

Trauma Beyond the Headlines: Psychological Consequences of Kidnapping on Victims and Communities in Ondo State, Nigeria

Original Research Article | Volume 1 | Issue 5 | 2026 | Article Number: 021

Accepted: 15 September 2026 | Published: 10 October 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)

 Crossref : <https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-2N5IDANF>



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Abstract

Kidnapping has emerged as one of the most pervasive internal security threats in Nigeria, and Ondo State, in Nigeria's South-West geopolitical zone, has recorded a marked increase in abductions along its highways, farming settlements, and forest fringes in recent years. While much of the existing scholarship on kidnapping in Nigeria has emphasized its economic costs and its implications for law enforcement, comparatively little empirical attention has been paid to its psychological toll on victims, families, and communities. This study addresses that gap by examining the psychological consequences of kidnapping in three local government areas of Ondo State — Akure North (Iju), Akoko South-East (Isua), and Akoko North-East (Ikare Akoko) — using a convergent mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were drawn from a structured survey of 280 usable responses (a 93% response rate from 302 questionnaires administered), while qualitative data were obtained from three focus group discussions (FGDs) with community members and security personnel, analyzed thematically. Descriptive results show that fear and anxiety ($M = 4.85$) and feelings of helplessness and insecurity ($M = 4.18$) were the most severe psychological effects reported by individuals, while post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms ($M = 4.16$) and depression ($M = 4.06$) were also prominent. At the community level, widespread panic ($M = 4.75$) and disruption of daily routines ($M = 4.63$) ranked highest. Thematic analysis of the FGDs revealed persistent fear of movement, overprotective parenting, post-release trauma among survivors, secondary traumatic stress among security personnel, and a near-total absence of formal mental health support. The study concludes that the psychological burden of kidnapping in Ondo State is both widespread and largely unaddressed by existing security interventions, and recommends the integration of trauma-informed psychosocial support into community security and post-incident response frameworks.

Keywords: Kidnapping, Psychological Trauma, Human Security, Post-Traumatic Stress, Community Wellbeing, Ondo State, Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

Kidnapping has grown from an occasional criminal act into a sustained security and public health crisis in Nigeria (Enemuwe, 2025). In the South-West geopolitical zone, Ondo State has been particularly affected, with recurrent abductions on major expressways, in forested farming communities, and along riverine routes (Ministry of Planning and Budget, 2020). News reports from within the state — including the abduction of church members (Leadership, 2023) and travellers on the Akure–Ikere expressway (NewsDirect, 2019) — illustrate a pattern in which no segment of the population is fully insulated from the risk of abduction.

Much of the existing literature on kidnapping in Nigeria has approached the phenomenon through the lens of its causes, its economic costs, or the effectiveness (or otherwise) of law enforcement responses (Okeke, Ikezue, & Oli, 2023). Far less attention has been paid, in a systematic and empirically grounded way, to what kidnapping does to the minds of those who survive it, those who wait for a ransom call, and those who simply live under its shadow. Where psychological consequences have been studied, the empirical focus has tended to fall on Nigeria's North-West and North-Central zones (Aloku & Atafo, 2022; Muhammad, Abdulmalik, & Jobe, 2023), leaving the South-West — and Ondo State specifically — comparatively under-examined despite a documented rise in incidents.

This paper responds to that gap. It draws on primary survey and focus-group data collected from three local government areas of Ondo State to examine, in depth, the psychological consequences of kidnapping for both the individuals directly affected and the wider communities in which they live. The paper is guided by the human security framework, which treats “freedom from fear” as inseparable from freedom from want, and argues that a security threat is only partially understood if its psychological dimension is left unmeasured (United Nations Development Programme, 1994).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper is anchored in the human security framework advanced by the United Nations Development Programme (1994), which broadens the referent object of security from the state to the individual and identifies seven interlocking components of security, including personal and community security. Personal security is concerned with freedom from physical threats such as violence and crime, while community security concerns the survival of social groups, traditions, and the trust that binds them together (United Nations Human Security Unit, 2022). Kidnapping is, in this framework, a direct assault on personal security because it forcibly removes an individual's freedom and safety; but its consequences do not stop at the individual — they radiate outward into families and communities, eroding the trust, cohesion, and sense of collective safety on which community security depends (Hadgu, 2025). This framework is well suited to a study of kidnapping's psychological consequences because it explicitly makes room for fear, trauma, and the erosion of trust as legitimate and measurable dimensions of insecurity, rather than treating them as incidental to “harder” security concerns such as crime statistics or state response capacity.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing but geographically uneven body of research documents the psychological consequences of kidnapping in Nigeria. Afolabi (2020) found that kidnapping has profound psychological effects on victims and their families, extending well beyond the duration of captivity. In Kaduna Metropolis, Aloku and Atafo (2022) used a cross-sectional survey of 191 residents and found a statistically significant relationship between exposure to kidnapping and psychological distress, underscoring that the threat need not be personally experienced to produce measurable psychological harm. Similarly, Muhammad, Abdulmalik, and Jobe (2023), studying the effects of kidnapping and banditry on teaching and learning in

tertiary institutions in North-West Nigeria, identified missed schooling, weakened academic functioning, and sustained life stressors as adverse cognitive and psychological outcomes, alongside symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including emotional shock, numbness, anxiety, guilt, depression, and social distrust.

Beyond the individual level, kidnapping has been shown to reshape the psychological and social fabric of entire communities. Okeke, Ikezue, and Oli (2023) argue that the consequences of kidnapping in Nigeria extend to a general climate of fear that alters daily routines, economic decisions, and inter-personal trust, effectively imposing a hidden social cost that is rarely captured in economic loss estimates alone. This is consistent with the human security literature's broader observation that fear itself — independent of actual victimization — functions as a mechanism of social control and psychological harm (Hadgu, 2025).

Despite this body of work, two gaps are evident. First, empirical psychological research on kidnapping in Nigeria has concentrated disproportionately on the North-West and North-Central zones, where insurgency-linked banditry has been most intense, leaving the South-West — and Ondo State in particular — comparatively unstudied despite a documented rise in local incidents (Ministry of Planning and Budget, 2020). Second, much of the available literature relies on quantitative distress measures without triangulating them against the lived, narrative accounts of victims, families, and the security personnel who respond to incidents. This study addresses both gaps through a mixed-methods design situated specifically in Ondo State.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, combining a structured quantitative survey with qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs), to examine the psychological consequences of kidnapping in three local government areas of Ondo State: Akure North (Iju), Akoko South-East (Isua), and Akoko North-East (Ikare Akoko). These areas were purposively selected on the basis of documented histories of recurrent kidnapping incidents.

A structured questionnaire, developed around the study's research objectives and validated through face validation by the research supervisor and postgraduate school panel, was administered to a stratified random sample of residents across the three areas. Of 302 questionnaires distributed, 280 were returned and found usable, yielding a response rate of 93%. Respondents rated a series of psychological-impact statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree); descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean, and rank) were computed for each item to determine the relative severity of different psychological consequences at both the individual and community levels.

Qualitative data were collected through three focus group discussions, one in each study area, involving community members and security personnel from local vigilance structures (Amotekun) and the Anti-Kidnapping Squad. Discussions were audio-recorded with participant consent and supplemented by field notes. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following a six-stage process of familiarization, manual coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and write-up, with direct quotations retained to preserve the texture of participants' lived experience.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Quantitative Findings: Psychological Impact on Individuals

Table 1 presents respondents' ratings of the psychological impact of kidnapping on individuals. "Increased fear and anxiety among residents" recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.85$), making it the most severely rated psychological consequence in the study. "Feelings of helplessness and insecurity" ($M = 4.18$) and "PTSD symptoms among victims and their families" ($M = 4.16$) followed closely, while

“depression and emotional distress” ($M = 4.06$) and “reduced trust in neighbors” ($M = 3.78$) were also rated as significant, if comparatively less dominant, consequences.

Impact on Individuals	Min	Max	Mean	Rank
Increased fear and anxiety among residents due to the prevalence of kidnapping	1	5	4.85	1
Feelings of helplessness and insecurity among community members	2	5	4.18	2
Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms among victims and their families	1	5	4.16	3
Depression and emotional distress caused by frequent incidents of kidnapping	1	5	4.06	4
Reduced trust in neighbors and community members due to fear of betrayal or collaboration with kidnappers	1	5	3.78	5

Table 1. Psychological Impact of Kidnapping on Individuals (Survey, 2025)

These results indicate that the anticipatory fear of kidnapping — rather than only the direct experience of it — constitutes the most widespread psychological burden, a pattern consistent with the view that the mere threat of victimization can be as psychologically damaging as an actual abduction (Aloku & Atafo, 2022).

5.2 Quantitative Findings: Psychological Impact on the Community

At the community level (Table 2), “widespread panic and fear disrupting social cohesion” was rated highest ($M = 4.75$), followed by “disruption of daily routines due to fear of being kidnapped” ($M = 4.63$). “Increased suspicion and mistrust among community members” ($M = 3.70$) and “decreased willingness to participate in community events” ($M = 3.56$) were rated as moderate but meaningful consequences, while “strained family relationships” ($M = 3.28$) was the lowest-rated, though still notable, item.

Impact on Community	Min	Max	Mean	Rank
Widespread panic and fear disrupting social cohesion in the community	1	5	4.75	1
Disruption of daily routines due to fear of being kidnapped	1	5	4.63	2
Increased suspicion and mistrust among community members	1	5	3.70	3
Decreased willingness to participate in community events and gatherings	1	5	3.56	4
Strained family relationships caused by fear of kidnapping or ransom demands	1	5	3.28	5

Table 2. Psychological Impact of Kidnapping on the Community (Survey, 2025)

Taken together, Tables 1 and 2 show that kidnapping produces a broad psychological footprint extending well beyond the individuals directly abducted: it disrupts routines, erodes trust, and discourages civic participation, thereby weakening the social bonds that underpin community security (Okeke, Ikezue, & Oli, 2023).

5.3 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the focus group discussions produced four recurring sub-themes, each illustrating a different facet of kidnapping's psychological toll.

Pervasive fear and altered daily behavior.

Participants across all three study areas described a constant, low-grade state of alertness that shaped ordinary movement and routine.

"Even during the day, when you hear a motorcycle slow down behind you, your heart skips. Everyone is always watching their back. We no longer feel free in our own town."

— Participant, Female Community Member, Akoko North-East (Ikare Akoko)

Overprotective parenting and restricted childhood.

Parents described curtailing children's freedom of movement out of fear of abduction, a pattern that participants themselves linked to psychological strain within families.

"We used to allow our children to go out and play or fetch water freely, but not anymore. We now keep them indoors. That kind of life builds fear in both the parents and the children."

— Participant, Male Community Member, Akoko South-East (Isua)

Post-release trauma among survivors.

Family members of former captives described symptoms consistent with PTSD — insomnia, nightmares, and social withdrawal — persisting well after physical release, alongside an acknowledged absence of adequate care.

"My cousin was kidnapped last year. Since she came back, she barely speaks to anyone. She wakes up at night sweating and sometimes cries for no reason. We've taken her to the health center, but they said they can't do much."

— Participant, Female Community Member, Akure North (Iju)

Secondary trauma among security personnel and the absence of formal mental health support.

Security officers reported emotional exhaustion following exposure to violent or traumatic rescue scenes, while community members repeatedly noted that no professional counseling was available locally, leaving prayer, isolation, or informal community support as the only recourse.

"Sometimes after operations, especially when we see a victim badly treated or killed, it affects our morale. Some officers even start avoiding assignments to those areas. The stress is real."

— Participant, Male Amotekun Officer, Akure North (Iju)

"People just try to 'move on' or go to church. There's no counselor or trained person to talk to, especially in places like Isua. And many people are afraid to talk about what happened."

— Participant, Male Anti-Kidnapping Squad Officer, Akure

6. DISCUSSION

The convergence of the quantitative and qualitative findings provides strong evidence that kidnapping in Ondo State inflicts psychological harm that is both individually acute and communally diffuse. The finding that fear and anxiety ($M = 4.85$) outranked all other individual-level consequences, including PTSD symptoms and depression, supports the proposition that the anticipated threat of kidnapping can be as psychologically corrosive as direct victimization (Aloku & Atafo, 2022). This is consistent with Afolabi's (2020) observation that kidnapping's psychological reach extends well past the victim to encompass families who live in continuous anticipatory dread.

The prominence of PTSD-consistent symptoms — insomnia, nightmares, flashbacks, and emotional withdrawal — among survivors described in the FGDs mirrors findings by Muhammad, Abdulmalik, and Jobe (2023) in North-West Nigeria, suggesting that the psychological signature of kidnapping trauma is broadly similar across otherwise distinct regional contexts, even where the operational drivers of kidnapping (herder-farmer conflict in the North-West versus forest-based opportunistic abduction in Ondo State) differ. This regional consistency strengthens the case that trauma-informed response protocols developed for one part of the country could, with contextual adaptation, be extended to others, including Ondo State.

At the community level, the finding that “widespread panic” and “disruption of daily routines” were rated more severely than “strained family relationships” suggests that kidnapping's psychological damage operates less through the breakdown of intimate relationships and more through a generalized climate of suspicion and behavioral restriction — a pattern also identified by Okeke, Ikezue, and Oli (2023) as central to how kidnapping reshapes everyday social and economic life in affected Nigerian communities. This generalized climate of fear is consequential precisely because, within the human security framework, it represents an erosion of “freedom from fear” that is not captured by counting kidnapping incidents alone (United Nations Development Programme, 1994); a community can be psychologically destabilized by a handful of high-profile abductions even where the statistical incidence rate remains comparatively low.

A particularly striking finding, and one less thoroughly documented in prior Nigerian literature, concerns the secondary psychological burden borne by security personnel. Officers from Amotekun and the Anti-Kidnapping Squad described emotional exhaustion, avoidance behavior, and reduced morale following exposure to violent rescue operations — a form of occupational secondary traumatic stress that, if unaddressed, risks compounding the very capacity gaps that already limit law enforcement effectiveness against kidnapping in the state. Taken alongside participants' repeated observation that no formal mental health services exist locally, this points to a structural gap in Ondo State's kidnapping response architecture: interventions have concentrated on physical security (patrols, technology, prosecution) while leaving the psychological aftermath — for victims, families, and responders alike — almost entirely unaddressed.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to examine the psychological consequences of kidnapping on victims and communities in Ondo State, Nigeria. The evidence, drawn from a survey of 280 residents and focus group discussions across three local government areas, shows that kidnapping produces psychological harm that is severe,

wide-reaching, and largely unmet by existing support systems. Fear and anxiety emerged as the dominant individual-level consequence, PTSD-consistent symptoms were common among survivors, and communities reported widespread panic, disrupted routines, and eroded trust. Security personnel themselves are not exempt from this psychological burden. Across all these dimensions, one finding recurs: affected individuals and communities are left to cope largely on their own, in the near-total absence of professional psychological services.

On this basis, the study recommends: first, that state and local government authorities, in partnership with health agencies and non-governmental organizations, establish accessible trauma counseling and psychosocial support services in the local government areas most affected by kidnapping; second, that security agencies such as Amotekun and the Anti-Kidnapping Squad incorporate trauma-informed training and internal psychological support structures for officers exposed to traumatic operations; third, that public awareness campaigns on kidnapping prevention be paired explicitly with messaging that normalizes seeking psychological support, given participants' own observation that many victims are "afraid to talk about what happened"; and fourth, that future research extend this inquiry longitudinally, to determine whether the psychological consequences documented here persist, worsen, or abate over time, and whether targeted psychosocial interventions measurably reduce their severity.

Addressing kidnapping in Ondo State, and in Nigeria more broadly, cannot be reduced to a matter of patrols and prosecutions alone. Unless the psychological dimension of this crisis — for victims, families, communities, and the officers who respond to it — is treated as a core component of the security response rather than an afterthought, the human security of affected populations will remain only partially restored even where physical security improves.

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