

BANDITRY IN NORTH-WEST NIGERIA: EFFECTS OF UNEMPLOYMENT, ARMS PROLIFERATION AND GOVERNANCE DEFICITS

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ARTICLE INFO

Article No.: 0317

Accepted Date: 22/04/2026

Published Date: 03/05/2026

Type: Research

ABSTRACT

Banditry has emerged as a persistent security challenge in North-West Nigeria, threatening human security, weakening governance structures, and hindering socio-economic development. This study examines the underlying drivers of banditry, focusing on youth unemployment, small arms proliferation, and governance deficits. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was adopted, with data collected from 420 respondents across Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto States using stratified random sampling. The findings indicate that youth unemployment significantly increases vulnerability to recruitment into bandit groups, while the widespread availability of small arms enhances the operational strength of these groups. In addition, weak governance structures were found to contribute substantially to the persistence of insecurity in the region. Overall, the results show that banditry is not caused by a single factor but is driven by the interaction of socio-economic hardship, the availability of weapons, and institutional weaknesses. The study concludes that addressing banditry requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach. It recommends policies aimed at creating employment opportunities for youths, strengthening arms control measures, and improving governance systems to effectively tackle the root causes of insecurity in North-West Nigeria.

Keywords: Banditry, Youth Unemployment, Arms Proliferation, Governance Deficit, Human Security, North-West Nigeria.

Introduction

Banditry has become one of the most severe internal security threats in North-West Nigeria, particularly in Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto States. It is marked by organized armed attacks, kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and the destruction of rural communities. These activities have led to large-scale displacement, loss of livelihoods, and a deepening humanitarian crisis (International Crisis Group, 2020; Onuoha, 2020). In recognition of its growing intensity, the Nigerian government designated bandit groups as terrorist organizations, underscoring the seriousness of the threat (Adesoji, 2021).

Existing studies largely attribute the persistence of banditry to factors such as poverty, environmental stress, and weak security responses. However, much of this literature tends to examine these factors in isolation, with limited empirical analysis of how key structural drivers particularly youth unemployment, small arms proliferation, and governance deficits interact to sustain the phenomenon. As a result, there remains insufficient evidence on the combined effects of these variables in explaining the dynamics of banditry in the North-West region.

Youth unemployment is frequently identified as a major risk factor, especially in rural areas where economic opportunities are limited (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Yet, not all unemployed youths engage in violent activities, raising questions about the conditions under which unemployment translates into recruitment vulnerability. Similarly, while the proliferation of small arms has been linked to increased violence (Small Arms Survey, 2018), existing studies often emphasize availability without adequately assessing how it shapes the operational capabilities of armed groups within specific local contexts. Furthermore, governance deficits manifested in weak state presence, poor service delivery, and limited institutional capacity are widely acknowledged, but their direct and measurable impact on insecurity outcomes remains underexplored.

This gap in the literature highlights the need for a more integrated and empirically grounded analysis. Without such understanding, policy responses risk being fragmented and ineffective. This study therefore seeks to address this limitation by examining how youth unemployment, small arms proliferation, and governance deficits jointly influence the persistence of banditry in North-West Nigeria.

The study is guided by three research questions: What is the relationship between youth unemployment and bandit recruitment? How does small arms proliferation sustain bandit operations? To what extent do governance deficits contribute to insecurity dynamics? The main objective is to provide empirical evidence on these structural drivers and their interaction, thereby contributing to more informed and comprehensive policy responses.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Banditry has been conceptualized in different ways across the literature, reflecting variations in context and analytical focus. Onuoha (2020) defines banditry as organized criminal violence driven largely by economic motives, particularly in ungoverned rural spaces. This aligns with earlier interpretations that frame banditry as a survival strategy in contexts of weak state control. However, other scholars argue that this definition is too narrow, as it underestimates the evolving political and ideological dimensions of bandit groups. In North-West Nigeria, banditry increasingly exhibits characteristics of insurgency, including territorial control and organized command structures. This suggests that banditry should not only be seen as criminality but as a hybrid security threat shaped by both economic incentives and governance failures.

Youth unemployment is widely recognized as a critical driver of instability, yet its role in violent conflict remains contested. The National Bureau of Statistics (2023) highlights the high

rate of youth unemployment in Nigeria, particularly in rural areas where economic opportunities are limited. While many studies establish a correlation between unemployment and violence, some scholars caution against assuming a direct causal relationship. Not all unemployed youths engage in criminal or violent activities, indicating that unemployment alone is insufficient to explain recruitment into armed groups. Instead, the interaction between unemployment, social exclusion, and lack of state support appears to be more significant. This suggests the need to examine unemployment not in isolation, but as part of a broader structural condition.

Small arms proliferation is another key concept in understanding contemporary insecurity. According to the Small Arms Survey (2018), the widespread availability of illicit firearms significantly increases the intensity and duration of armed conflicts. While this perspective emphasizes access to weapons as a major enabling factor, some scholars argue that weapons alone do not cause violence but rather amplify existing tensions. In the context of North-West Nigeria, porous borders and weak regulatory mechanisms have facilitated the influx of arms, thereby enhancing the operational capacity of bandit groups. However, the literature often fails to explain how arms availability interacts with socio-economic conditions to sustain long-term violence.

Governance deficit refers to the inability of the state to effectively perform its core functions, including the provision of security, enforcement of law, and delivery of public services. Adesoji (2021) identifies weak governance as a central factor in the persistence of insecurity in Nigeria. However, there is ongoing debate regarding the extent to which governance failure alone can explain banditry. Some studies emphasize security sector weaknesses, while others highlight broader institutional decay, including corruption and lack of accountability. In rural North-West Nigeria, limited state presence has created governance vacuums that allow non-state actors to operate freely. Yet, the literature often treats governance deficit as a background condition rather than examining its direct and interactive effects on insecurity.

Overall, these concepts are frequently discussed independently, with limited attention to how they intersect. This lack of integration represents a significant gap, as banditry in North-West Nigeria appears to be driven by the combined effects of socio-economic deprivation, arms availability, and institutional weakness.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Relative Deprivation Theory and Human Security Theory, which together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the structural drivers of banditry.

Relative Deprivation Theory, developed by Ted Robert Gurr (1970), posits that perceived disparities between expectations and actual living conditions can generate frustration, which may lead to violence. This theory has been widely applied in studies of conflict and insurgency. However, critics argue that it overemphasizes psychological factors while underestimating structural and institutional dynamics. In the context of North-West Nigeria, the theory helps explain why economically marginalized youths may be drawn to bandit groups, particularly when legitimate opportunities are absent.

Human Security Theory, advanced by the United Nations Development Programme (1994), shifts the focus from state-centered security to the protection of individuals from threats such as poverty, hunger, and violence. While this framework is useful in highlighting the multidimensional nature of insecurity, it has been criticized for being too broad and difficult to operationalize empirically. Nevertheless, it is particularly relevant in explaining the role of governance deficits in undermining individual security in rural Nigeria.

By combining these two theories, this study bridges the gap between individual-level motivations and structural conditions. Relative Deprivation Theory explains the drivers of participation in violence, while Human Security Theory accounts for the broader institutional failures that enable such participation.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies on banditry and insecurity in Nigeria have produced important insights, but they also reveal significant limitations. Onuoha (2020) finds a strong relationship between youth unemployment and recruitment into armed groups in northern Nigeria. While this study provides valuable qualitative evidence, it lacks rigorous statistical analysis, making it difficult to determine the strength and significance of this relationship.

Similarly, the Small Arms Survey (2018) demonstrates that the proliferation of illicit firearms contributes to increased violence across West Africa. However, the study adopts a regional perspective and does not sufficiently capture local dynamics within specific Nigerian states. This limits its applicability to understanding the micro-level drivers of banditry in the North-West.

The International Crisis Group (2020) provides detailed documentation of bandit operations in Nigeria, highlighting their growing sophistication and adaptability. While this report offers rich descriptive insights, it does not empirically test the relationships between key variables such as unemployment, arms proliferation, and governance deficits.

Adesoji (2021) emphasizes governance failure as a central driver of insecurity, arguing that weak institutions create opportunities for violent actors. However, the study does not examine how governance deficits interact with socio-economic factors, leaving an important gap in understanding the multidimensional nature of banditry.

More recent studies have begun to adopt mixed-method approaches, but many still focus on single variables or lack integrative analytical frameworks. As a result, there is limited empirical evidence on how multiple structural factors jointly influence banditry.

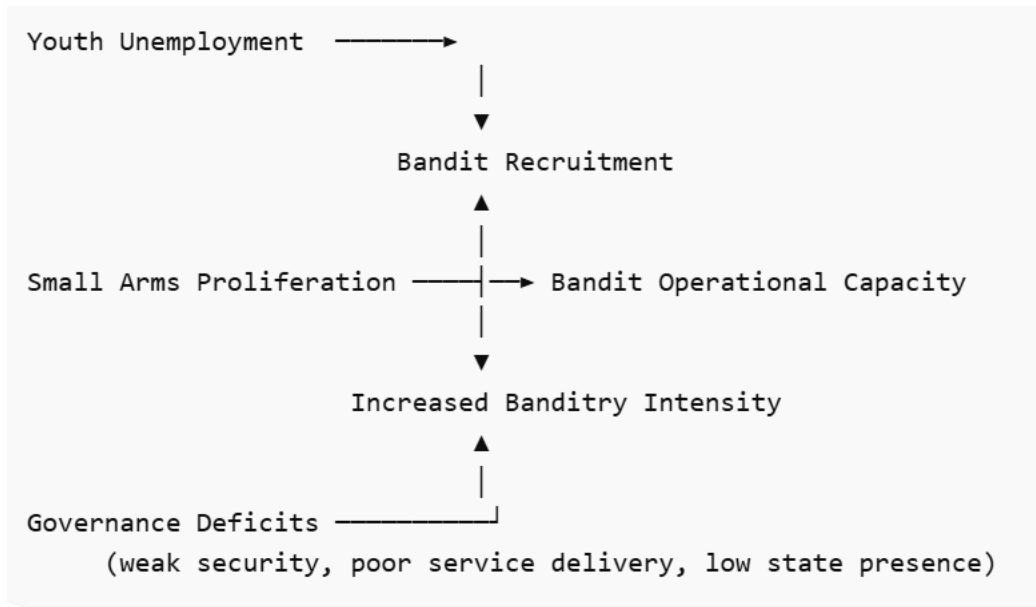
This study addresses these limitations by adopting a quantitative approach to examine the combined effects of youth unemployment, small arms proliferation, and governance deficits within a single analytical framework. By doing so, it provides a more comprehensive understanding of the structural drivers of banditry in North-West Nigeria.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model for this study presents banditry as a multi-causal structural phenomenon shaped by the interaction of socio-economic and institutional factors. Youth unemployment and small arms proliferation are treated as primary independent variables that directly influence recruitment into bandit groups and their operational capacity. Governance deficit functions both as an independent variable and as an amplifying condition that strengthens the effects of unemployment and arms availability.

In this model, unemployment increases the pool of vulnerable individuals, while access to small arms enhances the ability of these individuals to engage in organized violence. Governance deficits, in turn, create an enabling environment by weakening law enforcement, reducing state presence, and limiting access to social services. The interaction of these factors leads to the persistence and escalation of banditry.

Unlike previous models that examine these variables separately, this framework emphasizes their interdependence. It provides a more integrated explanation of banditry and supports the need for comprehensive policy interventions that address multiple structural drivers simultaneously.



Methodology

1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. The choice of this design is appropriate because it enables the systematic collection of data at a single point in time to examine relationships between key variables, including youth unemployment, small arms proliferation, governance effectiveness, and exposure to banditry in North-West Nigeria.

2 Study Area

The study was conducted in three states in North-West Nigeria: Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto. These states were purposively selected due to their high prevalence of banditry and related security challenges, making them suitable for examining the underlying socio-economic and governance factors.

3 Population and Sampling Procedure

The target population comprised adult residents (18 years and above) in selected communities within the three states. A total sample size of 420 respondents was determined to ensure adequate representation. A stratified random sampling technique was employed. The sampling process involved three stages. First, each state constituted a primary stratum. Second, within each state, selected local government areas (LGAs) affected by banditry were identified. Third, communities within the selected LGAs were further stratified, and households were randomly selected. Within each household, one eligible respondent was chosen using simple random selection. This approach ensured proportional representation across the study areas and reduced sampling bias.

4 Instrument for Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed specifically for the study. The instrument consisted of five sections:

Section A: Demographic characteristics (age, gender, education, occupation)

Section B: Youth unemployment status

Section C: Perceived availability of small arms

Section D: Governance effectiveness (service delivery, security presence, trust in institutions)

Section E: Exposure to banditry incidents

Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree (1)” to “Strongly Agree (5).”

5 Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Content validity was ensured through expert review by specialists in security studies and social science research, who assessed the relevance and clarity of the questionnaire items.

Reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of $\alpha = 0.82$, indicating a high level of internal consistency and reliability.

6 Method of Data Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and mean scores) were used to summarize respondents’ characteristics and key variables.

Inferential analysis included:

Chi-square (χ^2) tests to examine associations between categorical variables such as unemployment status and exposure to banditry.

Binary logistic regression analysis to assess the influence of independent variables (youth unemployment, perceived arms availability, and governance effectiveness) on the likelihood of exposure to banditry.

The logistic regression model is specified as:

$$\text{Logit}(P) = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \beta_3X_3 + \epsilon$$

Where:

P = Probability of exposure to banditry

X₁ = Youth unemployment

X₂ = Perceived arms availability

X₃ = Governance effectiveness

7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and no personally identifiable information was recorded. Data collected were used solely for academic purposes. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Results

Youth Unemployment and Exposure to Bandit Recruitment

Table 1: Employment Status and Exposure to Bandit Recruitment (N = 420)

Employment Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Exposure to Recruitment (%)
Unemployed	252	60	70
Underemployed	105	25	55
Employed	63	15	20
Total	420	100	—

Field Survey, 2026.

The results indicate that a majority of respondents (60%) were unemployed, while 25% were underemployed and only 15% were fully employed. Notably, 70% of unemployed respondents reported exposure to bandit recruitment, compared to 55% among the underemployed and 20% among the employed. This pattern suggests a strong association between employment status and vulnerability to recruitment into banditry. Individuals without stable income sources appear

significantly more susceptible to recruitment pressures, likely due to economic hardship and limited livelihood alternatives.

The chi-square test confirms this relationship:

$$\chi^2 (2, N = 420) = 18.62, p < 0.05$$

This indicates a statistically significant association between youth unemployment and exposure to bandit recruitment.

Small Arms Proliferation and Operational Impact of Banditry

Table 2: Perceived Arms Availability and Operational Impact (N = 420)

Arms Availability	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Operational Impact (%)
High	210	50	80
Moderate	140	33	50
Low	70	17	15
Total	420	100	—

Field Survey, 2026.

Half of the respondents (50%) perceived arms availability as high, while 33% rated it as moderate and 17% as low. Among those who reported high arms availability, 80% indicated a high operational impact of banditry, compared to 50% and 15% for moderate and low availability respectively. This finding implies that the availability of small arms significantly enhances the operational capacity and effectiveness of bandit groups. Areas with greater access to weapons tend to experience more intense and organized bandit activities.

The chi-square result further supports this relationship:

$$\chi^2 (2, N = 420) = 21.44, p < 0.01$$

This shows a highly significant relationship between small arms proliferation and the operational impact of banditry.

Governance Effectiveness and Banditry Impact

Table 3: Governance Level and Banditry Impact (N = 420)

Governance Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Banditry Impact (%)
Low	294	70	85
Moderate	91	22	50
High	35	8	15
Total	420	100	—

Field Survey, 2026.

A substantial proportion of respondents (70%) rated governance effectiveness as low, while 22% rated it as moderate and only 8% as high. Among those who perceived governance as weak, 85% reported high banditry impact, compared to 50% and 15% for moderate and high governance levels respectively.

This suggests that weak governance structures characterized by poor service delivery, weak security presence, and low institutional trust create an enabling environment for banditry to thrive.

The chi-square analysis confirms this association:

$$\chi^2 (2, N = 420) = 24.31, p < 0.01$$

This indicates a strong and statistically significant relationship between governance deficit and the intensity of banditry.

Binary Logistic Regression Analysis of Factors Influencing Exposure to Banditry

To further examine the combined effects of the independent variables, a binary logistic regression analysis was conducted in line with the model specified in Section 4.6.

Table 4: Logistic Regression Results for Predictors of Exposure to Banditry

Variable	β Coefficient	Std. Error	Significance
Unemployment	0.41	0.08	$p < 0.05$
Arms Proliferation	0.38	0.07	$p < 0.05$
Governance Deficit	0.52	0.06	$p < 0.01$

Field Survey, 2026.

The regression results reveal that all three variables significantly predict exposure to banditry.

Governance deficit ($\beta = 0.52$) has the strongest effect, indicating that weak governance substantially increases the likelihood of exposure to banditry.

Youth unemployment ($\beta = 0.41$) also shows a significant positive effect, reinforcing earlier findings that economic vulnerability drives recruitment.

Arms proliferation ($\beta = 0.38$) significantly contributes to exposure, highlighting the role of weapon availability in sustaining bandit activities.

Overall, the model demonstrates that structural factors economic, security, and institutional jointly influence the dynamics of banditry in the study area.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined the combined influence of youth unemployment, small arms proliferation, and governance deficit on banditry in North-West Nigeria. The findings provide empirical support for a multi-causal explanation, while also revealing important nuances that extend beyond existing literature.

The findings confirm that unemployment is significantly associated with exposure to bandit recruitment. However, the results suggest that unemployment should not be interpreted as a direct or automatic cause of participation in banditry. While a higher proportion of unemployed respondents reported exposure to recruitment, a notable share did not, indicating that economic deprivation alone is insufficient to explain recruitment dynamics.

This supports the argument in the literature that unemployment operates through broader conditions of vulnerability, rather than acting independently. In line with the critique of the National Bureau of Statistics (2023) and earlier studies, the findings suggest that factors such as social exclusion, weak state support, and limited economic alternatives are critical in shaping outcomes. At the same time, this study goes further than prior research such as Onuoha (2020), which largely relied on qualitative evidence. By providing statistical confirmation, the results strengthen the argument that unemployment is a significant but conditional driver. This refines Relative Deprivation Theory by showing that frustration arising from economic conditions translates into recruitment risk only when reinforced by structural constraints.

The findings show a strong relationship between arms availability and the operational impact of banditry. However, rather than treating arms proliferation as a root cause, the results suggest that it functions primarily as an enabling and amplifying factor. This aligns with the position of the Small Arms Survey (2018), which emphasizes the role of weapons in increasing the intensity of conflict. However, the present study adds an important dimension by demonstrating that arms availability does not operate in isolation. High access to weapons appears to magnify existing socio-economic and institutional weaknesses, rather than independently generating violence. This challenges simplistic interpretations that equate arms proliferation with causation. Instead, the findings indicate that weapons increase the efficiency, scale, and coordination of violence, particularly in environments where recruitment and governance failures already exist. In this sense, arms proliferation is better understood as a force multiplier within a broader conflict system.

Among all variables examined, governance deficit emerged as the strongest predictor of exposure to banditry. This finding reinforces the central argument of Human Security Theory, which emphasizes the role of institutional failure in shaping insecurity. However, the results also suggest that governance deficit should not be treated merely as a background condition, as is often the case in the literature. Instead, it plays a direct and active role in sustaining banditry. Weak governance structures characterized by limited security presence, poor service delivery, and low institutional trust create conditions in which both recruitment and armed operations can flourish. While Adesoji (2021) identifies governance failure as a key driver of insecurity, this study extends that argument by demonstrating its comparative strength relative to other factors. The stronger effect of governance deficit in the regression model indicates that institutional weakness not only enables banditry but also intensifies the impact of unemployment and arms availability. This finding challenges approaches that prioritize economic interventions alone, suggesting that without improvements in governance, such interventions may have limited impact.

A key contribution of this study lies in its integrated analysis of multiple variables. The logistic regression results demonstrate that unemployment, arms proliferation, and governance deficit jointly influence exposure to banditry, rather than operating as isolated factors. This supports the conceptual model proposed in this study and addresses a major gap in the literature, where variables are often examined independently.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings validate the combined use of Relative Deprivation Theory and Human Security Theory, while also highlighting their limitations. Relative Deprivation Theory explains motivation but does not fully account for why some individuals act while others do not. Human Security Theory captures structural conditions but lacks precision in explaining individual-level outcomes.

Implications for Policy and Research

The findings suggest that policy responses focusing on a single factor are unlikely to be effective. Addressing unemployment without controlling arms proliferation or improving governance may reduce vulnerability but will not eliminate the structural conditions that sustain banditry.

Similarly, security-focused approaches that emphasize arms control without addressing economic and institutional weaknesses may only produce temporary outcomes.

For future research, the results highlight the need for more integrative and multi-level analyses, particularly those that examine how individual motivations interact with structural constraints over time.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of youth unemployment, small arms proliferation, and governance deficit on banditry in North-West Nigeria using a quantitative approach. The findings demonstrate that all three factors are statistically significant predictors of exposure to banditry.

Among these, governance deficit emerged as the most influential factor, indicating that weak institutions and limited state presence play a central role in sustaining insecurity. Youth unemployment was also found to increase vulnerability to recruitment, though not as an independent cause. Small arms proliferation, while not a root driver, significantly amplifies the intensity and operational capacity of bandit groups. Overall, the study concludes that banditry in North-West Nigeria is a multi-dimensional phenomenon driven by the interaction of economic, security, and institutional factors. Addressing the problem therefore requires integrated interventions that go beyond single-factor solutions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

- i. The Federal Government, through the Ministry of Labour and Employment and in collaboration with state governments in Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto, should implement community-based employment programmes in high-risk local government areas (LGAs). These programmes should focus on vocational training (e.g., agriculture, livestock management, and small-scale enterprises), coupled with start-up grants or microcredit schemes to support self-employment. Priority should be given to unemployed and underemployed youths identified through local community registers. In addition, reintegration initiatives should be designed for at-risk youths to reduce susceptibility to recruitment.
- ii. Security agencies, particularly the Nigeria Customs Service, Nigeria Immigration Service, and the Nigerian Police Force, should enhance joint border surveillance operations along known transnational routes in the North-West. This should include the deployment of surveillance technologies (e.g., drones and tracking systems) and the establishment of intelligence-sharing platforms between federal and state security actors. Furthermore, periodic weapons recovery and amnesty programmes should be conducted in affected communities, alongside stricter enforcement of existing laws on illicit arms possession.
- iii. State governments, in collaboration with local government authorities, should strengthen governance at the grassroots level by deploying more security personnel to rural communities, establishing community policing structures, and improving access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. In addition, mechanisms for community engagement and trust-building such as regular town hall meetings between security agencies and residents should be institutionalized to improve information flow and early warning systems.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes three key contributions to knowledge.

First, it provides quantitative empirical evidence on the relationship between youth unemployment, small arms proliferation, governance deficit, and banditry in North-West Nigeria. Unlike earlier studies that relied largely on descriptive or qualitative approaches, this study statistically demonstrates that these variables are significant predictors of exposure to banditry.

Second, the study advances existing literature by offering an integrated analytical framework. While prior research often examines these factors independently, this study shows that banditry is better understood as a product of the interaction between economic vulnerability, arms availability, and institutional weakness.

Third, the study establishes the relative influence of governance deficit compared to other factors. The findings indicate that governance deficit has a stronger effect on exposure to banditry, thereby shifting the focus from single-factor explanations toward the central role of institutional effectiveness.

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