

PREVALENCE OF KIDNAPPING OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS AND THE EROSION OF SOCIAL ORDER IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The core responsibility of the government is to protect lives and property. In the last decade, Catholic priests had been the target of kidnappers in Nigeria, thereby negatively impacting the Church and social order. This study examined the kidnapping of Catholic priests and the erosion of social order in Nigeria. The study was guided by the assumptions of the social contract theory developed by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Utilizing secondary data obtained through media reports, journal articles, government publications and church publications, the paper employed thematic-content analysis to make sense of the data elicited for the study. The results revealed a widespread threat, with the Port Harcourt Diocese reporting the highest number of cases (20.65%), followed by Owerri Diocese (17.03%), Kaduna Diocese (11.23%) and Onitsha Diocese (10.87%). The kidnapping of Catholic priests in Nigeria spanning the period of 2015 and 2025, has been a systemic and escalating crisis with far-reaching consequences for social order, undermining security, disrupting religious life and weakening public trust and communal stability. The implication of the finding for the study is that the widespread and targeted kidnapping of these harmless men of God, reflects a deepening security crisis in Nigeria, revealing the country's inability to protect religious figures and emphasizing the pressing need for comprehensive security and socio-political interventions. Addressing this requires comprehensive security reforms, socio-economic interventions and enhanced collaboration between the Church, communities and the government, to restore public safety, religious dignity and societal stability.

Keywords: Catholic Priests; Kidnapping; Men of God; Prevalence; Social Order

Introduction

Kidnapping, as noted by Adebola and Temidayo (2023), is a widespread global issue and it is universally condemned (Abang *et al.*, 2025), Ibrahim and Mukhtar, 2017), observed that kidnapping in Nigeria affects not only foreigners but also locals of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds. This heinous crime has a devastating effects on the individuals and society as at large. Terrorist groups have been known to use kidnapping as a means of financing their operations (Okorie, 2023). Kidnapping for ransom has become a tactic of terrorists seeking to blackmail concessions from governments and officials (Abang *et al.*, 2025; Ohanikhere, 2010). Statistically, John (2011), submitted that globally, there are an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 kidnapping incidence that occur annually. Gala (2025), observed that as at 2023, South Africa had the highest kidnapping rate among African countries. It had 9.57 kidnappings out of 100,000 inhabitants. Benin Republic reported the second highest kidnapping rate. In tandem with that, Akubuike (2024), noted that between May 2023 and April 2024, 2,235,954 kidnap cases were recorded in Nigeria, with 1,668,104 in urban centres and 567,850 in rural areas.

A more recent trend is the issue of kidnapping Catholic priests in Nigeria (Uroko, 2024a). Constellis Report (2020), submitted that among the top 10 countries of the world, Nigeria ranked second in kidnapping between November 2019 and October 2020. Olofin (2023), and Abang *et al.* (2025), noted that Nigeria has experienced a sharp increase in kidnapping incidents, with victims drawn from diverse social and professional groups, including religious leaders, highlighting the growing insecurity and targeting of high-profile or symbolic individuals. In their submission, Adebola and Temidayo (2023), noted that Catholic priests are the most vulnerable groups in Nigeria's kidnapping crisis, with numerous abductions recorded across various dioceses between 2015 and 2025, some resulting in the safe return of victims, while others ended in tragedy, raising alarm over the safety of the clergy and religious, deepening national insecurity and far-reaching socio-political consequences of such targeted violence.

Cismas (2023), observed that the Catholic Church in Nigeria plays a crucial role in spiritual guidance, education, healthcare and social development. Priests serve as community leaders, offering moral direction and engaging in various humanitarian efforts. However, their increasing vulnerability to kidnapping disrupts their mission and threatens the Church's capacity to serve society more effectively. Ibrahim and Mukhtar (2017), observed that one of the motives behind kidnapping in Nigeria ransom demands. Asangausung and Brown (2025)

concluded that the targeted attacks on priests reflect the deepening insecurity in different parts of the country, particularly in regions beleaguered by banditry, insurgency and communal crisis.

The consequences of these kidnappings extend beyond the immediate victims (Ibrahim & Mukhtar, 2017). d’Avillez (2023), assumed that kidnapping instils fear among the clergy and church members, hinder pastoral activities and weaken the Church’s influence in fostering peace and development. d’Avillez (2023,) noted further that the financial burden associated with ransom payments divert resources that could otherwise support the Church’s mission. To curb kidnapping, the Nigeria Police Force and other security agencies have created specific units for prompt kidnapping response (Ugwuoke *et al.*, 2023). However, the response to kidnapping incidents are often inadequate, giving concerns about the social contract between the government and the led (Okorie *et al.*, 2024).

Previous studies have explored various dimensions of kidnapping in Nigeria. For instance, Abang *et al.* (2025), investigated the causes and effects of kidnapping in selected coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State, as well as the effectiveness of preventive strategies. Adebola and Temidayo (2023), focused on the impact of kidnapping for ransom on Nigeria’s international image, while Uroko (2024a) and Uroko (2024b), examined the kidnapping of Roman Catholic Church priests. Ibrahim and Mukhtar (2017) analysed the causes and consequences of kidnapping across the country, and Uzorma and Nwanegbo-Ben (2014) studied the challenges of hostage-taking and kidnapping in southeastern Nigeria. Building on these earlier works, the current study specifically examined the kidnapping of Catholic priests and the erosion of social order in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025, with focus on the prevalence, patterns and broader societal implications of the menace.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Concept of Kidnapping

Kidnapping is widely recognized as a serious offence that involves the unlawful abduction and detention of an individual, typically carried out through force, deception or coercion. Scholars such as Uzorma and Nwanegbo-Ben (2014), described kidnapping as a forceful or deceptive act often driven by ransom demands, noting how it has become a lucrative enterprise for various armed groups, including bandits, militants, pirates and terrorists who exploit Nigeria’s weak law enforcement systems and high-profit margins.

Similarly, researchers like Ottuh and Aituf (2014), as well as Odeku (2020), regard kidnapping as a legally and morally prohibited, yet, widespread offense, often carried out for financial gain, political leverage or ideological reasons.

Odoma and Akor (2019), extended this understanding by emphasising the organised and violent nature of kidnapping, identifying it as a tool for criminal objectives such as extortion, intimidation and coercion. Olulowo *et al.* (2021), reinforced this view by defining kidnapping as the act of seizing and detaining an individual through force or fraud, often with the intention of collecting ransom or resolving personal or political grievances. Ohakhire (2010), categorised the motives behind kidnapping into what he terms the “3Rs” (ransom, revenge and ritual), highlighting the diversity of motivations behind this crime.

Further literature points to the socio-economic and structural drivers of kidnapping in Nigeria. Olulowo *et al.* (2021), and others attribute the prevalence of kidnapping to factors such as widespread poverty, unemployment, the proliferation of arms and military uniforms, the influence of drug abuse, systemic corruption, poor governance, moral decline and the quest for quick wealth. Additionally, the inefficiency and under-equipment of law enforcement agencies, the weakening of state authority and perceived social injustice further compound the issue. In the context of this study, kidnapping is conceptualised as the act of unlawfully holding an individual against their will, with the aim of securing some form of benefit, whether financial, social or political, at the expense of the victim. It represents not just a breach of individual liberty but also a symptom of deeper societal issues, reflecting a broader breakdown in security, governance and morality.

Concept of Social Order

The concept of social order is broadly understood as the framework that sustains stability, cohesion and predictability within a society. Scholars such as Mboho and Udoh (2019), emphasize that social order involves the interplay of various societal elements working collectively to preserve the existing structure and ensure continuity. It encompasses the adherence of individuals to shared expectations, rules and norms that govern behaviour, as reflected in the view of Jaxon and White (2023), who describe social order as the outcome of individuals honouring social contracts, whether formal laws or informal codes of conduct. These shared values and standards form the bedrock of societal stability, enabling organised, productive and culturally meaningful interactions.

In the context of this study, social order is regarded as the condition that allows society to function harmoniously, either through voluntary conformity driven by mutual agreement or through coercive mechanisms that enforce obedience. It is sustained when members of society consistently act in ways that respect and reinforce these shared understandings, making it possible for communities to operate in a stable and cooperative manner.

Prevalence of Kidnapping among the clergy in Nigeria

Recent scholarly and institutional reports have consistently highlighted the alarming rate of kidnapping among clergy in Nigeria, particularly targeting Catholic priests. This trend has not only raised concerns about the security of religious leaders but also underscored the complex socio-political and economic factors driving these abductions. Uroko (2024a), investigated the reasons behind the frequent targeting of Roman Catholic priests by kidnapers and Islamic extremists. Using documentary analysis of classified documents, national and international gazettes and periodicals, the study found that Catholic priests are primarily targeted due to their active political engagement, efforts to promote Christianity, advocacy for civil rights and the expectation of large ransom payments from their relatives.

In a complementary study, Uroko (2024b), focused on north-central and southern Nigeria, where the perceived affluence and influence of Catholic priests render them high-value targets. These abductions serve both financial and ideological purposes, as terrorist and extremist groups aim to instill fear and assert dominance in these regions. Statistical evidence reinforces these scholarly insights. As at November 13, 2023, ACN International (2023), reported that 23 clergy members including Reverend Fathers, Reverend Sisters and Seminarians were kidnapped in Nigeria within the year. While 22 were released, one was brutally murdered. Additionally, two Reverend Fathers and one Seminarian were reported separately killed in the same period, confirming that kidnapping remains the greatest threat to the clergy in the country.

Nobert (2025), further elaborated on the extent of this crisis, documenting 63 kidnapped Reverend Fathers across several dioceses. Out of these, 51 were eventually released, while 12 were killed. The affected dioceses include Kaduna, Benin City, Minna, Otukpo, Warri, Pankshin, Idah, Yola, Lafia, Isele-Uku, Wukari, Sokoto and Kafanchan. The highest number of fatalities occurred in the Archdiocese of Kaduna (4 priests) and Sokoto Diocese (2 priests, including a seminarian). Broader data across a ten-year period further

highlight the persistence of this threat. Agenzia Fides (2025) and Zengarini (2025), reported that 145 Reverend Fathers were kidnapped between 2015 and 2025, with 11 killed and 4 still missing. Similarly, Akinselure (2025), estimated that at least 204 Reverend Fathers and Seminarians were abducted in the last decade, 15 of whom were killed in captivity. Ezech (2025), echoed these concerns, noting that 133 Reverend Fathers were kidnapped during the same period, resulting in 13 deaths. Collectively, these findings revealed a disturbing pattern of targeted violence against Catholic Reverend Fathers in Nigeria. The motivations range from financial extortion and political intimidation to religious extremism, placing priests and seminarians at significant risk across Nigeria.

Strategies of Kidnapping Catholic Priests in Nigeria

Literature revealed a disturbing and consistent pattern in the kidnapping of Catholic priests in Nigeria, characterised by violence, intimidation and a growing sense of insecurity within religious communities. Chimtom (2025), noted that many Catholic priests have fallen victim to abduction, with some losing their lives and others only released after paying substantial ransoms. These incidents often occur in transit, such as the kidnapping of Rev. Fr. John Ubaechu while en route to a religious retreat, underscoring the calculated nature of these attacks. The reports suggest a level of coordination and sophistication among the kidnappers, who frequently use unmarked vehicles, masks and dangerous weapons to carry out their operations, as observed by ACN United States (2024). The All Africa (2025), report highlights one of such instances in Anambra State, where a Reverend Father was abducted at a gas station by individuals in a white SUV without license plates, though he was later rescued by a combined effort of various security forces.

In many cases, as detailed by Chimtom (2025), kidnapping activities involve violent break-ins and gunfire, such as the incident involving Rev. Father Philip Ekweli and a major seminarian in Edo State, where the attackers destroyed property and overpowered local vigilantes through superior firepower. This pattern not only reflects the growing boldness and tactical planning of the perpetrators but also points to the vulnerability of religious figures and institutions in the face of limited security infrastructure. The recurring use of threats, ransom demands and lethal force has deeply unsettled the religious community, revealing the grave risks Catholic clergy face and the broader implications for religious freedom and safety in Nigeria.

Implications of Kidnapping on Social Order in Nigeria

The literature on the implications of kidnapping on social order in Nigeria presents a comprehensive picture of a crisis that profoundly disrupts the nation's social, economic and moral stability. Kidnapping has emerged as a deeply rooted phenomenon with wide-reaching consequences that touch virtually every aspect of Nigerian life. It does not only promote fear and insecurity among individuals and communities, but also significantly undermines social cohesion, interpersonal trust and public confidence in security systems. As Olofin (2020), emphasises, the social costs include a deterioration in community relationships, fear of social interaction and reluctance to offer public assistance, while the economic costs are seen in the form of ransom payments, the flight of capital and escalating investments in security. These consequences demonstrate how kidnapping weakens the very structures that sustain a stable and functioning society.

Beyond the immediate community effects, kidnapping has broader national and international implications. As Osegboun and Oladipo (2023), observed, the persistence of kidnapping contributes to the erosion of Nigeria's global image, creating a perception of widespread insecurity that deters tourism, hampers migration and repels foreign direct investment. The ripple effects of these dynamics affect national development, economic progress and international relations. Religious institutions are not spared either. Olulowo *et al.* (2021), examined the spiritual and organizational impact of kidnapping on churches, where fear and anxiety among congregants result in declining attendance, reduced commitment to church programmes and limited capacity for evangelism and outreach.

Further insight from Inyang and Ubong (2013), as well as Ilechukwu *et al.* (2015), adds depth to the understanding of the implications of kidnapping by differentiating between its direct and indirect economic impacts. Directly, families bear the heavy financial burden of paying ransoms, often targeting primary breadwinners, which disrupts household functioning, stalls businesses and leads to financial distress. Indirectly, resources are diverted toward preventive measures such as hiring private security, while governments are compelled to increase spending on security infrastructure and operations. These economic disruptions can force companies and businesses to shut down, trigger capital flight and increase unemployment, conditions that may further heighten national insecurity. Additionally, the psychological and physical trauma inflicted on victims, including cases of sexual abuse during captivity, adds a disturbing human dimension to the crisis.

Altogether, the literature paints a sobering picture of how kidnapping destabilizes the social order in Nigeria, it undermines economic activities, damages interpersonal and institutional trust, weakens social and religious bonds and exacerbates the sense of fear and vulnerability. The cumulative effect is a society increasingly fractured, insecure and struggling to maintain the structures necessary for peace, progress and collective wellbeing.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the assumptions of the Social Contract Theory. This theory was developed by political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes (1651), John Locke (1689) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762). The SCT argues that individuals consent to surrender some of their freedoms and submit to the authority of a state in exchange for protection, security and the maintenance of social order. The state, in turn, derives its legitimacy from its ability to safeguard life, liberty and property.

Applying this theory to Nigeria, the persistent kidnapping of Catholic priests reflects a fundamental breakdown of this social contract. The prevalence of kidnapping, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, is indicative of a systemic failure by the government to provide security to its citizens, especially those who are non-violent, morally upright and central to community life. Catholic priests, often seen as symbols of peace and moral guidance are increasingly targeted by kidnappers for ransom, not only because of their perceived influence and the resources of the Church, but also because they are typically unarmed and vulnerable. This pattern suggests a calculated criminal enterprise that exploits both the symbolic and financial value of religious leaders, pointing to a deteriorating public safety landscape.

The implications for social order are profound. As the government fails to protect clergy and citizens alike, public trust in government institutions diminishes, leading to rising fear, social anxiety and diminished participation in communal and religious activities. The targeting of priests destabilizes religious communities, weakens moral authority and disrupts the Church's role as a stabilizing force in society. This vacuum often leads to the emergence of informal security arrangements, such as community vigilantes or Church-funded protection, which further fragments the authority of the government and undermines formal law enforcement mechanisms.

Critically, social contract theory has been challenged on the grounds that it idealizes a rational agreement that may not reflect the historical or socio-political realities of many post-

colonial states like Nigeria. Critics argue that the theory assumes a level of equality and institutional functionality that does not exist in fragmented or neo-patrimonial states. In contexts where corruption, ethnic politics and resource inequality prevail, the notion of a unified social contract becomes more aspirational than actual.

However, despite these criticisms, social contract theory remains a useful tool for understanding the normative expectations of state-citizen relations. It offers a theoretical lens to assess state legitimacy and the consequences of governance failure. The theory's emphasis on the reciprocal obligations between the state and citizens justifies its application to the Nigerian situation, where the state's inability to ensure security not only violates its foundational obligations but also precipitates social disintegration. Thus, social contract theory effectively captures both the moral and structural implications of the kidnapping of Catholic priests, revealing it as a symptom of a deeper crisis in state capacity and social cohesion.

Materials and Methods

This study relied exclusively on secondary data to examine the phenomenon of kidnapping of Catholic priests and its consequential erosion of social order in Nigeria within the ten-year period spanning from 2015 to 2025. The use of secondary data was essential due to the sensitive and often dangerous nature of the subject, which makes primary data collection, such as interviews with victims or security personnel, difficult and potentially unsafe. The study sourced relevant information from a diverse range of credible and verifiable secondary sources. These included media reports from reputable national and international news outlets, peer-reviewed journal articles, academic textbooks, government publications such as security and crime statistics, and church publications including diocesan statements and bulletins.

These sources were selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the scope and dynamics of priest kidnappings, offering both factual reporting and scholarly analysis. The data collected were systematically organised and examined based on three core analytical themes: prevalence, pattern and implications. Under prevalence, the study explored the frequency and geographical spread of kidnapping incidents involving Catholic priests. The pattern of kidnapping focused on the methods employed by perpetrators, timing, locations and the response of both security agencies and religious institutions. The implications dimension dealt with the broader impact of these kidnappings on Nigeria's social order,

including societal fear, religious insecurity, and disruption of spiritual life and weakening of community cohesion.

To process and interpret the data, the study adopted a qualitative analytical technique, thematic-content analysis. This method enabled the researchers to identify, analyse and interpret recurring themes and patterns within the textual data. It allowed for an in-depth exploration of how kidnapping has evolved over time and how it correlates with broader issues of social disorder, insecurity and institutional breakdown in Nigeria. Through thematic-content analysis, the study was able to draw meaningful conclusions on how the targeted kidnapping of religious figures, particularly Catholic priests, reflects and contributes to the ongoing destabilization of social norms, values and structures in the country.

Results

Table 1: Distribution on Cases of Kidnapped Catholic Priests in Nigeria (2015-2025)

Diocese	No. of Kidnapped Catholic Priests	Percentage (%)
Wukari Diocese	2	0.72
Zaria Diocese	1	0.36
Sokoto Diocese	5	1.81
Kafanchan Diocese	9	3.26
Warri Diocese	7	2.54
Idah Diocese	4	1.45
Yola Diocese	2	0.72
Lafia Diocese	1	0.36
Archdiocese of Kaduna	9	3.26
Issele-Uku Diocese	5	1.81
Minna Diocese	3	1.09
Otukpo Diocese	6	2.17
Benin City	4	1.45
Shendam Diocese	1	0.36
Pankshin Diocese	4	1.45
Port Harcourt Diocese	57	20.65

Kontagora Diocese	1	0.36
Jalingo Diocese	1	0.36
Maiduguri Diocese	1	0.36
Katsina Diocese	1	0.36
Ekwuolobia Diocese	6	2.17
Auchi Diocese	7	2.54
Uromi Diocese	5	1.81
Ekiti Diocese	1	0.36
Kaduna Diocese	31	11.23
Awka Diocese	7	2.54
Nsukka Diocese	13	4.71
Owerri Diocese	47	17.03
Onitsha Diocese	30	10.87
Uyo Diocese	3	1.09
Ikot Ekpene Diocese	1	0.36
Calabar Archdiocese	1	0.36
Total	276	100

Source: Compiled by Abang and Asangausung (2025)

The data from table 1 revealed a significant geographic disparity in the incidence of kidnapped Catholic priests across Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. The figures indicated that a few dioceses bear a disproportionately high brunt of these abductions. Notably, Port Harcourt Diocese stands out with the highest number of recorded cases, accounting for 20.65 per cent of the total nationwide. This is followed by Owerri Diocese at 17.03 per cent, Kaduna Diocese at 11.23 per cent and Onitsha Diocese at 10.87 per cent. These four dioceses alone account for nearly 60 per cent of all reported kidnappings, suggesting that certain regions, likely in the South-South and South-East are particularly volatile or targeted.

In contrast, a majority of the dioceses recorded relatively low incidences, with many reporting only one or two cases and representing less than 1 per cent each of the total. This uneven distribution highlights possible regional security discrepancies, differences in the level of exposure or vulnerability of clergy, or varying levels of law enforcement

effectiveness. Overall, the data paint a troubling picture of clerical insecurity, especially in specific high-risk areas and underscores the urgent need for targeted security interventions and systemic responses to curb the menace of kidnapping within the clergy in Nigeria.

Question 1: What factors contribute to the prevalence of kidnapping among Catholic Priests in Nigeria?

Table 2: Factors contributing to the prevalence of kidnapping among Catholic Priests in Nigeria

S/n	Contributing Factors	Description	Remarks
1.	Financial Motivation	Priests are perceived as wealthy and able to pay large ransoms.	Major driver due to ransom demands
2.	Weak Security Infrastructure	Poor policing and inadequate protection in rural and urban areas increase vulnerability.	Enables kidnapers to operate freely
3.	Insider Information	Kidnapers often use insiders to track priests' schedules and locations.	Suggests organised crime networks
4.	Socio-Economic Issues	Poverty, unemployment and political neglect fuel crime and desperation among youth.	Root cause driving criminal activities
5.	Geographical Vulnerability	Priests working in remote, conflict-prone, or volatile regions face higher risks.	Certain dioceses are hotspots
6.	Routine and Predictable Movements	Priests' regular routes and predictable schedules make them easier targets.	Exploited by kidnapers
7.	Religious and Political Influence	Priests' involvement in politics and community leadership makes them targets for intimidation.	Heightens risk in certain areas

Source: Compiled by Abang and Asangausung (2025)

The analysis of the table on factors contributing to the prevalence of kidnapping among Catholic priests in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025 reveals a convergence of socio-economic, infrastructural and strategic vulnerabilities. A key driver is the financial motivation, where priests are perceived as affluent and capable of paying substantial ransoms, thus making them lucrative targets. This is compounded by weak security infrastructure, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, where law enforcement presence is minimal or ineffective, creating an enabling environment for kidnapers to operate with impunity.

The involvement of insiders, individuals with intimate knowledge of priests' routines and whereabouts, points to a troubling level of organisation and coordination within criminal networks. Furthermore, socio-economic pressures, such as high unemployment and poverty, serve as underlying causes that push many into criminality, while geographical factors increase the vulnerability of clergy working in remote or conflict-prone regions, often with little protection or community surveillance.

Additionally, the routine and predictability of priests' movements make them soft targets, as criminals can easily track and ambush them based on known schedules. Finally, the religious and political roles that priests sometimes play in their communities may draw attention from groups seeking to suppress dissenting voices or make political statements through violence. Altogether, these factors reveal a complex, systemic problem that reflects broader national challenges in governance, security and social equity.

Question 2: What strategies are commonly used in the kidnapping of Catholic priests in Nigeria?

Table 3: Strategies Commonly Used in the Kidnapping of Catholic priests in Nigeria

S/n	Strategies Used	Description	Remarks
1.	Ambush during travel	Priests are intercepted on the road, often while travelling alone or in isolated areas.	Most common method; linked to poor road security.
2.	Attacks at parish residence or rectory	Armed intruders invade rectories, especially at night, to abduct priests.	Indicates weak community surveillance.
3.	Posing as distressed parishioners or visitors	Kidnappers pretend to seek help or religious support to lure priests into vulnerable positions.	Exploits priests' roles in offering aid and hospitality.
4.	Use of insiders/informants	Criminals rely on local informants who provide schedules and locations of priests.	Shows organised nature of the crime.
5.	Kidnapping after Mass or religious functions	Priests are trailed and attacked after religious services or community events.	Exploits predictable routines.
6.	Use of motorcycles and fast vehicles	Motorcycles are used to quickly whisk victims away through rough or narrow terrains.	Facilitates rapid escape in difficult terrain.

7. Abductions during pastoral missions or evangelism	Priests are targeted in rural areas while engaging in outreach or missionary duties.	Highlights risk in remote, underserved regions.
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Source: Compiled by Abang and Asangausung (2025)

The analysis of table 3 detailing strategies used in the kidnapping of Catholic priests in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025 reveals a calculated exploitation of routine, isolation and institutional vulnerabilities. The most frequently used tactics involve ambushing priests during travel, which underscores the security risks associated with poor road infrastructure and inadequate patrols, particularly in rural or isolated areas. Kidnappers have also increasingly targeted priests in their own residences, revealing weaknesses in community vigilance and parish-level security measures.

Another significant pattern involves the use of deception, with abductors posing as distressed parishioners or visitors to gain access to priests, thereby exploiting the clergy's natural disposition toward compassion and service. This manipulation of trust highlights the moral dilemma that priests face in balancing openness with personal safety.

The involvement of insiders or informants further reflects the organised nature of the crime, with kidnappers obtaining detailed information about priests' routines and movements, making targeted abductions easier. The reliance on fast and adaptable transportation, such as motorcycles, enables swift getaways through terrains that are often inaccessible to police or community responders, reinforcing the tactical advantage of kidnappers.

Additionally, the timing of abductions such as after religious functions or during missionary work, demonstrates how kidnappers leverage the priests' predictable schedules and outreach responsibilities. This not only underscores their physical vulnerability but also emphasises the growing risks the clergy faces while performing pastoral duties. Overall, the methods used reflect a blend of opportunism, strategic planning and exploitation of institutional and societal weaknesses, pointing to the need for more robust, context-sensitive security measures for religious figures across Nigeria.

Question 3: What are the implications of the kidnapping of Catholic priests on social order in Nigeria?

Table 4: Implications of Kidnapping Catholic Priests on Social Order in Nigeria

S/n	Implication	Description	Remarks
1.	Erosion of public trust in security agencies	Continued abductions despite state security efforts reduce citizens' confidence in law enforcement.	Undermines government legitimacy and effectiveness.
2.	Psychological trauma within religious communities	Fear, anxiety and grief spread among church members and clergy.	Reduces spiritual participation and social cohesion.
3.	Disruption of religious and pastoral activities	Clergy limit movement and outreach due to fear of abduction.	Hampers the Church's mission and societal influence.
4.	Normalisation of criminality and violence	Frequent kidnappings without justice create a culture of impunity.	Encourages more criminal acts.
5.	Weakening of moral and spiritual authority	Priests, once seen as untouchable, are now seen as vulnerable.	Affects societal values and moral leadership.
6.	Decline in missionary and humanitarian engagement	Fear of abduction discourages priests and missionaries from working in volatile regions.	Reduces access to education, healthcare and charity services.
7.	Economic consequences on Church and families	Huge ransoms burden dioceses and families; financial drain weakens institutional stability.	Diverts resources from development projects.
8.	Religious tension and communal suspicion	Targeting of priests may be interpreted as religious persecution.	Fuels interfaith distrust and social unrest.

Source: Compiled by Abang and Asangausung (2025)

The data presented in table 4 reveal that the kidnapping of Catholic priests in Nigeria has far-reaching implications for the nation's social order, destabilizing both religious institutions and broader societal structures. One of the most critical consequences is the growing erosion of public trust in security agencies. Despite government claims of tackling insecurity, the persistent occurrence of priest abductions reflects a failure in state protection mechanisms, thereby undermining public confidence and the perceived legitimacy of law enforcement.

Psychologically, these abductions inflict trauma on religious communities, fostering fear, anxiety and grief among clergy and laity alike. This emotional toll diminishes participation in spiritual and communal life, weakening social cohesion. Furthermore, the constant threat of abduction disrupts pastoral duties, as clergy restrict their movements and activities, leading to a decline in religious outreach and the Church's influence in addressing community needs.

The normalization of such criminal acts fosters a culture of impunity, where violent crimes become increasingly tolerated due to the lack of justice and accountability. This atmosphere weakens the moral authority once held by priests, who were traditionally viewed as sacrosanct figures. Their vulnerability sends a troubling message about the shifting moral landscape and the diminishing reverence for religious and ethical values in society.

Moreover, the fear generated by these incidents discourages missionary and humanitarian engagement, especially in rural and volatile regions, thereby reducing access to vital services like education, healthcare and charity work. The financial burden associated with ransom payments places immense strain on both dioceses and affected families, diverting resources from development efforts and weakening institutional resilience.

Finally, these abductions risk igniting religious and communal tensions, as they may be interpreted as targeted attacks on Christian clergy. Such perceptions can fuel interfaith suspicion, deepen societal fractures and provoke unrest. Overall, the kidnapping of Catholic priests not only threatens the safety of religious figures but also significantly destabilizes Nigeria's socio-religious harmony, institutional credibility and national unity.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed a deeply entrenched and systemic crisis concerning the kidnapping of Catholic priests in Nigeria, highlighting the convergence of financial, structural and socio-political factors that sustain this alarming trend. The widespread nature of these abductions between 2015 and 2025 underscores not just isolated criminal activity but a national security emergency with implications for religious freedom, public trust and social order. The data clearly showed that Catholic priests have become prime targets due to a combination of predictable routines, lack of personal security, perceived access to church wealth and their symbolic religious and community leadership roles.

The high prevalence recorded in dioceses such as Port Harcourt (20.65%), Owerri (17.03%), Kaduna (11.23%) and Onitsha (10.87%), reflects both geographical vulnerabilities and contextual variations in regional insecurity. These figures suggest that the threat is not confined to any single region but is rather a reflection of the broader deterioration of law and order across the country. This finding is corroborated by Nobert (2025), who documented 63 kidnapped priests, with 51 released and 12 killed, spanning several dioceses, including Kaduna, Benin City and Sokoto. The disproportionately high number of fatalities in places such as the Archdiocese of Kaduna and Sokoto Diocese confirms that certain regions are particularly volatile, possibly due to heightened religious extremism or insurgency activity.

The statistical data also reinforce the alarming frequency of these incidents. ACN International (2023), reported that 23 clergy members, including priests, religious sisters and seminarians, were kidnapped within a single year, with one brutally murdered; further evidence that clergy remain among the most vulnerable groups in the Nigerian society. Over a ten-year period, Agenzia Fides (2025) and Zengarini (2025), reported that 145 priests were kidnapped, with 11 killed and 4 still missing. Akinselure (2025), provided an even higher estimate, indicating that 204 Catholic priests and seminarians were abducted in the last decade, with 15 killed in captivity. These consistent figures across different sources reinforce the credibility of the present study's findings and demonstrate that the crisis is not abating.

The motivations behind these abductions are complex and multifaceted. The findings align with existing literature which identifies financial extortion as a primary driver, as kidnapers often demand ransoms with the assumption that churches and dioceses can pay. However, beyond ransom-seeking, political intimidation and religious persecution also feature as underlying motives, particularly in regions experiencing ethno-religious tensions or militant insurgencies. This pattern of targeted violence is consistent with Ezeh's (2025), observation that the kidnapping of 133 priests over the same decade resulted in 13 deaths, indicating that the danger to the clergy is both real and growing.

These findings underscore the critical failure of security systems to protect even high-profile, non-political citizens such as priests, whose work centers on peace building, charity and spiritual care. The persistence of these abductions points to weak intelligence operations, insufficient security infrastructure, insider collusion and a broader collapse of state control in certain areas. The involvement of armed groups with varying agenda, ranging from financial

profiteering to religious extremism, exacerbates the challenge, making priests easy targets due to their public visibility and predictable routines.

Ultimately, the study reinforces the notion that the kidnapping of Catholic priests is both a symptom and a driver of Nigeria's weakening social order. It reflects broader issues of governance failure, social inequality and moral decline, while also contributing to societal fear, erosion of public faith in institutions and the disruption of religious life. The sustained nature of the crisis demands urgent, multidimensional intervention at both national and ecclesiastical levels to protect clergy, restore security and uphold the sanctity of religious practice in Nigeria.

Another finding revealed that the kidnapping of Catholic priests in Nigeria follows a systematic and well-coordinated pattern, characterised by calculated planning, exploitation of routine behaviour and tactical use of violence. This emerging trend aligns closely with the literature, which underscores how perpetrators target priests in vulnerable moments and familiar environments. The consistent use of ambushes during travel, attacks on parish residences and impersonation of parishioners show that kidnappers are not only familiar with the routines and structures of the Catholic clergy but are also increasingly emboldened by the weak security systems that fail to deter or respond effectively to these crimes.

Chintom (2025), affirmed this by highlighting the targeted nature of such attacks, noting how Catholic priests are frequently abducted while traveling, such as in the case of Rev. Fr. John Ubaechu, who was kidnapped on his way to a religious retreat. This reflects the broader finding that travel routes, particularly those taken regularly or during church events, have become hotspots for abductions. Similarly, the use of motorcycles and unmarked vehicles for escape, as seen in multiple reported incidents demonstrates the tactical mobility of the kidnappers and the ease with which they operate in both rural and urban settings. The All Africa (2025), report provides further evidence of such tactics, documenting a priest's abduction at a gas station in Anambra State by individuals using an untraceable white SUV. That he was only rescued by the combined force of police, army and community vigilantes reflects the degree of threat these incidents pose and the difficulty in responding promptly.

The destructive nature of these kidnappings, involving physical force and property damage, further corroborates the findings. Chintom (2025), provided a vivid example in the case of Rev. Father Philip Ekweli and a major seminarian, where the attackers forcibly broke into the rectory and engaged in a gunfight with local vigilantes. This incident reveals not only

the level of firepower available to the assailants but also the insufficient capacity of community-based security structures to defend against such violent incursions. The kidnappers' willingness to use lethal force and cause destruction to achieve their goals supports the finding that these are not opportunistic crimes but deliberate acts carried out with considerable planning and aggression.

Moreover, the literature underscores that many of these attacks are not random but involve insider collaboration or surveillance, allowing kidnappers to exploit moments when priests are alone, after mass, or during routine pastoral duties. This corresponds with the study's finding that attackers often pose as parishioners or rely on inside information to gain access to clergy. The blending of external threats with internal vulnerabilities points to a deepening security crisis within the religious domain, where even sacred spaces and trusted circles can no longer be considered safe.

The recurrence of these patterns over time, combined with the rising number of incidents and the inability of existing security mechanisms to stem the tide has created a climate of fear and instability within the Catholic community. The findings from the literature reflect not just the operational tactics of kidnappers but also the broader erosion of religious freedom and safety. Catholic priests, by virtue of their visibility and symbolic leadership, have become high-value targets in a country where law enforcement is often reactive, under-resourced and overwhelmed.

Further findings revealed that the kidnapping of Catholic priests in Nigeria poses a serious threat to social order by destabilizing fundamental pillars of societal cohesion, trust and moral authority. This disruption is particularly pronounced within religious communities, where priests serve not only as spiritual leaders but also as social stabilizers and moral exemplars. The trauma inflicted by these abductions extends beyond the immediate victims to the broader community, as fear, anxiety and a sense of helplessness permeate congregations and religious institutions. These findings closely align with Olofin's (2020), analysis, which underscores how kidnapping fractures social relationships, inhibits social interaction and erodes public confidence in communal cooperation and security structures.

The study also highlights the psychological consequences of such kidnappings, especially among clergy and laity, as fear of abduction begins to define religious participation and community engagement. This mirrors the findings of Olulowo *et al.* (2021), who noted that persistent insecurity discourages church attendance, weakens commitment to religious

activities and undermines the Church's broader role in providing mentorship, charity and moral guidance. The declining capacity for outreach and spiritual programs ultimately diminishes the Church's influence, undermining one of the country's most vital moral institutions.

Moreover, the findings draw attention to the economic implications of kidnapping Catholic priests, especially as church communities are often forced to mobilize resources for ransom payments or security reinforcement. Inyang and Ubong (2013), as well as Ilechukwu (2015), provide further clarity here, noting that ransom payments represent a direct financial loss, particularly when the victims are central providers or leaders of communities. Indirectly, parishes and dioceses are compelled to invest in security personnel and protective infrastructure, which diverts funds from other vital developmental and social services. These financial pressures weaken institutional sustainability and disrupt the Church's capacity to function effectively as a support system for many Nigerians.

The findings also corroborate Osegboun and Oladipo's (2023), broader observation that kidnapping contributes to a national and international perception of Nigeria as unsafe and unstable. The repeated abduction of priests a class of individuals widely regarded as peaceful and non-political, amplifies fears of lawlessness and institutional failure. This tarnishes Nigeria's global image and discourages foreign investments and partnerships that could otherwise contribute to national development. Furthermore, the religious dimension of these kidnappings, especially when framed by political or ethnic motivations, fuels inter-communal suspicion and religious tension, thereby aggravating existing divisions within the country.

Lastly, the normalization of criminal behaviour and impunity, particularly in regions where kidnappers operate freely and are rarely brought to justice contributes to a broader erosion of social values. As criminality becomes more entrenched, especially when it targets respected religious figures without adequate response, public disillusionment with the justice system deepens. This finding aligns with the views of Odoma and Akor (2019), who highlighted how kidnapping is not merely an economic or security issue but a symptom of deeper structural weaknesses, including poor governance, unemployment and moral decay.

In sum, the findings strongly affirm that the kidnapping of Catholic priests has far-reaching implications for Nigeria's social order. It compromises moral leadership, generates fear and trauma, damages economic livelihoods and undermines both religious authority and

public trust in the state's capacity to ensure safety. These consequences, taken together, threaten the long-term stability and cohesion of Nigerian society.

Conclusion

This study examined the incidence of the kidnapping of Catholic priests and its implications on social order in Nigeria (2015-2025). Drawing on a wide range of secondary data sources; media reports, academic literature, church records and government publications, the study identified recurring patterns, motivations and consequences of this deeply troubling phenomenon. The findings revealed that the kidnapping of Catholic priests is not isolated or incidental, but rather a systemic and growing threat marked by coordinated attacks, insider collaboration, strategic ambushes and exploitation of weak security infrastructure. Priests are often targeted during travel, after religious functions or within parish residences, reflecting a disturbing trend of calculated violence.

The study also found that the implications of kidnapping on social order are far-reaching. These include a deterioration of public trust in security institutions, disruption of religious life, psychological trauma, weakening of moral and religious authority and significant financial burdens on communities. The crisis has compounded socio-political instability, encouraged capital flight and damaged Nigeria's international image. Religious institutions, once pillars of stability and community support, have been significantly affected, leading to decreased church attendance, reduced participation in spiritual programs and strained communal relationships.

In terms of contribution to knowledge, this study advances the academic discourse on security and religion by providing a focused analysis of how religious figures, particularly Catholic priests, have become targets in Nigeria's broader insecurity crisis. Moreover, by documenting statistical evidence across multiple dioceses and over a decade, the study established a comprehensive empirical base that future researchers and policymakers can draw upon.

For further studies, scholars may consider investigating the psychological impact of kidnapping of Catholic priests on congregants and seminarians, the role of non-state actors in securing the release of abducted clergy or a comparative analysis between Nigeria and other countries facing similar threats to religious leaders. A more in-depth qualitative study

involving interviews with victims, church leaders and community members would also enrich the current understanding and provide more grounded responses to the crisis.

Recommendations

- i. Strengthen Security Infrastructure for Clergy and Religious Institutions: The Catholic Church, in collaboration with security agencies, should implement advanced security measures, including surveillance systems, designated safe zones and trained security personnel for clergy members, particularly in high-risk areas. Enhancing physical security at parishes, seminaries and priests' residences will deter potential kidnapers.
- ii. Enhance Law Enforcement and Judicial Response: The Nigerian government should enforce stricter anti-kidnapping laws, ensuring swift prosecution of offenders and dismantling kidnapping networks. Specialized security units should be deployed to monitor and respond to threats against clergy, while intelligence gathering must be intensified to pre-empt attacks.
- iii. Address Socio-economic Causes of Kidnapping: Long-term solutions require tackling the economic and social drivers of crime. Government and religious institutions should invest in youth empowerment programmes, job creation and poverty alleviation initiatives to reduce the financial desperation that fuels kidnappings.

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