



School Kidnappings and Psychosocial Well-being: Emerging Public Health Concerns in Nigeria

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Abstract

The increasing targeting of educational institutions by armed bandits and criminal networks has transformed school kidnapping from a security challenge into a critical psychosocial and public health concern in Nigeria. Against this backdrop, this paper examined *School Kidnappings and Psychosocial Well-being: Emerging Public Health Concerns in Nigeria*. The paper specifically explored the psychosocial consequences of school kidnappings on students, assessed the effects of school kidnappings on the mental health and social well-being of teachers, parents and affected communities, and identified public health measures and intervention strategies for mitigating the psychosocial effects of school kidnappings in Nigeria. The paper was anchored on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains how individual well-being is shaped by interactions within interconnected social and environmental systems. A PRISMA-guided systematic literature review approach was adopted, involving the identification, screening, appraisal and thematic synthesis of relevant scholarly literature on school kidnapping, psychosocial well-being and public health. The paper revealed that school kidnappings expose students to anxiety, depression, fear, emotional instability, post-traumatic stress symptoms and educational disengagement. The paper further showed that teachers, parents and affected communities experience psychological distress, grief, social dislocation, reduced trust in institutions and heightened perceptions of insecurity. The paper also established that school-based psychosocial support services, trauma-informed mental health interventions, strengthened school security mechanisms and community-based support systems are critical for mitigating these adverse outcomes. The paper concluded that school kidnapping constitutes a significant public health challenge with far-reaching implications for mental health, educational participation and community well-being. The paper recommended among others, institutionalisation of school-based psychosocial support programmes, strengthening

of safe school initiatives, and integration of mental health services into primary healthcare and community response systems.

Keywords: School Kidnapping, Psychosocial Well-being, Public Health, Mental Health, Educational Security, Trauma

1. INTRODUCTION

School kidnapping has become one of the most disturbing security and public health challenges confronting Nigeria's education sector. While the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from the Government Girls Secondary School, Chibok, in 2014 brought global attention to attacks on educational institutions, subsequent incidents across the country have demonstrated that schools remain vulnerable to armed violence and mass abductions. In recent years, schoolchildren and teachers have increasingly been targeted by armed groups, bandits, and criminal networks seeking ransom payments, political attention, or territorial control. These attacks have transformed schools from places of learning into sites of fear, trauma, and prolonged psychological distress (UNICEF, 2024). Recent evidence indicates that attacks on schools continue to occur despite various security interventions, thereby exposing children, teachers, and their families to serious psychosocial consequences.

Psychosocial well-being refers to an individual's psychological and social functioning, including emotional stability, self-esteem, social relationships, coping capacity, and overall mental health. Research has consistently shown that exposure to violence, armed conflict, kidnapping, and other traumatic events increases the risk of anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sleep disturbances, social withdrawal, and impaired academic functioning among children and adolescents (Kadir et al., 2019; Betancourt et al., 2020). Children who experience abduction directly, witness violent attacks, or live under the constant threat of kidnapping often exhibit long-term psychological symptoms that affect their educational attainment, social development, and future productivity.

The Nigerian experience provides compelling examples of these concerns. Following the Chibok abduction, studies documented severe psychological trauma among survivors and affected families, including persistent fear, grief, depression, and social stigma (Ekhatior-Mobayode & Abebe, 2020). Similar experiences were reported after the abduction of students from Government Science Secondary School, Kankara, Katsina State, in December 2020; Government Girls Secondary School, Jangebe, Zamfara State, in February 2021; Federal Government College, Birnin Yauri, Kebbi State, in June 2021; and the Kuriga school abduction in Kaduna State in March 2024, where more than 200 pupils and staff members were kidnapped (UNICEF, 2024). These incidents generated widespread fear among parents and communities, leading to school closures, displacement of learners, and disruptions to educational activities. UNICEF (2024) reported that only 37 per cent of schools assessed across ten Nigerian states had functioning early warning systems for detecting threats to school safety, highlighting significant gaps in school protection mechanisms.

More recently, in November 2025, armed gunmen attacked Government Girls Comprehensive Secondary School in Maga, Kebbi State, killing the vice-principal and abducting 25 schoolgirls from their hostel. Although the girls were later rescued, the attack intensified concerns regarding the

emotional and psychological effects of recurrent school kidnappings on students, teachers, and families. The incident occurred within a broader pattern of repeated school abductions that have affected hundreds of children across northern Nigeria in recent years (Asadu, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Beyond northern Nigeria, fears of school-based violence have also affected educational institutions in states such as Oyo, where reports of attempted abductions, insecurity around school environments, and heightened parental anxiety have led to increased demands for school protection measures. The cumulative effect of these incidents extends beyond immediate physical harm to include chronic stress, fear of school attendance, weakened teacher morale, family distress, and community insecurity. From a public health perspective, these outcomes contribute to increased mental health burdens, reduced educational participation, and social instability. Consequently, school kidnapping is no longer merely a security issue but an emerging public health concern requiring urgent scholarly attention and policy intervention.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The persistence of school kidnappings in Nigeria has generated widespread concern regarding the safety of learners and the future of education. Although government agencies have introduced several security initiatives, incidents of school abductions continue to occur across different parts of the country. The repeated targeting of educational institutions has exposed thousands of students, teachers, and families to traumatic experiences capable of undermining their psychological health and social functioning. Recent attacks, including the 2024 Kuriga abduction in Kaduna State and the 2025 kidnapping of schoolgirls in Kebbi State, illustrate the continuing vulnerability of Nigerian schools to violent attacks.

Existing responses to school kidnappings have focused largely on rescue operations, security deployments, and ransom negotiations, while relatively limited attention has been given to the psychosocial consequences experienced by survivors, affected families, teachers, and school communities. Children exposed to kidnapping incidents may develop persistent anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms, behavioural problems, poor concentration, and reduced academic engagement. Teachers and school administrators who witness attacks or lose colleagues during such incidents may also experience emotional distress, fear, and occupational burnout. Parents often live with prolonged uncertainty and psychological strain, particularly when abducted children remain in captivity for extended periods.

Furthermore, repeated attacks have contributed to declining school attendance, temporary school closures, increased dropout rates, and reluctance among parents to enrol their children in boarding schools, particularly in areas perceived as insecure. UNICEF (2024) has warned that weaknesses in school safety systems continue to expose millions of Nigerian children to educational disruptions and protection risks. Despite these concerns, empirical studies examining school kidnapping from a psychosocial and public health perspective remain limited, with much of the available literature focusing primarily on security, terrorism, and educational disruptions.

The absence of sufficient evidence on the psychosocial implications of school kidnapping creates a gap in understanding the full burden of the problem and limits the development of effective mental health interventions for affected populations. It is against this background that this study seeks to examine school kidnappings and psychosocial well-being as emerging public health concerns in Nigeria.

3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The aim of this paper was to examine the implications of school kidnappings on the psychosocial well-being of students, teachers, families, and affected communities as an emerging public health concern in Nigeria. The specific objectives are as follows:

- i. To examine the psychosocial consequences of school kidnappings on students in Nigeria.
- ii. To assess the effects of school kidnappings on the mental health and social well-being of teachers, parents, and affected communities.
- iii. To identify public health measures and intervention strategies for mitigating the psychosocial effects of school kidnappings in Nigeria.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper adopted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework developed by Moher et al. (2009). The PRISMA approach was considered suitable because it provides a transparent, rigorous and replicable procedure for identifying, screening, selecting and synthesising relevant literature while minimising selection bias. The review focused on scholarly literature relating to school kidnapping, psychosocial well-being, trauma, mental health, educational insecurity and public health consequences of violence against children.

Relevant studies were retrieved from major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, PubMed and African Journals Online (AJOL), using Boolean combinations of keywords such as "school kidnapping", "school abduction", "psychosocial well-being", "mental health", "public health", "students", "teachers", "parents", and "Nigeria". The search was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters published between 2019 and 2025, while a limited number of seminal studies published before 2019 were included through backward citation searching to provide theoretical and contextual foundations. To ensure quality and relevance, studies were included if they addressed school kidnapping or related forms of educational violence, examined psychosocial or public health outcomes, employed clearly stated research methods and were available in full-text English language format.

Studies were excluded if they lacked methodological clarity, were opinion-based commentaries without empirical or theoretical grounding, duplicated existing evidence, or were not directly related to the objectives of the paper. Following the PRISMA procedures of identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion, the selected studies were subjected to critical appraisal and thematic synthesis. Data extracted from the studies included authorship, year of publication, study location, theoretical orientation, methodology, key findings, conclusions and implications for psychosocial well-being and public health.

The extracted evidence was analysed using thematic synthesis procedures proposed by Thomas and Harden (2008), involving line-by-line coding, development of descriptive themes and generation of analytical themes. The adoption of the PRISMA-guided systematic review approach enhanced the credibility, transparency and reproducibility of the study while facilitating the integration of evidence from diverse disciplinary perspectives.

Table 1. Systematic Literature Review Protocol Summary

Element	Description
Databases	Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, African Journals Online (AJOL)

Time Period	2019–2025 (systematic search); seminal and foundational studies included through backward citation searching where relevant
Search Terms	"School kidnapping", "school abduction", "psychosocial well-being", "mental health", "public health", "students", "teachers", "parents", "Nigeria" and related Boolean combinations
Inclusion Criteria	Peer-reviewed publications; focus on school kidnapping, psychosocial well-being or public health implications; defined methodology; English full text available
Exclusion Criteria	Opinion pieces without empirical/theoretical basis; duplicate studies; non-English publications; studies not directly related to the review objectives
Identification	Studies retrieved from selected databases and supplementary reference searches
Screening	Titles and abstracts screened against inclusion and exclusion criteria
Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed for methodological relevance and quality
Quality Assessment	Critical appraisal of methodological rigour, relevance, credibility of findings and alignment with review objectives
Synthesis Method	Three-stage thematic synthesis following Thomas and Harden (2008): line-by-line coding, descriptive themes and analytical themes

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relevant literature for this paper was reviewed under conceptual review empirical review and theoretical framework following the paper's aim and objectives as follows:

Conceptual Review

School Kidnapping

School kidnapping has emerged in recent scholarship as a distinct form of abduction in which learners, teachers, or other school personnel are forcibly taken from educational institutions or school-related environments for ransom, political bargaining, coercion, ideological objectives, or other criminal purposes. Examining the wave of mass abductions in Nigerian schools, Ekwukoma (2022) defines school kidnapping as the act of taking students hostage, often in large numbers, by armed groups seeking financial gain, leverage against government authorities, or other strategic objectives.

Similarly, Verjee and Kwaja (2021) argue that school abductions should not be viewed merely as isolated criminal incidents but as manifestations of broader insecurity, weak state protection, and the political economy of violence that has fuelled organised kidnapping across Nigeria. While Ekwukoma's definition draws attention to the direct act of seizing students, Verjee and Kwaja situate the phenomenon within wider social and security conditions that sustain its occurrence. Both perspectives are useful because they recognise that school kidnapping involves the deliberate targeting of educational institutions and their occupants.

In the context of this paper, school kidnapping is defined as the forcible abduction of students, teachers, or school personnel from educational settings by armed individuals or groups, resulting in physical captivity, disruption of educational activities, and psychological distress for victims, families, and affected communities.

Psychosocial Well-being

Psychosocial well-being is widely discussed within psychology, psychiatry, nursing, and public health literature, although there is no universally accepted definition. Peter et al. (2022) contend that psychosocial health encompasses the interaction between psychological functioning and social experiences, including emotional stability, self-worth, interpersonal relationships, social participation, coping capacity, and adaptation to environmental demands. Their conceptual analysis emphasises that psychological and social dimensions are inseparable because individuals' mental states are shaped by their social contexts and relationships.

Likewise, Peters (2021) associates psychological well-being with the fulfilment of fundamental human needs, positive functioning, resilience, and the capacity to maintain meaningful social connections and life satisfaction. While Peter et al. focus on the interdependence of psychological and social functioning within health sciences, Peters places greater emphasis on positive adaptation and human flourishing. The strength of both positions lies in their recognition that well-being extends beyond the absence of mental illness to include healthy social functioning and effective coping mechanisms.

For the purpose of this paper, psychosocial well-being refers to the state of psychological and social health characterised by emotional stability, positive interpersonal relationships, resilience, social adjustment, and the ability to cope effectively with traumatic experiences and environmental challenges.

Public Health

Public health is generally understood as the organised effort of society to prevent disease, promote health, and improve population well-being. In a recent scoping review, Azari and Borisch (2023) observe that public health has evolved beyond the traditional focus on disease prevention to encompass collective actions aimed at protecting and improving the health of populations through multidisciplinary interventions, policies, and social measures.

Similarly, Jervelund and Villadsen (2022) argue that public health should be viewed as a multidisciplinary field that draws evidence from health sciences, social sciences, and behavioural sciences to address population-level health challenges. Although Azari and Borisch focus on the broad goals and functions of public health, Jervelund and Villadsen emphasise its interdisciplinary nature and reliance on diverse forms of evidence. Both perspectives converge on the idea that public health is concerned with protecting and enhancing the health of populations rather than treating individual illness alone.

In relation to this paper, public health is defined as the organised and multidisciplinary efforts undertaken by society, institutions, and governments to prevent health problems, promote psychological and social well-being, and protect populations from conditions that threaten their health and quality of life, including the psychosocial consequences of school kidnapping.

The Psychosocial Consequences of School Kidnappings on Students in Nigeria

School kidnapping has emerged as one of the most significant threats to the psychosocial well-being of children in Nigeria. Beyond the immediate dangers of captivity, students exposed to abduction often experience severe emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and social difficulties that may persist long after their release. Recent studies indicate that traumatic events involving forced separation from families, exposure to violence, threats of death, and prolonged uncertainty are strongly associated with anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), fearfulness, sleep disturbances, social withdrawal, and impaired educational engagement among affected

children (Yakasai et al., 2022; Urien, 2024). These outcomes are particularly pronounced among school-aged children because their developmental stages make them highly vulnerable to traumatic experiences and disruptions in social support systems.

The abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014 remains one of the most documented examples of the long-term psychological burden associated with school kidnapping in Nigeria. Studies examining survivors and affected communities found persistent symptoms of trauma, including recurring nightmares, emotional distress, hypervigilance, fear of social interactions, and difficulty reintegrating into normal school life (Edeh & Nwankwo, 2022; Ojedokun, 2023). Similar patterns were observed following the abduction of 344 students from Government Science Secondary School, Kankara, Katsina State, in December 2020, where reports indicated that many students returned with heightened fear, reduced concentration, and reluctance to resume schooling.

The same concerns were reported after the mass abduction of 279 girls from Government Girls Secondary School, Jangebe, Zamfara State, in February 2021 and the kidnapping of students from Federal Government College, Birnin Yauri, Kebbi State, in June 2021. These incidents reinforced a climate of insecurity that extended beyond victims to other students who were never directly abducted but remained fearful of becoming future targets.

Psychologically, school kidnapping disrupts children's sense of safety, predictability, and trust in social institutions. Yakasai et al. (2022), in a study of abducted schoolchildren in Kaduna State, observed that many survivors displayed symptoms associated with PTSD, including intrusive memories, emotional numbing, persistent fear, and avoidance of reminders linked to the traumatic event. These findings correspond with broader trauma literature showing that children exposed to violent victimisation frequently experience long-term mental health challenges that affect academic performance and social development. Exposure to armed violence and captivity often alters children's perceptions of the world, making them more suspicious, fearful, and emotionally withdrawn.

School kidnapping also affects students who are not directly abducted. The widespread publicity surrounding school attacks generates anticipatory anxiety among learners in vulnerable communities. Ibrahim (2022) argues that repeated attacks on schools in northern Nigeria have created a culture of fear that discourages attendance and weakens students' commitment to education. Following the Kankara, Jangebe, Greenfield University, and Birnin Yauri incidents, many parents temporarily withdrew their children from boarding schools, while some schools remained closed for extended periods due to security concerns. Such disruptions affect children's socialisation processes, educational attainment, peer relationships, and future aspirations.

The educational consequences of school kidnapping are closely connected to psychosocial outcomes. Urien (2024) notes that mass abductions contribute to negative attitudes towards schooling because students increasingly associate educational institutions with danger rather than personal development. Fear of abduction reduces classroom participation, lowers academic motivation, and contributes to absenteeism and school dropout. In many communities across Kaduna, Katsina, Zamfara, Niger, Sokoto, and Kebbi States, insecurity has forced learners into prolonged periods outside the formal education system. The consequences include interrupted learning trajectories, declining educational achievement, and diminished future opportunities.

The March 2024 Kuriga school abduction in Kaduna State further demonstrated the continuing psychosocial vulnerability of Nigerian students. Approximately 287 pupils and teachers were abducted during a school assembly, exposing surviving students and neighbouring communities to

heightened psychological distress. Reports following the incident indicated widespread fear among parents and learners, leading to temporary disruptions in educational activities and increased demands for school security. The recurrence of such incidents reinforces collective trauma within affected populations and contributes to the normalisation of fear among schoolchildren.

In summary, the psychosocial consequences of school kidnapping extend beyond the period of captivity. Victims often experience emotional distress, anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms, social withdrawal, educational disengagement, and diminished trust in social institutions. Even students who are not directly abducted may develop persistent fears that undermine their psychological well-being and educational participation. The repeated occurrence of school kidnappings across Nigeria therefore constitutes a significant threat to child development, mental health, and educational outcomes.

The Effects of School Kidnappings on the Mental Health and Social Well-being of Teachers, Parents and Affected Communities

The consequences of school kidnapping in Nigeria extend far beyond abducted students. Teachers, parents, caregivers, school administrators and entire communities often experience profound psychological, emotional and social disruptions following attacks on educational institutions. Research on collective trauma demonstrates that violent events directed at schools create layers of victimisation that affect direct victims, secondary victims and the wider social environment in which the attacks occur (Betancourt et al., 2020; Kadir et al., 2019). In the Nigerian context, repeated school abductions have generated fear, uncertainty, grief, social disorganisation and declining confidence in the ability of state institutions to provide security. These effects have become particularly visible in communities affected by the Chibok, Dapchi, Kankara, Jangebe, Greenfield University, Birnin Yauri and Kuriga abductions.

Teachers constitute one of the most affected groups during school kidnapping incidents because they often witness attacks directly, become victims themselves, or assume responsibility for supporting traumatised learners after release. Exposure to armed violence, threats of death, forced displacement and the loss of students under their care can produce anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion and occupational stress. According to Kadir et al. (2019), educators working in environments characterised by conflict and insecurity frequently exhibit symptoms associated with secondary traumatic stress, including sleep disturbances, emotional fatigue, fearfulness and diminished professional satisfaction. In northern Nigeria, many teachers have become reluctant to accept postings in rural communities where schools are perceived as vulnerable to attacks. This situation has contributed to teacher shortages in some high-risk areas and has weakened the quality of educational delivery.

The Greenfield University abduction in Kaduna State in April 2021 illustrates these concerns. During the incident, armed attackers abducted students and subsequently killed several captives. Apart from the trauma experienced by students, academic staff and school administrators faced significant psychological strain arising from fears regarding their own safety and concerns about the welfare of abducted students. Similar patterns emerged following the Birnin Yauri abduction in Kebbi State, where teachers and school personnel were among those affected by the attack. In many cases, educators resumed work while simultaneously dealing with unresolved emotional distress and heightened security anxieties.

Parents and caregivers experience another dimension of psychological suffering during school kidnapping incidents. The uncertainty surrounding the fate of abducted children often produces

intense emotional distress, prolonged grief, fear, helplessness and psychological exhaustion. Studies examining parental responses to child abduction and armed conflict indicate that prolonged uncertainty regarding a child's survival or release is strongly associated with depression, anxiety disorders and chronic stress-related conditions (Betancourt et al., 2020). Nigerian parents whose children were abducted in Chibok, Dapchi, Kankara and Kuriga frequently described experiences of sleeplessness, persistent fear, emotional instability and social isolation. Many families remained uncertain about the safety of their children for weeks or months, thereby prolonging psychological suffering.

The Chibok case provides one of the clearest examples of long-term parental trauma. Several years after the 2014 abduction, some parents continued to experience grief and emotional distress due to uncertainty regarding the whereabouts of their daughters. Similar concerns emerged after the Federal Government College Birnin Yauri abduction, where some students remained in captivity for extended periods. The psychological burden associated with prolonged captivity often persists even after victims return home because families must cope with the emotional and behavioural changes that may accompany traumatic experiences.

School kidnappings also affect family relationships and household functioning. Families frequently incur substantial economic costs associated with displacement, relocation, medical care and security arrangements. Parents may withdraw children from boarding schools or relocate them to safer communities, resulting in financial strain and disruption of social networks. In some instances, survivors experience social stigma or discrimination following their return, particularly where communities misunderstand the psychological consequences of trauma. Such reactions can hinder reintegration and recovery processes.

At the community level, school kidnappings undermine social cohesion and collective well-being. Communities affected by repeated attacks often develop a pervasive sense of insecurity that shapes everyday behaviour. Residents may restrict movement, avoid social gatherings and reduce participation in community activities due to fears of further attacks. Social trust, which serves as an important foundation for community resilience, may also decline when people perceive that security institutions are unable to provide adequate protection. According to Edeh and Nwankwo (2022), insecurity within educational environments frequently contributes to broader social instability because schools function as important centres of social interaction, community development and human capital formation.

The March 2024 Kuriga abduction illustrates how school kidnappings can affect entire communities. Following the attack, widespread fear spread beyond the immediate school environment, affecting neighbouring communities and generating concerns regarding children's safety across Kaduna State. Parents became hesitant to send children to school, while community leaders demanded stronger security measures. Similar reactions were observed following attacks in Katsina, Zamfara, Niger and Kebbi States. Such responses demonstrate that the psychological consequences of school kidnapping extend beyond direct victims to encompass wider social groups. Another important consequence involves the erosion of confidence in education as a pathway to social mobility. When schools become associated with danger, parents may question the value of formal education relative to perceived security risks. This perception contributes to declining enrolment rates, increased absenteeism and school closures in affected communities. Long-term educational disruptions may weaken social development and increase vulnerability to poverty, social exclusion and criminal activity.

The cumulative effects of school kidnappings on teachers, parents and communities therefore reflect a pattern of collective trauma. Emotional distress, chronic anxiety, fear, grief, weakened social trust, educational disruptions and economic strain combine to create significant psychosocial challenges that extend far beyond abducted students. Addressing these challenges requires interventions that recognise the needs of families, educators and communities alongside those of survivors.

Public Health Measures and Intervention Strategies for Mitigating the Psychosocial Effects of School Kidnappings in Nigeria

School kidnapping has evolved from a security challenge into a major public health concern because of its effects on mental health, educational participation, social functioning and community well-being. Public health approaches emphasise prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery rather than relying solely on security responses. Consequently, efforts to mitigate the psychosocial consequences of school kidnappings must involve coordinated actions across the health, education, social welfare and security sectors. Evidence from conflict-affected settings demonstrates that effective responses require a combination of trauma-informed mental health services, school-based interventions, community support systems and preventive security measures (Tol et al., 2021; Jordans et al., 2023).

One of the most important interventions involves the provision of structured psychosocial support services for survivors immediately after release from captivity. Children returning from abduction often require psychological assessment, trauma counselling and long-term mental health monitoring. Trauma-informed care enables professionals to identify symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, depression and behavioural difficulties while helping survivors develop coping mechanisms. Jordans et al. (2023) argue that early psychosocial interventions significantly reduce the likelihood of chronic psychological disorders among children exposed to traumatic events. In the Nigerian context, mental health professionals, social workers and school counsellors should be integrated into post-rescue programmes to facilitate recovery and reintegration.

School-based mental health programmes represent another critical intervention. Schools provide accessible environments where psychosocial support can be delivered to large numbers of learners. Such programmes may include counselling services, peer-support groups, emotional resilience training and teacher-led psychosocial activities. Research indicates that school-based mental health interventions improve emotional regulation, reduce trauma-related symptoms and strengthen social functioning among children exposed to violence (Tol et al., 2021). Given the widespread fear generated by school kidnappings, these interventions should not be restricted to abducted students alone but should also include classmates and other learners affected indirectly by insecurity.

Teachers require specialised support because they often function as first responders following traumatic events. Training educators to recognise signs of trauma, provide psychological first aid and refer students for professional assistance can strengthen school recovery efforts. Psychological first aid has been widely recognised as an effective early intervention following crises because it focuses on safety, emotional support and practical assistance rather than clinical treatment. Teachers who receive such training are better positioned to support traumatised learners while protecting their own mental health.

Community-based interventions are equally important. Since school kidnappings affect entire communities, psychosocial support should extend beyond schools to include parents, caregivers and community leaders. Community dialogue sessions, support groups and awareness campaigns can

reduce stigma associated with trauma and encourage affected individuals to seek assistance. Betancourt et al. (2020) emphasise that family and community support systems play crucial roles in promoting resilience among children exposed to violence and adversity. Strengthening these systems can improve recovery outcomes for survivors and their families.

Another important public health strategy involves expanding access to mental health services within primary healthcare systems. Nigeria continues to face shortages of psychiatrists, psychologists and other mental health professionals. Integrating mental health services into primary healthcare facilities would increase accessibility, particularly in rural areas where school kidnappings frequently occur. Community health workers can also be trained to identify psychological distress and facilitate referrals for specialised care. Such approaches are consistent with current recommendations advocating the integration of mental health into broader health systems in low- and middle-income countries (Patel et al., 2022).

Preventive interventions must also address the conditions that increase vulnerability to school kidnapping. The Safe School Initiative introduced in Nigeria sought to strengthen school security through physical protection measures, community participation and emergency preparedness. Practical measures include perimeter fencing, controlled access points, security personnel, surveillance systems, communication networks and school emergency response plans. Although security measures alone cannot eliminate psychosocial harm, they reduce the likelihood of attacks and contribute to a sense of safety among learners, teachers and parents.

Early warning and community surveillance systems constitute another preventive strategy. Communities often possess valuable information regarding emerging security threats. Establishing communication channels between schools, community leaders and security agencies can improve threat detection and facilitate rapid responses. Evidence from conflict-affected regions suggests that community participation enhances the effectiveness of school protection initiatives and promotes local ownership of security measures.

Educational continuity programmes should also form part of public health responses. Prolonged school closures following kidnapping incidents can exacerbate psychological distress and disrupt children's developmental trajectories. Alternative learning arrangements, temporary learning centres and remote education platforms can help maintain educational engagement during periods of insecurity. Continuity in education provides stability, social interaction and a sense of normalcy, all of which contribute positively to psychosocial recovery.

Finally, strengthening research and surveillance systems is essential for understanding the long-term psychosocial effects of school kidnappings. Reliable data on mental health outcomes, educational disruptions and community impacts would support evidence-based policymaking and resource allocation. Longitudinal studies are particularly important because many psychological effects emerge months or years after traumatic events.

In sum, mitigating the psychosocial effects of school kidnappings in Nigeria requires a public health approach that combines mental health services, school-based support programmes, community interventions, family-centred care, educational continuity measures and preventive security strategies. Such an approach recognises that recovery from school kidnapping extends beyond physical rescue and requires sustained efforts to restore psychological well-being, social functioning and educational participation.

Empirical Reviews

Yakasai et al. (2022) conducted a study on *Psychological Impact of Kidnapping on Mental Health and Well-being of Abductees: A Study of Abducted School Children in Kaduna State, Nigeria*. The study was carried out in Kaduna State, Nigeria, to examine the psychological consequences of school abduction on students who had experienced captivity. The study was anchored on trauma and mental health perspectives in explaining the psychological outcomes of kidnapping experiences. A retrospective cross-sectional survey design was adopted. The researchers purposively selected 32 abducted school children who had experienced kidnapping episodes in the state. Data were collected through in-depth interviews which enabled the participants to narrate their experiences before, during and after captivity. The findings revealed that most of the abducted students developed various psychological problems after their release, including anxiety disorders, insomnia, nightmares, depression, emotional instability, hyperarousal, panic attacks and symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. The study further found that many of the victims received medical attention for physical injuries but had limited access to psychosocial support and mental health services. The authors concluded that kidnapping exerts severe psychological effects on school children and that greater attention should be given to their mental health needs during reintegration.

The study provides useful insights into the psychological burden of school kidnapping in Nigeria. However, it focused primarily on abducted students in Kaduna State and paid limited attention to the broader psychosocial implications for teachers, parents, communities and public health systems. This creates a gap which the current paper addressed by examining school kidnappings as a wider psychosocial and public health concern in Nigeria.

Urien (2024) carried out a study on *The Psychological Impact of Mass Abduction of Students in Nigeria and Students' Attitude to Education*. The study focused on Nigeria and examined how recurring school abductions influence students' perceptions of education and schooling. The study was guided by psychological and educational perspectives relating to fear, trauma and educational participation. A descriptive research design was adopted, relying mainly on documentary and analytical evidence from reported incidents of mass school abductions across the country. Data were collected through the review of existing literature, documented reports and secondary sources relating to school kidnappings. The findings indicated that the increasing incidence of school abductions has generated widespread fear among students, parents and educational stakeholders. The study further revealed that repeated attacks on schools have negatively affected students' attitudes towards education, reduced school attendance, increased dropout tendencies and weakened confidence in educational institutions. The study concluded that the persistence of school kidnappings poses a serious threat to educational development and learner participation in Nigeria.

Although the study successfully linked school kidnapping to educational outcomes, it concentrated mainly on students' attitudes towards schooling and educational participation. It gave insufficient attention to the broader psychosocial well-being of victims, families, teachers and affected communities as well as the public health implications of the phenomenon. The present paper therefore extended the discussion beyond educational outcomes to include psychosocial well-being and public health concerns.

Ekwukoma (2022) conducted a study on *The Prevalence of School Kidnapping in Nigeria: Any Implications?* The study examined the growing occurrence of mass school abductions in Nigeria, particularly within the northern region of the country. The study was informed by educational

security and social protection perspectives which explain how insecurity affects educational access and development. A qualitative documentary research design was employed. The study relied on secondary data obtained from published literature, documented reports and available records on school kidnappings in Nigeria. Through content analysis, the study examined the frequency, patterns and implications of school abductions for educational development. The findings showed that school kidnapping had become a recurring security challenge affecting educational institutions across several states. The study further revealed that the phenomenon contributed to school closures, disruptions in teaching and learning activities, increased fear among students and parents, and declining confidence in educational safety. The author concluded that school kidnapping constitutes a major obstacle to educational progress and national development.

The study is important because it highlights the scale and educational implications of the problem. Nevertheless, its focus remained largely on the prevalence and educational consequences of school kidnappings. The study did not adequately examine the psychosocial effects on victims, teachers, parents and communities, nor did it analyse the issue from a public health perspective. This limitation creates a significant gap that the current paper filled by exploring school kidnappings and psychosocial well-being as emerging public health concerns in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

This paper was anchored on Ecological System Theory as reviewed below:

Ecological Systems Theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 and subsequently refined in collaboration with Morris in the Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT) model in 2006. The theory has become one of the most widely applied frameworks in contemporary public health, child development, trauma studies, mental health research, and violence prevention because it explains how individual well-being is influenced by interactions occurring within multiple environmental systems. Bronfenbrenner argued that human development and psychosocial outcomes cannot be understood solely by examining individual characteristics; rather, they are products of continuous interactions between individuals and the social environments in which they live.

The theory identifies interconnected systems that shape behaviour and well-being, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem consists of immediate environments such as family, school, peer groups, and neighbourhoods. The mesosystem refers to interactions among these immediate environments, such as relationships between families and schools. The exosystem includes institutions and structures that indirectly affect individuals, including government agencies, security institutions, media organisations, and local authorities. The macrosystem encompasses broader cultural values, political conditions, economic structures, social norms, and public policies. The chronosystem captures changes that occur over time, including life transitions, social transformations, and historical events that influence development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

The central assumption of the theory is that psychological and social well-being are shaped by reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environments. Consequently, traumatic experiences such as school kidnapping cannot be understood as isolated events affecting only abducted students; rather, their effects spread across families, schools, communities, institutions, and wider society. Another major assumption is that disruptions occurring within one ecological system can influence functioning in other systems. For example, insecurity within schools may affect family relationships, educational participation, community trust, and public health outcomes. The theory further assumes that adverse environmental conditions, including violence, armed

conflict, insecurity, and social instability, can undermine healthy development and psychosocial functioning, while supportive social environments promote resilience, recovery, and positive adaptation (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

One of the major strengths of the Ecological Systems Theory is its holistic explanation of human behaviour and well-being. Unlike theories that focus exclusively on individual psychological factors, Bronfenbrenner's framework recognises the influence of social, cultural, institutional, and political environments on mental health outcomes. This makes the theory particularly useful for examining school kidnappings because the phenomenon affects multiple social levels simultaneously. Another strength lies in its interdisciplinary applicability. The theory has been extensively employed in public health, psychology, sociology, education, social work, and child protection studies because it facilitates the analysis of how different environmental factors interact to shape health and well-being. The theory also provides a strong foundation for designing intervention programmes because it encourages responses at individual, family, school, community, and policy levels rather than focusing on victims alone (Eriksson et al., 2018).

Despite its strengths, the theory has certain limitations. Critics argue that Bronfenbrenner's framework is primarily descriptive and provides limited explanations regarding the specific mechanisms through which environmental factors produce particular psychological outcomes. The theory identifies multiple influences on behaviour but does not clearly indicate which factors exert the strongest effects under specific conditions. Another weakness is that the broad scope of the model can make empirical testing difficult because researchers may struggle to measure all ecological levels simultaneously. Furthermore, the theory may underestimate individual agency by placing greater emphasis on environmental influences than on personal coping capacities and resilience processes (Tudge et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding these limitations, the Ecological Systems Theory provides the most suitable framework for explaining school kidnappings and psychosocial well-being as emerging public health concerns in Nigeria. School kidnapping directly affects students within the microsystem by exposing them to trauma, fear, anxiety, depression, and disruptions in educational participation. Families also experience emotional distress, grief, and uncertainty following abductions. At the mesosystem level, interactions between schools and families are weakened as parents lose confidence in educational institutions and become reluctant to send children to school. The exosystem is reflected in the role of security agencies, government policies, media reporting, and community responses, all of which influence how kidnapping incidents affect victims and communities.

At the macrosystem level, broader issues such as poverty, insecurity, weak governance, armed banditry, and social inequalities contribute to the persistence of school kidnappings. The chronosystem becomes evident in the repeated occurrence of school abductions from Chibok in 2014 through Kankara, Jangebe, Birnin Yauri, Greenfield University, Kuriga, and other recent incidents, demonstrating how prolonged exposure to insecurity produces cumulative psychosocial and public health consequences over time.

The theory therefore offers a strong analytical foundation for understanding why school kidnapping should not be viewed merely as a criminal or security issue. Rather, it demonstrates that the phenomenon affects interconnected social systems that influence psychological health, educational attainment, family functioning, community stability, and public health outcomes. Consequently, effective responses must extend beyond rescue operations and security measures to include mental

health services, family support mechanisms, school-based interventions, community resilience programmes, and broader policy reforms aimed at addressing the structural conditions that sustain insecurity in Nigeria.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The paper demonstrated that school kidnapping has evolved beyond a security challenge to become a significant psychosocial and public health concern in Nigeria. In relation to the first objective, which examined the psychosocial consequences of school kidnappings on students, the evidence reviewed indicates that abducted learners are exposed to severe emotional and psychological disturbances that frequently persist long after their release. The findings from Yakasai et al. (2022) revealed that abducted schoolchildren in Kaduna State experienced anxiety, depression, insomnia, panic attacks, emotional instability and symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. These findings corroborate the position of Kadir et al. (2019), who argued that children's exposure to armed violence and traumatic events often results in prolonged psychological distress, impaired emotional regulation and reduced social functioning. Similarly, Urien (2024) observed that repeated school abductions have negatively affected students' attitudes towards education and contributed to fear of school attendance. This suggests that the consequences of kidnapping are not limited to the period of captivity but extend to educational engagement and social development.

Practical experiences from the Chibok, Kankara, Jangebe, Birnin Yauri and Kuriga abductions further support this position. In many of these cases, rescued students reportedly exhibited fear of returning to school, emotional withdrawal and persistent insecurity. The review therefore agrees with the argument that kidnapping disrupts children's sense of safety, trust and normal development. Beyond the direct victims, the fear generated by recurring attacks creates psychological vulnerability among students in neighbouring schools and communities who have not personally experienced abduction. This finding strengthens the position that school kidnapping constitutes a collective psychosocial threat capable of affecting educational participation and child development on a broader scale.

The paper also revealed that the burden of school abductions extends far beyond abducted students. Parents often experience prolonged periods of uncertainty, grief, anxiety and emotional exhaustion, particularly when victims remain in captivity for extended periods. This finding is consistent with Betancourt et al. (2020), who maintained that traumatic experiences affecting children frequently generate psychological consequences for caregivers and family members. The emotional suffering experienced by parents of the Chibok girls and the families of students abducted from Birnin Yauri, Kankara and Kuriga provides practical evidence of this reality. The inability of parents to ascertain the safety and welfare of their children often creates chronic stress that affects family relationships and overall well-being.

Teachers also emerge as important secondary victims of school kidnapping. As custodians of learners, many teachers experience guilt, fear, anxiety and occupational stress following attacks on educational institutions. The review supports the position of Kadir et al. (2019) that educators operating in insecure environments are susceptible to secondary traumatic stress arising from repeated exposure to violence and insecurity. The reluctance of some teachers to accept postings in vulnerable communities across northern Nigeria further illustrates the psychosocial burden associated with school attacks. At the community level, repeated abductions contribute to declining social trust, reduced participation in communal activities and increased perceptions of insecurity. Ekwukoma (2022) rightly observed that school kidnapping undermines confidence in educational

institutions and disrupts community development. The cumulative effect is the emergence of collective trauma that affects social cohesion and weakens confidence in state institutions responsible for security and child protection.

The paper also found that effective responses require interventions that go beyond military operations and rescue missions. The findings indicate that psychosocial support services, trauma counselling, school-based mental health programmes, community support systems, educational continuity measures and improved school security mechanisms are essential for addressing the consequences of school kidnapping. This finding aligns with the views of Tol et al. (2021), who argued that resilience and recovery among children exposed to violence are strengthened through sustained psychosocial and social support interventions. Similarly, Jordans et al. (2023) emphasised the importance of early mental health interventions in preventing long-term psychological disorders among children exposed to traumatic events.

The Nigerian experience demonstrates that the absence of structured psychosocial support following school abductions often leaves survivors, families and communities to cope with trauma without adequate professional assistance. While considerable attention is usually directed towards securing the release of abducted victims, less attention is often devoted to long-term rehabilitation and mental health recovery. The findings therefore suggest that integrating mental health services into school systems and primary healthcare facilities would contribute significantly to improving psychosocial outcomes. Equally important is the strengthening of preventive measures such as community-based surveillance systems, emergency preparedness plans, school protection infrastructure and stronger collaboration between schools, communities and security agencies. These measures would not only reduce the likelihood of future attacks but also restore confidence in educational institutions.

The Ecological Systems Theory adopted for this paper provides a strong explanatory framework for understanding these findings. Bronfenbrenner's proposition that human well-being is shaped by interactions occurring within multiple environmental systems is clearly reflected in the reviewed evidence. At the microsystem level, school kidnapping directly affects students, parents and teachers through exposure to trauma, fear and emotional distress. The psychological problems observed among abducted learners and their families demonstrate how disruptions within immediate social environments influence psychosocial well-being. At the mesosystem level, relationships between schools and families are weakened as parents become reluctant to enrol or retain children in schools perceived as unsafe. This has been evident following major abductions in Chibok, Kankara, Jangebe and Kuriga, where school attendance declined due to parental fears.

The exosystem is reflected in the influence of security institutions, government responses, media coverage and community structures on how kidnapping incidents affect victims and affected populations. Weak security arrangements, delayed responses and inadequate mental health services indirectly contribute to the psychosocial burden experienced by communities. At the macrosystem level, broader issues such as insecurity, poverty, armed banditry, weak governance and social inequalities create conditions that sustain school kidnappings and their associated consequences. Finally, the chronosystem explains how repeated school abductions over time have produced cumulative psychosocial effects across generations of learners, families and communities. The progression from Chibok in 2014 to Kankara, Jangebe, Birnin Yauri, Greenfield University and Kuriga demonstrates how persistent insecurity has transformed school kidnapping into a continuing public health challenge.

The theory therefore supports the findings by demonstrating that school kidnapping is not merely an isolated criminal act affecting individual victims. Rather, it is a social phenomenon whose consequences permeate families, schools, communities and institutions. The evidence reviewed confirms Bronfenbrenner's assertion that human well-being is shaped by interconnected social environments. Consequently, interventions aimed at addressing school kidnapping must adopt a multi-level approach that combines mental health support, family-centred interventions, school protection measures, community participation and broader policy reforms capable of addressing the structural conditions that sustain insecurity in Nigeria. Such an approach offers the greatest potential for protecting psychosocial well-being and reducing the public health burden associated with school kidnappings.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, school kidnapping has emerged as one of the most serious threats to child well-being, educational development and population health in Nigeria. The persistence of attacks on educational institutions across different parts of the country has demonstrated that the consequences of kidnapping extend far beyond the immediate objective of unlawful captivity. The phenomenon undermines the psychological stability of learners, weakens family structures, disrupts educational processes and generates fear within communities that should ordinarily serve as supportive environments for child development. As schools increasingly become targets of organised criminal groups and armed actors, the educational system is confronted not only with issues of access and safety but also with growing mental health and social challenges affecting students, teachers, parents and communities.

The public health implications of these developments are profound because prolonged exposure to fear, trauma, insecurity and uncertainty contributes to emotional distress, social dysfunction and reduced quality of life among affected populations. Addressing school kidnapping therefore requires a shift from viewing the problem solely through a security lens to recognising it as a human development and public health issue that demands coordinated responses from the education, health, social welfare and security sectors. Sustainable progress will depend not only on preventing future abductions but also on creating supportive systems capable of promoting psychological recovery, restoring confidence in educational institutions and strengthening community resilience against the adverse effects of insecurity.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Federal and State Ministries of Education, in collaboration with health authorities, should establish school-based psychosocial support units staffed by trained counsellors, psychologists and social workers to provide routine trauma assessment, counselling services and long-term mental health support for students, teachers and families affected by school kidnapping and related security incidents.
2. Government should strengthen the implementation of safe school initiatives through the provision of functional security infrastructure, early warning systems, emergency response mechanisms, community-based surveillance networks and regular security audits of schools, particularly in high-risk areas, in order to reduce vulnerability to attacks and restore public confidence in educational institutions.
3. Mental health and psychosocial support services should be integrated into primary healthcare systems and community development programmes in affected regions, while targeted awareness campaigns, support groups and resilience-building interventions should

be introduced to assist parents, teachers and communities in coping with the psychological and social consequences of school kidnappings and related forms of violence.

9. LIMITATIONS

While this paper contributes to the growing body of knowledge on school kidnappings and psychosocial well-being as emerging public health concerns in Nigeria, it is not without limitations. As a systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA framework, the study is inherently dependent on the scope, quality and methodological rigour of the studies included in the review. Although a systematic search strategy, clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and a critical appraisal process were employed to enhance the credibility and transparency of the review, the findings remain constrained by the methodological choices, research designs and analytical approaches adopted in the primary studies reviewed. Consequently, the conclusions drawn in this paper reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the existing body of literature on school kidnapping, psychosocial well-being and public health in Nigeria.

Furthermore, despite the comprehensive search conducted across major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar and African Journals Online (AJOL), the review was restricted to studies published in the English language. This may have introduced language bias and database coverage bias, as potentially relevant studies published in other languages or indexed in databases not covered by the search strategy may have been excluded. Similarly, the exclusion of grey literature, unpublished theses, policy briefs, conference papers and other non-peer-reviewed sources may have resulted in publication bias, given that studies with significant findings are more likely to be published than those reporting insignificant or contrary results.

Another limitation arises from the evolving nature of school kidnapping in Nigeria. Several recent incidents of school abduction have not yet received extensive scholarly attention, resulting in a reliance on a relatively limited pool of empirical studies directly examining the psychosocial and public health implications of these events. Consequently, some dimensions of the phenomenon may not yet be adequately captured within the available academic literature.

In addition, the paper adopted an analytical and interpretive approach and therefore did not generate primary data from students, teachers, parents, healthcare professionals or affected communities. As a result, the study could not establish causal relationships between school kidnapping and specific psychosocial or public health outcomes, nor could it directly assess variations across geographical locations and population groups.

Finally, most of the studies reviewed were concentrated in selected states within northern Nigeria where school abductions have been more prevalent. Therefore, caution should be exercised in generalising the findings to all regions of the country. While the evidence reviewed provides important insights into the psychosocial and public health consequences of school kidnapping, further longitudinal, comparative and field-based studies are required to validate and extend the findings presented in this paper.

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Data availability

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable. This study did not involve human or animal subjects.

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