



Urban Insecurity, Developmental Consequences, and Crime Control Responses to Mobile Phone Snatching in Kano Municipal Area Council, Nigeria

Suleman Ahmed WAN^a, Sakina Mohammed SHIBDAWA^b

^a*Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Science, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria*

^b*Department of Animal Science, Faculty of Agriculture, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria*

*Corresponding author: sawan@abu.edu.ng

Abstract

Mobile phone snatching has emerged as a persistent form of urban street crime in Nigeria, with significant implications for social stability and economic development. This study examines the effects of mobile phone snatching on social and economic development and evaluates the effectiveness of existing security measures and community interventions in curbing the crime in Kano Municipal Area Council. Using a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to residents and traders, while qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with security personnel, community leaders, and victims. Findings reveal that mobile phone snatching undermines economic productivity, discourages digital financial inclusion, weakens community cohesion, and fuels fear and mistrust in public spaces. Although security responses such as police patrols, community vigilante groups, and technological interventions exist, their effectiveness is constrained by inadequate resources, weak coordination, corruption, and limited community trust. The study concludes that mobile phone snatching poses a serious threat to sustainable urban development and that crime control strategies must move beyond reactive policing to include preventive, community-based, and socio-economic interventions. The paper recommends strengthening community policing, improving urban surveillance infrastructure, regulating informal phone markets, and implementing youth empowerment and rehabilitation programs.

Keywords: Urban insecurity, mobile phone snatching, development, community policing, Kano Municipal Area Council

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Introduction

Urban security is a fundamental requirement for sustainable social and economic development. Cities function optimally when residents can move freely, conduct business, and interact socially without fear of victimization. However, in many developing countries, rapid urbanization, unemployment, inequality, and weak institutional capacity have contributed to rising levels of urban crime (Ghani, 2017). Nigeria, as one of Africa's fastest-urbanizing countries, continues to grapple with various forms of urban insecurity, ranging from armed robbery and burglary to emerging street crimes such as mobile phone snatching. Mobile phone snatching has become one of the most common and visible forms of street crime in Nigerian cities. The crime involves the forceful or sudden theft of mobile phones from individuals in public spaces such as markets, roads, motor parks, and commercial centers. Unlike organized armed robbery, mobile phone snatching is often perpetrated swiftly, sometimes without weapons, making it difficult to prevent and detect (Kaiser et al., 2025). The increasing dependence on mobile phones for communication, mobile banking, e-commerce, and social interaction has significantly raised their value, thereby increasing their attractiveness as targets for theft (Addula, 2025).

In Kano Municipal Area Council, mobile phone snatching has become a persistent threat to everyday life. Kano, as one of Nigeria's major commercial and population hubs, experiences intense human movement, informal economic activities, and overcrowded public spaces. These conditions create opportunities for street crimes, particularly phone snatching, which thrives in environments characterized by anonymity, weak surveillance, and limited formal guardianship. Reports from residents and security agencies indicate that phone snatching is increasingly carried out by youth gangs operating in strategic locations and peak hours, thereby heightening fear and insecurity among residents. Beyond the immediate loss of personal property, mobile phone snatching has broader implications for social and economic development. Mobile phones play a critical role in facilitating small-scale entrepreneurship, mobile banking, digital financial inclusion, and access to social services. When residents fear using phones in public spaces, economic productivity declines, social interaction becomes restricted, and trust within communities weakens (Javaid et al., 2024). Traders, transport workers, students, and artisans who rely heavily on mobile communication are particularly affected, as phone theft disrupts business transactions and income flows (Zhu & Wang, 2022).

Moreover, persistent street crime erodes public confidence in state institutions, especially law enforcement agencies (Corsaro et al., 2015). When residents perceive security responses as inadequate, delayed, or corrupt, they become less willing to cooperate with authorities, further weakening crime control mechanisms (Reza et al., 2024). This situation reinforces a cycle of insecurity, social disorganization, and underdevelopment. In this context, mobile phone snatching is not merely a criminal issue but a development concern that affects social cohesion, economic growth, and urban sustainability. In response to rising urban crime, various security measures and community interventions have been introduced in Kano Municipal Area Council. These include police patrols, community vigilante groups, public awareness campaigns, and limited technological interventions such as phone tracking and IMEI blocking (Alehegn et al., 2025).

While these measures have achieved some success in specific locations, the persistence of mobile phone snatching raises critical questions about their overall effectiveness (Černohorská et al., 2025). Challenges such as inadequate manpower, poor logistics, weak coordination, lack of community trust, and limited rehabilitation of offenders continue to undermine crime control efforts (Islam, 2024).

Despite the growing prevalence of mobile phone snatching, existing scholarly literature in Nigeria has largely focused on general armed robbery, youth violence, or urban insecurity, with limited attention to the developmental consequences of phone snatching and the effectiveness of security and community-based responses. This gap restricts evidence-based policymaking and limits the design of sustainable interventions tailored to the specific dynamics of the crime. Against this backdrop, this study examines the effects of mobile phone snatching on social and economic development and evaluates the effectiveness of existing security measures and community interventions in Kano Municipal Area Council. By situating mobile phone snatching within broader theories of urban crime and development, the study contributes to sociological and criminological discourse while providing practical insights for policymakers, security agencies, and community leaders seeking to enhance urban safety and development.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Data collection

Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 180 respondents, including traders, commuters, and residents of selected wards in Kano Municipal Area Council. The questionnaire captured information on perceived effects of phone snatching on economic activities, social life, and development. Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with police officers, community vigilante leaders, traditional leaders, and victims of phone snatching. These interviews provided deeper insights into the effectiveness of security measures and community interventions.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages), while qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed thematically to complement and explain the survey findings.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and participation was voluntary.

Results and Discussion

This section discusses the major findings of the study in relation to the research objectives, theoretical framework, and existing empirical literature. The discussion focuses on three key thematic areas: (i) the effects of mobile phone snatching on social development, (ii) the effects on economic development, and (iii) the effectiveness of existing security measures and community interventions in Kano Municipal Area Council.

Effects of mobile phone snatching on social development

The findings of the study reveal that mobile phone snatching has severe implications for social development and community life in Kano Municipal Area Council. Respondents consistently reported heightened fear, anxiety, and insecurity in public spaces such as markets, roads, and transport hubs. This pervasive fear has led to reduced social interaction, limited mobility, and avoidance of communal spaces, particularly during early mornings and late evenings. From a sociological perspective, this outcome reflects a breakdown in social cohesion and informal social control. According to Social Disorganization Theory, crime thrives in environments where social institutions are weak and collective efficacy is low (Andiojaya, 2025). The study found that residents increasingly distrust one another and are reluctant to intervene or report suspicious activities, thereby allowing offenders to operate with relative impunity. This erosion of trust weakens neighborhood solidarity and undermines the ability of communities to regulate behavior informally. Furthermore, repeated incidents of mobile phone snatching have negatively affected public confidence in law enforcement agencies. Many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with police response times, perceived corruption, and selective enforcement. This finding supports the argument by (Nam et al., 2024), that ineffective policing reduces citizen cooperation, which in turn weakens crime prevention efforts. When residents lose faith in security institutions, they are less likely to report crimes or participate in community policing initiatives, further deepening social disorganization. The social consequences identified in this study align with previous research on urban insecurity in Nigeria, which suggests that persistent street crime contributes to social fragmentation, fear-driven behavior, and weakened civic engagement. Thus, mobile phone snatching extends beyond individual victimization to become a broader social problem that undermines social development and urban stability.

Effects of mobile phone snatching on economic development

The study also reveals that mobile phone snatching has significant adverse effects on economic development in Kano Municipal Area Council. Respondents reported that phone snatching disrupts business communication, mobile banking transactions, and customer relations, particularly for small-scale traders, artisans, and transport operators who depend heavily on mobile phones for daily operations. Mobile phones are central to Nigeria's informal economy, facilitating price negotiation, money transfers, supply coordination, and customer outreach. The fear of phone theft discourages individuals from using mobile devices openly, leading to reduced efficiency and productivity. Some respondents indicated a shift from digital transactions to cash-based systems, which exposes them to further risks and undermines the goals of financial inclusion and a cashless economy promoted by the Nigerian government (Wittberg et al., 2024). These findings are consistent with development literature that links insecurity to reduced economic activity and investment. According to the (Valdiglesias, 2025), crime increases transaction costs, discourages entrepreneurship, and limits innovation, especially in urban informal economies. In Kano Municipal, the prevalence of phone snatching discourages extended trading hours, reduces customer turnout, and constrains business expansion, thereby slowing local economic growth. Additionally, the economic burden of replacing stolen phones places further strain on already vulnerable households. Victims often incur unplanned expenses to replace devices and recover lost data, further exacerbating poverty and inequality. This supports the strain-based explanation that crime both results from and reinforces socio-economic deprivation (Spyromitros & Panagiotidis, 2022). Therefore, mobile phone snatching functions as both a consequence and a catalyst of underdevelopment within the urban economy.

Effectiveness of existing security measures and community interventions

Another major finding of the study concerns the effectiveness of security measures and community-based interventions aimed at controlling mobile phone snatching. While respondents

acknowledged the presence of police patrols, vigilante groups, and occasional security operations, the overall effectiveness of these measures was perceived as limited. Police patrols were described as irregular and insufficient to cover high-risk areas consistently. Inadequate manpower, poor logistics, and delayed response times were frequently cited as constraints. These limitations reduce the capacity of formal security agencies to act as “capable guardians,” as emphasized by Routine Activity Theory (Mushtaq & Shah, 2025). When guardianship is weak or inconsistent, opportunities for crime increase, particularly in crowded urban environments where suitable targets are abundant. Community vigilante groups were found to be relatively more effective due to their familiarity with local terrain and offenders. However, their operations are constrained by lack of training, legal authority, and funding. In some cases, respondents expressed concerns about abuse of power and human rights violations by vigilante members, which undermines public trust and legitimacy. This finding aligns with studies suggesting that community-based security initiatives require proper regulation and integration into formal security frameworks to be effective and sustainable (Haou et al., 2025).

Technological interventions such as phone tracking and IMEI blocking were identified as potentially effective but underutilized. Low public awareness, poor coordination with service providers, and weak enforcement limit their impact. This supports (Singun, 2025), which argues that technological solutions to phone theft are only effective when combined with public education, regulatory enforcement, and institutional support. Overall, the findings suggest that existing security measures are largely reactive rather than preventive. They focus on arresting offenders after crimes have occurred rather than addressing environmental vulnerabilities, social conditions, and routine activities that facilitate phone snatching. This reactive approach explains the persistence of the crime despite multiple interventions.

Synthesis of findings and theoretical implications

Taken together, the findings strongly support both Social Disorganization Theory and Routine Activity Theory. Social disorganization explains how weakened social cohesion, unemployment, and ineffective institutions create an environment conducive to mobile phone snatching. Routine Activity Theory, on the other hand, explains how the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets (smartphone users), and absence of capable guardians facilitates the crime in everyday urban settings. The findings also demonstrate that mobile phone snatching is not merely a law enforcement problem but a multidimensional development challenge. Addressing it requires integrated strategies that combine security, social policy, economic empowerment, urban planning, and community engagement (Lv & Sarker, 2024).

Summary of the study

This study examined the developmental consequences of mobile phone snatching and assessed the effectiveness of existing security measures and community interventions in Kano Municipal Area Council, Nigeria. Using a mixed-methods research design, data were collected from residents, traders, commuters, community leaders, and security personnel through structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews (Djatkiko et al., 2025). The study was guided by Social Disorganization Theory and Routine Activity Theory to explain both the persistence of the crime and the limitations of current control mechanisms. The findings revealed that mobile phone snatching has far-reaching social and economic implications beyond the immediate loss of personal property. Socially, the crime generates widespread fear, anxiety, and mistrust, leading to reduced social interaction, weakened community cohesion, and declining public confidence in law enforcement agencies. Economically, phone snatching disrupts business communication, discourages mobile banking and digital transactions, increases operational costs for small-scale entrepreneurs, and undermines financial inclusion efforts. These impacts collectively hinder urban

development and reduce the quality of life of residents. The study further found that existing security measures—such as police patrols, community vigilante groups, and limited technological interventions—have achieved only modest success. Their effectiveness is constrained by inadequate resources, weak coordination, insufficient training, lack of legal backing for community initiatives, and low public awareness of technological crime-prevention tools. Overall, the findings demonstrate that mobile phone snatching is both a symptom and a driver of urban insecurity and underdevelopment in Kano Municipal Area Council.

Conclusion

This study concludes that mobile phone snatching represents a serious threat to social stability and economic development in Kano Municipal Area Council. The crime thrives within a context of social disorganization, unemployment, weak institutional capacity, and inadequate urban guardianship. Its consequences extend beyond individual victimization to undermine community cohesion, economic productivity, and confidence in governance and security institutions. The persistence of mobile phone snatching despite multiple interventions indicates that current responses are largely reactive and enforcement-driven, with limited emphasis on prevention, social development, and community participation. While security agencies and community groups play an important role in crime control, their efforts remain insufficient in the absence of supportive socio-economic policies, effective urban planning, and institutional reforms. The study therefore affirms that mobile phone snatching should be understood not merely as a criminal justice issue but as a broader development challenge that requires integrated, multi-sectoral solutions. Addressing the problem demands a shift from short-term policing strategies to sustainable approaches that strengthen social institutions, enhance economic opportunities, and improve urban governance. Strengthening Community Security: Institutionalizing cooperation between police, traditional leaders, and vigilante groups with formal training and a clear legal framework. Investing in security infrastructure: Improving street lighting, installing CCTV in vulnerable areas, and facilitating police mobility to narrow the scope for perpetrators. Regulating the Secondhand Cell Phone Market: Tightening oversight of the informal cell phone market to break the chain of stolen goods sales through collaboration with telecommunications operators. Public Security Education: Increasing public awareness on how to maintain cell phones, reporting thefts, and IMEI blocking procedures. Youth Empowerment and Rehabilitation: Reducing crime rates by providing employment, skills training, and rehabilitation programs for ex-offenders. Integrated Prevention Strategy: Addressing the root causes of crime such as poverty, unemployment, and drug abuse through inclusive urban development policies.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Author contribution

Suleman Ahmed Wan: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software.: **Suleman Ahmed Wan,** and **Sakina Mohammed Shibdawa:** Data curation, Writing-original draft preparation.: **Sakina Mohammed Shibdawa:** Visualization, Investigation.: **Suleman Ahmed Wan:** Supervision, Software.: **Sakina Mohammed Shibdawa:** Validation, Writing-reviewing, and editing.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used Google translate in order to improve language and readability. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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