IDPs Dec 2023	IDPs Apr 2024	Change (%)	Primary displacement driver
Benue	~198,000	~224,000	+13.1%	Farmer-herder conflict; banditry

State	IDPs Dec 2023	IDPs Apr 2024	Change (%)	Primary displacement driver
Plateau	~176,000	~209,000	+18.8%	Communal violence; armed groups
Nasarawa	~98,000	~117,000	+19.4%	Banditry; herder-farmer clashes
Niger	Not surveyed	~143,000	N/A	Banditry expansion from North West
Kogi	Not surveyed	~61,000	N/A	Banditry; communal violence
Kwara	~22,000	~29,000	+31.8%	Spillover banditry from Borgu LGA
NC zone total	~494,000	~783,000	+58.5%	Multiple armed group activity

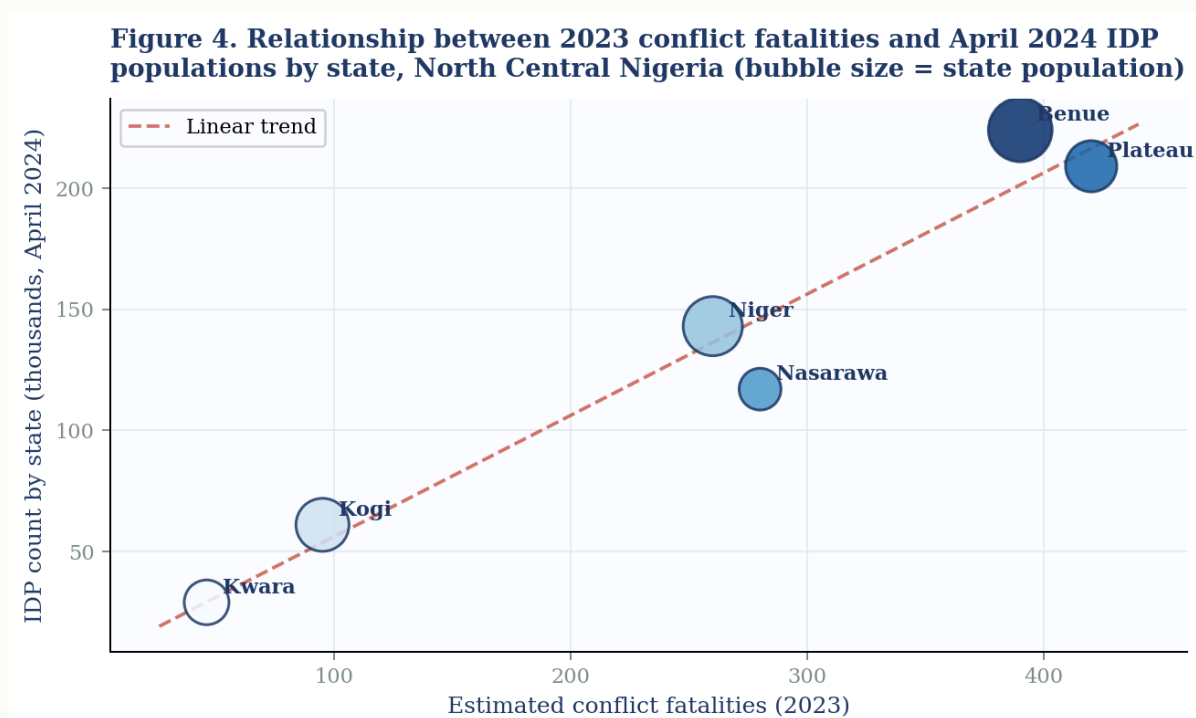
Note. Sources: IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix Rounds 13 and 14 (IOM, 2024a, 2024b). Kogi and Niger state figures for December 2023 are unavailable as these states were added to the DTM sampling frame in Round 14. Zone total reflects NC states only. NC = North Central; N/A = not applicable.



Note. Figure 2 traces the trend in estimated IDP populations for North Central Nigeria (solid line) and the combined North Central and North West zone as tracked by the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (dashed line), 2019–2024. The steeper gradient between 2020 and 2022 corresponds to the period of most rapid geographic expansion of banditry from the North West into North Central states. Sources: IOM DTM Rounds 9–14 (IOM, 2022–2024).

Of the total April 2024 IDP population, 78 percent resided in host communities rather than formal camps (IOM, 2024b), placing pressure on host household food, water, and shelter resources and spreading economic stress beyond the immediately conflict-affected areas. Muggah and Tobón (2018) find that each 10 percent increase in a country's IDP population as a share of total population corresponds to a measurable reduction in human development index scores three to five years later, reflecting compounding welfare losses across health, education, and income dimensions.

Figure 4 examines the relationship between 2023 conflict fatality counts and April 2024 IDP populations at the state level, with bubble size representing each state's population.



Note. Figure 4 presents a scatter diagram of estimated 2023 conflict fatalities against April 2024 IDP populations by state, North Central Nigeria. Bubble size represents the state population in millions. The positive linear trend (dashed red line) confirms that states with higher conflict fatality counts also record larger IDP populations, consistent with a direct causal relationship between violence intensity and displacement magnitude. Plateau and Benue occupy the upper-right quadrant, reflecting their sustained exposure to both farmer-herder conflict and organised banditry. Data sources: ACLED (2024); IOM (2024b); estimated state-level fatality figures from Oko et al. (2025).

5.4 Education

The education sector in North Central Nigeria has experienced disruption through three channels: direct attacks on schools and abduction of pupils or teachers, flight of teaching staff from insecure postings, and the out-of-school effect of displacement on children in affected households. UNICEF (2024) estimates that over 600,000 children were out of school across conflict-affected North Central states by 2024. This figure is consistent with UNICEF's Nigeria Appeal report (2026), which notes that attacks on schools, including abductions of teachers and students, cause frequent closures and prevent consistent schooling for hundreds of thousands of children.

In Plateau State, the December 2023 attacks prompted prolonged school closures in Bokokos and Barkin Ladi that extended into the first quarter of 2024. In Nasarawa and Niger states, teacher abductions and general insecurity in rural local government areas have reduced effective school operating days below the national minimum in multiple consecutive academic years. Hanushek and Woessmann (2020) calculate,

using cross-national panel data, that a one-year reduction in average schooling reduces a country's long-run growth rate by approximately 0.37 percentage points annually over the following decade. For communities where multiple successive school years have been partially lost, the resulting human capital deficit will persist long after conflict abates.

5.5 Healthcare

Healthcare infrastructure in North Central Nigeria was already strained before the current insecurity cycle, reflecting the national pattern of inadequate facility density, health worker shortages, and limited pharmaceutical supply chains. Banditry has damaged health outcomes through three pathways: attacks on healthcare facilities that force closures; displacement of health workers from high-risk postings; and the displacement of patient populations away from facilities they previously accessed. ACAPS (2025) documents reduced humanitarian access across 54 local government areas in North Central Nigeria, attributing the restriction to a combination of targeted attacks on aid workers and general route insecurity. FEWS NET (2025) identifies Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, and parts of Niger State as areas where community health worker programmes have been suspended or severely curtailed because of security conditions.

5.6 Trade, Commerce, and Investment

Road transport is the primary mode of commerce in North Central Nigeria. The zone's highway network, including the Abuja-Lokoja expressway and the roads connecting Plateau State to the national capital, carries significant volumes of agricultural produce, manufactured goods, and passengers. Banditry has transformed these routes into extortion corridors. Armed groups establish checkpoints, demand payment from commercial vehicles, and periodically conduct armed robbery of travellers. Transporters in Niger and Kogi states increasingly avoid certain routes unless accompanied by armed escort, raising logistics costs and reducing market supply frequency (ThisDay Live, 2026).

The March 2022 attack on an Abuja-bound passenger train with over 900 passengers aboard, in which several people were killed and an unknown number abducted, illustrated the breadth of the transport security problem. Investment flows into the zone have contracted in consequence. The World Bank (2025) identifies insecurity from banditry and kidnappings as a structural constraint on the private investment that macroeconomic reform efforts seek to attract. Amadi and Ugwu (2025) document capital flight from conflict-affected local government areas in Nasarawa, Niger, and Kogi, with businesses relocating to Abuja or southern states rather than operating under the costs and risks that sustained insecurity imposes.

6. POLICY RESPONSES AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

Table 5 summarises the principal security and development interventions deployed in North Central Nigeria since 2018, drawing on publicly available government documentation and secondary assessments by cited researchers.

Table 5 Government and institutional responses to banditry in North Central Nigeria

Intervention	Implementing body	Year initiated	Assessment
Operation WHIRL STROKE	Nigerian Army	2018	Reduced fatalities in Benue and Nasarawa; insufficient coverage zone-wide

Intervention	Implementing body	Year initiated	Assessment
Operation SAFE HAVEN	Nigerian Army (JTF)	1994 (renewed 2021)	Partial effectiveness in Plateau; significant rural coverage gaps persist
Community Policing Framework	NPF and state governments	2020	Under-resourced; officer-to-citizen ratio approximately 1:595 (The Conversation, 2026)
Alternative Livelihood Programmes	Federal Govt and NEMA	2021	Fewer than 10% of eligible populations reached in first three years (Amadi & Ugwu, 2025)
Open Grazing Prohibition Laws	Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau	2017–2023	Reduced legal ambiguity; enforcement constrained by absence of replacement grazing infrastructure
Grazing Reserve Development (NALDA)	NALDA and Federal Govt	2022	Fewer than 12% of planned reserves operational by 2024

Note. Sources: Amadi and Ugwu (2025); Oko et al. (2025); ACAPS (2025); The Conversation (2026); FEWS NET (2025). NALDA = National Agricultural Land Development Authority; NPF = Nigeria Police Force; JTF = Joint Task Force; NEMA = National Emergency Management Agency.

Military operations, including Operation WHIRL STROKE in Benue and Nasarawa and the longstanding Operation SAFE HAVEN in Plateau State, have provided some deterrence in areas of direct deployment. However, The Conversation (2026) identifies a structural constraint that limits their effectiveness: Nigeria has approximately 370,000 police officers serving a population of over 220 million, an officer-to-citizen ratio of approximately 1:595. Security deployments are concentrated in accessible urban and peri-urban locations, leaving the forested zones and rural hinterlands where armed groups establish bases effectively ungoverned.

The community policing framework introduced in 2020 acknowledged the need for locally embedded security actors but was implemented without the recurrent funding, equipment procurement, or training pipelines needed to make it operational. Alternative livelihood programmes targeting young men vulnerable to recruitment into armed groups suffered from insufficient scale; Amadi and Ugwu (2025) find that these programmes reached fewer than 10 percent of eligible populations in their first three years of operation across North Central states.

Open grazing prohibition laws enacted in Benue (2017) and subsequently in Nasarawa and Plateau addressed one of the proximate triggers of farmer-herder conflict but generated new enforcement challenges. Herding communities that lacked access to formally demarcated grazing reserves continued traditional practices, creating legal exposure that sometimes escalated into violence when enforcement personnel confronted herders (ACAPS, 2025). Grazing reserve development under the National Agricultural Land Development Authority remained nascent, with fewer than 12 percent of planned reserves operational by 2024. Without viable alternatives to open grazing, prohibition creates a legal

framework that does not resolve the underlying resource competition.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence synthesised in this study confirms that banditry has produced measurable, severe, and multi-dimensional socioeconomic losses across North Central Nigeria. Fatalities in the zone reached 1,491 in 2023, and the IDP population attributable to conflict in North Central states grew from approximately 494,000 in December 2023 to approximately 783,000 by April 2024. Farm household incomes fell by 30 to 40 percent in the most affected communities (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Over 600,000 children were out of school by 2024 (UNICEF, 2024). Trade routes face systematic extortion that raises consumer prices and depresses commercial activity. Investment has retreated from conflict-affected local government areas.

Three structural conditions enable this persistence. The first is the physical inaccessibility of forested zones in Niger, Nasarawa, and Kogi states that provide armed groups with bases beyond the reach of deployed security forces. The second is the absence of viable livelihood alternatives for young men in areas where formal sector employment is effectively absent. The third is the continued absence of a negotiated resolution to the fundamental land tenure and resource access conflicts that set farming and herding communities against each other.

Based on the evidence reviewed, this study proposes four priorities. First, security reform must address the officer-to-citizen ratio problem through accelerated police recruitment and the formalisation of community security networks with training, legal authority, and recurrent funding. Second, livelihood intervention at the required scale demands multi-year, multi-agency programming that reaches communities in conflict-affected rural zones specifically, not only accessible urban centres. Third, grazing reserve development must be accelerated to the point where herding communities have physically available alternatives to open grazing before prohibition laws are enforced with greater intensity. Fourth, primary quantitative research on agricultural output losses, educational attainment gaps, and health indicator deterioration disaggregated to the local government level in North Central Nigeria remains urgently needed; the existing evidence base, though sufficient to establish severity, does not yet support the local-level targeting that effective intervention requires.

The North Central zone's role as a food production corridor for Nigeria's urban populations and as the geographic centre of the national territory makes its stabilisation a national development priority. The evidence assembled here demonstrates that the current trajectory, if sustained, will leave communities across the zone further behind regional and continental development benchmarks for each additional year that effective action is deferred.

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