

MISSING PERSONS IN NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA

THE NUMBERS THE STORIES

FEBRUARY 2023



ACRONYMS

CJTF - Civilian Joint Task Force

ICRC - International Committee of the Red Cross

IDP - Internally Displaced Person

ISWAP - Islamic State West Africa Province

LGA - Local Government Area

NSAG - Non-State Armed Group

UNICEF - United Nations Children's Fund

UNHCR - United Nations Refugee Agency

INTRODUCTION

Over 25,000 people in Nigeria are registered as missing with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as of August 2022, according to the humanitarian organisation. This is a thousand more missing people compared to the figure released in the previous year. And more worrisome is that across Africa, about 64,000 people are registered as missing. This means Nigeria accounts for more than a third of the number across the continent.

"Sadly, the almost 14,000 children registered does not capture the full scope of this often-neglected and tragic humanitarian issue. There is no doubt that there are more children whose fate remains unknown" – Yann Bonzon, head of ICRC delegation in Nigeria.

The cause of the problem is primarily the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria's northeast that has led to the displacement of over 3.1 million people, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Families get separated during raids where members are abducted by terror groups while hurrying to escape from attacks and Boko Haram occupation or as a result of arbitrary arrests (and detention) by the Nigerian military or other militias assisting with counterinsurgency.

The overall goal of this study is to support the establishment of the national missing persons register by providing credible information from sources across Northeast Nigeria using Borno State as a pilot. To achieve this, the study assessed the impact of the insurgency and insecurity on the livelihood and living conditions of the residents in the study LGAs as well as collected verifiable evidence of missing persons in the study locations to help build the database; and give life to the statistics by telling human-angle stories on the development.



METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in Borno state, Nigeria, which has been the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. To further achieve our objective, we worked in five Local Government Areas: Askira, Bama, Chibok, Damboa, and Gwoza. The criteria for selecting these study locations are LGAs that are relatively accessible and have had higher occurrences of people going missing, as observed over the decade.

The study activities started with training data collectors who are based in the study locations and have the requisite knowledge of research and data collection. After this, data was collected over a period of six months with a periodic review (February-May; September-November) using a random and snowballing sampling technique. Data were collected electronically (using KoboCollect) from house to house (community or IDP camps) about the missing persons from people who know them or the missing persons who have been found.

On the data collected, 32.5% of the missing persons' information collected was found in Bama LGA, while 27.5% of the data was from Chibok LGA. 15.8% and 14.7% were collected from Askira Uba and Chibok LGAs respectively and the least amount of data collected (9.4%) was from Damboa LGA.

Data collected across LGAs

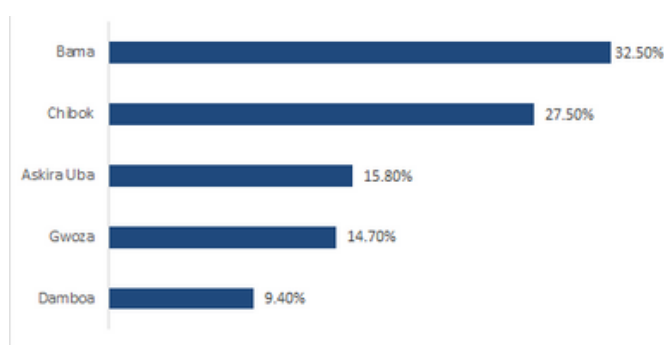


Fig. 1: Breakdown of data collected across the study locations.

Over the course of data collection, the team sought to reach out to all the members of the communities across the target LGAs to collect data on the missing persons. Most of the respondents (86.8%) were residents in the communities, while 13.2% were residents in IDP camps in the study LGAs.

The fewer number of respondents in the IDP camps is attributed to the government closure of the camps, as most of the people are now moving into the communities. Another reason is the bureaucracy and difficulty in accessing the camps in some of the locations.

Location of respondents

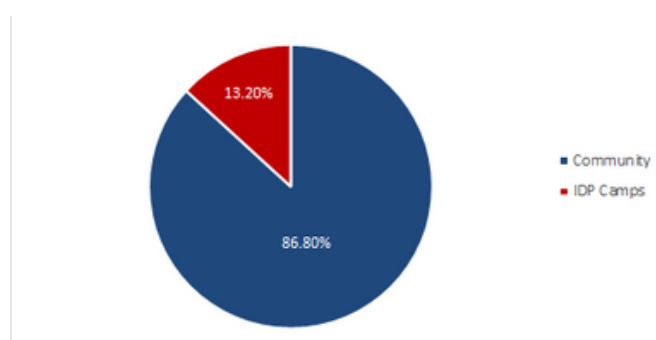


Fig. 2: Breakdown of the location of respondents.

VICTIMS' VOICES



I left Nguro Soye seven years ago because of Boko Haram. My husband, Baba Kura Ali Gajaw, told us to escape via different routes and then meet in Bama town. I spent seven days in Bama IDP camp with my children, but we didn't see him. We set out on foot to Maiduguri and when we reached Kawuri town, some soldiers brought us to Dalori camp. Then I sent for my father in town and he brought us here.

We had to part ways because they were looking for men. So his brother's wife, the children, and I left separately and he left separately with his brother. We asked people from Nguro Soye, detention centres, and the maximum-security prison, but up to now, we have not seen them or heard about their whereabouts. We think they may have been arrested by the military. We have inquired, but people say they have not seen even his corpse.

He was gentle and has been kind to me since we married. He was an Islamic cleric.

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Yakawu Bulama, 30



We went out together to Kulujiya, near the border. When they stayed back to say their prayer, the Cameroonian military with CJTF rounded them up and picked out seven of them [including Mallam Abba]. They took off their clothes and beat them with thorny canes. According to some people, the Cameroonian military brought two vehicles and took them away. But those in Cameroon said they didn't see them. His father died a week after we came to Bama from the pain of losing him. He died seven days after our arrival in Bama from Banki in July 2015.

Mallam Abba was short, dark, and a stammerer. He had tiny tribal marks and small ears. We grew up together and I even carried him on my back. He attended Qur'anic school in Andara and later became a truck driver. He used to sell sugar cane in the town. He lived peacefully with people. He visited me every day and when he travelled, he brought me presents. I even named my son after him.

His children keep asking for their father whenever they see family members. We tell them he is alive and they say, 'Let him come if he is alive.' They make me cry if I see them. What we need [from the government] is for them to release our people so that we would know whether they are alive or not.

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Yagana Aminaye, 35

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DATA

Gender

More than half (58%) of the missing persons identified were male, while 42% of the persons identified were female. This may be due to the fact that men are targeted both by state actors and Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The vast majority of people detained by the military and prison authorities in connection to the Boko Haram insurgency are men. Terror groups are also more likely to kill the male residents of a community and forcefully conscript them. Women have also been targeted by these groups for forced marriages and sexual slavery.

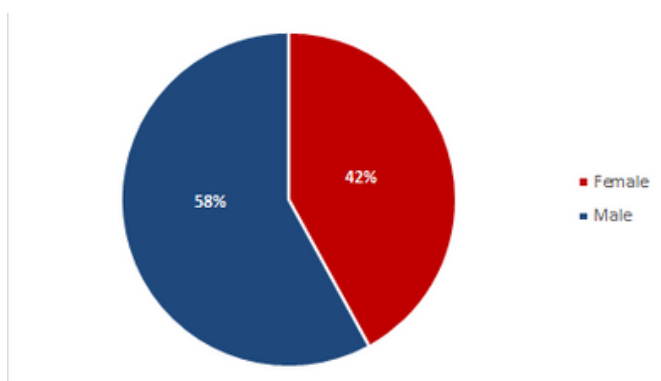


Fig. 3: Gender of missing persons

Age range

The ages of the missing persons were categorised into six categories. 32.8%, which represented the highest percentage of persons who were 11 to 20 years old. 25.7% of the missing persons were aged 21 to 30 years, and 18.1% were aged between 31 and 40 years.

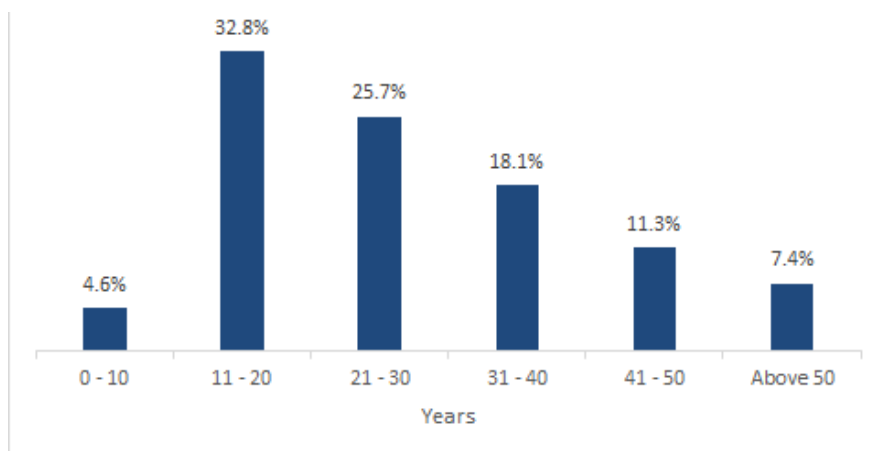


Fig. 4a: Age range of missing persons

The ages of the missing persons were categorised into six categories. 32.8%, which represented the highest percentage of persons who were 11 to 20 years old. 25.7% of the missing persons were aged 21 to 30 years, and 18.1% were aged between 31 and 40 years. Furthermore, 11.3%, 7.4%, and 4.6% of the missing persons were aged 41 to 50 years, above 50 years, and 0 to 10 years, respectively. Summarily, the findings show that the percentage of missing persons decreases as age increases, with the exception of children between 0 - 10 years, which constituted the lowest percentage.

In cross-tabulating the ages of the missing persons with gender, findings showed that the highest percentage of missing persons were girls and women between 11 and 20 years, followed closely by men between 21 - 30 years. In other words, the highest category of missing persons is school-aged girls.

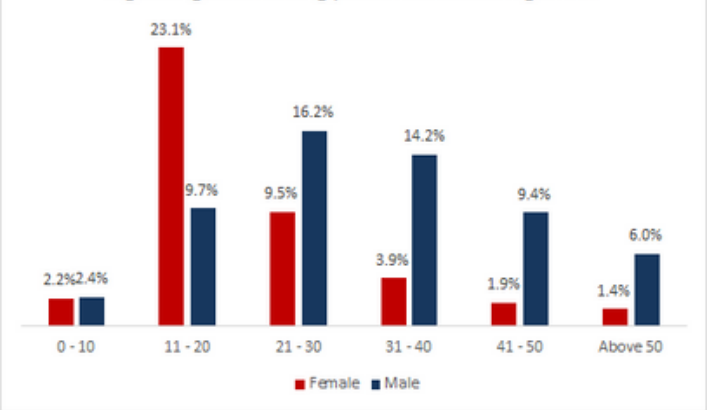


Fig. 4b: Age range of missing persons based on gender

LGA of origin

The study further sought to collect data on the Local Government Area (LGA) of the missing persons. 33.1% and 27.6% of the missing persons were from Bama and Chibok LGAs, respectively, altogether constituting more than half of the missing persons identified. 14.8% are from Gwoza LGA. 14.7% and 9.6% are from Askira Uba and Damboa LGAs, respectively. 0.3% of the persons identified were from other LGAs, including Biu, Damboa, Dikwa, Hawul, and Konduga.

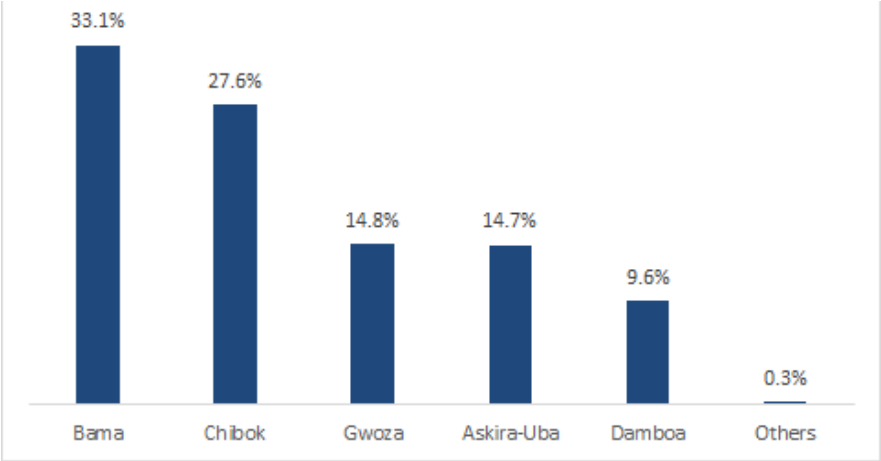


Fig. 5: Local Government Area of origin of the persons missing



Boko Haram had taken control of the town and we feared that if the government troops came, they would kill all of us. So we decided to leave. We went to Maksmari near Cameroon because if we went straight to Banki, we would run into Boko Haram. We first went to Cameroon before we were transferred to Bama. We came to Kulujiya and then to Banki. After seven days in Bama, were taken to Giwa barracks. We were kept in Giwa before we were taken to the maximum-security prison, where we spent four years.

We had to stay back in the community to avoid being detected by Boko Haram. We escaped in batches in the night around 1 o'clock. Then we moved out and went to Kulujiya in Cameroon. We were over 100, including women and children. At Kulujiya, the military beat us severely and later in the night, they selected seven of us and took them away in a vehicle, leaving us with 17 others. After about 30 minutes, we heard some gunshots, making us think they might have been shot by the military. We neither asked them nor did they tell us what happened to them, but we never saw them again.

There were 17 other people also beaten almost to death by the military with the use of a corn-planting implement with a sharp metal piercer called 'gabkal'. After that terrible incident, three of us came to Banki, and after screening us, they beat us again. When one CJTF officer told them I was a water vendor, they spared me. But the other two confessed and they were taken away. After some time, we heard gunshots and later, the CJTF told us they were shot dead. Then they transferred me to Bama, where I met my brother's wife, who told me that my brother, Baa'na Kura Amodu, and his small daughter, Ya Khadijah, have not been seen since we left that night. After seven days, they tied our faces and took us to Giwa barracks, where I spent seven months.

It makes me feel sick [to think about Ya Khadijah]; a small girl of six just disappeared. I kept wondering what happened to her.



We left Kumshe seven years ago when the military was about to take over the town. We arrived at Kulujiya. The military separated the men and said they would follow us later. At the checkpoint, one soldier fired gunshots and one man was shot when he tried to run away. The military picked four men, including my husband, Wakil Abba, to go and bury the dead man. We didn't see them return until they took us to Maiduguri.

Wakil was a driver. He was tall, light in complexion, and with Kanuri tribal mark. He talked gently. He was popular and known to be kind. He was a trader in livestock and used to drive a van. He also used to look after his livestock at home.

I have no husband and no children. I also lost my two brothers when we came as IDPs. I now take care of two children belonging to my late brothers. We stayed in Banki for five months. We survived on begging; we had to beg the military to give their leftovers. We heard that they brought food to people in Bama, thinking that they would also bring to Banki, but they didn't come to Banki. Then the military advised us to go to Maiduguri if we knew somebody; they said they would assist in transporting us. One of them brought me to Maiduguri.

I am the one taking care of myself and the children. If Wakil were around, he would be doing it for us. I would be very happy to see him.

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Yagana Mamanaye, 30

Religion

All the missing persons identified practice either Islam or Christianity. 66.3% of the persons missing were Muslims, while 33.7% of the persons were Christians.

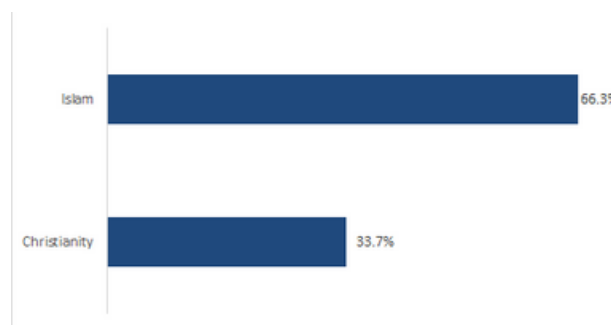


Fig. 6: Religion of missing persons

Educational qualification

Regarding the educational qualification of the missing persons, the study discovered that half (50.7%) of those identified had no formal education. 36.4% had secondary school as their highest form of education, while 8.2% and 4.6% had primary and tertiary education, respectively.

This also further speaks to the low literacy levels in Borno state and, by extension, the northeastern region of the country.

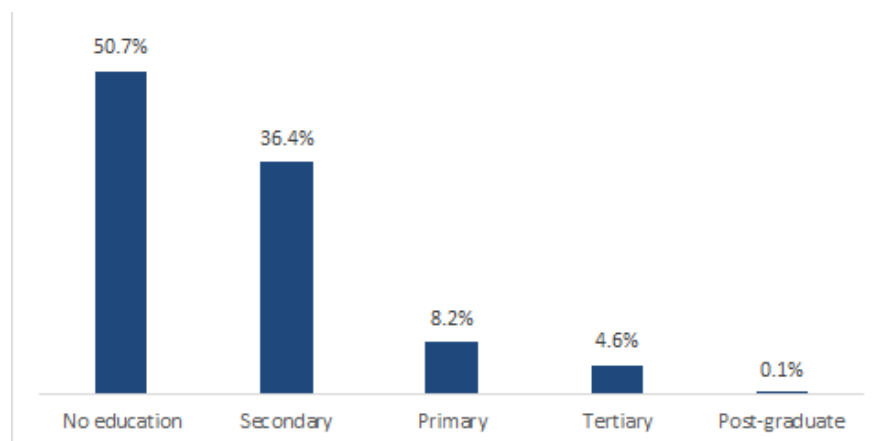


Fig. 7: Educational qualification of the missing persons

Employment status

Most of the missing persons identified were unemployed, constituting 47.2% of the data collected. 34.2% of the missing persons were self-employed, meaning they engaged in one form of entrepreneurial activity or another, such as trading. Furthermore, 12.4% of the persons were identified as students at the time they were missing and only about 6.2% of the persons were employed when they went missing.

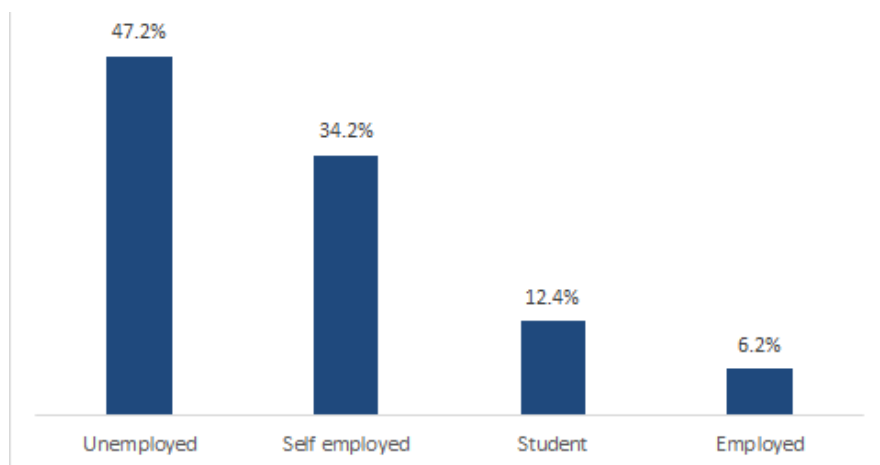


Fig. 8: Employment status of the missing persons

Persons found

The study further sought to determine if the persons who were missing at any point have been found or are still missing. The findings show that 74.6% of persons who have been missing are yet to be found, while 25.4% have been found.

Also, compared to males, more females (30.7%) have been found after going missing.

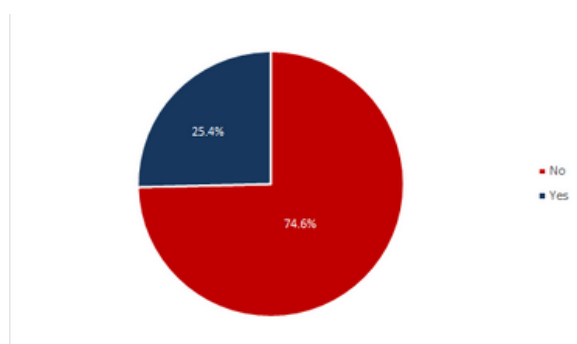


Fig. 9a: If the persons are still missing or are found

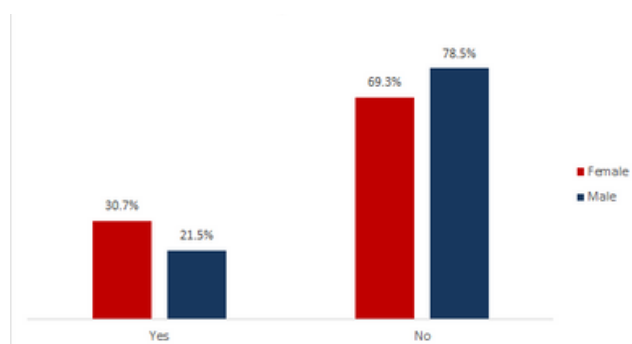


Fig. 9b: If the persons are still missing or are found by gender

Cause of re-appearance

What was responsible for finding the persons? Our findings revealed that 62.8% of the persons who were found escaped from captivity, while 12.3% were willfully released by their captors. Furthermore, 10.5% and 8.5% were found as a result of the intervention of relief/humanitarian organisations and military actions, respectively, while 4.3% were released due to some form of ransom payment. Only 0.3% were found as a result of willful surrender to government authorities.

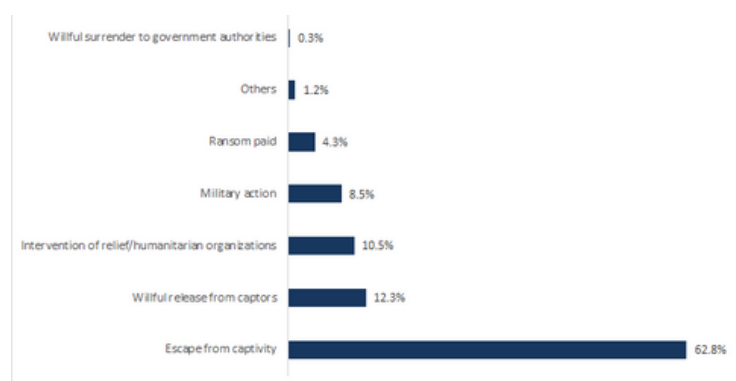


Fig. 10: What was responsible for the person's re-appearance?

How they went missing

The study sought to discover the circumstances under which the people went missing. Findings showed that abductions and attacks by insurgents were responsible for 88% of the persons going missing, while 3.1% were arrested by law enforcement/vigilantes. Kidnapping constituted 3.6% of how the persons went missing and 2.6% of the respondents do not have information about how they went missing. However, 1.4% and 0.6% went missing because they were recruited into the insurgent groups involuntarily and voluntarily, respectively.

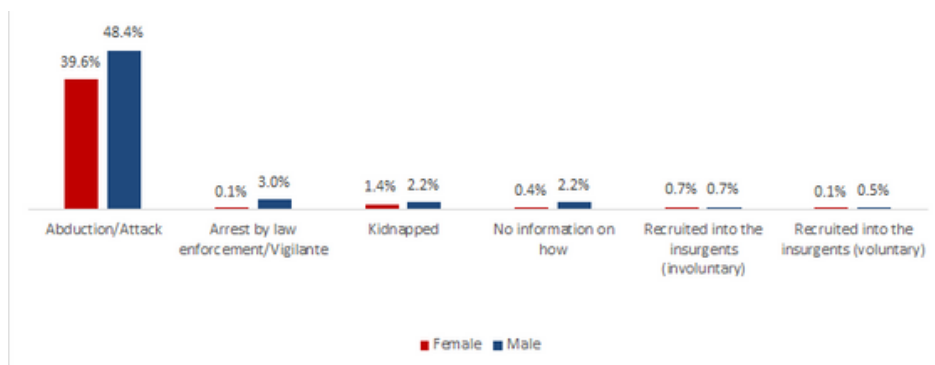


Fig. 11a: Breakdown of how the persons' went missing across gender

A deeper dive into abductions and attacks showed that the highest percentage of abductions was from Bama LGA (32.4%), followed by Chibok LGA 26.9%. Askira Uba and Gwoza had 12.3% and 10.5%, respectively, while the LGA with the least abduction/attacks was Damboa with 4.6% of the cases.

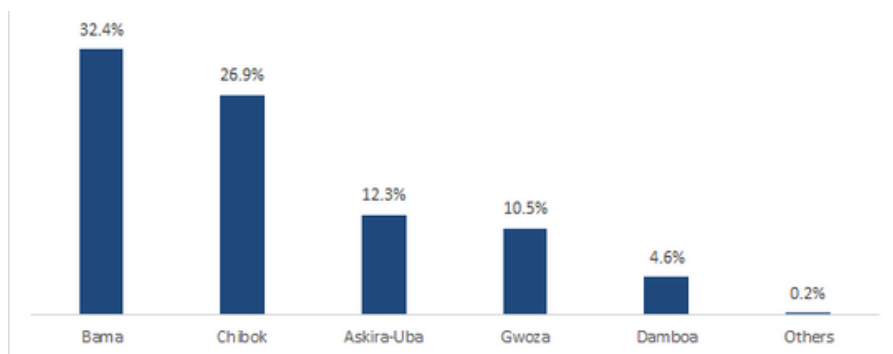


Fig. 11b: Missing persons due to abductions and attacks

Who was responsible?

NSAGs like Boko Haram and ISWAP were identified as responsible for the disappearance of 91.4% of the persons. State actors like the army and police were identified as responsible for the disappearance of 6.6% of the missing persons, 1.5% of the incidents were attributed to kidnappers, and other cases constituted 0.5%.

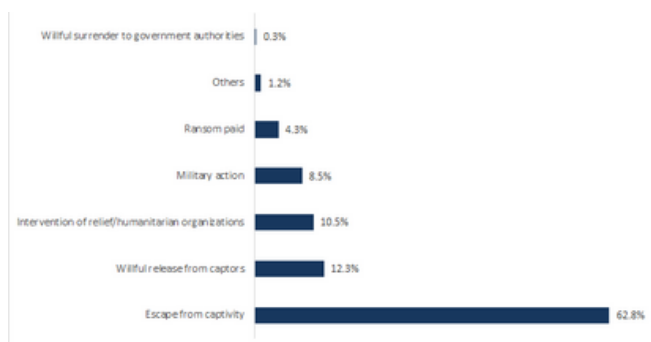


Fig. 12: Who was responsible for the missing person's disappearance?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following our extensive research of the crisis, HumAngle believes that Nigeria can tackle this problem with better data collection and more transparent criminal justice and counterinsurgency processes. We also have the following recommendations:

- The government needs to fast-track its efforts to create a nationwide missing persons register, but with a focus on areas devastated by conflict. The register should be made public in a way that would respect the victims' right to privacy, but also to such an extent as would allow for information on missing people to be offered by the public. The first solution is to document the entire length of the problem, and only the government has the infrastructure to do this.
- The authorities should put an end to the practice of arbitrary arrests and prolonged detention of suspects without trial and access to lawyers or their families. Everyone suspected of acts of terrorism should be prosecuted in accordance with local and international laws. The secrecy encouraged by such practices leads to gross abuses of human rights.
- The names and pictures of everyone in detention centres and prisons across the country should be publicly accessible and updated regularly. This will allow families looking for their loved ones to be aware of their whereabouts and confirm that they are alive.
- An investigation should be conducted into incidents of extrajudicial killing and secret burials, and those found to have gone fowl of the law should be brought to book. The victims should also be acknowledged and compensated.
- The families of people in detention or who may have died in unclear circumstances should be properly informed about the status of their members. Information about people abducted by terror groups shared with the government by escapees or released captives should be passed across to their families.
- Nigeria should improve data collection at the borders and coordination with the authorities in neighbouring countries, such as Cameroon, Chad, and Niger Republic, so that it can better track the transnational movements of displaced people.
- Nigeria needs to have more comprehensive data about people living in the country. As recently as 2018, more than half of new babies in the country were still not getting registered. Nigeria, in fact, has the highest number of children without birth certificates in Africa, according to UNICEF.
- Government and non-governmental agencies should have psychosocial programmes for people whose relatives have gone missing. Bearing the burden of a missing loved one is just as bad, if not worse, than bearing the certain death of a family member.



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