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Nature and Pattern of Carjacking Victimization in Nigeria

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Abstract

Carjacking victimisation has emerged as a critical security challenge in Nigeria, marked by escalating incidents of vehicle theft, often involving violence, deception, and sophisticated criminal networks. Imagine having to park a vehicle and getting to see it sudden disappearance. This study explores the nature, patterns, and contributing factors to carjacking in Nigerian cities, drawing on secondary data from newspaper reports spanning 2016 to 2025. Content analysis was used to explore broader idea of the phenomenon from three Nigerian newspapers.

The research reveals that carjacking is underreported due to public skepticism about recovery and weak institutional responses. Given that some victims feel reporting such case to the police is pointless and they might not recover the car back. Offenders employ diverse tactics, ranging from physical attacks using blunt weapons or firearms to elaborate schemes exploiting trust or leveraging technology such as Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) cloning. Lagos and Abuja emerge as hotspots for such crimes, with commercial drivers, financial institutions, and even law enforcement personnel increasingly targeted. Crime like carjacking reflects deeper socio-economic issues including poverty, unemployment, and systemic vulnerabilities in cybersecurity and vehicle security systems.

Findings show the role of organized syndicates and the evolving nature of car theft, which now includes cyber-enabled methods. In response, authorities have introduced digital platforms like the Central Motor Registry Command Centre (CMRCC) to enhance reporting and tracking of stolen vehicles. Recommendations include improving vehicle security technologies, raising public awareness, strengthening community policing, and addressing underlying socio-economic disparities. This manuscript contributes valuable insights for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and the public, offering a comprehensive understanding of carjacking dynamics in Nigeria and informing strategies for prevention and intervention.

Keywords: Cartheft, Victims, Carjacking, Organised Crime, Victimization, Vehicle theft

Introduction

Carjacking is a serious problem all over the globe. Perpetrators of carjacking in Nigeria often use force and intimidation to steal vehicles. It occurs in all cities, no matter the size, population, or level of security, though the severity differs. Organized crime networks operate across states, complicating containment efforts. Although the crime is underreported due to a number of fears, it remains a significant security concern. The pattern of robbery or car theft in the country reflects socio-economic challenges and weak law enforcement in the country. This paper examines the underlying factors that define carjacking victimisation in Nigeria.

Nigeria has widespread carjacking incidents, especially in cities like Lagos and Abuja, owing to a number of significant reasons such as uneven distribution of resources, unemployment, poverty, and the weak presence of law enforcement agents in strategic locations. Many carjacking incidents are committed at gunpoint, suggesting a high level of threat and violence against drivers. Some perpetrators resort to physical attacks using blunt objects like hammers or knives. For example, In Ogun State (14th December 2023), suspects smashed the head of a motorcyclist with a hammer during an attempted theft. Reports indicate that many crimes occur late at night or in the early hours of the morning. While some car thefts are not violent, others involve deceit. In Benin (November 2020), suspects were mobbed and set ablaze after allegedly deceiving victims under false pretenses.

Those at high risk are residents who park their cars on the streets as a result of space constraints in the compounds where they live. The rise in car theft highlights the urgency for global action. According to U.S department of Justice (2007), carjacking occurs in large cities and border towns. By population, Lagos is not the smallest city in Nigeria, but it has the fastest-growing population and the highest recorded rate of carjacking incidents.

The high cost of cybersecurity sometimes discourages car owners from subscribing to car tracking technology in Nigeria. Car thieves exploit vulnerabilities that require no physical tampering by using modern technological methods. In 2023, reports from cybersecurity agencies in Europe and North America revealed a sharp rise in vehicle identification number(VIN) based enhanced cybersecurity protocols. However, the global automotive industry faces a significant challenge in staying ahead of these threats (Sobowale, Punch, Wednesday, January 1st, 2025). Countries like Germany and Japan are already addressing these vulnerabilities through stricter regulations and enhanced cybersecurity protocols.

Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) is a unique 17 -character code assigned to every vehicle. No two vehicles share the same VIN. The VIN provides information about the car's brand, model, and manufacturing history. While the VIN serves as an important identifier, it has also become a tool used by criminal networks in perpetrating crimes. A Lack of awareness among vehicle owners creates opportunities for offenders to exploit. For example, what is sometimes required by carjackers is simply a photo of the license plate number or VIN to compromise a vehicle.

The study is important to the academic community because crimes like carjacking are connected to other offenses such as traffic robbery, looting, and other forms of criminal activity in the country. Carjacking is considered a serious offense and contravenes Sections 411 and 287 of the Criminal Law of Lagos State, 2015.

Carjacking is a growing concern in Nigeria. Victims often experience victimisation when their cars are stolen from parking lots, but many do not report such incidents because they believe the vehicles may never be recovered. Car theft syndicate are responsible for receiving, rebranding, and selling stolen vehicles (Sanusi, Punch, Sunday, 10th November 2024).

Due to the alarming rate of car theft in Abuja, the Inspector General of Police launched the Central Motor Registry Command Centre at the Force Headquarters in Abuja, to enable members of the public to report cases of stolen vehicles in the country.

Commercial drivers, such as Uber and Bolt drivers, are particularly vulnerable, which exemplify the need for stronger security measures to protect not only commercial drivers but also private car owners. In 2021, 10 Uber/Bolt drivers were killed in Abuja since January.

Literature Review

Carjacking, a violent confluence of theft and assault, has emerged as a significant security challenge in Nigeria, demanding comprehensive investigation and strategic countermeasures. Nigeria, characterized by its complex societal structure and rapid population growth approaching 200 million, faces dynamics of crime including carjacking, that are intricately woven into the nation's socio-economic fabric. These dynamics are influenced by factors such as poverty, unemployment, and disparities in wealth distribution (Kenneth, 2021). It is important to recognize that this form of criminal activity is aided through collaboration with organised network of people and even the use of traditional supernatural power (Aransiola and Asindemade, 2011).

The exploration of carjacking victimisation in Nigeria necessitates a multi-dimensional approach, considering the convergence of economic hardship, social inequality, and the availability of illicit resources. High rate of unemployment, harsh economic conditions, and deficiencies in the educational system contribute significantly to the proliferation of cybercrimes, mirroring the socio-economic drivers behind carjacking incidents (Aransiola and Asindemade, 2011). The surge in technology adoption has inadvertently paved the way for novel criminal methodologies that are both facile to execute and challenging to trace, investigate, and prosecute, thereby heightening the sense of insecurity within the Nigerian space (Chigozie-Okwum et al., 2017). Like carjackers, other perpetrators exploit vulnerabilities within the existing system, reflecting broader societal issues.

Where incidents like carjacking are not isolated events, but rather symptoms of deeper systemic issues. Addressing these issues will require a holistic approach that encompasses economic reforms, security training for citizens, and improvements in law enforcement strategies. A more effective strategy might involve comprehensive reform initiatives within the Nigerian Police, aimed at enhancing their capabilities, and fostering greater collaboration with local communities and international law enforcement agencies.

Methodology

The data spans several years (2016–2025) and covers multiple states, including Lagos, Abuja, Ogun, Anambra, Rivers, Kaduna, Edo, and others. The information includes details such as the time and location of incidents, methods used by offenders, number of arrests or victims, and media reports. This study utilized a qualitative and quantitative content analysis approach to examine

the nature and patterns of carjacking victimisation in Nigeria, based on secondary data extracted from newspaper reports. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to interpret the narratives surrounding each carjacking case. Data collection involved sourcing primary data from selected newspapers, including Punch, Vanguard and The Nigerian Tribune. News articles related to carjacking incident were collected over a period of time and retrieved through online searches using keywords such as "carjacking," "car theft," "hijacking".

A structured spreadsheet titled "Carjacking in Nigeria.xlsx" was used to systematically record relevant information from each article, including gathering information on carjacking incidents reported in Nigerian newspapers between 2016-2025. After collecting raw data, it was organized into structured categories within an Excel spreadsheet. This enabled the researchers to identify recurring themes (e.g., common methods used by perpetrators). Analyze spatial and temporal distributions of carjacking cases and cross-reference information across different news sources to validate accuracy.

The data collection focused on extracting relevant variables such as:

Date of incident/arrest : To determine temporal trends (monthly, yearly).

Location : To identify geographical hotspots of carjacking activities.

Newspaper Source : To ensure credibility and triangulation across multiple media platforms.

Arrests/killed : To assess law enforcement responses.

Number of victims killed : To analyze the level of violence associated with carjacking.

Nature of Offense : Whether the crime involved hijacking, theft, or robbery.

Method of Robbery : Insights into how carjackers operated (e.g., at gunpoint, use of force, deception).

Time and Day : To establish peak periods for carjacking incidents.

Point of Arrest/Incidence : To map out areas where crimes occurred or suspects were apprehended.

Victims Experience of Carjacking

Carjacking is prevalent in urban centers like Abuja, often exploiting traffic congestion, poor surveillance, and high movement.

On October 10, 2024, a victim reported to the Central Police Divisional Headquarters, Plateau State that his automobile, a 2006 ash-colored Honda Accord with registration number RBC 40 NW, had been stolen that was parked in a mechanic workshop.

Mr Olaoluwa's car had developed a mechanical fault; a friend recommended that he engage a mechanic from Apo Mechanic Village, FCT, named Abdulhamid Saidu (currently at large). Unaware of the mechanic's criminal intentions, Olaoluwa was reported to have handed over the car, along with its registration documents, for repair. But instead of repairing it, Saidu disappeared with the car (Sanusi, Punch, Sunday, 10th November 2024).

The case of Olaoluwa underscores how victims are targeted and manipulated by perpetrators who often exploit trust and

vulnerability. This form of victimisation is particularly psychologically distressing because it involves a breach of trust. Although this type of victimisation is not violent, it illustrates a soft entry method. Locations such as the mechanic villages have previously been linked to organised car theft networks. Victims may unknowingly engage with individuals embedded in these networks, leading to the loss of their vehicles.

Another victim has this to say:

A scrap merchant said that two guys attempted to sell him iron scraps valued at N10.3 million using a Scania vehicle with the registration number (JJJ 288 XX). Suspecting theft due to their haste in collecting payment, he astutely referred them to a neighbouring Chinese company, telling the management to withhold payment until the provenance of the products was confirmed.

At about 8:00 am on November 5, 2024, I was in my shop at Bara Village when two men brought a load of iron scraps for sale in a Scania truck motor vector with the registration number (JJJ 288 XX), I suspected that the goods were stolen because they were in a rush to collect their money which was bargained at N10,326,000.00," the source said (Shaba, Punch, Friday 8th November 2024).

The seller was suspicious due to the buyer's hurried attitude and the unusually low negotiated bargain of ₦10,326,000.00. This exemplifies how offenders manipulate victims into losing control of their thinking and forcing them in making hasty decisions. Consequently, the shop owner in this case is not a direct victim of carjacking, but becomes part of the chain of victimisation by potentially handling stolen goods demonstrating how widespread the impact of carjacking can be. By mention of stolen iron scraps, it is evident that the truck itself had been hijacked earlier. Some carjacking victims lose their vehicles, which are then broken down and sold off illegally through intermediaries such as scrap dealers. This presents another new dimension to understanding carjacking victimisation in Nigeria, the crime is evolving in nature shifting from opportunistic theft to organized, financially motivated criminal activity. The original owner of the Scania truck would likely suffer significant financial loss, disruption of business operations, and emotional distress. Perpetrators often exploit systemic weaknesses in security, documentation, and oversight when executing their plans. His suspicion suggests an awareness of risk among traders dealing with scrap metal or used parts.

Another narration of his experience:

Akeem was said to have disclosed that, once he realised, they might be thieves, he took the suspects to a Chinese company to hold their goods until he could verify the true owner.

A medical doctor explains his ordeal:

I was on night duty as a doctor and went to church from there, and after service, I decided to pick up some things from the market. Around 12.30pm on Sunday, I parked my car in front of the Tako Market in Abuja and went inside, and spent about 20 minutes in the market. I came out and realised that my car was no longer at the spot, where I parked it; I thought I forgot where I parked it, so I went around the market to check for it and I asked people around, but they claimed that they didn't see any

car there (Omojuigbe, Punch, Thursday, 17th June 2021).

The incident indicates public place vulnerability. Twenty minutes after returning from shopping, the victim discovered that her car has been stolen. Despite searching and asking people about the whereabouts of the vehicle, she was unable to locate it. Examining the victim's profile, it becomes clear that carjacking is not specific or limited to a particular social class, no one is immune to becoming victim in Nigeria. Carjackers demonstrate a high level of planning and surveillance, and they employ direct techniques to avoid detection. The incident took place in Abuja, a city often perceived as relatively secure compared to other Nigerian cities. This indicates that even so-called "safe zones" are not immune to carjacking.

Methods or instrument used by the offenders

Michael Segun, a suspected robber posing as a passenger, has been apprehended for attempting to steal a Toyota Camry from an unidentified commercial driver in the Alausa region of Lagos State.

The incident happened around 1.20 am on June 11, 2024. The driver was an airport taxi driver around the Chevron area of Ajah when the person who pretended to be a passenger, Michael Segun, stopped him and told him to convey him to the Afrikan Shrine. After they both concluded on the fare, they started the journey to the Shrine and on getting to Mobolaji Bank Anthony Way by 7Up, Alausa, Lagos, the passenger who was sitting beside the driver suddenly brought out a knife from his bag and attacked him in an attempt to snatch his ash-coloured Toyota Camry car. The driver sustained a deep knife cut on his hand while trying to struggle with the suspect and quickly raised the alarm, where some Good Samaritans came to his rescue, while the suspect took to his heels (Lambo, Punch, Thursday, 11th July 2024).

According to the report from Punch newspaper the vehicle reached a predetermined area in Mobolaji Bank Anthony Way by 7Up, Alausa, Lagos. Segun suddenly produced a knife from this bag which shows readiness and planning, he had prepared the tool necessary for empowering the driver. The use of knife was an attempt to gain control over the situation. Offender such as Segun utilized physical tools to achieve his objective.

Another victim narrated his victimisation this way:

So, the new tactics they are using now is to find a huge stone and dash it through your windscreens. If the stone can hit you, you won't be able to drive at that point. It is the same tactics of the hammer whereby they will come through your driver's side and throw a hammer through your side-glass (Olabulo and Mohammed, Tribune, Saturday, November 27, 2021).

This method describes an evolving criminal tactics targeting motorists, particularly in the context of carjacking and violent attacks on vehicles. What the offender did was a tactic that is not random vandalism but a calculated effort to incapacitate the driver immediately. The incident highlights how criminals are exploiting designs and psychological weaknesses in vehicle security. These tactics employed by the perpetrator describes how victims often face fear and become vulnerable, by mention of such tactics indicates a deteriorating sense of public safety and possibly inadequate law enforcement response.

This tactic is called distraction method.

Maxwell contacted me sometimes last year to buy my car that I put up for sale, but he didn't give me a good price for it, so, I couldn't sell it to him. But when I stole an old model Toyota Camry last year, I called him to come and take the car I stole. We started having a misunderstanding when he requested the car's original papers and I couldn't provide them. I later told him that I stole the car. Maxwell became more interested in the business and gave me a master key with which I could steal Toyota Camry cars (Ikoku, Punch, Thursday, 11th August 2016).

Maxwell is portrayed as a facilitator or middleman in auto theft. This indicates that Maxwell's interest is not in vehicles per se, but in acquiring them through illicit means likely for resale, stripping, or export where documentation is less scrutinized.

Breach of trust on relationship between victims and offender

A victim narrates his ordeal:

The prosecution alleged that on May 16, 2022, the defendant, employed as a driver by one Kayode Ajala, was entrusted with the car keys to run errands. However, the defendant reportedly took the car and never returned it. All efforts to contact him proved futile (Balogun, Punch, Thursday, 21st March 2024).

The defendant's actions not only breached the employment contract but also potentially constitute a criminal offense under the law. This case highlights the fine line between civil and criminal matters in employment relationships, particularly when entrusted property is involved. The court must carefully consider the intent behind the defendant's actions and the specific circumstances surrounding the non-return of the vehicle to determine the appropriate legal consequences.

Measures in Place to Counter the Incidence by State

A dedicated website was created to report incidents of car theft:

The CMRCC will make it possible for members of the public to report vehicles stolen from as far back as January 1, 2018, and yet-to-be-recovered to input the vehicle details on the online platform to serve as a reliable data point for the possible recovery of the vehicle (Lambo, Punch, Thursday, 8th December 2022).

The platform will also process motor vehicle information to support police operations and efforts toward enhancing national security. The digitalisation of the CMR is complete with two Command Centres in Abuja and Lagos, 37 CMR Information Centres across the country and in the Federal Capital Territory, 200 e-Enforcement Operational Patrol Vehicles with automatic number plate recognition on each vehicle as part of the first batch (Lambo, Punch, Thursday, 8th December 2022).

A website was created <https://reportcmr.npf.gov.ng>, to upload their vehicle information on the website with effect from December 7, 2022, as a security step for preventing it from being stolen and re-registered.

On November 21, 2024, at approximately 8:00 PM, the FCT Police Command received a distress call from a good Samaritan reporting a carjacking incident. Engr. Kemi H. Adidiru was driving from Lugbe to the city center when she was abruptly stopped and surrounded by six armed men under a pedestrian bridge along Alieta

Road, Lugbe. The robbers forcefully ejected both her and her driver from her vehicle a 2012 black Toyota Land Cruiser Prado (Reg. No. ABJ 670 EY) and sped off with the car and her belongings at gunpoint (Obarayese, Tribune, Saturday, November 23, 2024)

Central Motor Registry Portal

He noted that with modern vehicles relying heavily on electronic systems, car thieves now exploit vulnerabilities that require no physical tampering.

The expert said, "By simply capturing the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) displayed on a car's windshield, they can duplicate keys with an automated VIN to key tools, bypass security systems, and steal vehicles within seconds. Aluko further explained how snapping a photo of the VIN allows hackers to automate key cutting, clone electronic key fobs and exploit a vehicle's electronic systems.

Pattern of Carjacking Victimization in Nigeria

Geographical Distribution

Lagos State: One of the most frequent locations for carjacking, due to its urban density, traffic congestion, and economic importance. Multiple reports from Lagos highlight both successful arrests and recurring crimes.

Abuja/FCT: High-profile cases involving diplomats, journalists, and commercial drivers suggest vulnerability in government and business zones.

Temporal Patterns

Use of Technology: Cybercriminals and hacker uses VIN to bypass security systems and drive away with your car in seconds. Some thieves exploit modern technology leveraging technology to execute thefts swiftly. Inorder to mitigate against VIN cartheft it is advisable to conceal the VIN displayed on dashboards, particularly in public spaces that will help to curb the manace of cartheft victimisation since, offenders use modern technology in perpetrating the crime.

Theoretical Framework

In order to capture the nature and pattern of carjacking victimisation. The phenomenon of carjacking in Nigeria can be explained through the lens of Routine Activity theory, which explains that crime occurs at the convergence of three element: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardianship. In Nigeria, rapid urbanisation, economic hardship, and weak institutional responses create an enabling environment for carjacking to thrive. High and rising levels of unemployment, income inequality, and poverty serve as motivating factors for individuals or organised crime syndicates to engage in criminal activities such as car theft.

High-value vehicles used by ride hailing drivers become suitable targets due to their resale value and demand in illegal markets. Ineffective surveillance, inadequate street lighting, and insufficient vehicle security systems represent the absence of capable guardianship. The advent of cyber enabled methods, such as VIN cloning and electronic key fob hacking, exacerbates the vulnerability of vehicle owners. Routine Activity Theory underscores how socio-economic conditions and systemic weaknesses in security intersect to shape the patterns and prevalence of carjacking in Nigerian cities like Lagos and Abuja.

Conclusion

The nature and pattern of carjacking victimisation in Nigeria reveal a complex interplay of socio-economic factors, weak governance, mob justice, and delayed recovery of vehicles underscoring weak institutional response and technological vulnerabilities. Key observations include high targeting of commercial drivers, especially in Lagos and Abuja. Prevalence of violence , often involving firearms or physical assault. Urban centers remain the hotspots, though rural areas are increasingly affected.

Recommendation

The following measures are recommended for car owners in Nigeria: avoiding parking in unsupervised location that lacks capable guardianship, enable car locks and alarm systems to deter offenders and avoid locations with poor lighting. Efforts to curb carjacking should focus on upgrading vehicle tracking and anti-theft systems, ensuring that vehicle software is regularly updated to patch vulnerabilities, addressing unemployment and youth restiveness, and strengthening community policing and intelligence sharing.

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