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CULT-RELATED CRIMES AND WELL-BEING OF RURAL DWELLERS IN SOUTH-SOUTH GEO-POLITICAL ZONE OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between cult-related crimes and the well-being of rural dwellers in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, with particular emphasis on armed robbery and assassination. Guided by the Human Security Theory, the study sought to determine the extent to which these crimes influence the safety and well-being of rural residents. A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted. Using Cochran's sample size formula, a sample size of 384 was determined, while 372 valid responses were analyzed. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to select participants from rural communities in Cross River, Rivers, and Edo States. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire whose reliability was established using the test–retest method and Cronbach's Alpha. The hypotheses were tested using regression analysis at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that armed robbery had a significant relationship with the well-being of rural dwellers. while assassination also showed a statistically significant relationship with well-being of rural dwellers. The study concludes that cult-related crimes undermine the safety and well-being of rural communities and recommends strengthening community-based security initiatives and intelligence-driven early warning systems to improve human security across the South-South region of Nigeria.

Keywords: cult, crimes, well-being , armed robbery and assassination

Introduction

In many developing countries, cult-related activities have transcended educational institutions and evolved into organized criminal networks that threaten the safety and well-being of communities. From a global perspective, organized violent groups with cult-like characteristics have existed in different forms across continents. In Latin America, criminal gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and other violent organizations often exhibit secretive membership structures, ritualistic practices, and strong group identities that resemble cult organizations (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). Similarly, in parts of Europe and North America, extremist groups, secret societies, and organized criminal networks have employed coercion, violence, and intimidation to achieve political, economic, or ideological objectives (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022). Although these groups differ from the traditional understanding of cultism in Nigeria, they demonstrate how secretive criminal organizations undermine public safety, social cohesion, and community well-being. Globally, the concept of well-being has gained considerable attention within development discourse. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) defines well-being as a positive state in which individuals realize their abilities, cope with normal life stresses, work productively, and contribute to their communities. Well-being encompasses physical health, psychological stability, economic security, social relationships, and environmental safety.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goals 1, 3, 8, 11, and 16, emphasize that peaceful societies and effective institutions are indispensable for improving human well-being and promoting sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). Persistent violence, insecurity, and criminal activities significantly reduce quality of life by limiting access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and agricultural production. The relationship between crime and well-being has been widely documented in criminological and public health literature. Exposure to violent crime generates fear, psychological distress, economic losses, social fragmentation, and reduced community participation (World Bank, 2023). Rural populations are particularly vulnerable because they often have limited access to security infrastructure, healthcare services, and social protection mechanisms. Consequently, prolonged insecurity contributes to poverty, displacement, food insecurity, and declining social capital.

Within the African context, cult-related crimes have increasingly become intertwined with broader security challenges, including armed conflicts, youth militancy, political violence, kidnapping, illegal mining, and organized criminal activities. Several African countries have experienced the emergence of violent youth groups whose operations resemble cult organizations through oath-taking, secrecy, initiation rites, and organized violence (African Union, 2022). In countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, and South Africa, youth gangs and secret societies have contributed to violent crimes, communal conflicts, and political instability, thereby affecting community well-being and socio-economic development (UNDP, 2022). African societies have historically maintained traditional secret societies that performed legitimate cultural, judicial, and religious functions. However, contemporary criminal cult groups differ significantly from these indigenous institutions because their activities are often characterized by violence, extortion, drug trafficking, armed robbery, kidnapping, and political thuggery (Alemika, 2013). The transformation of some secret associations into violent criminal organizations has generated serious concerns regarding governance, public security, and rural development across the continent. Rural communities in Africa rely predominantly on agriculture, fishing, petty trading, and other informal economic activities for survival. These livelihoods require stable security conditions for sustainable production and income generation. Unfortunately, persistent criminal violence discourages investment, disrupts farming activities, limits access to markets, and weakens community resilience (African Development Bank, 2024). Rural residents often experience increased psychological trauma, reduced social trust,

forced migration, and deteriorating living standards as insecurity persists. Consequently, researchers increasingly recognize that crime represents not only a security issue but also a significant public health and development concern.

In Nigeria, cultism has evolved from relatively peaceful campus organizations into highly organized criminal networks operating both within and outside educational institutions. Historical accounts trace the emergence of organized campus cultism to the late 1950s with the formation of the Pyrates Confraternity at the University College, Ibadan. Although the organization initially pursued intellectual and social objectives, subsequent decades witnessed the proliferation of numerous rival cult groups characterized by violent initiation practices, armed confrontations, assassinations, kidnapping, and political violence (Okwu, 2006). Over time, many of these organizations expanded beyond university campuses into urban and rural communities.

The South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria has become one of the regions most affected by cult-related crimes. Comprising Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers States, the region possesses abundant petroleum resources but simultaneously experiences significant socio-economic inequalities, environmental degradation, youth unemployment, political conflicts, and organized criminality (International Crisis Group, 2023). These conditions have created opportunities for the proliferation of violent cult groups that engage in kidnapping, armed robbery, illegal oil bunkering, political intimidation, piracy, communal conflicts, and targeted killings. Several studies have identified Rivers State, Delta State, and Bayelsa State as major hotspots of cult-related violence due to intense competition over political influence, economic resources, and territorial control (Nextier SPD, 2024). Rural communities have become particularly vulnerable because security agencies are often concentrated in urban centres, leaving remote settlements inadequately protected. Consequently, cult groups frequently establish operational bases within rural communities where they exploit weak law enforcement, difficult terrain, and limited government presence. The consequences of cult-related crimes for rural dwellers extend beyond immediate physical violence. Agricultural production is disrupted as farmers abandon farmlands due to fear of attacks, while fishermen encounter insecurity along waterways controlled by criminal groups. Commercial activities decline because traders and transport operators face extortion, robbery, and kidnapping risks. Educational institutions experience reduced enrolment and irregular attendance as parents become reluctant to expose their children to unsafe environments. Health outcomes also deteriorate because insecurity limits access to healthcare facilities and emergency services. Beyond economic consequences, cult-related crimes substantially affect the psychological and social well-being of rural residents. Continuous exposure to violence generates fear, anxiety, depression, trauma, and feelings of helplessness among community members (WHO, 2021). Social cohesion weakens as mutual trust declines, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms become ineffective, and community participation diminishes. Families are displaced, social networks disintegrate, and vulnerable populations including women, children, and older persons experience heightened risks of victimization.

The South-South region presents a unique context for examining the relationship between cult-related crimes and the well-being of rural dwellers because the area simultaneously experiences resource-related conflicts, youth militancy, environmental challenges, political competition, and organized criminal violence. Despite numerous government interventions including military operations, community policing initiatives, amnesty programmes, and anti-cult legislation cult-related crimes remain persistent in many rural communities (Nigeria Police Force, 2024). This persistence suggests that existing interventions may not have adequately addressed the socio-economic and structural drivers of cultism. Existing studies often emphasize security implications without adequately exploring

broader dimensions such as economic well-being, psychological health, social relationships, access to livelihoods, community resilience, and quality of life (Nextier SPD, 2024).

Understanding these dimensions is essential for designing integrated policies that simultaneously promote security, rural development, and sustainable community well-being. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to examine cult-related crimes and the well-being of rural dwellers in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The study is expected to contribute to existing knowledge by providing empirical evidence on how cult-related criminal activities influence various dimensions of rural well-being and by generating policy recommendations for strengthening community security, promoting peaceful coexistence, and enhancing sustainable rural development.

Statement of the Problem

Cultism has become a deeply rooted social problem within many Nigerian communities and has increasingly manifested across the South-South geopolitical zone through various forms of violent criminal activities that continue to threaten peace, public order, and rural security. In many communities, particularly within Cross River State and neighbouring states, cult-related activities have been associated with armed robbery, murder, kidnapping, arson, illegal possession of firearms, communal violence, political thuggery, and other organized criminal activities largely perpetrated by young people who are often vulnerable to recruitment into secret cult groups (World Bank, 2023). The consequences of these criminal activities have contributed significantly to an atmosphere of fear, insecurity, loss of lives and property, disruption of economic activities, weakening of community cohesion, and declining confidence in the ability of security institutions to adequately protect rural populations (Okwu, 2006). Consequently, the safety and overall well-being of rural dwellers have continued to deteriorate, thereby undermining sustainable community development and social stability.

Historically, cultism was largely confined to tertiary educational institutions where secret fraternities were originally established as social and ideological associations. However, over the years, these groups have expanded beyond institutional environments and have become deeply entrenched within broader segments of Nigerian society. Cultism has increasingly evolved into a pervasive aspect of youth culture, where membership is often perceived as a means of acquiring identity, social recognition, protection, influence, and economic advantage. The increasing normalization and occasional glorification of cult affiliation within some communities have further strengthened its attractiveness among unemployed, marginalized, and socially excluded youths, thereby increasing their vulnerability to participation in violent criminal activities.

Furthermore, cult organizations have gradually become important operational instruments for organized criminal networks that exploit their members to perpetrate various illegal activities, including drug trafficking, kidnapping, armed robbery, electoral violence, extortion, illegal oil bunkering, and political intimidation. Within many rural communities, cult groups now function as organized criminal structures through which influential individuals and criminal syndicates maintain territorial dominance, enforce illegal economic interests, and intimidate perceived opponents. Consequently, cult activities have moved beyond their original ideological foundations and have increasingly become mechanisms for economic exploitation, criminal enterprise, and the systematic erosion of communal values, thereby worsening insecurity and reducing the quality of life of rural dwellers.

In response to the growing threat posed by cultism, successive governments and various non-governmental organizations have introduced several intervention measures aimed at curbing cult-related crimes and improving public safety. These interventions have included security crackdowns, anti-cultism legislation, prosecution of suspected cult members, intelligence-driven policing, public enlightenment campaigns, youth empowerment programmes, vocational training initiatives, community policing strategies, and advocacy

programmes designed to discourage youth involvement in cult activities. Despite the increasing scholarly attention devoted to cultism, crime, and rural insecurity, significant conceptual, methodological, geographical, and empirical limitations remain evident within the existing body of literature. Most previous studies have concentrated primarily on the prevalence, causes, operational patterns, or criminal manifestations of cultism within universities and urban centres, with comparatively limited emphasis on examining the broader implications of cult-related crimes on the safety, security, and well-being of rural dwellers across multiple states within the South-South geopolitical zone. Consequently, there remains insufficient empirical evidence capable of explaining the extent to which cult-related criminal activities influence the safety of rural populations within varying socio-cultural and security environments.

Furthermore, most existing studies have relied predominantly on qualitative methodologies, descriptive analyses, and localized case studies, thereby limiting the generalizability of their findings across the diverse rural settings of South-South Nigeria. While previous investigations have made valuable contributions toward understanding cultism, they have devoted comparatively less attention to quantitatively examining the multidimensional relationship between cult-related crimes and measurable indicators of rural safety. Existing studies have also focused largely on crime incidence, youth involvement, and security responses while paying relatively limited attention to broader issues such as community resilience, institutional effectiveness, public confidence in security agencies, and the social consequences of persistent cult-related violence on rural livelihoods and community well-being. Moreover, the majority of available studies have concentrated on individual states or isolated communities, thereby providing limited comparative evidence capable of explaining similarities and differences in cult-related criminal activities across different rural communities within the South-South region.

These conceptual, methodological, geographical, and contextual limitations have created considerable empirical uncertainty regarding the magnitude and nature of the relationship between cult-related crimes and the safety of rural dwellers in South-South Nigeria. There is therefore a compelling need for a more comprehensive empirical investigation capable of generating evidence that extends beyond isolated communities and descriptive narratives to provide statistically verifiable explanations of this relationship. Accordingly, this study seeks to bridge these identified gaps by adopting a quantitative approach to examine the relationship between cult-related crimes and the safety of rural dwellers across selected rural communities in South-South Nigeria.

Objectives of the study

i. To examine if armed robbery relates to safety of rural dwellers
ii. To assesses the role of assassination in the safety of rural dwellers

Research Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between Armed robbery and the safety of rural dwellers
2. There is no significant relationship between assassination and the safety of rural dwellers

Literature review

Armed robbery and the safety of rural dwellers

Armed robbery has become one of the most persistent forms of violent crime affecting both urban and rural communities across the world. While much scholarly attention has focused on urban crime due to higher population density and crime reporting, the experiences of rural communities have increasingly attracted academic interest because of the growing incidence of armed attacks in areas traditionally perceived as peaceful. Rural communities often depend on agriculture, petty trading, and small-scale enterprises for their livelihoods, making them particularly vulnerable to criminal activities that disrupt economic productivity, social stability, and community well-being. The increasing occurrence of armed robbery in rural areas has transformed the security landscape, raising concerns about the safety of rural dwellers and the

effectiveness of existing security measures (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2005). Safety is a fundamental human need and a prerequisite for sustainable development. Individuals who perceive their environment as unsafe are less likely to engage in productive economic activities, invest in local enterprises, or participate actively in community development initiatives. Armed robbery threatens this sense of safety by exposing individuals to violence, injury, psychological trauma, loss of property, and, in some cases, death. Beyond its immediate consequences, armed robbery undermines social cohesion, weakens trust among community members, and contributes to the erosion of confidence in state institutions responsible for maintaining law and order (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2019).

In many developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, rural communities face unique security challenges arising from inadequate policing, poor transportation networks, insufficient communication infrastructure, and limited government presence. These structural deficiencies often create opportunities for armed robbers to operate with minimal resistance or delayed intervention from security agencies. Consequently, rural dwellers are frequently exposed to repeated attacks that affect not only their personal safety but also food production, educational activities, healthcare access, and overall quality of life (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014).

In Nigeria, for example, the increasing prevalence of violent crimes, including armed robbery, kidnapping, and banditry, has intensified insecurity across several rural communities, forcing many residents to abandon their homes and farms for safer locations (International Crisis Group, 2020). The consequences of armed robbery extend beyond physical harm to include significant psychological, economic, and social effects. Victims often experience fear, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress, while communities subjected to repeated attacks may develop a persistent sense of insecurity that alters daily routines and social interactions. Economic losses resulting from theft of agricultural produce, livestock, household assets, and business capital further deepen rural poverty and hinder local development. Such conditions discourage investment, reduce agricultural productivity, and weaken the resilience of rural households, thereby exacerbating existing socioeconomic inequalities (World Bank, 2023).

In many rural communities, inadequate security personnel, poor surveillance systems, and isolated settlements create conditions that facilitate criminal activities. Similarly, Social Disorganization Theory suggests that communities characterized by poverty, weak institutions, and limited social control are more susceptible to criminal behavior (Shaw & McKay, 1942). These theoretical perspectives help explain why rural areas experiencing economic hardship and institutional weaknesses may become increasingly vulnerable to armed robbery. Armed robbery has become one of the major security challenges affecting rural communities in Nigeria. Although the phenomenon was once largely associated with urban centres, recent evidence indicates that rural areas have increasingly become targets due to weak security presence, poor road infrastructure, widespread poverty, and limited access to law enforcement agencies (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2021). The increasing incidence of armed robbery has undermined the safety of rural dwellers by exposing them to violence, loss of lives and property, psychological trauma, and economic hardship. One notable example is the persistent armed robbery attacks along the Abuja–Lokoja Highway and several rural communities in Kogi State, where criminal gangs have frequently attacked motorists, farmers, and residents. These attacks have resulted in deaths, kidnappings, and destruction of property, thereby discouraging agricultural production and commercial activities (Nigeria Security Tracker, 2022).

Another example occurred in Benue State, where armed robbers have repeatedly targeted rural farming communities, attacking villagers returning from markets and farms. Such incidents have not only caused casualties but have also displaced residents and reduced farming activities due to fear of victimization (International Crisis Group, 2018). Similarly, rural communities in Kaduna State, particularly in Birnin Gwari Local Government Area, have experienced recurring armed robbery attacks alongside other forms of rural banditry. Criminal

groups have attacked homes, stolen valuables, and intercepted travelers on rural roads. The persistent insecurity has disrupted education, healthcare delivery, and agricultural livelihoods, forcing many residents to abandon their communities (SBM Intelligence, 2020). In Oyo State, several rural communities located along the Ibadan–Ibarapa axis have experienced armed robbery incidents targeting traders, transport operators, and households. These attacks have weakened local economies by discouraging investment and increasing transportation costs due to insecurity (Adelakun, 2021). Another significant example can be found in Plateau State, where rural communities have witnessed armed robbery attacks that often occur alongside communal violence.

Criminals frequently exploit weak security arrangements to raid villages, steal livestock, cash, and agricultural produce. Consequently, many households experience food insecurity and declining incomes (Amnesty International, 2020). The impact of armed robbery on rural safety extends beyond immediate physical harm. Victims often suffer long-term psychological effects such as anxiety, fear, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. In many rural communities, the fear of armed attacks restricts movement, limits farming activities, discourages children's school attendance, and weakens community cohesion (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2005). Furthermore, persistent armed robbery erodes public confidence in state security institutions, leading some communities to establish local vigilante groups for self-protection, although these groups often operate with limited training and resources (CLEEN Foundation, 2021). Overall, the increasing prevalence of armed robbery in rural Nigeria demonstrates that insecurity is no longer confined to urban environments.

Assassination and the safety of rural dwellers

Assassination has remained one of the most disturbing forms of violent crime across societies, often resulting in profound political, social, and economic consequences. Traditionally associated with the deliberate killing of prominent political leaders, government officials, community leaders, or influential individuals, assassination has evolved in contemporary times to include targeted killings motivated by political rivalry, ethnic conflicts, criminal activities, terrorism, land disputes, and economic interests (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). While the direct victims of assassination are usually individuals, the broader effects extend beyond the targeted persons to families, communities, and society at large. In rural communities, where social relationships are closely interconnected and security infrastructure is often limited, the occurrence of assassination creates widespread fear, insecurity, and social instability. Safety is a fundamental human need and a prerequisite for sustainable community development. The concept of safety encompasses the protection of individuals from physical harm, violence, intimidation, and threats to life and property (Maslow, 1943). Rural dwellers rely heavily on peaceful environments for agricultural production, commerce, education, and other socio-economic activities. However, the increasing incidence of targeted killings and violent crimes in many developing countries has significantly undermined the safety and well-being of rural populations. Rural communities frequently experience inadequate policing, poor road networks, weak communication systems, and limited access to emergency response services, making them particularly vulnerable to violent attacks and assassinations (World Bank, 2024).

In Nigeria, the issue of assassination has become increasingly alarming over the past two decades. Although political assassinations have received considerable media attention, targeted killings linked to communal conflicts, cult-related violence, land ownership disputes, armed banditry, kidnapping, and farmer-herder conflicts have equally contributed to growing insecurity in rural areas (International Crisis Group, 2023). These incidents have created an atmosphere of fear among rural residents, discouraging participation in farming activities, reducing investments in local businesses, and weakening social cohesion. Community leaders,

traditional rulers, farmers, religious leaders, and youth leaders have increasingly become targets of violent attacks due to their positions, influence, or involvement in local disputes.

The safety of rural dwellers has become a critical development concern because rural areas contribute substantially to national food production and economic growth. Agriculture remains the primary occupation of rural populations in many African countries, particularly Nigeria, where rural households depend on farming for income and livelihood (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2023). Persistent insecurity arising from assassination and other violent crimes has disrupted agricultural production by forcing farmers to abandon their farmlands, migrate to safer locations, or reduce cultivation activities due to fear of attacks. Consequently, food insecurity, poverty, unemployment, and rural underdevelopment have continued to worsen. Beyond the economic implications, assassination significantly affects the psychological and social well-being of rural dwellers. Exposure to repeated incidents of violence often leads to anxiety, trauma, depression, and loss of trust among community members (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Families who lose loved ones through assassination frequently experience emotional distress, financial hardship, and social disintegration. Moreover, fear of becoming future victims may discourage community participation, weaken traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, and reduce cooperation between residents and security agencies.

The increasing prevalence of assassination also raises concerns regarding the effectiveness of security governance in rural communities. Security institutions in many developing countries face challenges such as inadequate personnel, insufficient logistics, poor intelligence gathering, and limited community engagement, all of which reduce their capacity to prevent targeted killings (UNODC, 2023). In addition, geographical isolation and difficult terrain often delay security responses during emergencies. These limitations have encouraged the emergence of community vigilante groups and local security initiatives aimed at complementing formal security agencies. Although these community-based approaches have contributed to improving local security in some areas, concerns remain regarding their operational capacity, accountability, and adherence to human rights standards. Assassination and targeted killings have become major threats to the safety and security of rural dwellers in Nigeria. Although assassinations are often associated with politicians, community leaders, traditional rulers, and security personnel, their occurrence in rural communities creates widespread fear, weakens local governance, disrupts economic activities, and undermines sustainable rural development (Thompson, 2025). Rural residents are particularly vulnerable because of inadequate security infrastructure, poor road networks, delayed emergency response, and limited state presence. One notable example is the repeated assassination of traditional rulers and community leaders in rural communities of Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, and Zamfara States. Community leaders who resist armed bandits or provide intelligence to security agencies have frequently become targets of assassination. These killings weaken traditional institutions and discourage local participation in community security initiatives. Such targeted violence has resulted in the displacement of villagers, abandonment of farms, and increased insecurity within affected communities (Omokeji & Austin, 2022). Another example is the assassination of local politicians and political stakeholders during election periods, particularly in rural areas where political competition is intense. Political violence has led to the killing of ward leaders, electoral agents, and party supporters in several communities across Rivers, Kogi, Benue, and Imo States. These incidents create an atmosphere of fear that discourages political participation and exposes ordinary rural residents to retaliatory attacks and communal violence (Ogungbemi & Ahmed, 1993).

Similarly, farmer-herder conflicts have increasingly involved targeted killings of village heads, farmers, and local vigilante leaders. In Benue State, numerous rural communities have experienced attacks in which influential community members were deliberately killed

before wider assaults on villages. These assassinations not only eliminate local leadership but also create panic that forces residents to flee their homes, thereby threatening food production and rural livelihoods (Adejoh, Amaike, Agugua, Olowu & Busari-Akinbode,2023). The Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria also provides examples of targeted assassinations in rural communities. Village heads, teachers, religious leaders, and individuals accused of collaborating with government authorities have been selectively killed. These assassinations have contributed to mass displacement, closure of schools, disruption of farming activities, and deterioration of rural livelihoods across Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States (Alimba & Malgwi, 2020). Furthermore, armed bandit groups operating in northwestern Nigeria frequently assassinate community leaders and local vigilante members who organize resistance against criminal activities (Olaniyi, 2020). Such killings discourage collective security efforts and increase residents' dependence on self-help security arrangements. The resulting insecurity limits agricultural production, restricts market access, and deepens rural poverty (Thompson, 2025). Beyond the immediate loss of lives, it erodes public confidence in government institutions, weakens traditional leadership, disrupts socioeconomic activities, and perpetuates cycles of violence and displacement.

Theoretical framework

Human Security Theory

Human Security Theory was introduced by the United Nations Development Programme in its 1994 Human Development Report. The report shifted the traditional understanding of security from a state-centered approach, which focuses primarily on territorial protection and military strength, to a people-centered perspective that prioritizes the safety, dignity, and well-being of individuals. Human Security Theory is built on several fundamental assumptions for instance, that the individual is the primary referent of security. The theory argues that security should focus on protecting people rather than merely safeguarding the territorial integrity of the state. It recognizes that insecurity may arise from violence, crime, poverty, disease, environmental degradation, unemployment, food shortages, and political instability. Human Security Theory provides an appropriate framework for explaining the relationship between cult-related crimes and the well-being of rural dwellers. Cult-related crimes including murder, kidnapping, armed robbery, intimidation, sexual violence, destruction of property, and communal conflicts directly threaten the safety and livelihoods of rural populations. Despite its relevance, Human Security Theory has several limitations. First, the concept of human security is broad and multidimensional, making it difficult to define precise boundaries. Because it encompasses economic, political, social, environmental, health, and personal security, researchers sometimes find it challenging to determine which aspects should receive greater attention in empirical studies.

Despite its broad scope and conceptual limitations, it remains a valuable theoretical framework for understanding how insecurity affects the overall quality of life of rural populations and for informing policies aimed at promoting sustainable peace, safety, and human development.

Methodology

The research design selected for this study is the cross-sectional survey research design This design is particularly suitable for gathering data at a single point in time to analyse the relationships between variables or to describe the characteristics of a population. The South-South geopolitical zone is one of the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. It comprises six states: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers. The population of this study comprises all adult residents (18 years and above) living in rural communities within the South-South Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria.

The sample size comprised of people residing in rural areas in South-South Region, Nigeria. Since the population of the study is unknown, Cochran sample determinant was

adopted in determining the sample size. To determine the sample size for victims of cult-related crimes, age 18 years and above, Cochran's formula (1963) was adopted. The formula for Cochran sample size determinant is stated thus:

$$n_o = \frac{Z^2pq}{e^2}$$

Where:

n_o = sample size

z = is Z-value from table at given confidence level (put at 95% or 1.96)

p = Proportion of victims of cult-related crimes age 18 years and above (given in this study as 50%). That is 0.5

q = I- P, compliment of p (put at 50%, i.e, 1-50%)

e = desired level of precision or error margin (put at 0.05).

Applying the formula therefore,

$$n = \frac{1.96^2\ (0.5)(0.5)}{0.05^2}$$

$$n = \frac{3.8416\ (0.25)}{0.0025}$$

$$n = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025}$$

$$n = 384.16$$

$$n = 384$$

The multi-stage sampling procedure was used to select participants for the study. The South-South geopolitical zone was comprised six (6) states, each with its unique characteristics and population demographics. The first stage of sampling involved selecting a representative location from the six states in the South-South region. This was based on the severity of cult activities in the area. Thus, from the six states, purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting 3 states (Cross River, Rivers and Edo). This is aimed to capture the diversity of the states and account for any variations in cult-related crime prevalence across different areas. In the second stage, within each selected states, specific communities were chosen using simple random sampling.

The communities were written in pieces of paper and wrapped into a bowl. They were mixed together and then 2 communities were selected from the mix. This was repeated for each LGA selected. With this, 2 communities were randomly selected from each LGA making a total of 6 communities to be sampled from. This approach aimed to ensure that all areas within an LGA have an equal chance of being included in the study, reducing bias and increasing the generalizability of the findings. Finally, within each selected communities, individuals were selected for participation in the study. This selection was done using purposive sampling. The purposive sampling is to ensure the eligibility of the respondents. The purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics that are relevant to the research objectives. In this case, the researchers select individuals who have direct experiences or knowledge of cult-related activities, such as youths, victims, former cult members, community leaders, and law enforcement officials who have dealt with cult-related crimes. Purposive sampling appropriate for this stage of the study because the researcher is specifically interested gathering information from individuals who have firsthand experience with cult-related activities. Additionally, purposive sampling allows the researchers to focus on specific subgroups within the population that are most relevant to the research questions, ensuring that the sample is well-suited to address the study objectives.Questionnaire was utilized as an instrument of data collection. In establishing the reliability of the instrument for this study, both stability reliability (test–retest method) and internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) were employed. Regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Findings

Hypothesis 1

Regression analysis of the relationship between armed robbery and the safety of rural dwellers

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Armed robbery	21.78	3.526	372
The well-being of rural dwellers	20.36	3.392	372

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Errors the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.304[a]	.093	.090	3.364	.093	37.754	1	370	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Armed robbery

The hypothesis under examination states that the armed robbery has no significant with the well being of rural dwellers in south- south, Nigeria. The regression analysis conducted provided valuable insights into the relationships between armed robbery is 21.78 with a standard deviation of 3.392. This indicates moderate levels of reported armed robbery and safery of rural dwellers within the sample of 372 respondents. The model summary shows an R value of .304, indicating a positive correlation between armed robbery and well-being of rural dwellers. The R square value of .093 implies that approximately 9.3% of the variance in well being of rural dwellers is explained by armed robbery. The adjusted R square of .090 reflects a slight adjustment for the sample size, confirming the model's general reliability. The standard error of the estimate is 3.364, indicating the average distance between the actual and predicted values. The ANOVA reports a significant F statistic of 37.754 (p-value=.000), suggesting that the regression model significantly predicts youth involvement in robbery. The p-value being less than 0.05 indicates that the relationship between armed robbery and well-being of rural dweller is statistically significant.

Hypothesis 2

Regression analysis of the relationship assassination and the safety of rural dwellers

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Assassination	21.78	3.526	372
The well-being of rural dwellers	20.02	3.395	372

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Errors the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.161[a]	.026	.023	3.485	.026	9.866	1	370	.002

a. Predictors: (Constant), Well-being of rural dwellers

Descriptive statistics indicated that the mean score for the assassination was 21.78, with a standard deviation of 3.526, while the mean score for the well-being of rural dwellers was lower, at 20.02, with a standard deviation of 3.295. The sample size for the analysis was 372 respondents, highlighting a moderate degree of variation in responses among participants. The

model summary presented a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.161, which suggests a weak positive relationship between assassination and the well-being of rural dwellers. The R Square value of 0.026 indicates that approximately 2.6% of the variance in the well-being of rural dwellers can be attributed to assassination. This finding is reinforced by the adjusted R Square value of 0.023 and a standard error of the estimate at 3.485. Importantly, the significance value (p-value) was recorded at 002, indicating a statistically significant relationship.

The ANOVA results further substantiated the model's effectiveness, showing an F-value of 9.866 with a significance level of .002. This result confirms that the regression model adequately explains the variance in the well-being of rural dwellers due to assassination. The coefficients table revealed that the unstandardized coefficient for assassination was -0.172, which implies that an increase in assassination correlates with the well-being of rural dwellers by 0.172 units. The negative standardized coefficient (Beta) of -0.161 indicates a small effect size, accompanied by a significant t-value of -3.141. In summary, the findings suggest that the null hypothesis should be rejected, assassination does indeed have a significant relationship with the well-being of rural dwellers.

Discussion of findings

Armed robbery and the safety of rural dwellers

One possible reason for these findings is the limited presence of security personnel and inadequate policing in many rural areas. Rural communities often have fewer police stations, poor road networks, limited communication infrastructure, and delayed emergency response, making them attractive targets for armed robbers. According to Alemika and Chukwuma (2025), ineffective policing, inadequate logistics, and poor intelligence gathering contribute significantly to the increasing rate of violent crimes in rural Nigeria. Similarly, Okoli and Iortyer (2014) argued that weak state security institutions create opportunities for criminal groups to operate with minimal resistance. The findings also reveal that armed robbery creates an atmosphere of fear and psychological distress among rural dwellers. This outcome occurred because repeated attacks expose residents to loss of lives, destruction of property, trauma, and uncertainty. Fear of robbery discourages farmers from cultivating distant farmlands, traders from transporting goods, and individuals from travelling during early morning or late evening hours. The findings demonstrate that armed robbery negatively affects agricultural production and rural economic development. This result is expected because agriculture remains the primary occupation of rural dwellers, and insecurity discourages investment in farming activities. Farmers often abandon fertile farmlands located in isolated areas due to fear of attacks, leading to reduced agricultural output, food shortages, and declining household income. FAO (2022) observed that insecurity in many developing countries has disrupted agricultural production and threatened food security by limiting access to farms and markets. Likewise, International Crisis Group (2020) reported that criminal violence has significantly reduced farming activities across several rural regions in Nigeria.

Another important finding is that armed robbery weakens social cohesion and trust within rural communities. This may have occurred because repeated attacks increase suspicion among community members, especially where robbers receive information from local collaborators. Consequently, traditional communal relationships become strained, reducing collective efforts toward community development and local security. Putnam (2000) emphasized that declining social trust weakens collective action and reduces communities' ability to address shared problems, including crime prevention. The findings agree with several previous empirical studies. For example, Okoli and Atelhe (2014) found that rural insecurity in Nigeria has significantly affected farming activities, household income, and community development. Similarly, Nwagboso (2012) concluded that violent crimes, including armed robbery, have become major obstacles to socio-economic development by discouraging investment and increasing poverty. Alemika (2013) also reported that rural communities

experience higher levels of vulnerability due to inadequate policing and weak law enforcement institutions.

The present findings are also consistent with Ajodo-Adebanjoko (2017), who observed that armed robbery contributes to increasing poverty, displacement, and social instability in rural Nigeria. Likewise, Abubakar (2021) found that insecurity, particularly armed robbery and banditry, has reduced agricultural productivity and worsened living conditions among rural households. These similarities strengthen the credibility of the current findings and indicate that armed robbery remains a persistent challenge affecting rural safety across different regions. However, the findings differ from studies conducted in some developed countries where rural communities experience relatively lower levels of armed robbery due to stronger policing systems, improved surveillance technology, better transportation infrastructure, and effective community policing strategies. For instance, Weisheit and Donnermeyer (2000) argued that although crime exists in rural areas globally, effective law enforcement and stronger institutional capacity substantially reduce violent crime in many developed societies. These differences may be attributed to variations in governance, resource allocation, socioeconomic conditions, and security infrastructure. The implications of these findings are substantial for policy and practice. First, government agencies should strengthen security architecture in rural communities through increased deployment of security personnel, establishment of additional police outposts, improved logistics, and rapid emergency response systems. Second, community policing and local vigilante groups should be strengthened and properly regulated to complement formal security agencies.

Assassination and the safety of rural dwellers

The findings indicate that assassination extends beyond the loss of individual lives to generate widespread fear, uncertainty, and psychological trauma among community members. Rural residents often perceive assassination as evidence of the inability of state institutions to provide adequate protection, thereby reducing public confidence in government security agencies. As fear becomes widespread, people become reluctant to participate in community activities, political engagement, agricultural production, and local markets. In many rural communities, capable guardians such as police patrols, surveillance infrastructure, and community policing mechanisms are either inadequate or entirely absent. This situation increases the likelihood of successful assassination attacks while simultaneously reducing the probability of arrest and prosecution. The findings therefore demonstrate that weak institutional protection increases rural insecurity and exposes vulnerable populations to violent crimes.

The findings are consistent with previous empirical studies. For example, Akinyetun (2021) reported that targeted killings and political violence in Nigeria have generated widespread fear among rural populations, resulting in population displacement, disruption of farming activities, and declining rural livelihoods. Similarly, Okoli and Lenshie (2018) found that violent attacks in rural communities significantly reduced citizens' confidence in state security institutions and increased reliance on informal self-help security arrangements. Their study concluded that persistent violence undermines sustainable rural development by disrupting agricultural production and local governance. Likewise, the findings support the work of Onuoha (2020), who observed that insecurity, including assassination and armed attacks, has become a major constraint to rural development in Nigeria. According to the study, continuous targeted killings discourage investment in agriculture, reduce school attendance, and force residents to migrate to urban areas perceived as safer. This pattern contributes to increased rural poverty and food insecurity. The present findings also align with international evidence. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022), persistent violence in rural communities weakens human security by limiting access to livelihoods, education, healthcare, and governance structures. The report argues that fear generated by

targeted killings affects not only direct victims but entire communities through psychological distress, forced displacement, and reduced economic participation.

Furthermore, the findings correspond with the observations of the World Bank (2023), which noted that insecurity and violent conflict significantly reduce agricultural productivity because farmers abandon their farms due to fear of attacks. In regions where assassination and armed violence are common, market activities decline, transportation becomes risky, and private investment decreases. These consequences reinforce cycles of poverty and underdevelopment within rural communities. Although the findings largely agree with previous studies, they differ slightly from the conclusions of some scholars who argue that community-based security initiatives and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms can reduce rural insecurity despite limited state presence (Boege et al., 2009). While community policing and local vigilante groups may improve intelligence gathering and crime prevention, the current findings suggest that such informal arrangements are often insufficient when confronted with organized criminal networks, political assassins, or heavily armed groups. This indicates that community efforts require stronger institutional support and collaboration with formal security agencies to achieve lasting effectiveness. The implications of these findings are substantial for public policy and rural development. First, strengthening rural security should become a national priority through increased deployment of trained security personnel, improved intelligence systems, and rapid emergency response mechanisms. Second, government should enhance collaboration between formal security agencies and community-based security structures to improve information sharing and crime prevention.

Recommendations

1) Strengthen Community-Based Security Structures: Local governments should establish and support community policing and vigilante groups that operate under the supervision of recognized security agencies. A measurable target would be to ensure that every rural community has at least one functional community security committee that meets monthly and submits quarterly security reports.
2) Increase the Presence of Security Personnel: Government should deploy more police officers and security personnel to rural communities by establishing additional police outposts in underserved areas. A practical benchmark is to establish at least one police outpost within a 10-kilometre radius of each major rural community over a five-year period.
3) Promote Public Awareness on Crime Prevention: Community leaders, schools, and civil society organizations should organize regular security awareness campaigns on crime prevention, emergency reporting, and personal safety. A realistic target is to conduct at least two community security sensitization programmes annually in each rural community.
4) Strengthen Intelligence Gathering and Early Warning Systems: Security agencies should collaborate with traditional rulers, community leaders, and local organizations to establish confidential information-sharing mechanisms. A measurable target is to create functional community intelligence committees in at least 90% of rural communities within two years.
5) Improve Criminal Investigation and Prosecution: Law enforcement agencies should enhance investigative capacity through specialized training and improved forensic support to ensure that perpetrators of assassination are identified and prosecuted. A realistic benchmark is to increase the annual clearance rate for homicide and assassination-related cases by at least 30% within five years.
6) Promote Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution: Government should institutionalize mediation programmes to resolve political, land, and communal disputes before they escalate into targeted killings. A measurable objective is to conduct at least four community peace dialogue sessions annually in each local government area with documented resolutions.

Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of cult-related crimes on the well-being of rural dwellers in the South-South Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria. The study was undertaken against the backdrop of increasing incidents of cult violence, intimidation, kidnapping, armed attacks, destruction of property, and other forms of criminal activities that have become recurring security challenges in many rural communities across the region. The findings provide empirical evidence that cult-related crimes constitute a significant determinant of the well-being of rural residents, with adverse consequences for their physical security, economic livelihood, psychological health, social relationships, and overall quality of life. The analysis revealed that the persistent activities of cult groups have weakened the socio-economic fabric of rural communities by disrupting agricultural production, restricting commercial activities, discouraging private investment, and reducing opportunities for sustainable livelihood. Rural dwellers living in communities with frequent cult-related incidents were found to experience heightened fear of victimization, reduced freedom of movement, declining household income, and limited access to social services. These conditions collectively undermine individual welfare and constrain community development, thereby widening existing socio-economic inequalities within the South-South region. Direct effects include loss of lives, physical injuries, destruction of property, displacement of residents, and psychological trauma. Indirect effects are reflected in declining educational participation, weakened social cohesion, reduced trust among community members, lower agricultural productivity, youth unemployment, and diminished confidence in local governance institutions.

The cumulative impact of these outcomes creates an environment in which sustainable rural development becomes increasingly difficult to achieve. Communities where traditional institutions, community development associations, youth leaders, religious organizations, and security agencies maintained effective collaboration demonstrated greater capacity to prevent violence, resolve conflicts, and strengthen community resilience. In contrast, weak institutional coordination, delayed law enforcement responses, political interference, and inadequate intelligence gathering were found to create opportunities for the continued operation and expansion of cult groups within rural communities. Sustainable solutions should combine effective policing with youth empowerment programmes, quality education, employment generation, community-based conflict prevention mechanisms, intelligence-led security operations, institutional accountability, and strengthened partnerships among government agencies, traditional authorities, civil society organizations, and local communities. Such a comprehensive approach is essential for addressing both the immediate manifestations of cult-related crimes and the structural conditions that facilitate their persistence.

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