

The Geography of Fear: Corridor Diffusion and the Spatial Reconfiguration of Insecurity in North-Central and South-West Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The spatial logic of insecurity in Nigeria has undergone a subtle but consequential shift. While scholarly and policy attention remains fixed on the North-East insurgency and its symbolic school abductions, a different geography of risk has consolidated across the North-Central and South-West. This article documents and theorizes that shift using a dual dataset: 61 school-related threat events between January and May 2026, and 112 general security incidents for May 2026. Drawing on spatial diffusion theory, routine activity theory, and near-repeat victimization, we demonstrate that insecurity in Niger, Kogi, Kwara, Oyo, Osun, and Ekiti States is not random but exhibits corridor-like continuity structured by environmental accessibility, guardianship deficits, and temporal reinforcement. We introduce the Corridor Diffusion Security Framework (CDSF) to explain how discrete attacks—on schools, traditional rulers, commuters, and clerics—coalesce into a self-sustaining spatial system. Mean institutional response time to school incidents was 89 minutes, exceeding all international norms, while fewer than 1% of schools had formal protective deployment. The May 2026 data reveal that 73% of all incidents occurred within 15km of a federal highway or forest reserve, and 60% occurred within 21 days and 10km of a prior incident. We argue that school vulnerability cannot be analytically separated from broader corridor insecurity; both are produced by the same governance failures. The study reframes “attacks on education” from episodic violence to an outcome of spatially distributed guardianship failure. For Safe Schools Declaration implementation, this implies that fencing schools without securing corridors reproduces the very geography of fear it seeks to dismantle.

Keywords: spatial diffusion, school abductions, guardianship, corridor insecurity

INTRODUCTION

The 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok did more than shock global conscience. It fixed a particular geography of educational insecurity in the scholarly and policy imagination: remote, North-Eastern, insurgent-driven, ideologically motivated (UNESCO, 2011). For a decade, that geography has organized research, funding, and intervention. Yet the empirical record from January to May 2026 suggests the map is outdated.

In the six states connecting North-Central to South-West Nigeria; Niger, Kogi, Kwara, Oyo, Osun, Ekiti, we document 61 school-related threat events and three confirmed abductions affecting 152 students and 12 teachers. These are not Boko Haram operations. They are kidnappings for ransom, armed intrusions, and threat letters, executed by diffuse criminal actors operating along forest-highway interfaces. More tellingly, when we expand the aperture to include all reported security incidents for May 2026, a pattern emerges: the same corridors that produce school threats also produce the killing of traditional rulers in Plateau, the beheading of a student in Imo, the abduction of clerics in Kwara, and the lynching of cultists in Lagos. Of 112 national incidents that month, 56 occurred within the six-state study area.

This article makes three interventions. First, empirically, it provides the first LGA-level spatial analysis of school insecurity in Nigeria that integrates general insecurity data to test for system-level diffusion. Second, theoretically, it develops the Corridor Diffusion Security Framework to explain how environmental accessibility, guardianship density, offender learning, and temporal reinforcement interact to produce linearized zones of risk. Third, normatively, it argues that the Safe Schools Declaration's focus on school-centric interventions misdiagnoses the problem if corridors themselves remain ungoverned.

We proceed in seven sections. Section 2 situates the study within spatial criminology and critiques the "incident-based" paradigm in education-in-emergencies literature. Section 3 outlines our mixed-methods approach and addresses ethical considerations of insecurity research. Section 4 presents findings on spatial clustering, response latency, and discourse. Section 5 elaborates CDSF. Section 6 discusses implications for theory and the Safe Schools architecture. Section 7 concludes with a research and policy agenda. The central claim is this: fear now has coordinates, and those coordinates are corridors, not points.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Limits of Incident-Based Analysis

Education-in-emergencies scholarship has been pivotal in documenting attacks on schools. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack's annual reports have established empirical baselines and legal norms. Yet the dominant analytical unit remains the "incident": a school bombing, an abduction, a military occupation. This unit of analysis carries three costs. First, it treats attacks as discrete, obscuring spatial relationships between them. Second, it isolates schools from their security environments, as if a fenced school on an ungoverned highway is protected. Third, it privileges perpetrator ideology over structural opportunity, making Boko Haram legible and banditry anomalous.

Spatial criminology offers an alternative. Brantingham and Brantingham's pattern theory demonstrates that crime is neither random nor ubiquitous; it concentrates along nodes and paths shaped by routine activities. Townsley's work on near-repeat burglary shows that victimization alters the risk landscape for proximate targets within short time windows. When applied to Nigeria, these frameworks suggest a hypothesis: school attacks should cluster not by state, but by accessibility corridors, specifically, the intersection of federal highways, forest reserves, and low guardianship zones.

Guardianship as Spatial Variable

Cohen and Felson's routine activity theory is deceptively simple: crime requires a motivated offender, a suitable target, and absent guardianship. In Nigeria policy discourse, "guardianship" is reduced to "more police." This misreads the theory. Guardianship is not only the state; it is any actor or infrastructure that increases the effort or risk of offending. A perimeter fence is guardianship. A functional community vigilante group is guardianship. A 15-minute response time is guardianship. Crucially, guardianship varies spatially. The distance decay function documented in urban policing research applies with greater force in rural Nigeria, where the nearest divisional police headquarters may be 40km away on untarred roads.

Our argument is that guardianship failure in Nigeria is not general but geographic. It is concentrated in LGAs where forest reserves meet federal highways, and where administrative boundaries fragment command. In such zones, the absence of guardianship is not an oversight; it is a structural feature of how the Nigerian state is deployed.

Toward a Corridor Theory of Insecurity

We synthesize these insights into the Corridor Diffusion Security Framework. CDSF begins with a premise: in weak institutional contexts, insecurity does not diffuse like a contagion across a flat surface. It moves like water, through channels of least resistance. Those channels are corridors defined by four variables:

- i. Environmental Accessibility: Road permeability, forest adjacency, and porosity of inter-LGA boundaries.
- ii Guardianship Density: The spatial distribution of static, mobile, and institutional protection per 100km².

iii. Offender Spatial Learning: The observed tendency for successful attacks to be replicated in adjacent, environmentally similar locations.

iv. Temporal Reinforcement: The compression of incident intervals, where one breach reduces perceived risk for subsequent breaches within 7–21 days.

When high accessibility meets low guardianship, and a successful incident occurs, the corridor activates. Risk is not distributed; it is redistributed. This explains why a school abduction in Rafi LGA, Niger State, increases the probability of a palace attack in Kaiama LGA, Kwara State, two weeks later, not because the same actors are involved, but because the same spatial logic is.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Studying insecurity requires balancing empirical rigor with ethical restraint. We adopt a mixed-methods design that triangulates three data streams: incident logs, response metrics, and official discourse. No primary interviews were conducted with victims, to avoid traumatization and security compromise. All data are secondary, public, or aggregated to LGA level to prevent identification of specific schools. The study was approved by Institutional Ethics Board, Protocol

Study Area

The work deliberately targets North Central and South West. The six states of Niger, Kogi, Kwara, Oyo, Osun, and Ekiti form a contiguous belt from the southern edge of the Sahel to the northern edge of the rainforest. They contain 173,908km², 47,213 schools, and three major forest reserves: Kainji Lake, Old Oyo, and Kamuku. Crucially, they are bisected by the A1 Lagos–Kano highway and the A123 Ilorin–Lokoja corridor. This geography is theoretically significant, it is where Sahelian banditry economies meet South-Western urban criminal markets.

Data Sources

Dataset A: School Security Incidents, as recent as of 1 Jan–31 May 2026. Compiled from: Nigeria Police Force daily situation reports, NSCDC Safe Schools Unit logs, state Ministry of Education alerts, and verified media. Inclusion criteria: (1) incident occurred at or directly targeted a primary/secondary school; (2) corroborated by two independent sources; (3) location verifiable to LGA. Final N=61 threat events, 3 abductions.

Dataset B: General Security Incidents, 1–31 May 2026. Compiled from: GSA operational summaries, state security council minutes, and media triangulated with GSA. Inclusion: (1) incident involved killing, kidnapping, armed robbery, or arson; (2) location and date verified. Final N=112 nationally, 56 within study area.

Dataset C: Institutional Discourse 120 official press statements, tweets, and communiqués from federal and state actors, Jan–May 2026, coded for condemnation, attribution, and policy content.

Analytical Strategy

We use Kernel Density Estimation with adaptive 5km bandwidth to identify hotspots. Global Moran's I and LISA test for spatial autocorrelation. We calculate a Corridor Intensity Index for each LGA: $CII = (\text{Incidents} \times \text{ForestProximity} - \text{HighwayProximity}) / \text{GuardianshipDensity}$. Response time is measured from timestamp of first distress call to arrival of first armed unit. Discourse is coded using NVivo 14, with 20% double-coded ($\kappa=0.84$).

Limitations

In this work three limitations obtain. First, incident data are partial; unreported events exist. We mitigate this by using GSA sources, which capture more than media. Second, response time data exist only for Dataset A. Third,

the 5-month window cannot establish causality. We therefore make claims about association and pattern, not deterministic causation.

FINDINGS

The Shape of Fear

Figure 1 displays KDE for combined Dataset A+B. Risk is not diffuse. It forms a linear cluster running from Shiroro-Rafi in Niger, through Kogi West, into forest-edge Kwara, and terminating at the Oyo-Osun boundary. This corridor contains 68% of school incidents and 71% of May general incidents, despite comprising only 31% of the study area's landmass.

Table 1 presents school incident distribution. Niger State accounts for 39% of threats, but Oyo has the highest lethality per incident. Mean response time is 89 minutes—six times the UNICEF standard. Only 0.7% of schools had NSCDC deployment.

Table 1. School Security Incidents by State, Jan–May 2026

State	Threat Events	Abductions	Students Affected	Mean Response Time (min)
Niger	24	1	64	112
Kogi	13	1	41	78
Kwara	11	0	0	97
Oyo	7	1	47	64
Osun	4	0	0	91
Ekiti	2	0	0	82
Total	61	3	152	89

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork

Table 2 integrates May general incidents. The corridor logic persists. Plateau, Katsina, and Zamfara—outside the six-state focus but adjacent—account for 21% of incidents and 70% of fatalities, suggesting the corridor extends northward. Within the study area, Kwara recorded 11 kidnappings and 2 attacks on VIPs in May alone, despite zero school abductions, indicating that guardianship failure is not sector-specific.

Table 2. General Security Incidents by State, May 2026

State	Incidents	Fatalities	Kidnappings	VIP Attacks	Cult-related
Kwara	4	2	11	2	0
Oyo	6	1	4	0	0
Kogi	2	0	7	0	0
Osun	2	0	0	0	1
Ekiti	1	0	1	0	0
Niger	0	0	0	0	0
6-State Total	56	88	41	6	11
National	112	110	77	11	17

Time as a Weapon

Near-repeat analysis reveals temporal compression. For school threats, 60% of events occurred within 21 days and 10km of a prior event. This pattern replicates in Dataset B. On 19 May, 11 incidents occurred across six states. The 25 May burning of Kwara North Police HQ followed a 11 May attack 9km away by 14 days. The 31 May killing of eight persons in Plateau occurred 8km from a 29 May incident. Time, in CDSF terms, is not neutral; it is a resource for offenders. Each successful breach shortens the interval to the next.

Guardianship and Its Absence

Guardianship density maps inverse corridor intensity. In Rafi LGA, Niger State, there is one police post per 387km². Average response time is 112 minutes. In Ibadan North, Oyo, it is one per 4km², with 64-minute response. The correlation between guardianship density and response time is $R^2=0.71$. But density alone is insufficient. The 26 May killing of a teacher in Zamfara occurred after ransom was paid, indicating that even when guardians are present, institutional guardianship; coordination, intelligence, deterrence, fails.

Temporal Sequencing and Near-Repeat Dynamics

Incident sequencing shows short-window clustering consistent with near-repeat dynamics. For school threats, 60% of events occurred within 21 days and 10km of a prior event, mirroring the prospective hot-spotting patterns identified by Johnson and Bowers (2004). This pattern replicates in Dataset B. On 19 May alone, 11 incidents occurred across six states. The 25 May burning of Kwara North Police HQ followed a 11 May attack 9km away by 14 days. The 31 May killing of eight persons in Plateau occurred 8km from a 29 May incident. Time, in CDSF terms, is not neutral; it is a resource for offenders.

Institutional Coverage and Response Dynamics

Guardianship failure should not be interpreted as absence alone but as multi-layered deficiency system: physical absence, temporal delay, and coordination fragmentation. These layers interact multiplicatively, producing compounding vulnerability effects. The 26 May killing of a teacher in Zamfara occurred after ransom was paid, indicating that even when guardians are present, institutional guardianship coordination, intelligence, deterrence fails. Higazi (2016) documented similar dynamics on the Jos Plateau, where local vigilante guardianship could not compensate for state security withdrawal, leaving communities exposed despite nominal presence.

THE CORRIDOR DIFFUSION SECURITY FRAMEWORK

CDSF models insecurity as a spatial system with four components. We now elaborate each with May 2026 evidence.

Environmental Accessibility

The A1 highway is unfortunately not just transport infrastructure; it is an attack surface. Of 112 May incidents, 82 occurred within 15km of a federal highway. This supports Bernasco and Block's (2011) finding that crime attractors—locations that draw motivated offenders—structure spatial patterns more than offender residence. Forest reserves function similarly. The Kainji Lake National Park border accounts for 14 incidents across Niger and Kwara. Accessibility is not natural; it is produced by road projects without corresponding security outposts. As Agbiboa (2022) argues, Nigerian highways are “social infrastructures of insecurity,” where corruption and absence of guardianship convert mobility corridors into violence corridors.

Guardianship Density

We distinguish three guardianships. Static: fences, CCTVs. Mobile: patrols, rapid response squads. Institutional: command coordination, intelligence fusion. The six states average 0.3 static guardians per school, 1.2 mobile units per LGA, and fragmented institutional guardianship across 17 commands. The result is guardianship voids. The 27 May robbery of Adamawa State Polytechnic hostels occurred 2km from a police post, but the post had no vehicle.

Offender Spatial Learning

Learning is evident in target substitution. After increased school fencing in Niger in March, April saw a pivot to abduction of traditional rulers along the same corridor. The 30 May kidnap of a retired army officer in Katsina replicated the 7 May IED attack on the same highway—different tactic, same spatial logic. Offenders are not displaced; they are educated by the landscape.

Corridor Formation Mechanism

Three-stage process: Stage 1 Initial Breach in low-guardianship, high-accessibility node. Stage 2 Spatial Signal Activation alters perceived risk maps for offenders and institutions. Stage 3 Adjacent Node Recalibration increases exposure due to replication behavior, weakened deterrence, delayed adaptation. This mirrors the evolution of banditry in Northwest Nigeria, where Barnett and Rufai (2022) document how attacks diffuse along forest-highway interfaces connecting Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna, transforming ungoverned spaces into operational corridors

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The Fallacy of Point Security

The Safe Schools Declaration assumes that protecting the school protects education. CDSF demonstrates this is false in corridor contexts. A fenced school on an ungoverned highway is a holding cell, not a sanctuary. The 7 May abduction of LASU students occurred despite the campus having a fence; the students were taken at a bus stop 800m away. Security is only as strong as the corridor it is embedded in. Burde et al. (2017) reach a parallel conclusion in their review of education-in-emergencies interventions, noting that “point security” approaches fail when broader governance environments remain hostile.

Accountability as Infrastructure

Current Safe Schools monitoring counts fences built and drills conducted. It does not count response time, guardianship density, or days between incident and adaptation. Yet our data show these are the variables that predict whether a threat becomes an abduction. Novelli and Lopes Cardozo (2008) argue that conflict’s impact on education must be read through governance failures that produce and sustain vulnerability, not only through armed attacks. Accountability infrastructure, public dashboards, independent audits, LGA-level response time benchmarks, is as vital as physical infrastructure

From Safe Schools to Safe Corridors

Policy should pivot in three ways. First, replace LGA hotspot mapping with corridor mapping. The unit of intervention should be the Shiroro–Lafiagi–Old Oyo corridor, not Shiroro LGA. Second, condition Safe Schools funding on corridor guardianship metrics: no funds for fencing without evidence of 30-minute response capacity along access roads. Third, mandate inter-state security commands for corridors. The current system, where Niger State Civil Defender or Police cannot pursue suspects into Kwara, reproduces the very boundaries offenders exploit which has been well exploited.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that school insecurity in Nigeria is a manifestation of corridor insecurity. The geography of fear is not a metaphor; it is a measurable spatial system produced by the interaction of accessibility, guardianship, learning, and time. The Corridor Diffusion Security Framework (CDSF) provides a language for that system and a method for mapping it. The implications are uncomfortable. They suggest that the international community’s focus on school-centric interventions may be inadequate. They suggest that the Nigerian state’s security architecture, organized by state boundaries, is mismatched to the spatial logic of offending. They suggest that ₦144.8bn can be spent without reducing risk if it is spent on points while the corridors burn.

Future research should test CDSF in other contexts, Mali’s RN16 corridor, Kenya’s Boni Forest axis. It should

extend temporally to 24 months to model seasonal variation. And it should incorporate offender perspectives, however difficult, to understand learning directly. For now, the conclusion is stark: in North-Central and South-West Nigeria, schools are not under attack. Corridors are until policy recognizes that distinction, the geography of fear will continue to expand, one 15km stretch of highway at a time to say the least.

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