

Insecurity, Rural-Urban Migration and Food Security in North-Central Nigeria: Implications for National Security and Social Stability

Abaji, Abdullahi Salamatu¹; Akoji, Solomon John¹; Rintep, Friday Christopher²; and Gonten, Wakdam Munporitgak³

¹Department of Sociology, Federal University of Lafia, Nigeria. ²Department of Sociology, University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria. ³Department of Psychology, Plateau State University, Bokokos.

Corresponding author: abaji_salamatu@socsci.fulafia.edu.ng

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62154/qjhcer.2025.020.01029>

Abstract

North Central, once considered Nigeria's "food safe haven," now grapples with a hollowing-out of its production base, increasing hunger, and dependency. This study examines the effects of insecurity and rural-urban migration on food security and urban social infrastructure across North Central, Nigeria. The study is anchored on the Human Security Theory. The study adopted a survey design accompanied by mixed-method research. Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau States were used as the target population of the study, aggregating 14.1 million. A sample size of 400 was derived using Taro Yamane's formula, and data were gathered through a structured questionnaire and key informant interviews (KIIs) with rural and urban dwellers, cutting across farmers, displaced persons, businessmen, civil servants, women leaders, religious leaders, community leaders, among others. Stratified and purposive sampling techniques were employed, and the research instrument yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.813 using Cronbach's Alpha. Findings revealed that insecurity has driven mass displacement from rural communities, weakened food production, and led to the occupation of abandoned settlements by bandits and herders. Urban areas are now overstrained with persisting issues of housing, sanitation, education, and unemployment. It was concluded that the insecurity not only threatens the existence of the rural dweller but also national food security and social cohesion. The study recommended that, government must prioritize rural security, rebuild displaced communities, and invest in rural infrastructure. Communities and individuals must promote resilience, early warning systems, and support returnees and NGOs, civil society, and faith-based organizations should intensify humanitarian/livelihood support for rural restoration.

Keywords: Rural-Urban Migration, Insecurity, Food Security, National Security, Social Stability, North-Central.

Introduction

The North Central is a region in the Federal Republic of Nigeria that is well-renowned for large scale agricultural production. Component states of the region are: Benue, Plateau, Kogi, Niger, Kwara and Nasarawa States. It is interesting to note that the Federal Capital Territory is considered under this region. The region has the potential of feeding not only Nigeria but Africa at large. However, the region has gradually transmogrified into one of

the most volatile regions in the country due to rising and reoccurring waves of violence. There has been wave of attacks, farmer-herder conflict, banditry, kidnappings amongst others from Benue to Plateau, Kogi to Niger and in the wake of such, leaving thousands dead and displaced. As reported by Daily Trust (2025, June 14), over 200 Villagers were killed in an overnight raid on Yelwata community, Guma Local Government area of Benue State. In sad and similar large scale attack is the massacre in Bokkos Local Government Area (LGA) of Plateau State in December 2023 where over 200 people were killed across 17 villages within 48 hours of coordinated attacks (International Crisis Group, 2024). The situation is not different in Mangu LGA, Plateau State, where earlier attacks between April and May 2023 resulted in the death of more than 130 persons, the burning of entire communities, and forced displacement of tens of thousands into makeshift camps (Amnesty International, 2023).

Out of the 6 states in the North-Central Region, there is no single state that is spared from insecurity. For instance, in Benue State which is often known as the “food basket of the nation” on countless occasions, armed militias suspected to be herders have stormed farming communities, killing residents, displacing entire populations, and rendering hectares of arable land inaccessible, (Sule, & Yusuf, 2023). This is supported by Daily Trust, (2025) which noted that in June 2025, the town of Yelwata in Guma LGA witnessed a horrifying massacre in which over 200 villagers were killed overnight, including women and children. There is indication from reports that more than 1.5 million Benue residents are now internally displaced, most of them farmers, living in squalid camps without access to farmland or social infrastructure (UNHCR, 2024). Benue state is a major supplier of yam, rice and cassava. These attacks occur around the hinterlands of the state, hence, there is no gainsaying that the spate of insecurity in the state has not only affected agricultural activities but has in no small degree, reduced output and total supply of such staple products nationwide.

Due to the porous borders of Nasarawa and Kogi states with Benue state, these states have also been drawn into the spiral of rural insecurity. In Nasarawa’s Awe and Doma LGAs, farmers- herders conflicts have displaced over 20,000 people between 2022 and 2024 (Nigeria Watch, 2024). In Kogi, the threat has taken a different form of rural highway ambushes and cross-river bandit raids rendering many communities near the Niger-Benue confluence ungovernable. A clear incident is the June 2023 killing of 12 farmers in Omala LGA where villagers were slaughtered while tending to their fields (Vanguard, 2023). Rural dwellers in this region often flee for safety to nearby towns and cities until the tension is completely doused. The implication of this rural exodus of many families from rural areas to towns is the abandonment of ancestral lands, crop production and rearing of animals. Niger State is not spared. It is one of the states in North Central heavily affected by banditry, kidnapping and unknown gunmen attacks. Between 2022 and 2023, Niger recorded more than 140 violent attacks and over 700 fatalities, especially in Shiroro, Rafi, and Munya LGAs (ACSS, 2024). Many of the once-thriving agrarian societies are now deserted. The rural population has now been reduced with many killed, abducted, or displaced. The

abandonment of critical crop-producing areas has rippling effects which include rising food prices, scarcity of food crops in the market, and the urban overpopulation of displaced rural dwellers with no available jobs or productive activities to be engaged on.

More so, as displaced populations flood urban areas ill-equipped to absorb them, new challenges emerge: rising crime rates, competition for scarce resources, ethnic tensions, and the proliferation of slums. The abandonment of rural life also leaves vast territories ungoverned, fertile for recruitment by criminal networks, thereby worsening national insecurity. The humanitarian toll is immense, but so too are the threats to food security, economic productivity, and national stability. These issues require urgent investigation.

Statement of the Problem

The wake of gory killings in Yelwata community in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State, where over 200 villagers were reportedly massacred in June 2025, is a sad reminder of the worsening state of insecurity in rural North Central Nigeria. This tragic event, like the Bokokos and Mangu killings in Plateau State and numerous others in Niger, Kogi, and Nasarawa, depict the growing vulnerability of farming communities that now live under constant threat of violence. These violent attacks have not only led to mass killings but have also forced thousands of farmers to abandon their ancestral lands and means of livelihood, thereby crippling agricultural productivity and local food systems. The situation has resulted in a growing wave of rural–urban migration such that, displaced individuals and families flee troubling villages for refuge in urban towns like Makurdi, Jos, Lokoja, Lafia, and Minna. Productive farmlands become abandoned and fallowed as farmers remain displaced. This presents a looming food crisis in the whole nation. This is because there is a link between insecurity in the rural area and increase in food prices due to scarcity. Ijirshar, Udaah, Mile, Vershima, & Adaudu, (2025) reported that just a 1% increase in rural insecurity leads to a 0.21% drop in food production. The National Bureau of Statistics (2024) documented a 60% rise in maize prices over one year. While rural villagers comprising of energetic youths keep pouring into urban centers, this may create a different layer of crisis due to the fact that urban slums will expand, unemployment will rise and pressure will be placed on already overstretched infrastructure, yielding to social instability such as petty crimes, theft, and youth restiveness.

Objectives of the Research

- i. To examine how rural insecurity has affected the agricultural productivity of farming communities in North Central Nigeria
- ii. To determine the [social and infrastructural] consequences of rural–urban migration on urban centers in North Central Nigeria
- iii. To ascertain the extent to which the abandonment of rural communities contributed to the proliferation of ungoverned spaces and insecurity escalation in the region

Literature Review

The issue of insecurity, rural-urban migration and food security is not new. The problem of insecurity, regardless its peculiarity and dynamics according to each region is not only common in North-Central region of Nigeria as it is a general problem not only in Nigeria but in Africa and other countries of the world. Hence, scholars have written extensively in this area, and there is need to review these studies with the aim of identifying grey areas and using such lens to understand the peculiar problem of the North Central.

Insecurity and Rural-Urban Migration

Insecurity means different things to different people and society however, according to Chandler (2017), insecurity encompasses ongoing threats to life, property, and communal cohesion, including violence, banditry, and forced displacement. This definition is sadly more than abstract when looking at the insecurity shrouding North Central Nigeria. In June 2025, over 200 people were massacred in Yelwata community alone, and in December 2023, coordinated attacks in Bokkos and Mangu LGAs of Plateau State claimed over 200 lives, leaving homes and farms in ashes (Human Rights Watch, 2025; International Crisis Group, 2024). These repeated acts can also be seen in Niger, Kogi and Nassarawa States.

This insecurity fuels a distinctive form of rural–urban migration which as defined by Todaro (1969) is movement driven by disparities in well-being; except here, fear, not hope, is the impetus. Gwanshak, Yusoff, and Shafie, (2022) surveyed 1,325 migrants in Jos, Plateau State and found that 58% fled rural areas primarily to escape violence, not in search of jobs or education. Stories of orphans in Makurdi IDP camps and traumatized families wandering urban streets are a manifest of a mass migration under duress rather than desire. According to International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2025), Benue state alone has over 1.5 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Meanwhile, urban centers are expanding due to refugee influx. Olorunfemi and Ede (2021) documented a 12% increase in informal settlements in Lokoja accompanied by an 8% rise in petty crime. Makurdi and Jos face similar challenges, as IDP camps mushroom, public services crumble, and social tension escalates. This mobility is occasioned not in pursuance of urban opportunity but due to insecurity. Amid this upheaval lies an often-overlooked crisis: the mental health fallout of uprooted rural families. According to Gwanshak et al. (2022) 67% of migrants reported symptoms of chronic stress, grief, and dislocation bringing about psychological crisis. This depicts the experience of rural dwellers about insecurity-driven migration.

Effects of Insecurity on Farming Activities and Crop Productions

One of the major effects of insecurity is on agricultural activities which is central to food security. Food security is defined commonly following the UN's 1996 World Food Summit as "a state when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." Achieving this is seen to become a mission impossible due to the

increasing insecurity which manifest in the area of farmer–herder violence, night attacks, unknown gunmen killings, banditry, kidnappings, and community massacres. This regularly disrupts every stage of food production, (Gwanshak et al, 2022). Beyond that, in the wake of insecurity, lives are usually lost, voices silenced, and generations uprooted. The U.S. Department of Agriculture projected an 8% decline in maize production in Nigeria in the 2024–25 marketing year, attributing much of this to insecurity, alongside high input costs and low government support (Mwangi, 2024). Recently, the National Bureau of Statistics recorded a 60% increase in maize prices between January 2023 and January 2024, directly linking these spikes to production disruptions (NBS, 2024). This sharp rise in staple prices is pushing approximately 33 million Nigerians into acute food insecurity, particularly in conflict-affected states like Benue, Plateau, and Niger (Reuters, 2024).

Thus, the impact on food security has been profound. One striking example is Benue State’s rural heartland. A recent study by Ijirshar et al. (2025) in Guma, Agatu, and Gwer LGAs which established a quantifiable link between insecurity and agricultural collapse. The study found that a 1% increase in rural violence in Benue translates to a 0.211% drop in crop production and a 0.311% decline in livestock yields. National statistics confirm this downward trend: maize prices surged by over 60% between January 2023 and January 2024, a spike directly linked to disrupted farming and transport breakdowns (NBS, 2024). Another study exemplifying this is a study into yogi yams in Logo LGA by Oriko et al., (2024) who reported that 67.3% of farmers experienced reduced productivity after herdsmen attacks, with yams laying unharvested, inputs destroyed, and entire fields abandoned in desperation. Similarly, (Kwaghtser, 2019) reported an astonishing 56% decline in food production following violent incursions, with 62% of farmers seeing their income shrink. Fertile soils remain bushy wastelands, while rural families struggle to recover planting seasons amid trauma and insecurity. Also, villages are usually burnt down and farmlands destroyed during insecurity which makes it hard for rural dwellers to return for any agricultural activity in the aftermath of the violence.

Rural-Urban Migration: The Rise of Rural Insecurity and Ungoverned Spaces

Ungoverned spaces serve as strategic safe havens for militant and bandit groups. The concept of “ungoverned spaces” as explained by Ejiofor (2022) is when the state fails to enforce law and supply protection and non-state actors exploit the void-not just to commit crime, but to build alternative power structures. He added that these zones are used for recruitment, arms storage, and planning attacks. This territorial vacuum threatens not just local communities, but raises the stakes of insurgency across state lines. A study by Aremu and Ogundele (2023) reported that depopulated farms in Niger State are increasingly commandeered by bandits and militia, serving as recruitment grounds and training camps. The vacuum left by fleeing farmers becomes a strategic asset for criminal networks; forces that threaten not only rural resilience but national security at large. Also, due to depopulation of the rural areas, climatic and socio-economic stressors get worst thereby flourishing ungoverned territories where the state’s presence is nominal. Egwu (2022)

traces these vacuums to the rise of cattle-rustling gangs in North Central. Farmlands and secondary roads across Benue, Niger, and Kwara have reportedly become ambush zones for cattle theft and abductors. Without government oversight, local farmers are left to defend their fields or flee altogether. Aremu and Ogundele (2023) added that displaced Niger State farmers report being followed into towns by armed gangs bringing into bear the reach of these non-state actors. Furthermore, connection has been established between ungoverned spaces and sovereignty. When the state cannot secure large swathes of its own land, public confidence in national institutions erodes. As Egwu (2022) argues, this delegitimizes the state and empowers criminal militias that provide “security” in parallel to official forces. For a country already challenged by multiple insurgencies, this is a systemic failure with profound national security implications.

Effects of Rural-Urban Migration on Social Stability

The sudden influxes of traumatized migrants overcrowd cities that lack the infrastructure or social cohesion to integrate them. Olorunfemi and Ede (2021) warn that such social pressure can trigger competition, inter-ethnic tension, and localized unrest. Olorunfemi and Ede (2021) added that in Lokoja, schools, clinics, and public utilities are struggling to cope with the abrupt demographic surge erodes social stability and heighten tensions among densely populated migrant-host communities. Affordable housing and sanitation aside, such urban settlements soon become hubs not just for despair and disorder, but also for potential radicalization and communal conflict. They revealed a 12% increase in slum settlements and an 8% rise in petty crime in Lokoja since 2019, trends attributed directly to the rural influx of insecure migrants. In Jos and Makurdi, migrant populations have turned makeshift shelters into permanent slums resulting to stretching health centers, schools, and sanitation systems beyond breaking point (Ijirshar et al 2025).

More so, the social fabric within these cities is under growing stress. Urban violence characterized by theft, assault, and communal clashes, appears increasingly among migrant youth deprived of livelihoods. There is a connection between rural migrants and crime, with kidnappings, drug abuse, and robbery on the rise as migrants struggle to survive. These incidents often flare along ethnic or communal lines, straining trust between host communities and newcomers, (Gwanshak et al, 2022). Additionally, urban health and welfare erode under the strain. Migrant settlements often lack clean water, sanitation, and access to clinics leading to public health hazards and social exclusion. This not only compromises city wellbeing but deepens the sense among migrants that they are second-class citizens, seeding social disillusionment and setting the stage for long-term instability, (Reuters, 2024). While these studies capture the nature of insecurity and its attendant impact on food, such studies did not cover the overarching issue of national insecurity and social stability.

Implication of Insecurity and Rural-Urban Migration on National Security

The demographic and social upheavals created by insecurity-induced migration have direct reverberations on national security. First, overcrowded slums become refuges for criminal gangs. In Lagos's Somolu, for instance, dense informal housing was linked to high gang violence rates (Nigeria Police, 2005), hinting at the pattern now emerging in North Central cities. Where legitimate structures falter, criminal networks fill the void. Second, as rural communities empty, vast ungoverned spaces emerge; safe havens for bandits, cultists, and militia. Egwu (2022) and Aremu and Ogundele (2023) document how towns in Niger State have become de facto no-go zones, providing bases for illegal armed activity. These zones amplify insecurity, complicating state authority and spreading violence beyond rural borders. Third, the urban pressure contributes to societal fractures. Social science research links urban overcrowding; when paired with high youth unemployment to increases in radicalization and recruitment into violent groups (Samuel, 2024). In North Central, where both conflict and poverty are rising, the risk of politically motivated violence or insurgency grows as marginalized youths seek belonging and income through anomalous means. Finally, the erosion of state authority, both rural and urban undermines governance. As noted by Egwu (2022), when the state cannot secure its people or territory, its legitimacy is compromised. From these studies, what remains unknown is how insecurity, the collapse of local farming systems and rural-urban migration affect national security. This study is positioned to investigate the interconnected effects of insecurity, rural–urban migration, farming collapse, and emerging ungoverned spaces within North Central Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The Human Security Theory, developed by the United Nations Development Program in its 1994 Human Development Report is used to underpin the study. The theory shifts the traditional concept of security from a focus on state sovereignty to the protection of individuals. It identifies seven dimensions of human security; economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political. Central to this theory is the recognition that security is not just the absence of conflict, but the protection of people from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression, and from sudden disruptions in daily life (UNDP, 1994). In the context of North Central Nigeria, this theory allows a multidimensional exploration of how persistent insecurity violates not only physical safety but also food access, economic livelihood, and community life.

The strength of the Human Security Theory lies in its broad, people-centered framework. Unlike realist or militaristic approaches that focus narrowly on borders or insurgency, it brings attention to how insecurity destroys the daily lives of ordinary people. For instance, in Benue and Plateau states, the displacement of farmers and the rise of ungoverned spaces not only threaten national stability but also disrupt food systems, displace children from schools, and tear apart communities all of which are covered by the human security lens (Ijirshar et al., 2025; Egwu, 2022). Other perspectives, such as the push–pull model of migration (Lee, 1966) or the social disorganization approach to community breakdown

(Shaw & McKay, 1942), shed light on single dimensions of displacement and instability, but they function most effectively inside the wider, integrative frame provided by Human Security Theory. The Human Security Theory's holistic nature is especially useful for scholars examining complex interlinkages between rural violence, urban chaos, and systemic collapse. However, the theory is not without limitations. Its broadness often makes it difficult to operationalize in concrete policy terms. Critics argue that the theory can become too all-encompassing, making it hard to measure or prioritize among competing threats (Paris, 2001). Moreover, because it focuses on individual welfare, it sometimes underplays structural and institutional weaknesses that perpetuate insecurity. Despite these criticisms, the theory's adaptability and inclusivity remain its greatest strengths, especially in analyzing overlapping crises in fragile regions like North Central Nigeria, where security, development, and migration intersect daily. In practical application, the theory justifies not only military responses to insecurity but also calls for investment in rural education, agricultural resilience, conflict prevention, and urban planning. For example, supporting displaced farmers with safe return programs and livelihood rebuilding not only restores food production but reduces urban overcrowding and potential crime. Policies based on this theory would recognize the risks of allowing ungoverned spaces to fester and instead propose integrated responses combining security patrols, community policing, food aid, and trauma counseling. Thus, despite its theoretical broadness, Human Security Theory proves to be highly relevant and effective in explaining and addressing the real-life experiences of those affected by rural violence and displacement in North Central Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopted a survey design approach using mixed-method (triangulation) research which allowed the use of questionnaire, interview and observation. Three states: Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa were purposively selected due to their high intensity of displacement and conflict. In each state, 2 rural communities affected by insecurity and two urban areas with observable traffic of rural migration were chosen, given a total of 12 communities: Guma and Logo (rural), Makurdi and Otukpo (urban) in Benue; Riyom and Bokkos (rural), Jos North and Jos South (urban) in Plateau; and Keana and Awe (rural), Lafia and Karu (urban) in Nasarawa. The combined population of Benue (6,236,763), Plateau (4,200,442), and Nasarawa (3,685,546) is 14,122,751 (City Population, 2024). Using the Taro Yamane formula for sample size determination at a 5% margin of error, the required sample size was calculated as approximately 400 respondents.

To ensure appropriate representation, a combination of purposive and stratified sampling techniques was used with purposive sampling to target conflict-affected areas and stratified sampling to include various sub-groups like farmers, women, displaced persons, and traders (Kothari, 2004; Creswell, 2014). Practically, in each state, two rural communities and two urban centers were selected, making up a total of 12 communities. Each of the 12 communities had 33 to 34 respondents, broken down as follows: Makurdi (34), Otukpo (33),

Guma (34), Logo (33), Jos North (34), Jos South (33), Riyom (34), Bokokos (33), Lafia (33), Karu (33), Keana (33), and Awe (33). Within each community, respondents were selected using systematic random sampling from household lists compiled by community leaders, ensuring representativeness across demographics; non-response was mitigated by oversampling by 10% and follow-up visits. The questionnaire comprised six multiple-choice questions to assess the impact of insecurity on agriculture and related social effects. Reliability was assessed using SPSS version 25, with Cronbach's $\alpha=0.813$ for the overall questionnaire, indicating reliable measurement of the impact of insecurity. Additionally, four key informants per community (traditional rulers, religious leaders, youth representatives, security personnel, or farmer/herder group leaders) were purposively selected, totaling 48 informants for interviews to complement survey data. This is presented in table 1.

Table 1: Sample Distribution

State	Community Type	Number of Communities	Respondents per Community	Total per State
Benue	2 Rural (Guma, Logo) 2 Urban (Makurdi, Otukpo)	4	34 respondents $\times$ 4 = 136	136
Plateau	2 Rural (Riyom, Bokokos) 2 Urban (Jos North, Jos South)	4	33 respondents $\times$ 4 = 132	132
Nasarawa	2 Rural (Awe, Keana) 2 Urban (Lafia, Karu)	4	33 respondents $\times$ 4 = 132	132
Total		12		400

Source: Researchers' Computation (2025)

Instruments were subjected for content validity and the questionnaire was considered reliable after scoring a coefficient Cronbach's alpha value of 0.813. Quantitative data collected was collated using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v.26) and presented in simple percentages in charts and tables while the qualitative data was analyzed using thematic content analysis. Both data were presented side by side – triangulated.

Results

The study is built around three critical questions and objectives. Four hundred (400) copies of questionnaire were used for the study, however, the study validated a total of three hundred and eighty nine (389) copies. A total of 11 copies were considered invalid. This gives a total response rate of 97.3% which is considered adequate (Cresswell, 2014). The data generated from these questions are presented below and discussed subsequently:

Objective 1: To examine how rural insecurity has affected the agricultural productivity of farming communities in North Central Nigeria

Question 1: In what ways has insecurity affected your farming activities?

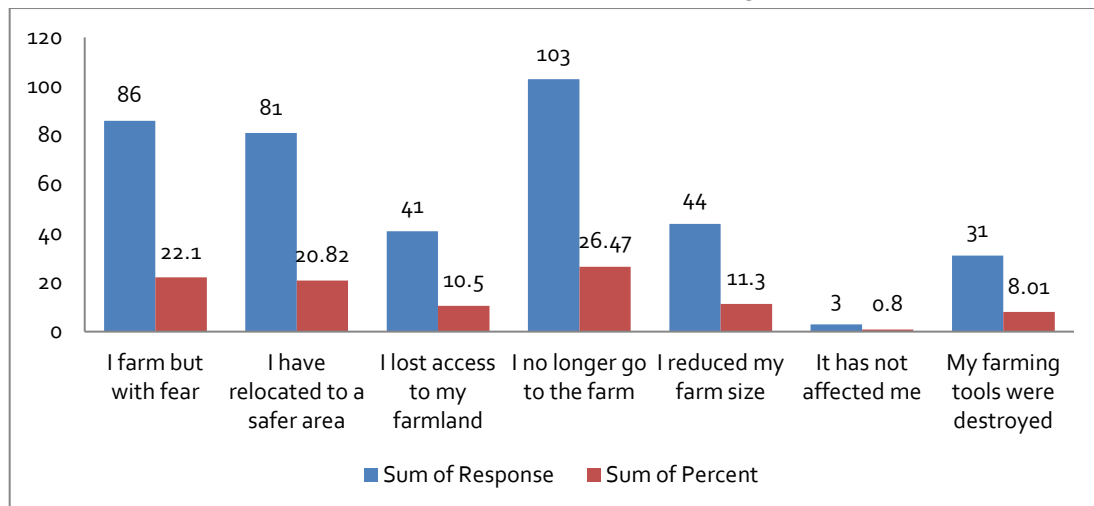


Figure 1: Ways in Which Insecurity Affects Farming Activities

Source: Field Survey, SPSS Output v.26 (2025)

Figure 1 shows varying responses of respondents in relation to the effect of insecurity on agricultural activities. From the responses, $n=86(22.1\%)$ of the respondents affirmed that they farm but with fear, $n=81(20.82\%)$ of the respondents were of the opinion that they have relocated to a safer area, $n=41(10.5\%)$ of the respondents affirmed that they lost access to their farmlands, $n=103(25.7\%)$ of the respondents affirmed that they no longer go to their farms, $n=44(11.3\%)$, and $n=31(8.01\%)$ of the respondents were of the opinion that they have reduced their farm size and that their farming tools were destroyed respectively, while $n=3(0.8\%)$ of the respondents said they were not affected. By implication, insecurity has significantly disrupted agricultural livelihoods in rural communities of North Central Nigeria, leading to drastic shifts in farming patterns and overall productivity. Quantitative findings reveal that 25.7% of respondents no longer go to their farms, 22.1% farm with fear, and 20.8% have relocated to safer areas, while others have either lost access to farmland, reduced farm sizes, or had their tools destroyed. These descriptive statistics are reinforced by qualitative accounts, where respondents narrated distressing experiences such as farming close to their homes due to fear of attacks, loss of productive land, stolen or burnt tools, and the psychological trauma of constant danger. For instance, a farmer in Bokkos LGA described farming with fear and watching his tools being stolen, while a vigilante in Awe LGA reported personal displacement from his large cassava farm and emphasized the widespread despair among local farmers. Similarly, a community leader from Guma LGA lamented the collapse of their agrarian economy, noting how large-scale farming has given way to backyard subsistence, with many young people abandoning agriculture altogether.

These responses show the intensive consequences of insecurity on food production, economic resilience, and rural stability.

Question 2: What changes have you noticed in your agricultural output since the insecurity began?

Table 2: Noticeable Changes in Agricultural Output Due to Insecurity

Response	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Total loss of crops	134	34.4
Major reduction in yield	101	26.0
Moderate reduction in yield	09	2.3
Minor reduction	02	0.5
I have shifted to livestock	03	0.8
I now depend on food aid	58	14.9
I have stopped farming completely	80	20.6
No change	02	0.5
Total	389	100.0

Source: Field Survey, SPSS Output v.26 (2025)

Table 2 shows that out of 389 respondents, n=134(34.4%) of the respondents were of the opinion that they encountered loss of crops, n=101(26.0%) of the respondents experienced major reduction in yields. Meanwhile, n=80(20.6%) and n=58(14.9%) of the respondents stopped farming completely and depend on food aid respectively, while n=3(0.8%), n=2(0.5%) and another n=2(0.5%) of the respondents said they have shifted to livestock, experienced minor reduction and no change respectively. By implication, the result shows that insecurity has led to a drastic decline in food production, with many farmers either abandoning their farms or experiencing significant crop losses and reduced yields. This situation has increased dependence on food aid and pushed some into alternative livelihoods like livestock rearing. The interviews conducted support these findings. As the farmer specifically stated, "All my maize and yam spoil last year because I no fit go harvest dem early...na fear make me run leave am" (Male, 39, Guma LGA, Benue State). Another added, "Young farmers have abandoned farm to join okada or move to town; we now depend on government food sometimes" (Traditional Ruler, 63, Bokkos LGA, Plateau State), while a female farmer shared, "We no dey plant again like before; last year, we chop government rice three times for one month" (Female Farmer, 45, Keana LGA, Nasarawa State).

Objective 2: To determine the [social and infrastructural] consequences of rural–urban migration on urban centers in North Central Nigeria.

Question 3: What challenges has your urban area faced due to increased rural migration?

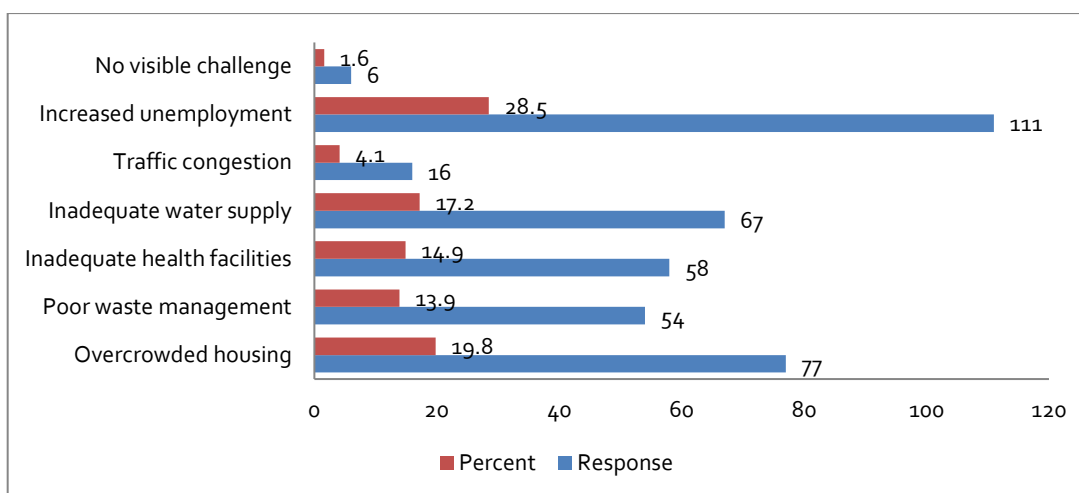


Figure 2: Consequences of Rural–urban Migration on Urban Centers in North-Central Nigeria

Source: Field Survey, SPSS Output v.26 (2025)

Figure 2 shows the challenges facing urban areas due to rural migration. From the responses, $n=111(28.5\%)$ of the respondents feel it has led to increased unemployment, $n=77(19.8\%)$ and $n=67(17.2\%)$ of the respondents felt it led to overcrowded housing and inadequate water supply respectively. More so, $n=58(14.9\%)$ and $n=54(13.9\%)$ of the respondents said it led to inadequate health facilities and poor waste management respectively, $n=16(4.1\%)$ of the respondents said it led to traffic congestion while $n=6(1.6\%)$ said there is no visible challenge. This result is supported by the interview carried out with selected respondents in Jos North, Lafia, and Makurdi who affirmed that rural migration has contributed to serious pressure on infrastructure in towns. A youth leader in Jos North noted, “Too many people have come from places of attacks and are now occupying places like Kabong, Jenta, and so on and you know these areas already are like ghettos, there is no work, no good sanitation and so on.” Similarly, a community leader in Bokkos explained that many families live in overcrowded one-room apartments due to rural insecurity, stressing, “now bokkos has become like Jos and our regular market day because you will see a lot of people on the street and so on. Houses are not becoming scarce. You will see one single room having 20 people.” A resident in Makurdi also pointed out the rising struggle for clean water and healthcare, saying, “Public boreholes no dey reach everybody, and clinics dey filled every time.” These lived experiences support the data on Figure 2 which shows that 28.5% reported increased unemployment, 19.8% cited overcrowded housing, and 17.2% mentioned inadequate water supply. Thus, the rising movement of people from insecure rural areas into urban centres has increased competition for scarce resources such as water, housing, and has increased poverty.

Question 4: Which group do you think is most affected by pressure on social services?

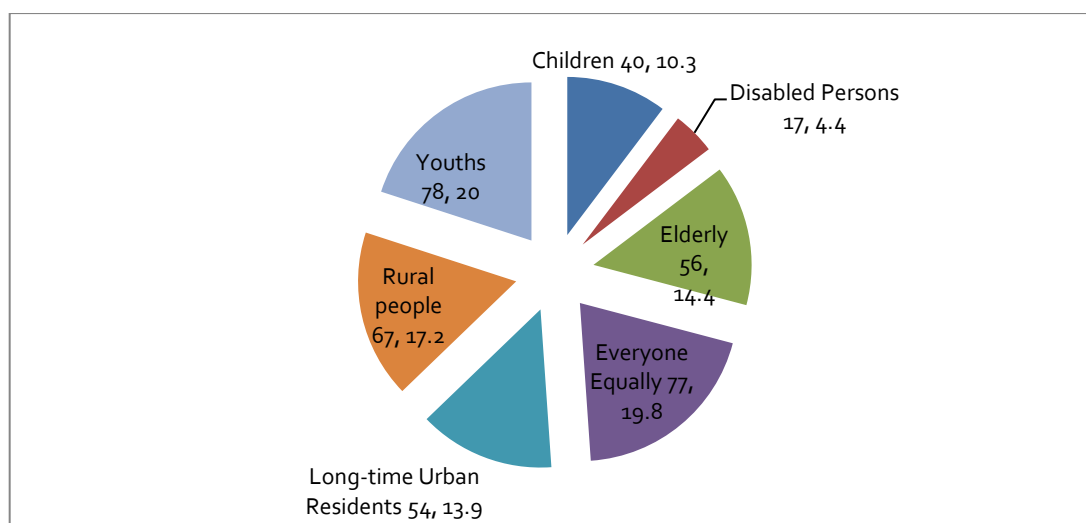


Figure 3: Age Group Affected Most by Pressure on Social Services

Source: Field Survey, SPSS Output v.26 (2025)

Figure 3 shows responses on the group most affected by pressure on social services. From the responses, $n=78(20\%)$ of the respondents felt, $n=77(19.8\%)$ of the respondents confirmed that everyone is affected equally, $n=67(17\%)$ of the respondents felt rural people are most affected, $n=56(14\%)$ of the respondents felt the elderly are most affected, $n=40(10.3\%)$ of the respondents felt children are most affected while $n=17(4.4\%)$ of the respondents felt the disabled persons are most affected. This is substantiated by the interview conducted with residents and community leaders in urban areas centres of Jos, Lafia, and Makurdi. A health worker in Lafia noted that the elderly suffer the most due to long queues and inadequate care, saying, “most old people cannot stand for a long time, yet, they wait for hours for check-up and the queue sometimes is much” A resident in Jos stressed that children are also affected, especially in overcrowded schools, noting, “public schools are jam-packed with students with few teachers and the children are not given adequate attention because the parents always go out to find what they can sustain the family... sometimes they go to work with the children”. Meanwhile, a vigilante in Makurdi emphasized that rural migrants often lack access to services because they are not familiar with the system. These experiences align with the data showing that 20% felt the elderly are most affected, 19.8% believed everyone suffers equally, and 17% singled out rural people as the most affected. By implication, the increased demand on limited urban social services disproportionately affects vulnerable groups especially the elderly, rural migrants, and children.

Objective 3: To ascertain the extent to which the abandonment of rural communities contributed to the proliferation of ungoverned spaces and insecurity escalation in the region

Question 5: What is currently happening in the abandoned rural communities near you?

Table 3: Current Situation in Abandoned Rural Communities

Response	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Used by bandits/criminals	176	45.3
Turned to grazing fields	97	24.9
Occupied by displaced persons	02	0.5
Completely empty	02	0.5
Used for illegal mining	09	2.3
Used by vigilante groups	31	8.0
Some people are gradually returning	48	12.3
I don't know	24	6.2
Total	389	100.0

Source: Field Survey, SPSS Output v.26 (2025)

Table 3 shows responses on what is currently happening in the abandoned rural communities. From the respondents, n=176(45.3%) of the respondents feel the abandoned rural communities are used by bandits and criminals, n=97(24.9%) of the respondents said they are turned to grazing fields, n=48(12.3%) of the respondents said some rural dwellers are gradually returning, n=31(8.0%) of the respondents said they are used by vigilante groups, n=2(0.5%) and another n=2(0.5%) of the respondents they are occupied by displaced persons completely empty respectively while n=24(6.2%) of the respondents had no idea about it. In furtherance to this findings, key informant interviews conducted with a local farmer, a traditional ruler, and a vigilante officer in the affected areas are in support of it. The traditional ruler in Riyom said that, "Our villages have turned to hideout for bandits, even security personnel are scared of going there. A vigilante member in Logo confirmed that some of these areas are now patrol routes for criminal gangs, stating, "Dem dey pass bush path, dey hide gun for old farms." Meanwhile, the farmer noted that his old farmland has become a grazing area, saying, "Since we have left our farms because of these attacks, the place is now left for cows, every day you will see cows on the farms eating everything there like is their own." This clearly corroborates the findings that 45.3% of respondents believe abandoned communities are now used by criminals, while 24.9% say they have become grazing fields. This is indicating that the abandonment of rural communities not only threatens food security but also creates ungoverned spaces that foster insecurity.

Question 6: What security challenges have increased due to abandoned rural areas?

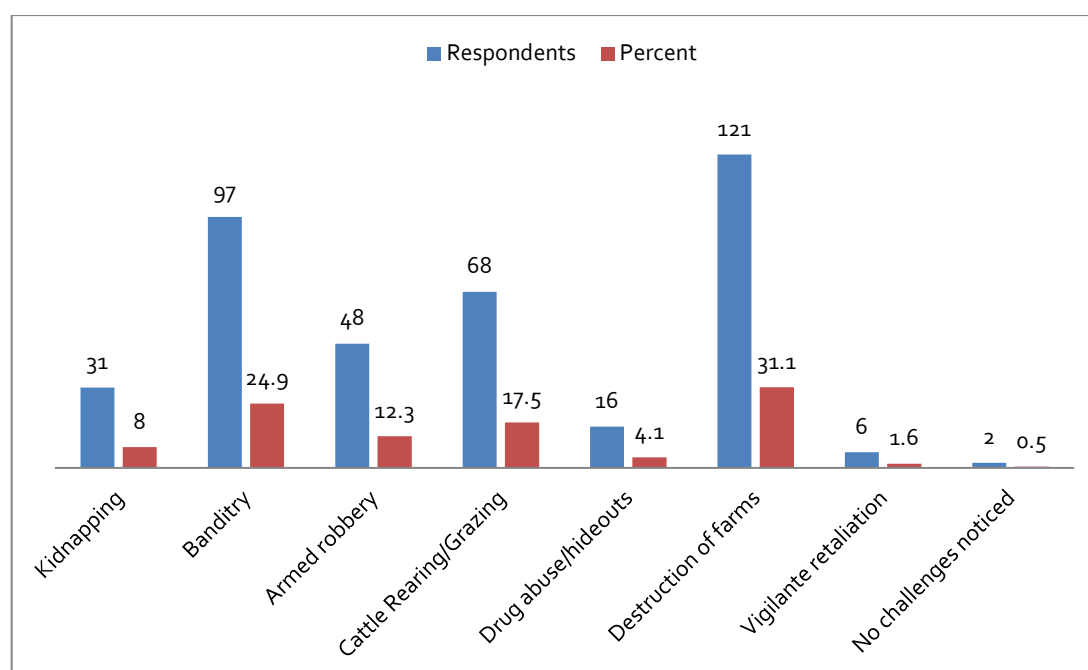


Figure 4: Rising Security Challenges Due to Abandonment of Rural Areas

Source: Field Survey, SPSS Output v.26 (2025)

Figure 4 shows that, $n=121(31.1\%)$ of the respondents felt that destruction of farms has increased due to abandoned communities, $n=97(23.9\%)$ of the respondents affirmed to armed banditry, $n=68(17.5\%)$ of the respondents affirmed to cattle grazing, $n=48(12.3\%)$ and $n=31(8.0\%)$ of the respondents affirmed to armed robbery and kidnapping respectively, $n=6(1.6\%)$ of the respondents affirmed to vigilante retaliation while $n=2(0.5\%)$ of the respondents said there are no challenges noticed. This result is supported by the interviews conducted with a displaced farmer, a youth leader, and a vigilante member. A farmer from a community in Riyom stated, "When we left, they burned down our houses close to our farmlands that remain. There is nothing anymore to back to now." The youth leader in Bokkos added, "Bandits do camp in some of the villages and is from there that they launch their attacks on our people that are near the place." A vigilante member further revealed that cattle grazing has taken over most of the abandoned farmlands, saying, "Once people are ransacked from their homes and farmlands, herders usually bring in their precious cows to graze over graze over our crops that we ran and left without fear." These statements corroborate the data in Figure 4, where 31.1% of respondents reported increased destruction of farms, 23.9% pointed to armed banditry, and 17.5% indicated cattle grazing as major consequences of rural abandonment.

Discussion

Data was collected and presented across the three objectives that guided the study. In the first objective which examines how rural insecurity has affected the agricultural productivity of farming communities in North Central Nigeria. It was discovered that insecurity has

significantly disrupted farming activities, with many farmers abandoning their farmlands, reducing their cultivation sizes, or farming with fear due to persistent attacks. Quantitative findings (Figures 1 and Table 2) reveal high levels of fear (22.1%), relocation (20.8%), abandonment of farms (25.7%), crop losses (34.4%), and dependence on food aid (14.9%). These disruptions are further corroborated by interviews presenting real-life accounts of destroyed tools, stolen harvests, and displacement of entire households. Yusuf and Adesina (2022) found that insecurity in agrarian regions significantly reduces farm output and increases food insecurity. Similarly, Gwanshak et al. (2022) observed that insecurity has displaced rural farmers, leading to loss of agricultural livelihoods and economic hardship in affected regions. In support of this, the Human Security Theory emphasizes the protection of people's safety, livelihoods, and dignity as a foundation for sustainable development. It explains that agricultural productivity cannot thrive where physical security is threatened, as fear and displacement erode the stability required for farming and food systems to function effectively.

In objective two which examines the social and infrastructural consequences of rural–urban migration on urban centers in North Central Nigeria. From the questionnaire and interviews, it was discovered that rural–urban migration has led to overcrowded housing, increased unemployment, inadequate water supply, poor waste management, and pressure on health facilities in towns like Jos, Lafia, and Makurdi. For instance, 28.5% of respondents said unemployment had increased, 19.8% pointed to overcrowded housing, and 17.2% mentioned a lack of clean water. Interviews confirmed these findings, as community members spoke about families living in single-room apartments, poor sanitation, and the struggle to access public services. A youth leader in Jos North said that people displaced by insecurity are now congesting already poor areas with limited resources. A resident in Makurdi noted that boreholes and clinics can no longer serve the growing population. These issues are in line with the findings of Ijirshar et al. (2025), who observed that increased rural migration has overwhelmed urban infrastructure in North Central Nigeria. Similarly, Egwu (2022) emphasized that insecurity-driven migration has caused urban centres to struggle with basic social services. This is also established by the theoretical framework of the study, The Human Security Theory which helps to interpret the observed overcrowding, unemployment, and resource strain as structural outcomes of migration patterns rather than isolated challenges.

In the third objective which focuses on ascertaining the extent to which the abandonment of rural communities contributed to the proliferation of ungoverned spaces and insecurity escalation in the region. From the data in Table 3, 45.3% of respondents reported that abandoned rural communities are now used by bandits and criminals, 24.9% said they have become grazing fields, while 12.3% noted a slow return of displaced rural dwellers. Interviews with key informants confirmed these findings a traditional ruler in Riyom described the villages as hideouts for bandits, while a vigilante officer in Logo noted that these areas have become passage routes and weapon storage points for criminal gangs. A farmer lamented that his abandoned farmland is now overrun by cattle. Similarly, Figure 4

shows that 31.1% of respondents believe farm destruction has increased, 23.9% pointed to armed banditry, and 17.5% to cattle grazing. Further interviews supported these claims, with a displaced farmer stating their houses and farmlands were destroyed, while a youth leader confirmed that criminals launch attacks from abandoned settlements. These findings align with Kwaghtser (2019) who noted that the abandonment of rural settlements creates a vacuum often filled by non-state actors, and Ejiofor (2022) who argued that such ungoverned spaces are major drivers of insecurity and disruption in affected regions. This is further supported by the Human Security Theory which posits that the absence of effective governance and institutional presence in abandoned rural communities creates a power vacuum that is often exploited by non-state actors, leading to the proliferation of ungoverned spaces and escalating insecurity; it holds that when legitimate authority withdraws, such spaces become fertile grounds for criminal enterprises, armed groups, and other destabilizing forces, thereby deepening the cycle of violence and instability in affected regions.

Conclusion

The findings across the three objectives paint a disturbing but lucid picture of life in North Central Nigeria. Rural insecurity has deeply eroded agricultural productivity; farmers now abandon fertile lands out of fear, cultivate with one eye over their shoulders, or relocate entirely, leaving families hungry and dependent on external food aid. This rural collapse has driven thousands into urban centers like Jos, Makurdi, and Lafia, where basic amenities are already over-utilized. People now crowd into one-room apartments, queue for hours at a single borehole, and compete for limited menial jobs which create frustrations and social tension. At the same time, rural communities left behind are no longer only empty spaces, but have become hideouts for bandits, storage areas for weapons, and safe spaces for criminal operations. Lands belonging to farmers right from birth have become grazing paths and areas for cattle and a hideout for attackers. It is critical to note that the effects of insecurity transcend beyond the farmers and their farmlands; it has rippling effects on the nation's food systems, urban safety nets, and national insecurity, and it will continue if cogent measures are not taken. These findings bring the urgent need for a robust theoretical engagement with the dynamics of state withdrawal and the creation of ungoverned spaces, while also demanding decisive policy interventions that prioritize rural security, strengthen institutional presence, and integrate conflict-sensitive agricultural policies into national security strategies.

Recommendations

Arising from the findings of the study, the following recommendations are forwarded:

1. To restore agricultural productivity, the government should deploy well-trained, community-based security personnel to protect farming areas and ensure displaced farmers can return safely. Communities can organize local vigilance groups with support from security agencies, while NGOs and faith-based

organizations should provide seeds, tools, and trauma healing to affected farmers. Individuals with farmlands should be encouraged to farm in cooperatives for safety. Agricultural extension officers must also return to these communities to support food production and rebuild trust in rural life.

2. To reduce pressure on urban centres, the government should invest in expanding urban infrastructure such as building more low-cost housing, improving water supply, and expanding health services. Communities should support migrants through local integration initiatives such as shared housing. Also, Civil Societies and NGOs can offer vocational training and entrepreneurship skills to unemployed youth promote small business startups.
3. To prevent abandoned rural areas from becoming criminal hideouts, the government must reclaim and rebuild these communities through reconstruction projects, rural policing, and incentives for returnees. Farmers must return to their ancestral homes and go about their normal lives.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely acknowledge the support and cooperation of the rural communities across Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa, and Kogi States who participated in this study. Gratitude goes to the farmers, youth leaders, religious and traditional leaders who shared their experiences despite security concerns. Special thanks also to the local vigilante groups and neighbourhood watch for granting access and helping to ensure safety during fieldwork. Their contributions were vital in providing reliable data and first hand information into the realities on the ground.

References

- Africa Center for Strategic Studies [ACSS]. (2024). *Tracking violence and displacement in Niger State*. Retrieved from <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/spiraling-criminal-gang-violence-in-nigeria/>
- Amnesty International. (2023). *Nigeria: Authorities must protect communities after Mangu killings*. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/nigeria-authorities-must-protect-communities-after-mangu-killings/>
- Aremu, O.J., & Ogundele, E. (2023). Urban expansion and agricultural land loss in Niger State, Nigeria. *Land Use Policy*, 132, 106703.
- Chandler, D. (2017). *Resilience: The governance of complexity*. Routledge.
- City Population. (2024). *Population of Nigerian States*. Retrieved from <https://www.citypopulation.de/en/nigeria/>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Daily Trust. (2025, June 14). *Over 200 killed in overnight raid on Yelwata community, Benue*. Retrieved from <https://dailytrust.com>
- Egwu, S. (2022). Unguarded areas and rural insecurity in Nigeria, 2010–2022. *Journal of Modern African Studies*.
- Ejiofor, P. F. (2022). *Beyond Ungoverned Spaces: Relative Deprivation and Banditry in Nigeria*. *African Security*, 15(2), 111–141.

- Gwanshak, J. Y., Yusoff, M. B. M., & Shafie, A. B. (2022). Issues of rural–urban migration in North-Central Nigeria: A study of Plateau State urban centres. *International Journal of Health Sciences*, 6(S2), 1698–1714.
- Human Rights Watch. (2025). *Nigeria: Yelwata massacre and ongoing violence in Benue State*.
- Ijirshar, V. U., Udaah, I. I., Mile, B. N., Vershima, J. S., & Adaudu, A. (2025). Effect of insecurity on agricultural output in Benue State, Nigeria. *arXiv preprint*.
- International Crisis Group. (2024). *Conflict Watch: Nigeria's Plateau State massacres*. Retrieved from <https://crisisgroup.org>
- International Crisis Group. (2024). *Conflict Watch: Plateau State coordinated attacks & Bokkos massacre*.
- Kothari, C. R. (2004). *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques* (2nd ed.). New Age International Publishers.
- Kwaghtser. (2019). Impacts of herdsman–crop farmer conflict on agricultural production in Benue State. *Zamfara Journal of Politics and Development*, 5(3).
- Mwangi, G. (2024, March 15). Nigeria 2024–25 corn production expected to fall 8%. *Wall Street Journal*.
- National Bureau of Statistics. (2024). *Selected Food Price Watch*.
- Nigeria Watch. (2024). *Annual report on violent deaths in Nigeria*. Retrieved from <https://nigeriawatch.org>
- Olorunfemi, F. B., & Ede, P. N. (2021). Rural–urban migration and urban expansion: A study of Lokoja, Kogi State. *International Journal of Environmental and Social Science Research*, 9(1), 22–35.
- Oriko, S. E., Ismaila, M. D., & Ogbaini, C. A. (2024). Navigating challenges: Herdsmen–crop farmers conflict and its effect on yam productivity in Benue State. *Journal of Agricultural Economics*.
- Paris, R. (2001). Human Security: Paradigm shift or hot air? *International Security*, 26(2), 87–102.
- Reuters. (2024, November 1). Nigeria's hunger crisis deepens with 33 million at risk.
- Samuel, A. U. (2024). Urban violence and security challenge in Nigeria. *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, 12(8), 70–76.
- Sule, B. F., & Yusuf, M. O. (2023). *The impact of herdsman-farmers conflict on agricultural development in Benue State, Nigeria*. SAGE Open, 13(1), 1–10.
- Todaro, M. P. (1969). A model of labor migration and urban unemployment in less developed countries. *The American Economic Review*, 59(1), 138–148.
- UNHCR. (2024). *Nigeria: Displacement Report – Benue and North Central IDPs*. Retrieved from <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents>
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (1994). *Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security*. Oxford University Press.
- United Nations. (1996). *Rome Declaration on World Food Security and World Food Summit Plan of Action*.
- Yamane, T. (1967). *Statistics: An Introductory Analysis* (2nd ed.). Harper and Row.
- Yusuf, H. A., & Adesina, F. A. (2022). Insecurity and livelihood crises in rural Nasarawa State, Nigeria: Evidence from conflict-prone communities. *African Security Review*, 31(4), 411–429.

Appendix: Research Instruments

INSECURITY, RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION AND FOOD SECURITY IN NORTH-CENTRAL NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL SECURITY AND SOCIAL STABILITY

By

ABAJI, ABDULLAHI SALAMATU, AKOJI, SOLOMON JOHN; RINTEP, FRIDAY CHRISTOPHER & GONTEN, WAKDAM MUNPORITGAK

Department of Sociology,

Federal University of Lafia, Nigeria and University of Jos, Jos Nigeria

Dear Respondents,

We are conducting an academic study to better understand issues related to insecurity, rural-urban migration and food security. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences. All information you provide will be treated with strict confidentiality, stored securely, and used only for research purposes. Additional safeguards are in place to protect vulnerable participants. By signing below, you confirm that you have read and understood this information and freely consent to participate in the study.

Name of Participant: _____ **Signature:** _____ **Date:** _____

Researcher's Name & Signature: _____

Objective 1: To examine how rural insecurity has affected the agricultural productivity of farming communities in North Central Nigeria

1. In what ways has insecurity affected your farming activities?
 - a. I Farm but with fear () b. I have relocated to a safer area () c. I lost access to my farm land ()
 - d. I no longer go to the farm () e. I reduced my farm size f. It has not affected me g. My farming tools were destroyed
2. What changes have you noticed in your agricultural output since the insecurity began?
 - a. Total loss of crops () b. Major reduction in yield () c. Moderate reduction in yield () d. Minor reduction () e. I have shifted to livestock () f. I now depend on food aid () g. I have stopped farming completely () h. No change ()

Objective 2: To determine the [social and infrastructural] consequences of rural–urban migration on urban centers in North Central Nigeria

3. What challenges has your urban area faced due to increased rural migration?
 - a. No visible challenge () b. Increased Unemployment () c. Traffic Congestion () d. Inadequate Water Supply () e. Inadequate health facilities () g. Poor waste management () h. Overcrowded housing ()
4. Which group do you think is most affected by pressure on social services?
 - a. Children () b. Disabled Persons () c. Rural People () d. Elderly () e. Youths () f. Long-term Urban Residents () g. Everyone equally ()

Objective 3: To ascertain the extent to which the abandonment of rural communities contributed to the proliferation of ungoverned spaces and insecurity escalation in the region

5. What is currently happening in the abandoned rural communities near you?
 - a. Used by bandits/criminals () b. Turned to grazing fields () c. Occupied by displaced persons () d. Completely empty () e. Used for illegal mining () f. Used by vigilante groups () g. Some people are gradually returning () h. I don't know ()
6. What security challenges have increased due to abandoned rural areas?
 - a. Kidnapping () b. Banditry () c. Armed Robbery () d. Cattle Rearing/Grazing () e. Drug abuse/hideouts () f. Destruction of Farms () g. Vigilante retaliation () h. No challenges noticed ()

Thank you for your time!

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Objective 1: To examine how rural insecurity has affected the agricultural productivity of farming communities in North Central Nigeria

- a. Can you describe how insecurity in your rural community has affected your farming activities and crop yields?

- b. In what ways has insecurity influenced your access to farmland, farm inputs, or markets for your produce?

Objective 2: To determine the social and infrastructural consequences of rural–urban migration on urban centers in North Central Nigeria

- a. How has the influx of people from rural areas impacted social life and relationships in this urban center?
- b. What changes have you noticed in infrastructure or public services (such as housing, sanitation, water, health, transport) due to migration from rural communities?

Objective 3: To ascertain the extent to which the abandonment of rural communities contributed to the proliferation of ungoverned spaces and insecurity escalation in the region

- a. How has the abandonment of rural communities created spaces without government presence or control in this region?
- b. In what ways has this abandonment increased insecurity or criminal activities around your area?