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Portrait of the Root Causes of Boko Haram Insurgency in Borno State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study looks into the main reasons behind the Boko Haram violence in Borno State, Nigeria, aiming to offer evidence-based suggestions for prevention, recovery, and policy changes. A descriptive survey design was employed to gather information from 112 participants, comprising internally displaced individuals, community leaders, youth, women, and local security volunteers. The data were collected through structured questionnaires written in Hausa and Kanuri. The analysis, presented in frequency tables and percentages, reveals that unemployment (73.2%) and poverty (67.9%) are the primary reasons cited. Other factors include political marginalisation (62.5%), religious extremism (58.0%), poor governance/corruption (53.6%), ethnic grievances (42.9%), and the spread of illegal weapons (33.0%). The findings suggest that economic struggles, political exclusion, and governance failures create an environment where extremist ideas can thrive by exploiting these issues to garner support. The study explains the results using the Relative Deprivation Theory, which posits that feelings of disparity between what people expect and what they experience can lead to frustration and violence within a group. It concludes that relying solely on military solutions is insufficient and calls for a combined strategy that includes job creation, political inclusion, governance reforms, counter-radicalisation efforts, fostering social unity, and arms control. By emphasising how economic, political, and ideological issues are connected, this research highlights the need for comprehensive local actions to tackle the underlying causes of the insurgency and promote lasting peace in Borno State, Nigeria.

Keywords: Boko Haram; Insurgency; Extremists; Insecurity; Borno; Islam; Salafists; Jihadists; Sunni.

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1.1 Introduction

The Boko Haram insurgency, which started in northeastern Nigeria in the late 2000s, has caused serious human, economic, and governance issues in Borno State and the Lake Chad area. Even with ongoing military efforts, the conflict has split into different groups, continues to harm civilians, and has led to long-lasting displacement and humanitarian crises (Zailani, Magaji, Jafaru, 2025). Recent studies highlight that the lasting nature of this insurgency is not just about extremist beliefs but is closely linked to social and economic hardships (Shaba et al, 2018), failures in governance, poor public services, and local complaints that make it easier for recruitment and violence to thrive (Crisis Group, 2024; UN, 2023).

This study aims to go beyond just describing violence and seeks to understand the deeper reasons behind radicalisation and ongoing insurgency in Borno State. Notable factors such as poverty (Jafaru, Magaji, & Abdullahi, 2024), youth unemployment (Magaji & Adamu, 2011), broken education systems (Lamiya, Magaji, & Yakubu, 2025), loss of jobs due to climate issues (Yakubu, Magaji, & Magaji, 2025), degradation of Lake Chad, and feelings of neglect from the government have pushed many people towards joining violent groups (Adeboye, 2021; Granville, 2020). Additionally, the splitting of Boko Haram into different factions like Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) has made it harder to respond to humanitarian needs and create effective policies. This makes it crucial to have a current analysis focused on local conditions for better prevention and recovery strategies.

While many studies cover Boko Haram's tactics, timeline, and effects, fewer offer a complete, evidence-based explanation of the root causes specifically affecting Borno State that clarify why some people join or resist violent groups. This gap is significant because interventions primarily based on military responses may overlook key issues, such as economic hardship, weak governance, social exclusion, and mistreatment by security forces (UN, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2022). Without a precise analysis grounded in local realities, policy efforts may not succeed in reducing recruitment or rebuilding trust among affected communities.

The primary objective of this study is to identify and comprehend the fundamental causes of the Boko Haram conflict in Borno State. It will examine social, economic, political, environmental, and organisational factors that have contributed to recruitment, support systems, and the strength of insurgent groups. The aim is to develop recommendations grounded in evidence for preventing violence, supporting community recovery, and informing policy changes. To achieve this goal, the research will employ a combination of methods, including interviews with local stakeholders, analysis of existing data, and reviews of recent field reports. This approach ensures that the findings are both grounded in real evidence and useful for policy-making.

2.1 Conceptual Review

Boko Haram

Scholars and organisations have defined the concept of Boko Haram. This work will consider a few of these conceptualisations before arriving at its definition of the concept.

Warner & Chapin (2020) describe Boko Haram as:

"*A violent, Salafist-jihadist group (in its various incarnations and often encompassing its offshoots) based in northeastern Nigeria, which seeks to establish a caliphate ruled by sharia law in northeastern Nigeria and its environs."*

Their definition described the group as a Salafist movement aimed at establishing an Islamic State in northeastern Nigeria and beyond.

The National Counterterrorism Centre (2025) labels Boko Haram as:

"Sunni violent extremist group that seeks to establish a Salafi-Islamist state in Nigeria free from Western-style education and influence"

All the previous definitions viewed Boko Haram as an extremist Sunni movement seeking the establishment of an Islamic State based on Sunni doctrine, without any regard to Western education and influence.

Boko haram is a violent political movement led by anti-Arewa lords, aimed at establishing an Islamic state based on an adulterated Sunni and Islamic doctrine.

Insurgency

Additionally, the word "insurgency" has attracted many definitions. Some of these definitions are considered below:

Fearon & Laitin (2007) define insurgency as "a technology of military conflict characterised by small, lightly armed bands practising guerrilla warfare from rural base areas."

Long (2018) frames insurgency as "the use of political and military means by irregular forces to bring about a change in an existing political order". These forces, in most cases, mingle with civilians in order to hide from the forces defending the political order (Adekoya, Magaji, & Ismail, 2025).

Johnston (2018)defines insurgency as "an organised movement aimed at overthrowing a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict," with aims such as political independence, self-determination, or secession.

Insurgency is a political movement characterised by guerrilla warfare aimed at overthrowing a constituted authority using conflict and violence.

Empirical Review

There are empirical works. Some of the current empirical works are considered below:

Granville (2020) explores, in his dissertation work, the lived experiences of civilians in Borno State who have been affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. The researcher employed in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and thematic analysis with survivors, displaced persons, local leaders, and aid workers, documenting the social, economic, and psychological consequences of prolonged violence in their work. The key findings of his work reveal that persistent insecurity has undermined livelihoods, disrupted education, accelerated displacement, and contributed to social fragmentation and a growing mistrust of state institutions. Participants emphasise that state neglect, poor governance, and breakdowns in social services were perceived as important structural drivers that amplified vulnerability to recruitment and abuse. The dissertation concludes with policy recommendations that focus

on community-led recovery, enhanced social protection, and rebuilding trust in local governance structures.

The qualitative data from the affected groups offer valuable insights into how local people perceive their experiences and the trauma they have endured. However, since the data were collected during a specific time and place, they may not apply to other communities beyond those sampled. Additionally, qualitative findings cannot accurately measure the extent to which each root cause contributes to the overall situation. The dissertation employs purposive sampling, which may introduce a selection bias, as individuals who are more easily accessible to researchers or aid agencies may be overrepresented.

Another work in this aspect is by the United Nations (2023). The research employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches, collecting data across various African contexts to map pathways into and out of violent extremism. For Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin, the work analyses socioeconomic, educational, and occupational profiles of recruits, showing that structural deprivations (unemployment, disrupted schooling), experiences of abuse or displacement, and local social networks often interact with ideology to shape recruitment pathways. The report employs mixed methods, including survey data, case studies, and interviews, to argue that interventions must address layered grievances (economic, political, and social) rather than focusing narrowly on ideology or security alone. Policy guidance emphasises education, livelihoods, reintegration, and community resilience. The work garnered recommendations because it sourced data from multiple countries and employed a combination of research methods, which enabled us to compare different situations and identify common trends, such as the impact of disrupted education and displacement on individuals. The report focuses on policy, making it particularly useful for those working in the field of public policy.

However, since the research spans multiple countries, the findings regarding Nigeria and Lake Chad are not as detailed as those of studies that focus on a single country. Important local details about Borno State, such as its political history and specific governance issues, might not be fully explored.

Braimah (2024) in his work applies time-series and spatial models to twelve years of documented attack data in Northeast Nigeria to map trends, hotspots, and to forecast future attack frequencies. Using government incident databases and open-source event data, the author fits ARIMA and spatial autoregressive models to show how insurgent activity clusters in specific localities in Borno State and how seasonal and policy-driven shocks alter attack rates. Results suggest that while overall attack frequency peaked in 2014–2015, pockets of violence remain concentrated where governance and economic indicators are weakest. Forecasting scenarios highlight areas at continued risk unless socio-economic conditions and local governance improve.

The research is rich because its quantitative method reveals clear patterns, trends over time, and specific areas that need attention. This approach helps plan interventions and explore connections, like the links between unemployment or displacement and the number of attacks.

However, this work relies on event data that may be skewed due to gaps in reporting, particularly in high-risk regions where incidents may not be fully reported. Additionally, predictive models could become inaccurate if there are significant changes, such as new military actions or divisions within groups. Braimah's quantitative mapping complements qualitative community data effectively.

Salihu et al. (2024), in their mixed-methods article, examine the social consequences of Boko Haram violence on children orphaned by the conflict in Borno State. Quantitative household surveys measure indicators of well-being (school attendance, nutritional status, psychosocial outcomes) among orphaned vs. non-orphaned children; qualitative interviews with caregivers, teachers, and social workers explore coping mechanisms and service gaps. Findings show significantly lower school retention, worse psychosocial indicators, and higher vulnerabilities to recruitment among orphaned children. The researchers emphasise how familial disruption, poverty, and weakened protective institutions serve as indirect root causes, enabling insurgent expansion. This study combines measurable indicators of child well-being with personal stories, focusing on a vulnerable group of orphans who are often overlooked in larger analyses. It illustrates how humanitarian issues are connected to deeper causes, such as the fact that being an orphan can increase a child's likelihood of being recruited into conflict.

However, because the study concentrates on children, it does not cover other important areas as much, such as governance, adult unemployment, or political factors. The sampling may be limited to accessible camps or communities, which could result in missing out on children who are hidden in remote areas or active conflict zones.

Bamimore (2024) investigates economic resilience among market traders affected by Boko Haram related instability, using the Bodija market as a case study (Bodija is historically in Ibadan; the paper uses comparative perspectives on markets affected by insurgency). The study combines semi-structured interviews with traders, transactional record analysis (where available), and thematic analysis to document supply-chain disruptions, price volatility, customer loss, and coping strategies (diversification, relocation, and reliance on informal credit). Results point to cascading economic vulnerabilities where market collapse fuels unemployment and increases incentives for illicit coping strategies, indirectly amplifying conditions conducive to violent recruitment.

This text explains how economic issues connect conflicts to problems in markets and people's livelihoods, which helps us understand how financial struggles can be a deep-rooted cause of these issues. The viewpoint of traders provides valuable insights that are often overlooked in larger datasets. However, since this piece is a working paper on SSRN, it might not have been peer-reviewed yet. Also, Bodija is not located in Borno, so it should not be equated with a market in Borno State. The market conditions in Borno, which include areas affected by conflict, may vary significantly, for example, due to cross-border trade, markets for herders, or market shutdowns caused by military actions.

The UNIDIR (2023) report on Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin emphasised that the regional study analyses patterns and drivers of child recruitment into armed groups across the Lake Chad Basin, including Borno State. Using mixed-methods administrative data, NGO case files, and interviews, the report identifies key risk factors, including occupation/household displacement, disrupted schooling, poverty, and the vulnerabilities inherent in the Almajiri system. The analysis quantifies associations (where data permit), showing that children from disrupted households are more likely to be associated with armed groups. Recommendations stress protective education, community-based reintegration, and addressing structural poverty to reduce recruitment pathways. This study focuses on an important and often overlooked group of children. It uses data from multiple sources to confirm its findings and offers practical suggestions for programs. The research examines the Lake Chad region, exploring the connections between issues such as migration, open borders, and recruitment trends in Borno.

However, there are challenges with data quality, as case files and records can be incomplete, making it hard to prove direct causes even though the connections are strong.

Theoretical Framework

The work will be anchored on the Relative Deprivation Theory, which explains the root causes of the Boko Haram insurgency.

Relative Deprivation Theory: This theory was created by Gurr in 1970 and later expanded by Walker and Pettigrew in 1984, building on earlier studies in sociology and psychology. The theory suggests that when individuals or groups perceive a significant disparity between what they believe they deserve and what they possess, particularly in terms of social, economic, or political resources, they may become frustrated and turn to conflict or violence.

This theory is evident in Borno State, where many residents feel a sense of systemic marginalisation due to economic neglect, inadequate education, and poor infrastructure compared to other areas. This feeling of being deprived can help explain why some individuals support Boko Haram, seeking justice or resisting their situation (Adesoji, 2021).

However, the Relative Deprivation Theory may place too much focus on personal perceptions without fully explaining why only certain deprived groups choose violence. Additionally, it might overlook broader structural issues and factors related to the government.

This theory is chosen for this research because it directly addresses feelings of injustice and offers insights into the motivations behind insurgency. It serves as an essential framework for analysing the underlying causes of the Boko Haram insurgency in Borno.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design to collect data from a specific group, maintaining the status quo of the variables. This method helped identify and analyse the primary factors underlying the Boko Haram insurgency in Borno State, utilising descriptive statistics to explain the findings. The research took place in Borno State, located in northeastern Nigeria, which shares borders with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. With 27 local government areas and Maiduguri as its capital, Borno State has been at the centre of Boko Haram activities for more than ten years, making it an important area because of its geography, culture, and social-political importance.

The study focused on residents from specific local government areas that were heavily impacted by the insurgency. This group included internally displaced persons, community and religious leaders, youth, women, and local security volunteers. A total of 112 participants took part in the study, chosen through a multistage sampling technique.

Data were sought through a structured questionnaire that included primarily closed-ended questions and a few open-ended ones. The questions explored demographics, socio-economic backgrounds, perceived causes of the insurgency, and its effects. Trained research assistants who can speak in Hausa and Kanuri fluently administered the questionnaire directly to ensure participants understood it well. The data was coded, and the responses were displayed in frequency distribution tables along with percentages. This process helped identify trends and patterns regarding what people believed were the leading causes of the insurgency, complemented by narrative explanations for context.

Data Analysis

Table 4.1: Root Causes of Boko Haram Insurgency in Borno State, Nigeria

Serial Number	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
1	Unemployment	82/112	73.21/100
2	Poverty	76/112	67.9/100
3	Political Marginalization	70/112	62.50/100
4	Religious extremism/Radicalisation	65/112	58.04/100
5	Poor Governance/ Corruption	60/112	53.57/100
6	Ethnic Grievances	48/112	42.9/100
7	Proliferation of illicit arms	37/112	33.04

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Interpretation of the Table

The most commonly mentioned socio-economic issues were unemployment (73.2%) and poverty (67.9%). This shows that economic struggles are the main reason behind Boko Haram's recruitment in Borno State.

Political and governance concerns: More than half of the people surveyed identified political marginalisation (62.5%) and poor governance/corruption (53.6%) as key issues, indicating that being excluded from decision-making and weak government institutions are significant contributors to instability.

Ideological influences: Religious extremism/radicalisation (58.0%) ranked just above governance problems, suggesting that while ideology is important, it likely builds on economic and political issues.

Other notable factors: Ethnic grievances (42.9%) and the spread of illegal weapons (33.0%) were mentioned less often but are still significant, as they can fuel and worsen insurgency once it begins.

Overall trend: The findings show a complex problem, with socio-economic challenges, political exclusion, governance failures, and ideological radicalisation all playing interrelated roles.

In summary, Table 4.1 disclosed respondents' opinions on the root causes of book haram in Borno State, Nigeria. The table revealed that an analysis of data from 112 respondents shows that unemployment (73.2%) and poverty (67.9%) are the most commonly recognised root causes of the Boko Haram insurgency in Borno State. Political marginalisation (62.5%) and religious extremism (58.0%) are also significant factors, while poor governance/corruption (53.6%), ethnic grievances (42.9%), and the spread of illegal weapons (33.0%) are mentioned

by many respondents as well. These results indicate that the insurgency mainly stems from socio-economic hardships, worsened by political exclusion and weak governance, with ideology playing a secondary but important role. To tackle these challenges, we need policies that combine improving livelihoods, reforming governance, promoting political inclusion, and countering extremist ideologies.

Research Implications

Creating jobs and fighting poverty must be parts of strategies to stop insurgency since these issues are often what lead people to join such groups.

Having a government that includes everyone and promotes political involvement can help alleviate the feelings of being left out that insurgents exploit.

Programs aimed at preventing radicalisation should work in conjunction with economic benefits and social services.

Enhancing security measures to prevent the spread of weapons will help weaken the ability of insurgent groups to operate.

Discussion of Findings

The survey results show that the Boko Haram insurgency in Borno State is influenced by a mix of socio-economic, political, and ideological reasons, with socio-economic struggles being the most significant factor.

Socio-economic struggles as the leading cause: The high rates of unemployment (73.2%) and poverty (67.9%) in the responses highlight how economic difficulties have facilitated the recruitment of insurgents. Boko Haram takes advantage of these economic frustrations by offering money or a sense of purpose to those who are unemployed.

Political exclusion and governance issues: Over half of those surveyed identified political marginalisation (62.5%) and poor governance/corruption (53.6%) as significant factors. This supports the political grievance theory (Gurr, 1970), which suggests that feelings of injustice and exclusion from decision-making can lead to rebellion. In Borno State, past neglect, lack of political representation and unfair resource distribution have increased anger towards the government. Poor governance and widespread corruption damage public trust, allowing insurgent ideas to gain popularity.

The impact of ideological extremism: A significant number of people (58.0%) mentioned religious extremism or radicalisation, indicating that belief systems play a key role in keeping the insurgency alive. However, this influence is slightly less than that of social and economic issues, suggesting that extremist beliefs may act more as a trigger rather than the leading cause of the conflict. This supports Adesoji's argument (2021) that religious ideas often gain popularity when existing economic and political problems already exist.

Other contributing factors: Ethnic tensions (42.9%) and the spread of illegal weapons (33.0%) were mentioned less often but are still important. Ethnic tensions can arise from feelings of unfair treatment or competition for limited resources, while illegal weapons make insurgent attacks more dangerous and widespread. The lower percentages indicate these factors support the situation rather than being the main reasons, but their effects should not be overlooked.

Interconnected causes: The responses show a connection between economic struggles, political exclusion, and ideological radicalisation. Unemployment and poverty lead to frustration; political neglect and corruption create feelings of injustice; and extreme beliefs offer a way to voice these grievances, which can result in violent actions. This finding aligns with the multicausal conflict model, which emphasises that insurgencies typically do not have a single cause but instead arise from overlapping social, economic, and political issues.

Policy Implications

Since the problem is complex and multifaceted, focusing solely on one aspect, such as military actions against insurgents, will not be sufficient. We need a complete approach that includes:

Helping the economy by creating jobs, offering vocational training, and supporting young people to start their businesses.

Ensuring political inclusion with fair representation and local government systems. 3. Making changes in governance to fight corruption and provide better services.

Implementing ideas to counter radical beliefs through De-radicalisation programs, community-based religious education, and working with respected faith leaders.

Controlling arms by improving border security and promoting disarmament efforts.

Theory and Findings

The Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT), popularised by Gurr in his 1970 work, "Why Men Rebel," suggests that conflict and violence often arise when there is a noticeable discrepancy between what people believe they deserve and what they achieve. This feeling of unfairness, whether it can be measured or not, can lead to anger, resentment, and eventually, group violence.

In the case of the Boko Haram insurgency in Borno State, survey results strongly support RDT's ideas:

Unemployment and poverty as causes of deprivation: The high rates of unemployment (73.2%) and poverty (67.9%) reported by respondents show a significant sense of economic hardship. Many individuals, especially young people, see a gap between the job opportunities available to others in Nigeria (or even in nearby urban areas) and their limited options. This feeling of economic unfairness leads to frustration and makes them more susceptible to recruitment by insurgents.

Political marginalisation and poor governance as types of political deprivation: Political marginalisation (62.5%) and issues such as poor governance/corruption (53.6%) indicate that people feel neglected politically and institutionally. Communities in Borno may sense that they are left out of national decisions and are not receiving their fair share of political power or development benefits. According to RDT, this type of political exclusion increases the likelihood of organised rebellion, especially when communities perceive they have no legitimate means to express their concerns.

Religious extremism as a reaction to deprivation: Although religious extremism (58.0%) has its ideological roots, its appeal grows stronger when individuals face socio-economic and political hardships. Boko Haram exploits these feelings of injustice by presenting its ideology

as a means to achieve dignity, justice, and divine reward, thereby transforming personal anger into collective militant action.

Ethnic Grievances and Arms Proliferation as Contributing Factors: Ethnic grievances (42.9%) can worsen feelings of relative deprivation when specific ethnic groups believe they are unfairly treated compared to others. The spread of illegal weapons (33.0%) makes it easier for these feelings of deprivation to lead to violence, making the situation even more dangerous. Since this issue is complex and multifaceted, focusing solely on military actions against insurgents will not resolve the problem. We need a complete strategy that includes:

Implications of RDT for the Study

The results show that the ongoing Boko Haram in Borno State cannot be seen only as a religious or ideological issue; it is deeply linked to feelings of inequality and unmet expectations. RDT suggests that if we do not address these feelings of deprivation through economic support, political inclusion, and improved governance, military solutions will not be sufficient. Therefore, this theory emphasises the importance of comprehensive counterinsurgency strategies that address grievances, which should extend beyond security measures to encompass genuine social and political changes.

Summary

This study examined the perceived primary causes of the Boko Haram insurgency in Borno State, Nigeria, based on feedback from 112 participants. The findings indicate that unemployment (73.2%), poverty (67.9%), political exclusion (62.5%), religious extremism (58.0%), and poor governance/corruption (53.6%) are the most significant factors driving the insurgency. Other important contributors include ethnic issues (42.9%) and the spread of illegal weapons (33.0%).

The results reveal a complex problem where social and economic hardships, political exclusion, and failures in governance combine with radical beliefs to promote violent extremism. When viewed through the Relative Deprivation Theory, the findings suggest that feelings of unmet expectations, whether economic, political, or social, create frustration that insurgent groups exploit for recruitment and organisation.

Conclusion

The Boko Haram insurgency in Borno State is not caused by just one thing but is the result of various grievances working together. The high levels of unemployment and poverty reported by respondents underscore the economic roots of the conflict. Political exclusion and poor governance increase dissatisfaction, while extremist beliefs help turn this frustration into violent actions.

Using the Relative Deprivation Theory in this situation reveals that insurgency thrives where there is a significant gap between what people expect and what they experience, especially when there are few legitimate avenues to express their concerns. If we do not address these deeply rooted issues, security measures will only provide short-term relief, as the underlying conditions that support the insurgency will remain unchanged.

Recommendations

Economic Empowerment and Job Creation: Develop targeted job programs for young people, offer vocational training, and support entrepreneurship in areas affected by conflict. Focus on

developing agricultural value chains and assisting small businesses to create more job opportunities.

Political Inclusion and Governance Reform: Enhance local governance systems to ensure marginalised communities have fair political representation. Implement anti-corruption strategies and improve public services to restore trust in government institutions.

Integrated Counter-Radicalisation Strategies: Collaborate with respected religious and community leaders to counter extremist messages through grassroots education and awareness about peace. Establish community programs to address radicalisation and reintegration of former insurgents.

Social Cohesion and Conflict Resolution: Encourage discussions among different ethnic and religious groups to resolve past conflicts. Launch community-led peace-building projects that include youth, women, and traditional leaders.

Arms Control and Security Sector Reform: Strengthen border controls to prevent the illicit flow of weapons. Enhance intelligence gathering and strengthen cooperation between police and communities to disrupt insurgent networks.

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