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Impact of Insecurity on Food Security in Benue State, Nigeria

[1]Utobo, O., [2]Obiekwe, N.J., [3]E.O. Nwankwo-Offiah & [3]A.C. Muojekwu

[1]National Horticultural Research Institute, Otukpa Outstation, Benue State, Nigeria
[2]Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria
[3]Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Anambra State, Nigeria

[1]https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8271-6764
[1]https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3315-4530
[1]https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3615-1527
[1]https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1950-0651

***Corresponding Author:** utobo1984@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background: Benue State, Nigeria, has experienced persistent insecurity challenges, including herder-farmer conflicts, banditry, and kidnapping. These security threats have significant implications for food security, as agricultural activities are disrupted, and farmers are unable to cultivate and harvest their crops.

Objective: This study investigated the impact of insecurity on food security in Benue State, Nigeria, with a focus on the effects of herder-farmer conflicts on agricultural productivity and food availability.

Method: Survey research method was adopted, using structured questionnaire and interview schedule. Employing a multistage sampling technique, data were collected from 180 farming households across three highly affected Local Government Areas (Guma, Logo, and Agatu). Descriptive statistics and Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis were used to analyse the data.

Result: Findings show that 72% of households experienced at least one form of insecurity in the past year, with herder attacks being the most prevalent and recurrent. Insecurity significantly disrupted agricultural activities—68% of respondents abandoned farmlands, while 59% faced market inaccessibility due to fear and road blockades. Coping mechanisms adopted by affected households included skipping meals (70%), reliance on less preferred foods (55%), and food aid dependence (35%). Regression results showed that insecurity incidents ($\beta = -0.34$, $p < 0.01$), displacement ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$), and poor market access ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.05$) were significant predictors of reduced food security, while income level and agricultural support had positive effects.

Conclusion: The study concludes that insecurity undermines food production, access, and resilience, leading to worsening food insecurity in affected areas.

Unique Contribution: This study contributes to the existing literature on the nexus between insecurity and food security, providing empirical evidence from Benue State, Nigeria. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars working on food security and conflict resolution in Nigeria.

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Key recommendation: The study recommends urgent policy interventions, including enhanced security measures, support for displaced farmers, and investment in rural food supply chains to mitigate the adverse impacts of conflicts on food security in Benue State, Nigeria.

Key Words: Insecurity, Food Security, Herder-Farmer Conflicts, Agricultural Productivity, Benue State

INTRODUCTION

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2006). In recent years, the issue of food insecurity has become increasingly pronounced in Nigeria due to various socio-political and environmental challenges. Among these, insecurity—particularly armed conflict, communal violence, and herder-farmer clashes—has emerged as a major threat to food systems, especially in agrarian states like Benue.

Benue State, often referred to as the "food basket of the nation," contributes significantly to Nigeria's production of staple crops such as yam, rice, maize, cassava, and soybeans (Okoruwa et al., 2021). However, over the past decade, the state has witnessed increasing levels of insecurity, predominantly due to violent clashes between herders and farmers, rural banditry, and communal land disputes (Adesina and Olaniyi, 2020; Odoemena, 2022). These security challenges have led to the destruction of farmlands, displacement of thousands of farming households, and loss of agricultural labor and assets, thereby directly undermining food production and supply.

Benue State is widely regarded as the "food basket of the nation" due to its comparative advantage in agricultural production. The state is a major producer of staple and cash crops such as yam, cassava, rice, maize, soybeans, groundnuts, and citrus fruits. It also has significant livestock and fishery potential. The tropical climate, marked by distinct wet and dry seasons, and fertile alluvial soil types, particularly in the Benue River Valley, support year-round agricultural activities (Okoruwa et al., 2021). Despite its agrarian endowment, Benue State has been severely affected by various forms of insecurity. The most prominent threat in recent years has been the persistent conflict between sedentary farmers and nomadic herders, especially in LGAs such as Guma, Logo, Agatu, and Katsina-Ala. These conflicts often revolve around access to land and water resources, leading to frequent violence, destruction of property, and displacement of communities (Adesina and Olaniyi, 2020). In addition to herder-farmer clashes, the state has also experienced rising cases of banditry, kidnapping, and communal land disputes, further compounding the insecurity crisis.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps have been established across the state to shelter those displaced from their ancestral farmlands, with limited access to food, healthcare, and education. According to the Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA, 2023), as of mid-2023, there were over 30 active IDP camps housing more than 1.5 million displaced persons. These insecurities have had profound implications on agricultural production, market access, food

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availability, and the livelihoods of farming households. This makes Benue State a strategic and relevant location for assessing the impacts of insecurity on food security in Nigeria.

Several studies have documented the negative implications of insecurity on agricultural development and food security in Nigeria. For example, Adebayo et al. (2020) found that communities exposed to violent conflict in the North-Central region, including Benue State, experienced a significant decline in crop output and access to farmland. Similarly, Okunola and Adejumo (2019) emphasized that insecurity not only disrupts food production but also affects food distribution channels and market accessibility, leading to inflated food prices and reduced food availability. Moreover, insecurity often results in the mass displacement of rural populations, leading to overcrowding in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps with limited access to food, water, and other essential resources (Iroegbu and Okechukwu, 2021). In Benue State alone, the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) reported over 1.5 million people displaced due to violent attacks between 2018 and 2023, with many unable to return to their farms (SEMA, 2023).

Despite numerous interventions by the government and international agencies, food insecurity remains prevalent in affected regions. This is partly due to the lack of contextual and data-driven analysis of how insecurity impacts the different pillars of food security—availability, access, utilization, and stability (Obi, 2021). It is within this context that this study investigated the specific ways in which insecurity has affected food security in Benue State, with a view to informing policy and intervention strategies.

Despite its agricultural potential, Benue State has become a hotspot of violent conflicts and persistent insecurity, leading to devastating socio-economic consequences. Thousands of farmers have been displaced from their ancestral lands due to frequent clashes between herders and farming communities. According to reports from humanitarian agencies and government sources, these conflicts have not only led to loss of lives but have also contributed to the abandonment of fertile lands, destruction of crops, and reduced farming activities. The alarming rate of displacement and disruption of agricultural activities raises serious concerns about the ability of the state to ensure food security for its population. Furthermore, the lack of adequate security responses, poor access to markets, and the psychological trauma experienced by affected communities have compounded the food insecurity crisis.

Despite several efforts by government and non-governmental organizations to address these challenges, there is a dearth of empirical data on how insecurity directly affects food security in Benue State. Understanding this relationship is critical for designing effective policies and interventions. Hence, this study is motivated by the need to explore and quantify the impact of insecurity on food security outcomes in the state with the following research questions: what are the nature and causes of insecurity affecting food production in Benue State? What are the effects of insecurity on household food availability and accessibility? What are the impact of displacement due to insecurity on agricultural productivity? What are the coping strategies adopted by affected households in ensuring food security?

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OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The broad objective of the study was to investigate the impact of insecurity on food security in Benue State. The specific objectives were to:

1. describe the nature and causes of insecurity affecting food production in Benue State
2. analyse the effects of insecurity on household food availability and accessibility
3. examine the impact of displacement due to insecurity on agricultural productivity
4. identify the coping strategies adopted by affected households in ensuring food security

METHODOLOGY

Area of Study

The study was conducted in Benue State. The State is located in the North-Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria and is geographically situated between latitudes 6°25′N and 8°8′N, and longitudes 7°47′E and 10°E. It shares boundaries with five Nigerian states—Nasarawa to the north, Taraba to the east, Cross River to the south, Ebonyi to the southeast, and Kogi to the west. It also shares a border with the Republic of Cameroon to the southeast, which contributes to its unique cross-border socio-economic interactions.

The state was created in 1976 and has Makurdi as its capital. It comprises 23 Local Government Areas (LGAs), including major agricultural hubs such as Guma, Gwer West, Otukpo, Gboko, Tarka, Ogbadibo, and Logo. According to the National Population Commission (NPC, 2006), the population of Benue State was over 4.2 million, with estimates in 2022 projecting it to be approximately 6 million. The state is largely rural, with over 75% of the population engaged in agriculture as their primary occupation.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The population of the study comprises farming households and internally displaced persons (IDPs) affected by insecurity in Benue State. Specifically, the study targets individuals residing in conflict-prone Local Government Areas (LGAs) such as Guma, Logo, Agatu, Katsina-Ala, and Gwer West, which have experienced persistent herder-farmer conflicts, banditry, and communal violence. Key informants such as local agricultural officers, IDP camp managers, and community leaders were also included to provide expert perspectives on the dynamics of insecurity and food insecurity in the region. The population of the study according to Benue State Agricultural Development Project (ADP), was 10,000 persons.

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Sample Size Determination

The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula (1967) for a known population:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2} \quad \text{---------- (1)}$$

Where:

N	=	Population of the Study (10,000)
n	=	Sample Size
(e)	=	Level of significance
1	=	Unit (a constant)
Note: (e)	=	0.05

$$n = \frac{10000}{1+10000(0.05)^2} = \frac{10000}{1+25} = \frac{10000}{26} = 384.6$$

Thus, a total of 385 respondents were selected for the study.

Sampling Technique

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to select the sample for the study:

Stage 1: Purposive Selection of LGAs. Five LGAs—Guma, Logo, Agatu, Katsina-Ala, and Gwer West—were purposively selected based on their high incidence of insecurity and significant displacement of farming populations, as reported by Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA, 2023).

Stage 2: Stratified Sampling. Within each selected LGA, the population was stratified into two groups: Resident farming households still active in agriculture, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) residing in camps or host communities.

Stage 3: Proportionate Random Sampling. A proportionate number of respondents was selected from each stratum in line with their estimated population sizes, to ensure balanced representation. Simple random sampling was then used to select individual respondents from both strata in each LGA using household registers and IDP camp records as sampling frames.

Stage 4: Key Informant Selection. Ten (10) key informants—including agricultural extension officers, traditional rulers, IDP camp coordinators, and security officials—were purposively selected based on their roles and knowledge of insecurity and food supply issues in the affected areas.

Stage 5: After the administration of the questionnaire on the three hundred and eighty-five (385) respondents selected across the study area, one hundred eighty (180) questionnaire were retrieved and used as the sample size for the study.

Methods of Data Collection

This study employed a combination of primary and secondary data collection methods to gather comprehensive and reliable information on the impact of insecurity on food security in Benue

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State. The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods ensured a triangulated approach that enhanced the depth and validity of the findings.

Primary Data Collection Methods: A structured questionnaire was designed and administered to selected farming households and internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the five selected LGAs: Guma, Logo, Agatu, Katsina-Ala, and Gwer West. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions, and it was divided into five sections: Section A: Socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, household size, education, etc.); Section B: Nature and frequency of insecurity incidents; Section C: Effects of insecurity on farming activities and food production; Section D: Food availability, accessibility, and dietary patterns; Section E: Coping strategies adopted and suggestions for improvement. The questionnaire was pre-tested in a non-sampled but similar community (e.g., Tarka LGA) and revised for clarity and relevance.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 purposively selected key informants, including: Agricultural extension officers; IDP camp coordinators; Community leaders and traditional rulers; Representatives from the Benue State Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources; Security personnel familiar with conflict-prone zones. The KIIs helped provide contextual insights into the causes of insecurity, challenges to food access, and institutional responses.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): A total of five (5) focus group discussions were conducted—one in each selected LGA—with 8 to 10 participants in each group. These discussions targeted: Male and female farmers, Youths affected by insecurity, IDPs in camps and host communities. FGDs were used to explore group perspectives, local coping mechanisms, and community-driven recommendations.

Direct Observation: Researchers also carried out direct field observations of: Abandoned or destroyed farmlands, Food distribution patterns in IDP camps, Security checkpoints and access restrictions to markets and farms. These observations were recorded using field notes and photographs (with permission), and were used to support questionnaire and interview findings.

Secondary Data Collection Methods: Secondary data were sourced from: Reports from Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) and National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), Statistical bulletins from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Previous empirical studies and journal articles on food security and conflict in Nigeria, Policy documents from the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (FMARD), Reports from international organizations such as the FAO, WFP, and IOM. These sources provided baseline information on displacement figures, agricultural productivity trends, food prices, and security-related data in Benue State.

Model Specification

To quantitatively examine the relationship between insecurity and food security in Benue State, an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) multiple regression model was specified. The model helps to analyze how various insecurity-related variables affect household food security levels.

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Dependent Variable: Food Security Status (FSS): Measured using the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) or a composite food security index derived from indicators such as food availability, accessibility, utilization, and dietary diversity. A lower HFIAS score indicates higher food security.

Independent Variables: The independent variables include different dimensions of insecurity and household characteristics that influence food security:

Variable	Notation	Description
Insecurity Incidents	INSEC	Number of conflicts/insecurity events experienced by the household in the past 12 months
Displacement Status	DISP	Dummy variable(1= displaced, 0 = not displaced)
Farm Access	FACCESS	Number of months per year household had access to their farmland
Market Access	MACC	Travel time to nearest market(in minutes or hours)
Household Size	HHSZ	Number of people in the household
Income Level	INC	Monthly household income (₦)
Agricultural Support	AGSUP	Dummy variable (1= received support, 0 = none)

Source: Researchers' Formulated Variable description Table

Functional Form: The functional form of the regression model is specified as:

$$FSSi = \beta_0 + \beta_1 INSECi + \beta_2 DISPi + \beta_3 FACCESSi + \beta_4 MACCi + \beta_5 HHSZi + \beta_6 INCi + \beta_7 AGSUPi + \mu i \quad \ldots\ldots (2)$$

Where:

FSS*i* = Food security status of household

β_0 = Intercept

β_1 - β_7 = Coefficients of the explanatory variables

μi = Error term capturing unobserved factors

Justification of the Model

The OLS regression model is appropriate due to the continuous nature of the dependent variable (food security score or index). It allows for interpretation of the marginal effects of each independent variable on food security. However, if food security is categorized into ordinal groups (e.g., food secure, mildly insecure, moderately insecure, severely insecure), then an ordered logit or probit model may be used instead.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Types and Frequency of Insecurity Incidents

Type of Insecurity	% of Respondents Affected	Avg. Frequency per household (Past year)
Herder Attacks	45	1.7
Banditry	18	0.5
Communal clashes	15	0.4
Kidnapping	12	0.3
Armed Robbery	10	0.2

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The result showed that herder attacks are the most prevalent form of insecurity, confirming reports by Adesina and Olaniyi (2020) that pastoralist-farmer conflicts dominate violence in the State. The relatively high average frequency per household (1.7) underscores the chronic nature of such threats. Findings indicate that herder attacks are the most prevalent form of insecurity,

followed by armed banditry and communal clashes. These results are in line with Ijirshar, Terwase, and Agber (2025), who identified violent disputes over land and grazing rights as a principal cause of farm abandonment in key agrarian LGAs such as Guma and Agatu. Additionally, Save the Children and Plan International (2024) reported that 68.9% of surveyed households in Benue perceived farmer-herder conflicts as the major threat to their livelihoods. The widespread displacement caused by these violent conflicts has led to the collapse of productive activities and the destruction of rural infrastructure, exacerbating food insecurity.

Table 2: Effects of Insecurity on Food Security Indicators

Food Security Indicator	% of Households Affected
Households abandoning farmlands	68
Reduction in harvest yield	62
Limited access to markets	59
Increased food prices	55
Decline in food diversity	47

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Abandoned farmlands and reduced harvests confirm that insecurity disrupts agricultural production. These findings support Adebayo et al. (2020) and Okunola and Adejumo (2019), who linked market inaccessibility and production shortfalls to rural insecurity in Nigeria. With over half of the respondents experiencing increased food prices, the findings suggest insecurity is inflating local food costs, a major component of household food insecurity. Overall, the study confirms that insecurity has both direct and indirect effects on food security. Directly, it displaces farmers and disrupts agricultural production. Indirectly, it constrains market access, inflates food prices, and undermines household resilience. These findings align with global

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patterns of conflict-induced food insecurity but are particularly alarming given Benue's status as the "food basket" of Nigeria. The continuing violence, if left unaddressed, threatens to transform a region of food surplus into one of chronic deficit.

Table 3: Coping Strategies among Affected Households

Copping Strategy	% of Households Using it
Skipping meals	70
Eating less preferred/cheaper foods	55
Borrowing food or money	42
Relying on food aid	35
Reducing adult consumption for children	28

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Most households are engaging in negative coping mechanisms, such as skipping meals or reducing food quality. Such strategies are not sustainable and can lead to long-term malnutrition and psychological trauma. The study found that 70% of affected households skipped meals, 55% reduced dietary diversity, and 35% relied on external food aid. These coping mechanisms mirror those identified by Iroegbu and Okechukwu (2021), who documented similar patterns among internally displaced persons (IDPs) in conflict-ridden areas of Benue. Save the Children and Plan International (2024) further emphasized that such strategies are harmful to vulnerable populations, particularly children and pregnant women. Okoruwa, Nwachukwu, and Ajani (2021) argue that prolonged reliance on negative coping strategies may lead to long-term nutrition deficits, weakened labor productivity, and persistent poverty traps. While humanitarian responses are essential in the short term, the persistence of these strategies indicates a failure of sustainable food systems in conflict-affected areas.

Table 4: Regression Results on Determinants of Household Food Security

Variable	Coefficient (β)	P-value	Significance
Insecurity Incidents (INSEC)	-0.34	0.001	***
Displacement Status (DISP)	-0.42	0.000	***
Farm Access (FACCESS)	0.25	0.013	**
Market Access (MACC)	-0.29	0.021	**
Household Size (HHSZ)	-0.05	0.097	Ns
Income Level (INC)	0.31	0.004	***
Agricultural Support (AGSUP)	0.22	0.027	**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

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The regression result confirms that insecurity, displacement, and poor market access significantly reduce household food security. Positive influences include income and agricultural support, suggesting that strengthening rural incomes and extension services can buffer insecurity effects. This is in line with studies by Obi (2021) and Okoruwa et al. (2021) who highlighted income and institutional support as key resilience factors. Quantitative analysis showed that insecurity significantly affects both the availability and accessibility of food. The regression results reveal that displacement ($\beta = -0.42$), frequency of attacks ($\beta = -0.34$), and market inaccessibility ($\beta = -0.29$) are statistically significant predictors ($p < 0.05$) of food insecurity. These findings support the conclusions of Anchovur, Tavershima, and Iorapuu (2024), who found that farmers in Makurdi and surrounding areas are unable to access markets due to road blockades and fear of attacks, leading to high post-harvest losses. The national trend is similar. According to the World Food Programme (2024), insecurity combined with climate stress is projected to push over 33.1 million Nigerians into acute food insecurity in 2025. Furthermore, data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2025) show that Benue State recorded the highest food inflation rate in the country—51.8%—primarily driven by disruptions in farming and supply chains due to insecurity (Nairametrics, 2025). This reinforces the direct linkage between violence and economic access to food in the state.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study is that insecurity in Benue State has a profound and multifaceted impact on food security among rural households. The frequency and intensity of herder-farmer conflicts, banditry, and other forms of violence have disrupted agricultural activities, forced many farmers to abandon their farmlands, and limited access to essential markets. As a result, food availability and access have declined sharply, pushing many households into adopting negative coping strategies such as meal skipping, dietary compromise, and reliance on food aid. The regression analysis confirmed that variables directly linked to insecurity such as displacement, market inaccessibility, and frequency of attacks are significant negative predictors of household food security status. Conversely, income level, access to farm inputs, and agricultural support services were found to enhance resilience to food insecurity. Based on the findings, the following policy and practical recommendations were made:

1. Enhancement of security in agrarian communities
2. Support to displaced and affected farmers
3. Improving market access and infrastructure
4. Strengthening of agricultural extension and support services
5. Promoting food assistance and nutrition interventions
6. Integrating conflict sensitivity in agricultural policies
7. Engagement of stakeholders in conflict resolution

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Ethical clearance
Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest
The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions
Utobo, Oliver conceived the study, including the design, trained research assistants collated the data, Utobo, O., Obiekwe, N.J., Nwankwo-Offiah, E.O. and Muojekwu, E.O. handled the analysis and interpretation. Infact, all authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials
The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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