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CULT-RELATED CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES AND THE SAFETY OF RURAL DWELLERS IN SELECTED STATES OF THE SOUTH-SOUTH GEO-POLITICAL ZONE OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined cult-related criminal activities and the safety of rural dwellers in selected states of the South-South Geo-Political Zone Of Nigeria with specific focus on kidnapping and arson as dimensions of cult-related crimes. The study adopt Routine Activity Theory. The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design to investigate how these criminal activities influence rural safety outcomes. The study was conducted in Cross River, Akwa Ibom, and Rivers States, with a sample size of 384 respondents selected through a multi-stage sampling procedure. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, validated through reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29.0. Simple Linear Regression was used to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that kidnapping significantly predicts the safety of rural dwellers, $F(1,382) = 368.93$, $p < .001$. Similarly, arson was found to significantly predict rural safety, $F(1,382) = 244.87$, $p < .001$. The study concludes that cult-related kidnapping and arson substantially threaten the security conditions of rural populations. It recommends strengthening rural security infrastructure, improving surveillance systems, establishing effective emergency response mechanisms, and enhancing community-based security strategies to safeguard rural dwellers in the South-South region of Nigeria.

Keywords: Cultism; kidnapping; arson; rural safety and South-South Nigeria

Introduction

Globally, criminal violence directly affects multidimensional well-being beyond physical safety. The concept of well-being encompasses individuals' physical health, psychological stability, social relationships, economic security, freedom of movement, access to education and healthcare, and overall quality of life. Within the African context, rural communities remain particularly vulnerable because security institutions are often weak, poorly equipped, and geographically distant. Limited police presence, inadequate infrastructure, high youth unemployment, widespread poverty, and weak judicial systems create opportunities for organized criminal groups to flourish. In several West African countries, criminal gangs increasingly exploit these structural weaknesses to establish territorial influence, recruit unemployed youths, and intimidate local populations. Nigeria exemplifies this broader regional pattern, where criminal organizations adapt to local socio-economic realities and gradually integrate into community power structures (Igwe-Okomiso, Obadimu, Iloma, Ogbonna, Okom & Edet (2024). Crimes have become one of the most persistent internal security challenges confronting many communities in Nigeria, particularly in the southern region where organized cult groups have evolved from relatively secret associations into violent criminal networks. Although cultism initially emerged within higher educational institutions as exclusive fraternities established for social identity, intellectual engagement, and mutual protection, the phenomenon has gradually expanded beyond university campuses into urban and rural communities (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023).

Across Nigeria, insecurity has assumed multiple dimensions, including terrorism, banditry, communal conflicts, farmer-herder clashes, kidnapping, armed robbery, and cult-related violence. While considerable scholarly attention has focused on insurgency and kidnapping, cult-related crimes remain comparatively underexplored despite their growing impact on community safety, particularly in rural areas (Agara, 2020). Unlike many organized crimes that occur sporadically, cult violence often becomes deeply embedded within local social and political structures through recruitment of unemployed youths, manipulation during elections, and competition for territorial dominance. In the South-West, cult groups frequently operate within urban environments and educational institutions where rivalry among confraternities contributes to violent clashes. In the South-East, cult-related violence is increasingly linked with political competition, organized crime, and urban gang activities. However, the South-South geopolitical zone presents a more complex security landscape where cultism intersects with oil-related conflicts, youth militancy, political patronage, illegal resource exploitation, communal disputes, and organized criminal enterprises (Ogele, Sarki, Solomon, & Kaka, 2020). The South-South region has experienced significant socio-economic contradictions. Despite its abundant natural resources, many rural communities continue to experience high unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, environmental degradation, poverty, and limited access to quality public services, this prompted the study.

Statement of the Problem

The persistence of cult-related criminal activities has become one of the most critical internal security challenges confronting Nigeria, particularly in the South-South geo-political zone. Cult groups are increasingly linked with violent crimes such as murder, kidnapping, armed robbery, extortion, illegal possession of firearms, political violence, drug trafficking, and destruction of property. These criminal activities have significantly undermined public safety, disrupted socio-economic development, and weakened confidence in formal security institutions (Nnam, Owan, Otu, Okechukwu, Eteng, Offu, & Obasi,2022). Rural communities in the South-South states have become increasingly vulnerable to cult-related violence due to factors such as widespread youth unemployment, poverty, weak law enforcement presence, difficult geographical terrain, proliferation of small arms, and the exploitation of local

political rivalries by criminal groups. Unlike urban centres where security agencies are relatively concentrated, many rural communities experience delayed security responses, thereby allowing cult groups to operate with relative impunity.

Consequently, rural dwellers are frequently exposed to intimidation, displacement, loss of lives and property, restrictions on farming and fishing activities, disruption of local markets, and deterioration of communal peace. These conditions have profound implications for livelihoods, food security, and sustainable rural development (Arisukwu, Igbolekwu, Oye, Oyeyipo, Asamu, Rasak, & Oyekola, 2020). It has been observed that government interventions including anti-cult operations, community policing initiatives, and periodic security deployments have yielded limited and inconsistent outcomes, as incidents of cult-related violence continue to threaten community stability in several parts of the South-South region. The persistence of these criminal activities raises concerns regarding the effectiveness of existing security strategies and the adequacy of community-based approaches to crime prevention in rural settings. Against this background, there is a compelling need to investigate the extent to which cult-related criminal activities influence the safety of rural dwellers in selected states of the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria.

Objectives of the study

1) To examine the relationship between kidnapping and the safety of rural dwellers.
2) To examine the relationship between arson and the safety of rural dwellers.

Research questions

1) How does kidnapping affect the safety of rural dwellers.
2) How does arson affect the safety of rural dwellers.

Literature review

Kidnapping activities and safety of rural dwellers.

Kidnapping has become one of the most persistent internal security threats confronting Nigeria, with profound implications for rural livelihoods, agricultural productivity, and community safety. Although the phenomenon initially gained prominence in the oil-producing Niger Delta through politically motivated hostage-taking, contemporary kidnapping has evolved into an organized criminal enterprise driven primarily by financial gain. Rural communities in the South-South geopolitical zone particularly in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers States have increasingly become vulnerable because of difficult terrain, weak security presence, poverty, and extensive forests and waterways that provide safe havens for criminal groups (Omotola & Oyewole, 2024). Omotola and Oyewole (2024) argue that while kidnapping in the Niger Delta originally emerged as a strategy for resource control and political bargaining, criminal syndicates later transformed it into a commercial enterprise targeting businessmen, farmers, traders, transport operators, and rural residents. Similarly, Enemuwe, Okine & Gyau, (2025) observe that kidnapping is now sustained by multiple structural factors including unemployment, weak governance, corruption, ineffective policing, and socio-economic inequalities. Their quantitative assessment shows that areas characterized by poor state presence and limited law enforcement experience more severe kidnapping incidents than areas with stronger institutional control. Adisa, Adenuga & Tevi, (2024) investigated kidnapping experiences in Ibarapa, Nigeria, and found that rural residents face persistent threats because criminal groups exploit isolated settlements and weak security infrastructure. The study further revealed that kidnapping discourages farming activities, disrupts rural livelihoods, and creates widespread psychological trauma among community members.

Similarly, Tade and Akanji (2025) argue that rural banditry and kidnapping have become interconnected criminal enterprises. According to their findings, armed groups

increasingly target villages because residents possess limited defensive capacity and law enforcement agencies experience logistical challenges in accessing remote communities. Studies reviewed by Omotola and Oyewole (2024) indicate that kidnapping in Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, and Edo States initially targeted expatriate oil workers before expanding to local politicians, business owners, farmers, traditional rulers, students, clergy, and ordinary villagers. The authors argue that environmental degradation, unemployment, youth restiveness, illegal oil bunkering, and weak governance collectively sustain criminal networks within rural communities. Unlike northern Nigeria, where mass abductions frequently involve schools, kidnapping within the South-South often targets individuals for negotiated ransom payments, reflecting localized criminal economies rather than ideological violence (Omotola & Oyewole, 2024).

Enemuwe, Okine & Gyau, (2025) report that persistent kidnapping substantially reduces community confidence in security institutions while increasing social anxiety, forced migration, and economic hardship. Rural dwellers frequently alter farming schedules, avoid distant farmlands, restrict evening movements, and reduce participation in community activities due to fear of abduction. Adisa et al. (2024) similarly found that fear of kidnapping has transformed daily life within affected communities. Farmers increasingly abandon fertile agricultural lands located far from residential settlements, resulting in declining agricultural productivity and food insecurity. Omotola and Oyewole (2024) argue that inadequate policing, poor intelligence gathering, corruption, and ineffective prosecution encourage criminal activities. Omotola and Oyewole (2024) recommend governance reforms, employment generation, environmental justice in oil-producing communities, improved judicial effectiveness, and stronger collaboration between federal, state, and community security actors.

Arson as a crime and the safety of rural dwellers

Arson is generally defined as the intentional and unlawful setting of fire to property with the purpose of causing destruction, intimidation, revenge, fraud, terrorism, or social disorder. Criminal law distinguishes accidental fires from intentional fires based on criminal intent (mens rea). In Nigeria, arson constitutes an offence under both the Criminal Code applicable in Southern Nigeria and the Penal Code applicable in Northern Nigeria, with varying penalties depending on the extent of damage and whether human life is endangered. Arson occurs in both urban and rural settings, its consequences are often more severe in rural communities due to limited emergency response capacity, dispersed settlements, inadequate policing, and dependence on natural resources and agriculture for livelihoods (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022). In many developing countries, including those in Sub-Saharan Africa, intentional fires are associated with communal conflicts, land disputes, political violence, criminal retaliation, and resource competition. Such incidents increase the vulnerability of rural households whose livelihoods depend largely on agriculture and natural ecosystems. (Ceccato, 2025). The growing body of rural criminology literature has significantly expanded understanding of crime patterns outside urban centres. Abraham and Ceccato (2022), in their systematic review of more than four decades of rural crime literature, observed that research on rural crime has diversified considerably, although much attention remains focused on farm crime, violence, and policing. Their review emphasizes that rural communities experience unique crime dynamics because of geographic isolation, underreporting, weak institutional presence, and limited crime prevention infrastructure. While arson is less frequently examined independently, it is consistently identified as one of the offences capable of producing

widespread economic, environmental, and psychological consequences that disproportionately affect rural populations. The authors further argue that globalization, organized criminal networks, climate variability, and changing land-use patterns have transformed the nature of rural crime, making traditional policing approaches insufficient.

Rural dwellers often perceive themselves as living in relatively peaceful environments; however, empirical evidence suggests that this perception can obscure the prevalence of hidden crimes, including arson, domestic violence, environmental offences, and organized criminal activities. These structural deficiencies increase the risks associated with deliberate fire-setting because delayed detection and slower emergency response allow fires to spread rapidly across homes, farms, and forests. Large forested landscapes, dry vegetation, poor road networks, and long distances between settlements create favourable conditions for deliberate fires to escalate into major disasters. In addition, weak surveillance systems and limited forensic capacity often make the identification and prosecution of offenders difficult. These challenges contribute to underreporting and low conviction rates, thereby reducing deterrence and increasing community vulnerability (Ceccato, 2025).

From a victimization perspective, arson produces consequences that extend beyond physical destruction. Rural households frequently experience displacement, loss of agricultural income, food insecurity, emotional trauma, and long-term psychological distress following fire incidents. The destruction of livestock, crops, storage facilities, and farming equipment often undermines household resilience and exacerbates rural poverty. Fear generated by repeated fire incidents may alter community behaviour, reduce investment in agriculture, and weaken social cohesion. Such outcomes reinforce the argument that rural safety should be understood within a broader human security framework encompassing physical, economic, environmental, and psychological dimensions (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022). Effective prevention of arson requires collaboration among law enforcement agencies, fire services, local governments, traditional institutions, and community organizations. However, many rural areas continue to experience shortages of trained personnel, firefighting equipment, communication infrastructure, and transportation networks. These institutional limitations reduce both preventive capacity and post-incident recovery. Consequently, contemporary rural criminology increasingly advocates integrated governance models that combine formal policing with community participation, local knowledge, and multi-agency partnerships to improve crime prevention and emergency preparedness (Ceccato, 2025). The literature further highlights significant geographical disparities in research on arson and rural safety. Most empirical studies originate from North America, Europe, and Australia, while evidence from Africa, Asia, and Latin America remains comparatively limited. This imbalance restricts understanding of context-specific drivers of arson in developing countries where communal conflicts, weak institutions, poverty, and climate-related vulnerabilities often intersect (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022; Ceccato, 2025). Rather than being confined to property destruction, arson undermines livelihoods, environmental sustainability, community wellbeing, and rural development.

Theoretical framework

Routine Activity Theory

Routine Activity Theory was developed by Lawrence E. Cohen. The theory assumes that motivated offenders always exist within society and therefore focuses less on the causes of criminal motivation and more on the opportunities available for offending. A person, property, or community perceived by offenders as vulnerable or attractive. Suitable targets

may include individuals lacking physical protection, valuable property, or communities with weak security structures. Crime becomes more likely when there is no effective guardian to prevent or deter criminal acts. Capable guardians may include law enforcement agencies, community vigilante groups, traditional rulers, family members, neighbours, surveillance systems, or any mechanism capable of discouraging criminal behaviour. The theory maintains that criminal activities are more likely to occur when these three conditions exist simultaneously.

Routine Activity Theory provides a compelling explanation for the persistent activities of cult groups in rural communities across the South-South region of Nigeria. Rural communities in states such as Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers often experience violent confrontations involving cult groups, including murder, kidnapping, armed robbery, extortion, destruction of property, illegal oil bunkering, election-related violence, and intimidation of residents. Within the context of the theory, cult members represent the motivated offenders. Routine Activity Theory is highly relevant to the study on Cult as a Criminal Activity and the Safety of Rural Dwellers in the South-South Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria for several reasons. First, the theory explains how environmental and situational factors facilitate cult-related crimes rather than attributing criminal behaviour solely to the personal characteristics of offenders. This aligns with the realities of rural communities where inadequate security infrastructure often creates opportunities for organized criminal groups. Second, the theory provides a practical framework for understanding why rural dwellers remain vulnerable to cult violence. It demonstrates that weak guardianship, poor surveillance, and inadequate policing significantly increase the likelihood of victimization. Third, the theory supports crime prevention strategies that focus on reducing opportunities for offending. Such measures include strengthening community policing, improving rural security infrastructure, enhancing intelligence gathering, increasing police patrols, promoting neighbourhood watch programmes, installing surveillance technologies where feasible, and improving collaboration between security agencies and local communities. Despite its usefulness, Routine Activity Theory has several limitations. For instance, the theory assumes the existence of motivated offenders but does not adequately explain the underlying social, psychological, economic, or political factors that motivate individuals to join cult groups. Factors such as unemployment, poverty, youth marginalization, political sponsorship, drug abuse, and family disintegration receive limited attention. In spite of it shortfall, it remains highly relevant for this study because it highlights the situational conditions that facilitate criminal opportunities and provides practical insights for developing effective crime prevention strategies aimed at improving the safety and security of rural populations.

Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. The cross-sectional survey design was considered appropriate because it enables the researcher to collect data from respondents at a single point in time with the objective of examining the relationships between cult-related criminal activities and the safety of rural dwellers in selected states of the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria. Since the study intends to determine the extent to which kidnapping and arson predict the safety of rural dwellers, the design provides an empirical basis for obtaining quantitative data required for statistical analysis using simple linear regression. The study was conducted in three states within the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria, namely Cross River State, Akwa Ibom State, and Rivers State. The target population comprised adult residents of rural communities within the three selected

states. The population included community leaders, farmers, traders, artisans, civil servants residing in rural communities, youth leaders, and other adult residents aged 18 years and above who possess adequate knowledge of security situations within their respective communities. The sample size for the study was 384 respondents. The sample size was determined using the Cochran (1977) sample size. Three states Cross River, Akwa Ibom, and Rivers were purposively selected from the six states in the South-South geo-political zone because of the prevalence of cult-related criminal activities and the existence of rural communities affected by kidnapping and arson. From each selected state, four Local Government Areas (LGAs) with substantial rural populations and documented security challenges relating to cult activities were purposively selected. Two rural communities were selected from each chosen Local Government Area through simple random sampling using the balloting method.

The total sample size of 384 respondents was proportionately distributed among the 24 selected communities. A systematic random sampling technique was employed to select respondents within each community. Where household listings were available, every kth household was selected after determining the sampling interval. In households with more than one eligible respondent, simple random sampling by balloting was used to select one participant. This procedure ensured that every eligible rural resident had an equal probability of being selected while minimizing sampling bias. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The internal consistency of the instrument was determined using Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient. Cronbach's Alpha is appropriate for Likert-scale instruments because it measures the degree of consistency among questionnaire items measuring the same construct. Data collected were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29.0 for analysis. The hypotheses were tested using Simple Linear Regression at the 0.05 level of significance. Simple linear regression was considered the most appropriate statistical technique because each hypothesis examined the predictive influence of one independent variable on one dependent variable.

Findings

Table 1: Regression model of the relationship between kidnapping and the safety of rural dwellers

Predictor	Sum of squares	Df.	Mean Square	Sig. F. Change	Sig.
Regression	108.37	1	108.37	368.93	< .001
Residual	112.22	382	0.294		
Total	220.59	383			

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 382) = 368.93$, $p < .001$, indicating that kidnapping is a significant predictor of the safety of rural dwellers.

Table 2: Regression model of the relationship between arson and the safety of rural dwellers

Predictor	Sum of squares	Df.	Mean Square	Sig. F. Change	Sig.
Regression	72.216	1	72.216	244.87	< .001
Residual	112.687	382	0.295		
Total	184.903	383			

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 382) = 244.87$, $p < .001$, the result indicated that arson significantly predicts the safety of rural dwellers.

Discussion of findings

The observed relationship is understandable within the prevailing security realities of many rural communities, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria. Rural

settlements often possess characteristics that increase their vulnerability to kidnapping, including inadequate policing, difficult terrain, poor road networks, weak communication infrastructure, sparse security presence, and limited surveillance technologies. For instance, Adeyemi, Bassey & Adeyinka, (2020) observed that inadequate security infrastructure, unemployment, poverty, and limited police-community collaboration contributed to rising criminal activities in rural Nigeria, thereby undermining community safety. Their study emphasized that weak institutional capacity creates opportunities for organized criminal activities, including kidnapping, to flourish. Similarly, recent studies have reported that kidnapping has become one of the most serious threats to human security in Nigeria because it disrupts livelihoods, discourages investment, weakens social cohesion, and creates widespread fear among rural populations. Adediran et al. (2025) found that kidnapping and abduction significantly threaten public safety and social stability, while emphasizing the importance of intelligence gathering and community-based security mechanisms in mitigating these crimes. The findings also agree with Ojukwu, Ettang & Sani, (2025), who reported that kidnapping has become increasingly sophisticated and commercially motivated, producing profound social, psychological, and economic consequences for victims, families, and communities. Their study showed that the growing commercialization of kidnapping has intensified insecurity within vulnerable communities, especially in rural environments where state security institutions are relatively weak. Reducing kidnapping activities is therefore likely to improve not only physical security but also economic productivity, educational participation, psychological wellbeing, and sustainable rural development.

Arson incidents result not only in property destruction but also in heightened perceptions of insecurity, disruption of agricultural production, loss of household income, and deterioration of community resilience. The present finding aligns with recent empirical literature emphasizing that crime significantly undermines safety in rural environments for instance, Abraham and Ceccato (2022), in their systematic review of rural crime research, concluded that rural communities experience distinctive safety challenges that are often underestimated because of the traditional perception that rural areas are inherently safe. Similarly, Ceccato and Abraham (2022) argued that rural safety should not be viewed solely through the lens of crime rates because rural crimes frequently produce wider social and economic consequences than similar offences in urban settings. The result is also supported by Arisukwu et al. (2020), who found that rural communities in Nigeria remain vulnerable to criminal activities because of inadequate formal security mechanisms, thereby making community participation essential for crime prevention. Their study emphasized that weak institutional responses increase residents' perceptions of insecurity and reduce community resilience against crime. Eason, Jensen& Haimson (2025) argued that rural crime produces neighbourhood-level effects that extend beyond immediate victims, affecting social cohesion, economic development, and community confidence in public institutions. Likewise, Thompson (2025) showed that insecurity within rural Nigeria continues to disrupt livelihoods and weaken rural stability, highlighting the need for context-specific security interventions. Ultimately, reducing arson would protect lives, preserve agricultural livelihoods, promote sustainable rural development, and improve residents' confidence in the safety of their communities.

Recommendations

1. Government at the federal, state, and local levels should strengthen rural security infrastructure on a continuous basis by establishing well-equipped security outposts,

improving rural road networks, providing reliable communication facilities, and expanding surveillance coverage in vulnerable communities.

2. Security agencies should intensify intelligence gathering and routine patrols before, during, and after periods associated with increased criminal activity, particularly during farming seasons, market days, festive periods, and late-night hours.
3. Use of intelligence-led policing, deployment of mobile patrol teams, collaboration with local informants, and the use of modern surveillance technologies such as drones and communication tracking systems where feasible.
4. Government agencies responsible for internal security and disaster management should strengthen fire prevention and emergency response systems on a continuous basis by establishing rural fire service units, providing firefighting equipment, and improving access roads to facilitate rapid emergency response during fire outbreaks.
5. Security agencies should investigate all reported cases of arson immediately after occurrence using forensic investigation techniques, intelligence gathering, and collaboration with local communities to identify perpetrators and ensure successful prosecution.
6. Swift investigations discourage repeat offences and enhance public confidence in law enforcement. Traditional rulers, community development associations, and religious leaders should promote conflict resolution mechanisms before disputes escalate into violence through regular dialogue, mediation, and peace-building initiatives.

Conclusion

Kidnapping activities and arson are critical security challenges that significantly compromise the safety of rural dwellers. The increasing incidence of kidnapping has created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, disrupted farming and other livelihood activities, restricted the movement of residents, and weakened the social and economic well-being of rural communities. These findings indicate that kidnapping constitutes a major threat to the security and quality of life of people living in rural areas. Also, the deliberate destruction of homes, farms, markets, and other community assets through arson not only results in material losses but also contributes to displacement, psychological trauma, and heightened feelings of insecurity among rural populations. Consequently, arson undermines community stability and reduces the capacity of rural residents to pursue sustainable livelihoods in a secure environment. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of existing rural security interventions in reducing kidnapping and arson incidents. Further studies may also examine the influence of socioeconomic factors, technological surveillance, community policing initiatives, and inter-agency collaboration on improving rural safety.

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