

ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL-CHILD ABDUCTION AND QUALITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

IMOUKHUEDE Philips Ohikhena

Department of Educational Foundations

University of Benin

philsohis@gmail.com

09051855471

OMOROGIEVA Esther Pamela (Mrs)

Department of Educational Foundations

University of Benin

esther.omorogieva@uniben.edu

07036589681

Abstract

This study analyses the challenges of school- child abduction on the quality of education in Nigeria, with a particular focus on the northern regions where insecurity has escalated. Drawing from empirical reports and historical accounts such as the Chibok, Dapchi, and Kankara as well as abductions in Niger and Kebbi States in November 2025, the study highlights how repeated school attacks has led to mass closures, psychological trauma, teacher attrition, and a surge in the number of out-of-school children. The study examines factors such as poverty, weak governance, and inadequate security infrastructure as underlying causes of the crisis. The paper argues that these abductions not only disrupted learning but also eroded public confidence in the education system, undermining Nigeria's progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4. It concludes by recommending a multi-sectoral approach involving security reform, implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration, community engagement, and strategic investment in education infrastructure as well as human capital to safeguard the future of Nigerian children.

Keywords: School- Child Abduction, Insecurity, Quality Education

Introduction

In recent years, Nigeria has witnessed an alarming increase in incidents of school-child abduction, particularly in the northern regions of the country. These attacks, which gained international attention with the abduction of 276 Chibok school girls in April 2014, have continued to occur with devastating frequency. Schools which were once considered safe spaces for learning and development have become targets for armed groups seeking to destabilize society, assert ideological dominance, or extract ransom. The consequence has been a deepening crisis in the education sector, marked by the closure of schools, fear among parents and students, and a general decline in access to and quality of education (UNICEF, 2023; Save the Children, 2023).

School insecurity in Nigeria is mostly perpetrated through abduction. Abduction could therefore be defined as the unlawful seizure, confinement, and detention of an individual against their will, often for ransom, coercion, or ideological reasons. Within the Nigerian context, kidnapping has evolved into a pervasive security threat, with increasing focus on the education sector. Kanu and Agbo (2022) explain that kidnapping, which is often used interchangeably with abduction in Nigeria has

developed into a structured industry with financial, political, and ideological motivations. Since the abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014, Nigeria has witnessed multiple similar incidents in Dapchi, Kankara, Kagara, and Jangebe, and very recent abductions in Papiri in Niger State and Maga in Kebbi States which occurred in November, 2025. These abductions not only violate children's rights to protection and education but also destabilise the entire education system, leading to school closures, mass withdrawal of students, and a breakdown in public trust.

School-child abduction has compounded Nigeria's already fragile education system. According to Kanu and Agbo (2022), kidnapping has grown into an organised criminal enterprise involving various social actors and motivations, including political, ideological, and financial interests. This troubling development is exacerbated by systemic weaknesses in the country's security infrastructure and socioeconomic inequality, particularly in the North-West and North-East geopolitical zones. Reports from humanitarian agencies indicate that over 1,000 children have been kidnapped in school-related attacks between 2014 and 2022, with many still unaccounted for (UNICEF, 2021; The Guardian, 2021). These assaults are not isolated incidents but part of a larger pattern of insecurity that threatens the broader objectives of national development.

Insecurity generally refers to the presence of danger or fear of harm within an environment. In the school context, insecurity is defined as any condition that threatens the safety and psychological stability of students and disrupts academic activities. Mudege, Zulu, and Izugbara (2008) describe school insecurity as encompassing the cultural, psychological, and institutional repercussions of violence, leading to heightened vulnerability among learners. Similarly, Moser and Rogers (2005) assert that insecurity can manifest in both perceived and actual forms, causing fear and avoidance behaviours that reduce student enrolment and attendance. In Nigeria, insecurity in education has escalated due to terrorism, armed banditry, and abductions, particularly in the North-West and North-East regions. These threats significantly undermine the school system's ability to provide safe learning environments, thereby reducing both access to and quality of education.

Quality education on the other hand, is broadly defined as education that is inclusive, effective, and delivered within a safe, supportive learning environment. According to UNICEF (2023), quality education includes learner-centred pedagogies, trained teachers, adequate learning infrastructure, and psychological safety for students. UNESCO (2020), further highlights that quality education must ensure consistent access, equitable participation, and academic progress without disruption. In Nigeria, school abductions severely threaten these indicators. When children and teachers are kidnapped, schools are forced to close or operate under fear, learning is disrupted, and emotional distress affects performance and motivation. In regions where school violence persists, many children are too afraid to attend school or are withdrawn by their families for fear of further attacks. This climate of fear, insecurity, and displacement undermines the foundational goals of education, including literacy, skill development, and social empowerment. According to the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC, 2018), over 600,000 children lost access to learning between 2014 and 2021 due to insecurity in northern Nigeria. The ripple effects include a decline in school enrolment and attendance, teacher attrition, and the exacerbation of

Nigeria's out-of-school children crisis, which already ranks among the highest globally (UNESCO, 2020). These realities compromise not only the right of every child to education but also the country's efforts toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 - ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education.

While insecurity is a national challenge, the education sector bears a disproportionate share of its consequences. The human capital required for national progress is under threat, and without targeted interventions, Nigeria risks raising a generation deprived of foundational knowledge and skills. The right to education, as enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reaffirmed in Nigeria's educational laws, must be protected through deliberate policy actions and robust security reforms. The closure of schools as a response to abduction, though understandable, plays into the agenda of anti-education groups and undermines long-term educational goals.

Based on the foregoing, this study examines the challenges of school-child abduction on the quality of education in Nigeria. Specifically, it explores how rising insecurity has impaired school attendance, enrolment, and learning outcomes.

Factors Contributing to the Incidence of School-Child Abduction in North-West Nigeria

Various contributing factors have led to the growing incidence of the abduction of school children particularly in the North-West of Nigeria, some of which include;

High Poverty Rates: Poverty rates in the North-West and North-East are among the highest in Nigeria, standing at 64.8% and 71.9% respectively (World Bank, 2022). High unemployment and food insecurity exacerbated by desertification, conflict, and displacement have increased desperation among youths. With few opportunities for gainful employment or social mobility, many resort to crime as a means of survival. This situation is aggravated by weak governance structures, under-resourced local institutions, and limited state presence in rural areas.

Poor Security Systems: The capacity of Nigeria's security architecture to respond to these threats remains inadequate. Although the military is deployed across more than 30 states in joint operations with the police, the widespread insecurity suggests institutional fatigue and operational overstretch. Nigeria's security sector suffers from underfunding, poor training, corruption, and lack of synergy among agencies. According to the Global Terrorism Index (2020), Nigeria ranks among the top five most terrorised nations globally. In such an environment, schools particularly in remote locations become soft targets for kidnappers, who often encounter little or no resistance.

Ineffective Security Mechanisms: Compounding these challenges is the absence of effective state policing and community-based security mechanisms. Most rural schools operate without perimeter fencing, alarm systems, or armed guards. In many communities, traditional gatekeepers and local vigilante groups lack the training or resources to resist heavily armed attackers. Additionally, law enforcement responses are often slow and reactive, rather than preventive. The failure to arrest or prosecute perpetrators further emboldens criminal networks and deepens public mistrust in state protection.

Socio-economic Disparities: Widespread socioeconomic inequalities between northern and southern Nigeria have amplified the marginalisation felt in the North-West. El-Rufai (2021), observed that the human development indicators in many northern states are comparable to those in war-torn regions of the world. This disparity has fostered disillusionment and a sense of exclusion among the youth, which in turn has contributed to the rise of banditry and other forms of organised violence, including school abductions. Without substantial investment in equitable development and youth empowerment, these insecurities are likely to persist.

From the above, school-child abduction in the North-West is not merely a security challenge, but a symptom of deeper structural issues including poverty, weak governance, poor border control, and lack of educational investment. Tackling the crisis requires an integrated approach that combines improved border security, community policing, socioeconomic reform, and targeted investment in the education sector.

School-Child Abduction as a Challenge to Quality Education in Nigeria

The frequent abduction of school children in Nigeria has become a serious impediment to achieving quality education, particularly in the northern regions of the country. Quality education, as defined by UNESCO (2020), involves learner participation, safe learning environments, qualified teachers, adequate infrastructure, and consistent academic progress. However, widespread insecurity, especially the abduction of school children by armed groups, has disrupted these key elements, leading to a decline in education standards and outcomes. Some of these challenges include;

Reduced School Attendance and Enrolment: A major consequence of these abductions is the sharp reduction in school attendance and enrolment. According to UNICEF (2023), Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children in the world, with an estimated nine million children of primary school age not attending school. This figure is most pronounced in the northern states, where recurrent school attacks have created an atmosphere of fear and distrust. Many parents, particularly in rural areas, have withdrawn their children from school due to safety concerns, and some communities have experienced long-term school closures. In Katsina State alone, nearly 100 schools remained closed as of 2022 due to persistent security threats, affecting the education of over 30,000 children (Save the Children, 2022).

Inconsistent Enforcement of Compulsory Education: The legal and policy frameworks supporting compulsory education in Nigeria, such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004 and the Child Rights Act of 2003, have been severely undermined by persistent insecurity. Although the laws provide for free and compulsory education for all children, their enforcement is inconsistent across states. Particularly in insecure zones, local authorities lack the capacity to uphold the rights of children to uninterrupted education. Amnesty International (2020) and other rights-based organisations have raised concerns that Nigeria is failing in its obligation to protect children's right to safe learning environments, as guaranteed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Teacher Attrition: Another challenge linked to abductions is the decline in teacher availability and school infrastructure, especially in vulnerable regions. Attacks on

schools often result in the destruction of buildings, the killing or abduction of teachers, and the mass transfer or resignation of school staff. Ibrahim (2020) reports that more than 2,295 teachers have been killed and over 1,400 schools destroyed in Northern Nigeria since the escalation of conflict. Many of these schools have not reopened due to fear of reoccurrence and lack of reconstruction support. This situation has deepened the pre-existing teacher shortage in rural areas. A national audit conducted by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC, 2018) revealed a shortfall of 277,537 teachers in basic education schools, with severe deficits in early childhood and primary education.

Inequality in Education Infrastructural Development: Compounding this issue is the lack of adequate educational funding and uneven resource distribution. While some urban centres enjoy modest investments in infrastructure and teacher training, rural and conflict-affected areas are largely neglected. Former President Olusegun Obasanjo recently described the situation of over 14 million out-of-school children as one of Nigeria's most urgent development failures (Vanguard, 2021). Investments in school security, teacher welfare, and learning infrastructure remain grossly inadequate, particularly at the state and local government levels. Even when funds are allocated, they are often mismanaged or poorly implemented.

High Rate of Illiteracy: The national literacy rate of 62.02 percent does not reflect wide disparity between the North and the South. The regional disparity in literacy and educational attainment reflects the deepening educational divide caused by insecurity. According to UNESCO (2020), youth literacy in Southern Nigeria averages around 80%, while in the North, female youth literacy is as low as 29%. States such as Borno (14.5%), Katsina (21.7%), and Kebbi (25.3%) record some of the lowest literacy rates in the country compared to Lagos 92 percent, and 15 other southern states recording between 53 percent and 80 percent literacy. These figures are a direct consequence of prolonged insecurity, systemic neglect, and socio-cultural barriers exacerbated by fear of school abductions.

The abduction of school children is not an isolated criminal offence; it is a systemic threat that affects every layer of educational access and quality in Nigeria. It contributes to increased dropout rates, poor academic performance, low literacy levels, and a growing distrust in the public education system. To reverse these trends, there is an urgent need for a coordinated approach involving improved security, legal enforcement, teacher support, and equitable investment in education especially in conflict-affected regions.

Strategies to Mitigate School-Child Abduction for Quality Education in Nigeria

Addressing the recurrent abduction of school children in Nigeria requires a multiple approach that encompasses security reform, infrastructural development, community engagement, and improved education policy implementation. Various strategies that must be put in place must be proactive, context-specific, and aligned with global best practices for securing education in conflict-affected settings, some of which are;

Strengthened Intelligence Networks: In addition to physical security, there is a pressing need to strengthen intelligence and early warning systems. According to Brookings Institution (2021), a three-pronged strategy of intelligence, integration, and development is essential for responding to terrorism and insurgency. Local

intelligence networks, especially those embedded within communities can play a vital role in detecting and reporting suspicious activities. The involvement of Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), local vigilante groups, and trained community volunteers in school security management can provide an additional layer of protection. However, these efforts must be coordinated under clear legal frameworks and supported with adequate training and resources.

Investment in Security Infrastructures: State and federal governments must increase investment in security infrastructure across public schools, particularly in rural and high-risk areas. This includes the deployment of trained school protection officers, installation of alarm systems and CCTV surveillance, and the construction of perimeter fencing. Experience from countries like Kenya and Colombia where community policing and safe school campaigns have helped reduce attacks demonstrates the importance of security-sector reform that is child-sensitive and rights-based (UNESCO, 2020).

Education Continuity: There is the need to strengthen the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD), which Nigeria endorsed in 2015. The SSD outlines a framework for ensuring the continuity of education during armed conflict, protecting schools from attack, and ensuring the safety of learners and education personnel. However, its implementation has been largely ineffective at the grassroots level. There is an urgent need to domesticate the SSD principles in national policy and ensure they are enforced through state-level legislation and funding. Public awareness campaigns and regular policy monitoring by civil society organisations will help reinforce government accountability in this regard.

Addressing the Socio-Economic Causes of Insecurity: These causes include; poverty, unemployment, and youth exclusion. As the World Bank (2019) and African Development Bank (2020) note, Northern Nigeria bears a disproportionate share of the country's poverty burden, with high youth unemployment and low human development indicators. Long-term security cannot be achieved without investing in quality education, job creation, and social protection programmes for young people in marginalised regions. A strategic focus on skills acquisition, vocational training, and rural education access will help deter youth participation in armed violence and criminal activity.

Finally, intergovernmental coordination and political will are essential to sustaining security interventions in the education sector. Education and security cannot be treated as separate silos. Ministries of Education must collaborate with Defence, Interior, and Humanitarian Affairs to develop integrated school safety frameworks. States and local governments should be empowered, through legislation and funding, to localise these responses and adapt them to their specific contexts. Such decentralised models are more effective in responding to diverse threats across regions.

Conclusion

The issues presented in this paper highlight the serious challenges of the abduction of school children on the quality of education in Nigeria. The study established that these incidents are not only acts of criminality but also direct assaults on children's rights to safety and education, as guaranteed by both national and international legal frameworks. The repeated closure of schools due to insecurity, the fear instilled in

students and teachers, and the destruction of educational infrastructure have all contributed to the deterioration of access to and the quality of basic education, particularly in the northern region. It is evident that the kidnapping and abduction of school children has exacerbated the already critical problem of out-of-school children in Nigeria. Declining enrolment and attendance, poor academic performance, and widening regional disparities in literacy and learning outcomes are all symptoms of an education system under siege. These trends undermine the objectives of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme and Nigeria's commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 4 on quality education.

Despite these challenges, Nigeria remains globally renowned for its human capital potential. She has produced an array of scientists, engineers, academic professionals dotting far-flung areas of the world. No doubt, "Children have the right to education and protection, and the classroom must be a place where they are safe from harm" (Ibrahim, 2020, p.23). This can only come about when all well-meaning Nigerians join hands with patriotic minds to save education and save Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the discussions in this paper, the following recommendations are proposed to curb school-child abduction and improve the quality of education in Nigeria:

- Federal and state governments should prioritise the physical security of schools by constructing perimeter fencing, installing alarm systems and surveillance cameras, and deploying trained security personnel.
- Ministries of Education, Defence, Interior, and Humanitarian Affairs should work together to develop and implement a unified school security framework.
- Long-term strategies must address root causes of insecurity, including poverty, unemployment and inequality
- Community leaders, Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), and local vigilante groups should be empowered to support school safety initiatives.

References

- African Development Bank. (2020). *The Nigeria poverty profile*. AfDB Press.
- Amnesty International. (2020). *Nigeria: Children abducted, raped and forced into marriage in the North-East*. <https://www.amnesty.org>
- Amnesty International. (2021, December). *Nigeria: Escalating attacks targeting children endanger right to education*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/12/nigeria-escalating-attacks-targeting-children-endanger-right-to-education/>
- El-Rufai, N. A. (2021). *Human capital development communications strategy validation meeting*. The Guardian Nigeria. <https://www.nguardiannews.com>
- Federal Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning. (2022). *National Development Plan*. <https://nationalplanning.gov.ng>
- Ibrahim, A. (2020). Peace education as a unifying factor in Nigeria: Problems and prospects. In S. K. Behera & L. K. Omotoyosi (Eds.), *Education for world peace: Issues, challenges and new directions* (pp. 263–275). Lulu Publishing.
- Kaalu, S. (2021, September 3). *In northern Nigeria, attacks on schools threaten children's right to education*. UNICEF Nigeria. <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/stories/northern-nigeria-attacks-schools-threaten-childrens-right-education>

- Kanu, I. A., & Agbo, M. N. (2022). Kidnapping and Nigeria's national security: North-Central in perspective. In I. A. Kanu, G. Pwakim, & E. S. Igbochesi (Eds.), *Theology, philosophy and education in the 21st century: Festschrift in honour of Rev. Msgr. Professor Cletus Tanimu Gotan* (pp. 769–799). Jos University Press.
- Moser, C. O., & Rogers, D. (2005). *Urban violence and insecurity: An introductory roadmap*. World Bank Publications.
- Mudege, N. N., Zulu, E. M., & Izugbara, C. O. (2008). How insecurity impacts school attendance and dropout among urban slum children in Nairobi. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 2(1), 98–112. <https://www.ijcv.org>
- Save the Children. (2023, August 17). *More than 1,680 schoolchildren kidnapped in Nigeria since the 2014 Chibok girls abduction*. Save the Children International. <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/2023/nigeria-more-than-1600-schoolchildren-kidnapped-in-nigeria-since-the-2014-chibok-girls-abduction->
- UNESCO. (2020). *Educational reforms: Experiences and prospects*. UNESCO Publishing.
- UNICEF. (2021). *Out-of-school children in Nigeria: A situation analysis*. <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria>
- UNICEF. (2023). *Safe schools initiative and the right to education in Nigeria*. <https://www.unicef.org>
- UNICEF. (2024, January 24). *UNICEF urges immediate action to bolster school safety in Nigeria*. UNICEF Nigeria. <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/press-releases/unicef-urges-immediate-action-bolster-school-safety-nigeria>
- UNICEF. (2024, April 15). *On the 10-year mark of the Chibok abductions, UNICEF urges action to secure children's education in Nigeria*. UNICEF Nigeria. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/10-year-mark-chibok-abductions-unicef-urges-action-secure-childrens-education>
- Universal Basic Education (UBE) (2004). *Educational reforms*: Federal Government Press.
- Universal Basic Education Commission. (2018). *National personnel audit of public and private basic education schools in Nigeria*. Federal Government Press.
- Vanguard News. (2021, December 2). *Obasanjo laments 14 million out-of-school children in Nigeria*. Vanguard Nigeria. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/12/obasanjo-laments-14m-out-of-school-children-in-nigeria/>
- World Bank (WB) (2022). *Support against hunger*: World Bank Group Inc.