



COERCED DISORGANIZATION: RETHINKING SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION THEORY FOR ARMED RURAL COMMUNITIES IN ZAMFARA STATE, NIGERIA



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Abstract

Social Disorganization Theory is routinely applied to insecurity in northwestern Nigeria, yet it was formulated to explain urban crime, where weak collective efficacy emerges gradually from poverty, residential turnover and population heterogeneity. This study asks whether that causal architecture holds where disorganization is not an emergent by-product of urban ecology but a deliberate objective of armed actors. It aims to specify how community-level social control breaks down in Zamfara State and what theoretical adjustment this requires. The research employs a qualitative documentary design, analysing peer-reviewed criminological and conflict scholarship, Nigerian statutory instruments, government and security-sector publications, and reports of international and independent research organisations, coded against four categories fixed in advance: the institution targeted, the mechanism of degradation, the actor initiating it, and the resulting change in informal social control. The findings show that the principal institutions of informal control in Zamfara - traditional rulership, schooling, markets and settlement itself - are not merely weakened by structural disadvantage but directly and selectively attacked, and that residents withdraw from collective action less from anomie than from a rational fear of retaliation that intensifies precisely where community capacity would otherwise be strongest. The study advances the concept of coerced disorganization and distinguishes it from the emergent disorganization of the Chicago tradition along four dimensions: causal origin, temporality, reversibility and the direction of the collective-efficacy relationship. It concludes that where disorganization is coercively produced, community-strengthening interventions cannot precede physical protection without exposing participants to targeted violence, inverting the sequencing implicit in conventional community-security programming.

Abstrak

Teori Disorganisasi Sosial lazim diterapkan untuk menjelaskan ketidakamanan di Nigeria barat laut, padahal teori tersebut dirumuskan untuk menjelaskan kejahatan perkotaan, tempat lemahnya efikasi kolektif muncul secara bertahap dari kemiskinan, perputaran penduduk, dan heterogenitas populasi. Penelitian ini mempertanyakan apakah arsitektur kausal tersebut tetap berlaku ketika disorganisasi bukan produk sampingan ekologi perkotaan, melainkan tujuan yang disengaja aktor bersenjata. Tujuannya menjelaskan bagaimana kontrol sosial tingkat komunitas runtuh di



Negara Bagian Zamfara dan penyesuaian teoretis apa yang diperlukan. Metode yang digunakan adalah desain dokumenter kualitatif, dengan menganalisis literatur kriminologi dan studi konflik yang ditelaah sejawat, instrumen perundang-undangan Nigeria, publikasi pemerintah dan sektor keamanan, serta laporan organisasi riset internasional dan independen, yang dikodekan berdasarkan empat kategori yang ditetapkan di awal: institusi yang menjadi sasaran, mekanisme perusakannya, aktor yang memulainya, dan perubahan kontrol sosial informal yang dihasilkan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa institusi utama kontrol informal di Zamfara - kepemimpinan tradisional, persekolahan, pasar, dan permukiman itu sendiri - tidak sekedar melemah akibat kerugian struktural, melainkan diserang secara langsung dan selektif, serta bahwa warga menarik diri dari tindakan kolektif bukan karena anomie, melainkan karena ketakutan rasional akan pembalasan yang justru menguat tepat ketika kapasitas komunitas seharusnya paling kuat. Penelitian ini mengajukan konsep disorganisasi terpaksa (coerced disorganization) dan membedakannya dari disorganisasi emergen tradisi Chicago melalui empat dimensi: asal-usul kausal, temporalitas, reversibilitas, dan arah hubungan efikasi kolektif. Disimpulkan bahwa ketika disorganisasi diproduksi secara paksa, intervensi penguatan komunitas tidak dapat mendahului perlindungan fisik tanpa memaparkan peserta pada kekerasan tersasar, sehingga membalik urutan yang tersirat dalam program keamanan komunitas konvensional.

INTRODUCTION

Zamfara State in northwestern Nigeria has experienced more than a decade of sustained armed violence in which organised groups locally described as bandits have raided rural settlements, abducted residents for ransom, rustled livestock at scale, levied informal taxes on farming communities, and displaced populations across the state and into neighbouring Katsina, Sokoto and Kaduna. The violence is not episodic disorder but a durable political economy with identifiable actors, revenue streams and territorial logics (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019; Rufa'i, 2021; Barnett et al., 2022). Its consequences reach far beyond the immediate casualties: farms are abandoned during planting seasons, schools close for entire academic years, weekly markets that once anchored rural exchange are shut by decree of armed groups or by state order, and traditional rulers who historically arbitrated disputes are killed, deposed or co-opted (Ojo, 2020; Ojewale, 2021). Human security in the state has therefore deteriorated across every dimension the concept was designed to capture - economic, food, health, personal, community and political (UNDP, 1994). What makes the Zamfara case analytically distinctive, however, is not the severity of these outcomes but their apparent directionality: the institutions that ordinarily allow a community to regulate its own members appear to be failing not despite armed pressure but because of it, and in a patterned rather than random way. That observation, if correct, has

consequences for how the criminological theory most often invoked to explain the crisis should be applied.

The dominant framework in that literature is Social Disorganization Theory. In its classical formulation, drawn from Shaw and McKay's mapping of juvenile delinquency across Chicago's concentric zones, crime concentrates in neighbourhoods whose structural characteristics - economic deprivation, residential instability and population heterogeneity - impede the formation of the dense relational ties and shared expectations through which residents supervise young people, resolve disputes and intervene against disorder (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Bursik, 1988). Sampson and Groves (1989) rendered the theory empirically testable by specifying the intervening mechanisms of local friendship networks, organisational participation and the supervision of peer groups, and Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls (1997) subsequently reformulated the mediating construct as collective efficacy, the combination of social cohesion among neighbours with their shared willingness to intervene for the common good. Subsequent work refined the tradition considerably, showing that spatial dynamics link neighbourhood violence across boundaries (Morenoff et al., 2001), that legal cynicism can sustain violence even where structural conditions improve (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011), and that neighbourhood effects persist across generations in ways that resist short-term intervention (Sampson, 2012). A substantial body of Nigerian and African scholarship has applied this apparatus to rural banditry, herder-farmer conflict and community insecurity, generally concluding that poverty, unemployment, weak institutions and youth marginalisation have eroded social control and thereby enabled criminal recruitment (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016; Egbuta, 2018; Okoli & Ugwu, 2019; Ladan & Matawalli, 2020).

That body of work has established the association convincingly, but it has left a prior question largely unexamined, and it is a question about the theory rather than about Zamfara. Classical social disorganization theory treats weak collective efficacy as an emergent property of ecological processes: no actor intends it, it arises from the aggregation of individually rational residential and economic decisions, and it is in principle reversible through the same mechanisms that produced it. In Zamfara, by contrast, the degradation of local institutions bears the marks of intention. Traditional rulers are assassinated rather than gradually marginalised; schools are burned and pupils abducted rather than quietly abandoned; markets are closed under explicit threat rather than eroded by commercial reorganisation; and entire settlements are cleared rather than depopulated through voluntary migration. Where the object of the theory - community capacity for self-regulation - is itself the target of armed strategy, it is not obvious that a framework built on unintended ecological drift can carry the explanatory weight placed upon it. The conflict-studies literature has

developed sophisticated accounts of how armed actors govern, restructure and deliberately reshape civilian social order (Kalyvas, 2006; Weinstein, 2007; Wood, 2008; Mampilly, 2011; Arjona, 2016), yet that literature and the social disorganization tradition have rarely been brought into direct contact. The gap this study addresses therefore lies precisely at their intersection: criminology has the vocabulary for community-level social control but assumes its erosion is unintended, while conflict studies has the vocabulary for strategic civilian targeting but rarely frames it as a problem of informal social control.

This article accordingly asks three questions. First, which institutions of informal social control in Zamfara have been degraded, and by what mechanisms - structural attrition, deliberate targeting, or both? Second, does the resulting configuration of weak collective efficacy correspond to the causal architecture assumed by classical social disorganization theory, or does it depart from it in ways sufficient to require conceptual revision? Third, if such revision is warranted, what follows for the design and sequencing of community-security interventions in the state? The argument advanced here is that Zamfara exhibits what is termed coerced disorganization: a configuration in which the weakening of informal social control is not an emergent by-product of structural disadvantage but a produced and actively maintained condition, generated by armed actors who target the specific institutions through which communities would otherwise organise resistance. This distinction is not terminological. If disorganization is emergent, community-strengthening interventions can proceed in parallel with security operations, as most programming assumes. If it is coerced and actively maintained, then strengthening a community's capacity for collective action without first neutralising the coercive threat does not merely fail - it marks participants for retaliation, which inverts the sequencing of intervention that current policy takes for granted.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative documentary research design. The design is appropriate because the research question is conceptual and mechanism-oriented rather than distributional: it asks how institutional degradation occurs and whether its causal structure matches an existing theory, not how frequently particular offences are committed. Primary field research in the affected local government areas of Zamfara was not undertaken, since the active security situation in the study area makes community-level fieldwork hazardous for researchers and, more importantly, potentially dangerous for participants, whose visible cooperation with outside investigators is precisely the kind of exposure the analysis below identifies as a source of retaliatory risk. This constraint is treated not as an incidental limitation but as itself evidence bearing on the argument, and is revisited in the discussion.

The documentary corpus was assembled between January and August 2026 from four categories of source. The first comprises peer-reviewed criminological and conflict-studies scholarship, retrieved from Scopus-indexed and SINTA-accredited journals together with Google Scholar, using combinations of the search terms "social disorganization", "collective efficacy", "rural banditry", "Zamfara", "northwest Nigeria", "armed group governance", "civilian targeting" and "community security", restricted to English-language publications and, for the empirical material specifically, to the period 2011 to 2026, corresponding to the onset of organised banditry in the northwest; classical theoretical works were retained without date restriction. The second comprises Nigerian statutory and policy instruments, principally the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), the Nigeria Correctional Service Act 2019, and the National Drug Control Master Plan. The third comprises publications of Nigerian security and justice institutions and of federal and state government agencies. The fourth comprises reports of international organisations and independent research institutes with established methodologies for conflict documentation.

Source selection followed explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria. Documents were included where they addressed community-level social control, criminal behaviour or armed violence; provided information specific to Zamfara State or to structurally comparable communities in northwestern Nigeria; identified an institution, actor or mechanism relevant to the coding frame described below; and originated from an academic, governmental or established research institution whose methodology could be assessed. Documents were excluded where the underlying evidence could not be traced, where claims about specific incidents rested on unattributed reporting, or where the material was substantially advocacy-oriented without supporting documentation. Where sources diverged on the scale of a particular event, the analysis relied on the pattern of institutional targeting rather than on contested numerical estimates, since the argument developed here turns on the type of institution attacked rather than on the magnitude of any single episode.

Analysis proceeded through thematic coding against four categories fixed prior to examination of the corpus. The first category records the institution of informal social control implicated in a given account: traditional rulership, family, school, religious institution, market, community association or settlement itself. The second records the mechanism by which that institution was degraded, distinguishing structural attrition, in which the institution weakened through economic or demographic processes without an identifiable intervening actor, from deliberate targeting, in which an identifiable armed actor acted upon the institution directly. The third records the actor initiating the degradation, where one is identifiable. The

fourth records the reported consequence for informal social control, distinguishing reduced capacity, in which residents retained the willingness to act but lost the means, from reduced willingness, in which the means persisted but residents withdrew from collective action. This second distinction is analytically central, because classical social disorganization theory predicts that capacity and willingness decline together as structural conditions deteriorate, whereas the coerced-disorganization argument predicts that they can diverge.

The coding frame was applied by the author across the full corpus, with each source read in its entirety rather than searched for confirming instances, and with accounts that resisted classification recorded as such rather than assimilated to the nearest available category. Two features of the resulting analysis should be stated plainly. First, because the corpus consists of documentary sources produced by others for other purposes, the frequency with which a category appears reflects the reporting priorities of those sources as much as the underlying reality, and no inference about prevalence is drawn from category counts. Second, because the design is interpretive and single-analyst, the coding has not been subjected to inter-rater reliability assessment; the frame is therefore set out above in sufficient detail for another researcher to apply it independently to the same or an expanded corpus, which is offered as the relevant standard of transparency for work of this kind rather than a claim of replicated coding.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Structural Conditions and the Baseline of Community Vulnerability

The documentary evidence confirms that Zamfara exhibits, in abundance, the structural characteristics that classical social disorganization theory identifies as antecedents of weak collective efficacy. Economic deprivation is severe and predominantly rural, with livelihoods concentrated in rain-fed agriculture, livestock production and petty trade, sectors that offer limited absorptive capacity for a young and rapidly growing population (World Bank, 2022). Educational disadvantage compounds this: school participation rates in the northwest are among the lowest nationally, and the pool of young people outside both schooling and formal employment is correspondingly large. Population mobility, the second of Shaw and McKay's structural variables, is present in an extreme form through conflict-induced displacement rather than through the voluntary residential turnover that characterised Chicago's zone of transition. Heterogeneity, the third, appears in the ethnic and occupational cleavage between predominantly Hausa farming communities and predominantly Fulani pastoralists, a cleavage with a long history of managed

coexistence that has been progressively militarised (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016; Egbuta, 2018).

On the classical account, these three conditions should be sufficient to predict impaired collective efficacy, and the association is indeed observable. The evidence reviewed here does not dispute it. What the evidence additionally shows, however, is that these structural conditions substantially predate the current security crisis. Poverty, low schooling and the farmer-herder cleavage characterised Zamfara for decades during which the state, whatever its developmental deficits, did not exhibit anything resembling the present collapse of rural order. If structural disadvantage alone were doing the causal work, the sharp discontinuity observable from approximately 2011 onward would be difficult to account for, since the structural variables moved gradually while the outcome moved abruptly. This temporal mismatch is the first indication that the classical model, applied unmodified, underspecifies the case, and it directs attention toward what changed rather than toward what has long been constant (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019; Rufa'i, 2021).

Patterns of Institutional Degradation: Evidence of Selective Targeting

Applying the coding frame to the corpus produces a distribution that is difficult to reconcile with structural attrition alone. Across the institutions of informal social control identified in the frame, the mechanism most frequently reported is not gradual weakening but direct action by an identifiable armed actor, and the institutions selected for such action are not random with respect to their regulatory function. Traditional rulership offers the clearest instance. District and village heads in affected areas have been assassinated, abducted, forced to flee, or compelled into negotiated accommodation with armed groups, and the documented pattern indicates that rulers who resisted accommodation or cooperated with security forces faced markedly elevated risk (Rufa'i, 2021; Barnett et al., 2022). Under the classical model, traditional authority would be expected to erode as its economic base and demographic constituency shifted; what is observed instead is its removal, and the removal is concentrated among precisely those office-holders exercising their regulatory function most actively.

Schooling shows the same signature. School closures in the affected local government areas have resulted substantially from mass abduction of pupils and from credible threat of abduction, rather than from the enrolment attrition that economic hardship alone would produce (Ojewale, 2021). The distinction matters because the two mechanisms have different implications for reversal: enrolment attrition responds to fee waivers, feeding programmes and household income support, whereas closure under threat responds only to the removal of the threat. Markets exhibit a third

variant. Weekly rural markets in Zamfara have been closed both by armed groups enforcing their own commercial and informational interests, and by state authorities seeking to disrupt bandit supply and ransom logistics. The closure of a rural market is not merely an economic event: the periodic market is among the principal occasions on which dispersed rural households assemble, exchange information about local conditions, and reproduce the relational ties that Sampson and Groves (1989) identified as the mediating mechanism between structural conditions and crime. Its suspension removes the infrastructure of collective efficacy, and it does so whether the closure is imposed by armed groups or by the state.

Settlement itself constitutes the fourth and most comprehensive category. Displacement in Zamfara proceeds substantially through the clearing of communities under attack rather than through the incremental out-migration that ecological models assume. The analytical consequence is significant: where residential instability arises from voluntary mobility, the departing and arriving households are differently situated but the settlement persists as a social unit; where it arises from clearance, the unit itself dissolves, and the relational networks that constituted it are not transferred to the destination but fragmented across multiple host communities and displacement sites. The corpus accordingly records displacement functioning as both consequence and cause, consistent with the reciprocal dynamic the earlier literature has noted, but with the additional specification that the initiating mechanism is coercive rather than ecological.

The Divergence of Capacity and Willingness

The fourth coding category yields the finding of greatest theoretical consequence. Classical social disorganization theory anticipates that the capacity and the willingness of residents to exercise informal control decline together, since both are held to depend on the same underlying relational density that structural disadvantage erodes. The documentary evidence for Zamfara indicates that these two components can diverge sharply. Accounts of communities under armed pressure repeatedly describe residents who retain detailed local knowledge of unusual movements, of individuals associating with armed groups, and of emerging local disputes - that is, who retain the informational capacity on which informal control depends - while declining to act upon it. The reported reason for non-action is not indifference, normative confusion or the absence of shared expectations, which are the mechanisms the classical model would invoke, but the anticipation of retaliation against the individual who acts and against their household (Barnett et al., 2022; Ojo, 2020).

This is a materially different causal structure from the one the theory describes. Under emergent disorganization, a resident does not intervene because the shared

expectation that one should intervene has attenuated, and because the relational ties that would make intervention effective are absent. Under the configuration observed here, the expectation persists and the ties may remain substantially intact, but intervention has been rendered individually catastrophic by an actor with the demonstrated capability and willingness to punish it. The observable outcome - residents not intervening - is identical, which is precisely why the two configurations are readily conflated; the underlying mechanism, and therefore the appropriate intervention, is not. This finding also bears on the relationship between legal cynicism and violence identified by Kirk and Papachristos (2011): the withdrawal documented here is not primarily a cultural frame acquired through experience of unresponsive policing, though that is present, but a contemporaneous risk calculation that would be rational for residents holding entirely conventional attitudes toward law and order.

A corollary follows that the corpus supports and that conventional programming does not anticipate. If withdrawal from collective action is driven by anticipated retaliation, then the risk attaching to participation should rise, not fall, with the visibility and effectiveness of that participation. Residents who organise, who are identified as organisers, and whose organisation begins to impede armed group operations become more attractive targets than residents who remain dispersed and passive. The evidence concerning vigilante and community self-defence formations in the northwest is consistent with this expectation, indicating that such formations have attracted severe reprisals against the communities hosting them, and that in some cases their emergence preceded rather than followed escalation of violence against the settlement (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019; Ojewale, 2021). Collective efficacy, in other words, does not operate straightforwardly as a protective factor under these conditions; its visible exercise can operate as a hazard.

The Reciprocal Cycle and Its Coercive Motor

The evidence confirms the reciprocal relationship between insecurity and disorganization that previous studies of the region have identified: violence displaces populations and closes institutions, and communities so weakened become more vulnerable to further violence. The present analysis specifies the mechanism driving that cycle more precisely. The cycle is not self-propelling in the manner of a purely ecological feedback loop; it is maintained by an actor with an interest in maintaining it. Armed groups operating in Zamfara derive revenue from ransom, livestock theft and informal taxation of agricultural production, all of which are facilitated by communities that cannot organise collective resistance, cannot reliably transmit information to security agencies, and cannot sustain the traditional authority structures through which negotiated settlements might otherwise be enforced (Rufa'i,

2021; Barnett et al., 2022). Disorganization, on this reading, is not merely a condition that armed groups exploit opportunistically; it is a condition that their operational interests give them positive reason to produce and sustain.

This specification has an immediate implication for the interpretation of intervention failure. Where a cycle is ecologically self-propelling, interventions fail because they are too small, too brief or poorly targeted, and the appropriate response is to scale, extend or retarget them. Where a cycle is actively maintained by a strategic actor, interventions may fail because that actor adapts to them, and scaling an intervention without addressing the actor's capacity to respond may simply raise the intensity of the counter-response. The distinction is not merely academic: it determines whether disappointing results from community-strengthening programmes should be read as evidence that more of the same is required, or as evidence that the sequence itself is wrong.

DISCUSSION

Why the Classical Model Underspecifies the Case

The findings above indicate three specific respects in which classical social disorganization theory, applied unmodified, fails to capture the Zamfara configuration. The first concerns causal origin. In the Chicago tradition, weak collective efficacy is emergent: it arises from the aggregation of individually rational decisions by residents, landlords, employers and migrants, none of whom intends the resulting decline in community regulatory capacity, and no actor in the model has an interest in producing that decline. In Zamfara, an identifiable actor does have such an interest and acts upon it. A theory whose causal apparatus contains no intentional agent cannot, without extension, explain an outcome substantially produced by one.

The second concerns temporality. Ecological disorganization develops over decades, tracking the slow movement of structural variables, which is why the tradition has been able to demonstrate the persistence of neighbourhood effects across generations (Sampson, 2012). Coerced disorganization can be produced within a single season: a market closed by decree, a school emptied by a single abduction, a district head assassinated in one night. The observed discontinuity in Zamfara from approximately 2011, against slowly moving structural indicators, is explicable on the second timescale but not on the first. Any account that attributes the crisis principally to poverty and unemployment must contend with the fact that both were present, at comparable levels, throughout a preceding period in which the outcome was absent.

The third concerns reversibility, and it is the respect with the greatest practical consequence. On the ecological account, collective efficacy can in principle be rebuilt

by improving the structural conditions that impaired it - raising incomes, stabilising residence, strengthening local organisations - because those conditions are what suppressed it. Where disorganization is coerced, improving structural conditions does not remove the suppressing force, because the suppressing force was never the structural condition. A community whose incomes have risen and whose associations have been reconstituted, but which remains within the operational reach of an armed group that punishes collective action, has not recovered its capacity for informal social control; it has acquired more to lose by exercising it.

Coerced Disorganization as a Conceptual Extension

The concept proposed here to name this configuration is coerced disorganization, defined as a condition in which the weakening of a community's capacity or willingness to exercise informal social control is produced and actively maintained by an armed actor whose operational interests are served by that weakening, through the selective degradation of the specific institutions that would otherwise coordinate collective resistance. The definition contains four elements, each doing distinct work. The requirement of an armed actor distinguishes the concept from the ordinary politics of institutional decline. The requirement that the actor's interests be served by the weakening distinguishes it from incidental collateral damage, in which institutions are destroyed in the course of violence directed at other objectives. The requirement of active maintenance distinguishes it from a one-time destructive event after which recovery may proceed unimpeded. The requirement of selectivity - that the institutions targeted are those with coordinating functions - distinguishes it from indiscriminate violence, and is the element most directly supported by the patterns reported above.

Positioned against the existing literature, the concept occupies a space that neither of its parent traditions currently fills. Within criminology, it extends rather than displaces the social disorganization framework by specifying a scope condition: the classical model holds where the degradation of collective efficacy is emergent, and requires the extension proposed here where it is coerced. This is a friendly amendment in the sense that it preserves the tradition's central insight about the mediating role of community-level social control while identifying a class of cases in which the antecedents of that mediation differ in kind. Within conflict studies, the concept connects to a well-developed literature on how armed actors reshape civilian social order, and specifically to the finding that groups with different resource endowments and civilian relationships generate different patterns of governance and violence (Weinstein, 2007; Arjona, 2016). What the criminological framing adds to that literature is the specific analytic category of informal social control, which

conflict studies has generally approached through the vocabulary of governance and order rather than through the mechanisms of community self-regulation that criminology has spent a century developing.

The extension also engages a debate internal to the social disorganization tradition itself. Warner and Rountree (1997) questioned whether local social ties translate straightforwardly into informal social control, finding that the systemic model's assumed pathway from network density to regulatory capacity held unevenly across neighbourhood contexts. Kubrin and Weitzer (2003) subsequently catalogued the tradition's principal unresolved problems, among them the insufficient specification of the mechanisms linking structure to control and the neglect of forces external to the neighbourhood that shape its internal dynamics. The argument advanced here can be read as a contribution to precisely that agenda: coerced disorganization identifies an external force - an armed actor with an interest in local disorganization - that severs the assumed link between ties and control without weakening the ties themselves, which is a specific answer to the general problem Warner and Rountree posed. The meta-analytic finding that macro-level predictors of crime vary considerably in their effect sizes across studies and specifications (Pratt & Cullen, 2005) is consistent with the possibility that heterogeneous scope conditions of this kind are operating beneath the aggregate estimates.

The relationship to Kalyvas's (2006) account of violence in civil war warrants particular attention, since that work also concerns the strategic targeting of civilians and the informational dynamics of denunciation and control. The convergence is real, and the present analysis draws on it. The divergence is that Kalyvas's central problem is the production of civilian collaboration under conditions of contested territorial control by rival armed actors, whereas the Zamfara case involves armed groups whose relationship with the state is less one of contested sovereignty than of exploitative coexistence with an under-present state. The mechanism identified here - degradation of coordinating institutions to prevent collective resistance - operates in the absence of the competitive dynamic that drives much of Kalyvas's model, which suggests that coerced disorganization may be a more general phenomenon than civil-war control theory alone would predict. Related work indicating that armed groups' treatment of civilians varies systematically with their organisational characteristics and resource base (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2006), and that patterns of civilian victimisation differ by the technology and structure of the conflict (Balcells, 2010), supports the expectation that coerced disorganization should be present in some armed contexts and absent in others rather than being a universal feature of insecurity.

The Retaliation Constraint and the Inversion of Collective Efficacy

The divergence between capacity and willingness documented above supports a proposition that runs against the grain of both the criminological literature and contemporary security programming: under conditions of coerced disorganization, the relationship between collective efficacy and community safety is not monotonic. In the classical model, higher collective efficacy predicts lower violence, and the relationship is treated as effectively linear across the observed range (Sampson et al., 1997). Where an armed actor punishes collective action, however, a community that begins to organise passes through a phase in which it has become visible as an organising entity but has not yet acquired the capacity to defend itself against the resulting reprisal. During that phase, increased collective efficacy is associated with increased rather than decreased exposure to violence.

This is best understood as a threshold or U-shaped relationship rather than a refutation of the classical finding. At sufficiently high levels of collective capacity - where a community can defend itself, where the state provides reliable protection, or where the armed actor's operational reach has been curtailed - the classical protective relationship should reassert itself. The hazard is concentrated in the intermediate range through which any community moving from passivity to organisation must pass. The policy consequence is therefore not that collective efficacy should be discouraged, which would be perverse, but that communities should not be encouraged into the intermediate range without the protection required to traverse it. Vigilante formation in the northwest illustrates the general dynamic, indicating both that such formations can impose real costs on armed groups and that their emergence has been associated with severe reprisals against host communities (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019).

A methodological implication follows for research on collective efficacy in conflict-affected settings. Standard instruments measure collective efficacy by asking residents how likely their neighbours would be to intervene in specified scenarios. Where non-intervention is driven by anticipated retaliation rather than by attenuated shared expectations, such instruments will record low collective efficacy in communities whose underlying cohesion and normative consensus may be substantially intact, and will therefore misattribute the deficit to the wrong mechanism. Instruments applied in such settings require items that separate willingness from capacity and that identify the perceived source of risk attaching to intervention, a refinement the present study cannot supply from documentary evidence but that follows directly from its argument.

Comparative Reach: Coerced Disorganization Beyond Zamfara

If the concept has value beyond the single case, it should identify a recognisable configuration elsewhere. Several candidate settings suggest themselves from the existing literature, though the present study's documentary design permits their identification as candidates rather than their verification as instances. Contexts in which armed actors have systematically targeted traditional authorities, schools and periodic markets in rural settings under weak state presence share the structural signature identified here, and the framework would predict in each case a divergence between residents' informational capacity and their willingness to act upon it, together with elevated risk attaching to visible community organisation.

The comparative claim should be stated with appropriate modesty. What the framework offers is a set of diagnostic questions rather than an empirical generalisation: does an identifiable armed actor benefit operationally from local disorganization; are the institutions degraded selectively with respect to their coordinating function; is the degradation actively maintained rather than historical; and do residents report retaining knowledge they decline to act upon. Where the answers are affirmative, the analysis suggests that programming built on the assumption of emergent disorganization is likely to underperform in a specific and predictable way. Where they are negative, the classical model may apply without modification, and the extension proposed here is unnecessary.

Equally, the concept should not be over-extended. Not every context of rural insecurity exhibits coerced disorganization, and the framework would be weakened rather than strengthened by treating it as a general theory of violence in weak-state settings. Contexts in which institutional decline genuinely is ecological, in which armed actors are transient rather than territorially embedded, or in which communities retain functioning protective relationships with state security forces, fall outside its scope. The value of specifying scope conditions lies precisely in identifying where a framework does not apply.

The Sequencing Problem in Community-Security Programming

The most consequential practical implication concerns the order in which interventions are undertaken. Community-security programming characteristically proceeds on the assumption that strengthening community institutions, expanding livelihoods and building trust between residents and security agencies can be pursued concurrently with, or even in advance of, the establishment of physical security, on the reasoning that these measures address root causes while kinetic operations address symptoms. Where disorganization is emergent, this assumption is defensible. Where it is coerced, it is not, because the intermediate-range hazard identified above

means that mobilising a community that remains within an armed group's operational reach exposes the mobilised to targeted violence.

What follows is a protection-first sequence rather than an abandonment of developmental measures. The sequence implied by the analysis has four stages. The first establishes credible physical protection for a defined set of settlements, sufficient to make retaliation against identified individuals costly for the armed actor - a condition considerably more demanding than periodic patrol presence and closer to sustained area denial. The second restores the coordinating institutions that were selectively targeted, prioritising those whose degradation was deliberate rather than those whose weakness is structural: reinstating traditional authority structures, reopening markets under protection, and resuming schooling with security arrangements adequate to the abduction threat. The third rebuilds the informational relationship between residents and security agencies, which requires confidential reporting mechanisms whose confidentiality is credible to residents rather than merely asserted by agencies, since the risk being managed is retaliation by an actor with local presence. Only the fourth stage undertakes the broad developmental programming - livelihoods, skills, education expansion, psychosocial support - that current approaches typically place first.

Two qualifications are necessary. First, the sequence is analytic rather than strictly chronological: humanitarian assistance to displaced populations is a present obligation that cannot await the establishment of protection, and nothing in this argument suggests otherwise. The sequencing claim concerns specifically those interventions that require residents to become visible as participants in collective action. Second, the protection-first sequence is demanding of state capacity that is, on the available evidence, currently constrained, which means the analysis identifies what would be required rather than what is immediately feasible. That gap between requirement and feasibility is itself a finding, and it suggests that the realistic near-term objective in the most severely affected areas may be the protection of a limited number of settlements to a standard adequate to sustain institutional recovery, rather than thin coverage across a wider area that satisfies neither the protective nor the developmental objective.

Distinguishing Coerced Disorganization from Adjacent Explanations

Before the framework can be accepted, it must be shown to do work that simpler alternatives do not. Three rival explanations of the Zamfara pattern deserve direct consideration. The first attributes the crisis principally to state absence: on this account, communities lose regulatory capacity because the state never established effective presence in the rural northwest, and armed groups fill the resulting vacuum.

There is much in this, and the analysis above assumes rather than disputes the state's limited rural reach. But state absence alone cannot explain the selectivity documented in the findings. A vacuum does not choose which institutions to degrade; it permits degradation without patterning it. The concentration of violence on office-holders exercising regulatory functions most actively, and on the assembly points where collective coordination occurs, indicates a selecting agent rather than a mere absence, and it is that agent the framework is designed to capture.

The second alternative treats the pattern as ordinary predatory criminality writ large: armed groups attack whatever is profitable, and traditional rulers, markets and schools are attacked because ransom, goods and hostages are found there. This explanation accounts for a substantial share of the violence and should not be dismissed. It struggles, however, with the cases in which targeting is costly rather than profitable. Killing a district head who has refused accommodation yields no ransom and invites security-force attention; closing a market forecloses a site from which levies might otherwise be extracted. Where the targeting runs against the immediate revenue interest but serves the longer-term interest in preventing organised resistance, predation alone is an incomplete account, and the strategic reading advanced here is the more parsimonious one.

The third alternative holds that what is described here as coercion is simply fear, a normal psychological response to violence that requires no special conceptual apparatus. This objection has force against a loose version of the argument but not against the specific claim advanced. The claim is not that residents are frightened, which is obvious and uncontested, but that fear is distributed in a particular way: it attaches disproportionately to collective and visible action rather than to individual and private action, and it is sustained by an actor with a demonstrated capacity to punish the former specifically. Generalised fear would depress all forms of social participation more or less evenly; the pattern reported here shows residents continuing to observe, to know and to discuss privately while withdrawing specifically from action that would be attributable to them. That asymmetry is what requires explanation, and it is what the framework explains.

Establishing these distinctions matters for more than analytical tidiness, because each rival explanation implies a different intervention. If the problem is state absence, the remedy is state presence in general - more personnel, more facilities, wider coverage. If the problem is predation, the remedy is to reduce the profitability of the criminal enterprise through interdiction of ransom payments and livestock markets. If the problem is generalised fear, the remedy is reassurance and psychosocial support. Each of these has merit, and none is inconsistent with the framework

proposed here. But if the problem is additionally the strategic suppression of collective response, then a fourth remedy is required that none of the others supplies: the specific protection of the specific institutions and individuals through whom collective response would be organised. That is the distinctive practical contribution of the concept, and it is why the distinction is worth drawing carefully rather than treating coerced disorganization as a restatement of what is already known.

Implications for Criminological Theory

For criminology, the argument suggests that the social disorganization tradition would benefit from explicit specification of the conditions under which its causal model holds. The tradition's generalisation from Chicago to other urban settings has been extensively examined, and its cross-national portability has been tested with mixed results. What has been less examined is its portability across the boundary separating settings in which institutional decline is emergent from settings in which it is produced. The present analysis suggests that boundary is theoretically significant and that crossing it without adjustment produces a specific error: attributing to structural disadvantage an outcome substantially produced by strategic action, and consequently prescribing structural remedies for a coercive problem.

The argument also bears on the collective efficacy construct specifically. Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls (1997) defined collective efficacy as the linkage of cohesion and mutual trust with shared expectations for intervention, treating the two components as jointly constitutive. The Zamfara evidence suggests that under coercive conditions the components can be separated empirically, with cohesion and trust persisting while expectations for intervention are suppressed by external threat rather than internally attenuated. If that separation is general to coercive settings, the construct requires either disaggregation or explicit restriction to non-coercive contexts, and the disaggregated measurement strategy suggested earlier becomes a prerequisite for valid comparison across settings.

Finally, the analysis suggests a broader methodological caution about the transfer of criminological frameworks to conflict-affected settings, which has accelerated as criminology has extended its remit toward atrocity, war and organised armed violence. Frameworks developed to explain crime under conditions of functioning if imperfect state authority embed assumptions about the state's role that may not survive transfer. Social disorganization theory assumes a state that is present but ineffective at the neighbourhood level; the Zamfara case involves a state that is, in the affected rural areas, substantially absent, and into whose absence an alternative coercive authority has moved. That is a different configuration, and recognising it as

such is a precondition for applying the tradition's genuine insights rather than its incidental assumptions.

Two further theoretical connections deserve brief notice, since they indicate where the argument intersects with adjacent literatures without being reducible to them. The first concerns the observational study of disorder. Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) demonstrated that visible physical and social disorder is analytically separable from crime itself and that both are rooted in structural disadvantage and weak collective efficacy. Under coercive conditions the relationship between visible disorder and underlying regulatory capacity becomes less reliable still: a settlement under armed control may present externally as orderly precisely because an armed actor enforces a predictable if extractive regime, while its residents retain no capacity whatever for autonomous self-regulation. Observable order and community self-governance can therefore diverge sharply, which cautions against inferring institutional health from surface calm in conflict-affected settings. The second concerns the broader neighbourhood-effects research programme, which has established that social processes at community level mediate structural conditions across a wide range of outcomes beyond crime (Sampson et al., 2002). If coerced disorganization suppresses those processes, its consequences should extend correspondingly beyond criminal behaviour into health, educational attainment and economic participation, which is consistent with the multi-sector deterioration documented in Zamfara and suggests that the framework's implications are not confined to security policy narrowly conceived.

A final theoretical observation concerns the relationship between this argument and explanations grounded in individual motivation. Strain-theoretic accounts hold that blocked legitimate opportunity generates pressure toward illegitimate adaptation (Merton, 1938; Agnew, 1992), and such accounts are frequently invoked to explain recruitment into armed groups in northwestern Nigeria. Nothing in the present analysis contradicts them, and the structural conditions documented above are precisely those strain theory identifies. The point is rather that strain and coerced disorganization operate at different levels and answer different questions: strain helps explain why particular individuals join armed groups, whereas coerced disorganization explains why the communities from which they are drawn cannot collectively resist that recruitment. A complete account requires both, and conflating them - treating community-level regulatory failure as the aggregate of individual motivational deficits - produces exactly the kind of policy that addresses individual incentives while leaving the coercive suppression of collective response untouched.

Policy Implications for Zamfara State

Translating the analysis into recommendations for Zamfara specifically yields priorities that differ from those typically proposed. The protection of traditional rulership emerges as a first-order security concern rather than a matter of cultural preservation, since district and village heads constitute the coordinating institution whose targeting most directly disables collective response, and whose restoration most directly enables it. Concrete measures follow: protective arrangements for office-holders in high-risk areas, formal recognition of their role in local security coordination, and support for the reconstitution of authority structures in communities where office-holders have been killed or displaced.

The reopening of periodic markets deserves comparable priority, and for reasons that are informational as much as economic. Because the weekly market is the principal occasion on which dispersed rural households assemble, its suspension removes the infrastructure through which local knowledge circulates. Where markets have been closed as a security measure to disrupt bandit logistics, the analysis here suggests that closure carries a cost to community coordination that current policy may not fully register, and that protected reopening should be evaluated against that cost rather than treated as straightforwardly security-enhancing.

Schooling requires an approach calibrated to the mechanism of closure. Where schools have closed through abduction threat rather than enrolment attrition, interventions addressing household demand for education - fee support, feeding programmes, awareness campaigns - address the wrong constraint. The binding constraint is the credibility of physical protection at the school site and along routes to it, and expenditure that does not relieve that constraint is unlikely to restore attendance regardless of its scale. Confidential reporting mechanisms require the same realism: their value depends entirely on whether residents believe the confidentiality will hold against an actor with local presence and demonstrated retaliatory capability, which is a considerably higher standard than institutional assurance and one that must be verified from the residents' perspective rather than asserted from the agency's.

Finally, the analysis supports a reorientation in how programme success is assessed. Indicators measuring the number of community associations formed, training sessions delivered or residents reached record activity that, under coercive conditions, may increase exposure without increasing safety. Indicators more consistent with the argument advanced here would measure whether office-holders in targeted institutions remain in post and unharmed, whether markets and schools operate continuously across a full cycle, and whether residents report willingness to

transmit information - the last measured, on the argument above, separately from their capacity to do so.

Limitations and the Boundaries of the Argument

The limitations of this study are substantial and constrain the confidence attaching to its conclusions. The design is documentary, and the corpus consists of sources produced by others for purposes other than this analysis, which means that the pattern of institutional targeting reported here reflects what those sources chose to document. Deliberate targeting is more newsworthy than gradual attrition, and reporting incentives may therefore inflate its apparent prevalence relative to structural processes that generate no discrete reportable event. The analysis attempts to mitigate this by resting the argument on the selectivity of targeting with respect to institutional function rather than on its frequency, but the concern cannot be eliminated from documentary evidence alone.

The absence of primary fieldwork is the second and more serious limitation. The central empirical claim - that residents retain informational capacity while withdrawing from action, and that they do so from anticipated retaliation rather than attenuated expectations - concerns residents' own reasoning, and documentary sources can report that reasoning only at second hand. Direct verification requires interview or survey evidence from affected communities, which the security situation precluded and which would in any case raise the participant-exposure concern noted in the methods. The claim should therefore be treated as a theoretically motivated interpretation consistent with the documentary record rather than as an established empirical finding, and its verification is the most important single item on the research agenda this study generates.

Third, the concept of coerced disorganization is advanced on the basis of one case, which is sufficient to propose a conceptual distinction but not to establish its generality. Its value will depend on whether the diagnostic questions set out above identify a recognisable configuration in other settings and whether the divergence between capacity and willingness proves detectable with appropriate instruments. Fourth, the analysis deliberately brackets several factors that any complete account of the Zamfara crisis would require: the political economy of gold mining in the state, the regional circulation of small arms, cross-border dynamics with Niger, and the governance and accountability deficits within the security sector itself. These are excluded not because they are unimportant but because the argument here is specifically about the mechanism of institutional degradation, and a framework that attempted to incorporate every relevant factor would specify none of them adequately.

Table 1. Limitations of the Study, Their Consequences for the Claims Advanced, and the Research Operations Required to Address Them

Limitation	Consequence for the claims advanced	Mitigation adopted in this study	Research operation required
Documentary corpus produced by others for other purposes; reporting incentives favour discrete, newsworthy attacks over gradual attrition	The prevalence of deliberate targeting relative to structural attrition may be overstated	Argument rested on the selectivity of targeting with respect to institutional function rather than on its frequency	Triangulation of the institutional-targeting pattern against independently coded incident data and administrative records
Absence of primary fieldwork in affected communities	The central claim about residents' reasoning –knowledge retained, action withheld –is available only at second hand	Claim advanced as a theoretically motivated interpretation consistent with the record, not as an established finding	Interview or survey instruments measuring willingness and capacity to intervene separately, identifying the perceived source of risk
Single-case design	Sufficient to propose a conceptual distinction; insufficient to establish its generality	Diagnostic questions specified in portable form so that the configuration can be sought elsewhere	Comparative application in other settings of rural armed violence, including the central Sahel and north-eastern Nigeria
Deliberate bracketing of gold-mining political economy, small-arms circulation, cross-border dynamics and security-sector accountability	Explanatory scope confined to the mechanism of institutional degradation	Scope condition stated explicitly rather than left implicit	Integrative designs testing whether the bracketed factors condition or modify the coercion mechanism

Table 1 sets the four limitations alongside what each does to the claims advanced, so that the boundaries of the argument can be read directly rather than inferred from the prose. The first row concerns the corpus itself. Document analysis draws its evidence from material generated for purposes other than the researcher's, which gives it unobtrusiveness and reach but leaves the analyst dependent on what the producing institutions considered worth recording (Bowen, 2009). That dependence is not neutral in conflict settings. Source-based accounts of political violence are systematically shaped by the reporting apparatus that produces them, so that the distribution of recorded events reflects the distribution of observation as much as the distribution of violence (Davenport & Ball, 2002), and event data drawn from media reporting under-record incidents in remote, low-access and low-connectivity areas of exactly the kind that characterise rural Zamfara (Weidmann, 2016). The mitigation recorded in the second column follows from this: because a discrete attack on a district head is more reportable than the slow attrition of a household economy, the

argument was built on the pattern of selectivity across institutional functions rather than on counts of incidents, which is the inference least sensitive to the density of reporting.

The second row is the more consequential constraint. The claim that residents retain informational capacity while withholding action, and that they do so from anticipated retaliation rather than attenuated shared expectations, is a claim about reasoning, and documentary sources report reasoning only as relayed by intermediaries. The obvious remedy - direct interviewing - is itself constrained by the conditions the study describes, since research in active conflict settings carries risks that fall on participants rather than on the investigator and that cannot be transferred away by consent procedures alone (Wood, 2006). The design therefore treats the mechanism as interpretation rather than finding, and the fourth column specifies what would convert it: instruments that measure willingness to intervene separately from capacity to intervene, and that ask respondents to name the source of the risk they associate with intervening. Absent that separation, any survey of collective efficacy in a coercive setting will return a single depressed score and will attribute to weak relational density what may be a rational response to a credible threat.

The third row addresses generality. A single case cannot establish the frequency of a configuration, but that is not the work it is being asked to do; case studies are strongest precisely where the objective is conceptual development and the identification of mechanisms that variable-oriented designs average away (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gerring, 2004). The relevant discipline is to be explicit about the logic of selection and about the population to which the concept is offered, rather than to treat one case as a small sample of an unspecified universe (Small, 2009). Zamfara is not claimed to be representative of rural insecurity generally; it is claimed to be a setting in which the coercive production of disorganization is unusually legible, and the diagnostic questions were written in portable form so that the same configuration can be sought, and failed to be found, elsewhere.

The fourth row records what the study deliberately does not attempt. Gold-mining rents, the circulation of small arms, cross-border dynamics with Niger and accountability deficits within the security sector are all material to the Zamfara crisis, and none of them is engaged here beyond acknowledgement, because the argument concerns the mechanism by which institutions of informal control are degraded rather than the aggregate causation of the conflict. Read together, the four rows indicate the shape of the research agenda the study generates and its ordering: the fieldwork identified in the second row is the priority, since it tests the mechanism on which the concept rests; the comparative work in the third row establishes whether the concept travels; and the integrative work in the fourth row determines whether the bracketed factors modify the mechanism or merely accompany it. Until the second of these is undertaken, the contribution of this study is properly described as a specified and testable conceptual claim rather than a demonstrated empirical regularity.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to determine which institutions of informal social control have been degraded in Zamfara State and by what mechanisms, whether the resulting configuration matches the causal architecture of classical social disorganization theory, and what follows for intervention design. The evidence indicates that the institutions most consequential for community self-regulation - traditional rulership, schooling, periodic markets and settlement itself - have been degraded substantially through deliberate targeting by armed actors rather than through the ecological attrition the classical model assumes, and that this targeting is selective with respect to the coordinating function of the institutions concerned. The evidence further indicates that residents' capacity to exercise informal control and their willingness to do so have diverged, with knowledge retained but action withheld from anticipated retaliation, a divergence the classical model does not predict because it treats both components as products of the same relational density.

The study's principal contribution is the concept of coerced disorganization, which names this configuration and distinguishes it from emergent disorganization along four dimensions: causal origin, in that an identifiable actor intends the outcome; temporality, in that it can be produced within a season rather than across decades; reversibility, in that improving structural conditions does not remove the suppressing force; and the direction of the collective-efficacy relationship, in that visible community organisation can raise rather than lower exposure to violence within an intermediate range. The concept is offered as an extension of the social disorganization tradition rather than a replacement for it, specifying a scope condition under which the classical model applies and beyond which it requires adjustment. Its practical corollary is a protection-first sequencing of intervention, which inverts the order implicit in most community-security programming and follows directly from the finding that mobilisation without protection exposes the mobilised.

These conclusions rest on documentary evidence and a single case, and the limitations set out above constrain them accordingly. The most important next step is primary research in accessible affected communities, employing instruments that measure willingness and capacity to intervene separately and that identify the perceived source of risk attaching to intervention, which would allow the central claim of this study to be tested rather than inferred. Comparative work applying the diagnostic questions proposed here to other settings of rural armed violence would establish whether coerced disorganization identifies a general configuration or a locally specific one. Should the framework survive that scrutiny, its value would lie in directing attention, in Zamfara and elsewhere, toward the institutions whose protection most directly restores a community's capacity to govern itself - and toward

the recognition that asking communities to organise before they can be protected imposes a risk on them that current programming does not adequately acknowledge.

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The author conceived the study, designed the analytical framework and coding scheme, assembled and analysed the documentary corpus, and wrote the manuscript in its entirety. The author read and approved the final version for submission.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This is a documentary study; no new empirical dataset was generated. All sources analysed are publicly available at the locations cited in the References. The coding frame applied to the corpus is set out in full in the Methods section to permit independent application.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS STATEMENT

The author declares no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to the author. The interpretations expressed herein are those of the author and do not represent the official position of any institution.

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