

**On the nature and causes of LRA abduction:
What the abductees say**

Christopher Blattman
Yale University

and

Jeannie Annan
Yale University

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EDITED BY TIM ALLEN AND KOEN VLASSENROOT

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1. Introduction

Twenty years after its birth, the strategy, organization and motives of the Lord's Resistance Army remain shrouded in mystery and supposition. What little we know is drawn almost entirely from interviews with former participants, commanders, and civilian victims. What emerges is a patchwork of motives, methods, and structure, with different accounts sometimes in direct conflict.

The phenomenon of abduction is also poorly understood. Governmental and non-governmental agencies have only a hazy idea of the magnitude and incidence. Moreover, while we know that many youth met terrible fates—whether killed, forced to commit unspeakable acts, or taken as slaves for combat or sex—we have little sense of what experiences are exceptional and which are the rule. Finally, we can only speculate as to the reasons for mass child abduction—perhaps the same barbarism and irrationality that is said to have characterized the LRA's other activities.

This chapter suggests that one of the major impediments to understanding both the LRA and abduction has been the absence of any systematic and representative information. In the absence of a public face and (until very recently) an active political arm, the LRA's activities, motives, and structure have been defined by external actors, from Western academics and journalists to the Ugandan military and government. Information on the LRA has been largely qualitative, interview-based, and highly subjective. With interview accounts, particularly those presented in the popular media, one worries that the most sensational rather than the most common experiences have found their way into discourse. Moreover, such compelling accounts are vulnerable to intentional and unintentional manipulation by the journalists, rights advocates, and government or military officials who report them.

What has often emerged is a picture of the LRA as a primal force—illogical, barbaric, and cult-like. For instance, a recent *New York Times* article characterizes the LRA's war as typical of the senselessly brutal conflicts that have “morphed from idea- or cause-driven struggles to warlord-led drives whose essential goal is plunder” (Gettleman 2007). The LRA in particular is reported to have “degenerated into a drugged-out street gang living in the jungle with military-grade weaponry and 13-year-old brides.” The *Times* emphasizes the very worst of the violence, reporting that the LRA's ranks “are filled with boys who have been brainwashed to burn down huts and pound newborn babies to death in wooden mortars, as if they were grinding grain.” Few media accounts of the LRA are complete

without reference to the cult-like aspect of the LRA, in particular Kony's alleged intent to rule the country by the Ten Commandments, or the supposed magical protection from bullets bestowed upon faithful recruits.

An emerging historical, political and anthropological literature—much of it summarized in this book—has begun to challenge the worst of these stories about the LRA, abduction, and the war in general. Yet a sense of proportion is still absent from most discussions. The collection of systematic data offers the opportunity to obtain a sense of proportion and present a more accurate picture of both the LRA and abduction.

This chapter presents data from Phase I of the Survey of War Affected Youth, or SWAY, a representative survey of hundreds of young men and boys in northern Uganda.¹ Based on these data and the associated interviews, the LRA appears to be a much more strategic and conventional military organization than often supposed, however terrible its violence. A different view of abduction also emerges. On the one hand, abduction is seemingly more widespread, more focused on adolescents, and (on average) less grotesquely violent than often imagined. On the other hand, what is more common and broad-based than previously supposed is the emphasis on political ideology in the group, as well as the level of cooperation and allegiance to the rebel cause reported by abductees—a testament to the LRA's (at least temporary) success at disorienting and indoctrinating their unwilling recruits.

Most importantly, what emerges is an answer to why children (especially adolescents) were so attractive to the LRA. Dozens of hypotheses appear in the large and growing literature on child soldiers, yet virtually none have been tested. While all explanations are undoubtedly influential, which dominate and which are marginal is essentially unknown. New data allow us to discriminate between these competing accounts. In northern Uganda, child (specifically young adolescent) recruitment reveals itself to be a product not of barbarism but of rational calculation. The data suggest that young adolescents were disproportionately targeted for three principal reasons: because they were overrepresented in the population; because they were more effective guerrillas than younger children; and, perhaps most importantly, because they were more easily indoctrinated and disoriented than young

¹ See www.sway-uganda.org for details of SWAY, including questionnaires, reports, and ongoing activities.

adults. By understanding the dominant forces influencing child recruitment in this instance, we are in a better position to change the incentives and constraints facing rebel leaders and reduce and combat the recruitment of children more effectively.

2. Data: The Survey of War Affected Youth

In order to understand the long-term impacts of the war on youth, in 2005 and 2006 the authors and a team of local assistants conducted a representative survey of 1016 households and 741 male youth in eight sub-counties in the Districts of Kitgum and Pader². The survey collected two main forms of data: first, current well-being (economic, physical, psychological, and social) and, second, detailed information on abduction and other war experiences.³ It is the latter that forms the basis of this analysis.

The population surveyed covered males currently aged 14 to 30. Former abductees were over-sampled, and 462 were interviewed in total. In the eight regions surveyed, roughly two in five young males now aged 14 to 30 had ever experienced an abduction of any length, and roughly one third reported an abduction of at least two weeks. Females reported abduction with less than half the frequency—less than one in six women now aged 14 to 30 report abduction of any length. At the time of writing, an in-depth survey of females was underway. Their experiences, especially those of women taken to become fighters and ‘wives’, will be examined in future work.

Had the survey only sampled youth presently in the camps, it would have missed migrants, unreturned abductees, as well as those that perished during the conflict. Interviewers thus sought to develop a sample of youth living in the region *before* the conflict and track them across the country.⁴

² These sub-counties are Acholibur, Akwang, Atanga, Kitgum Matidi, Orom, Pader, Pajule, and Palabek.

³ The impacts of war and child soldiering on well-being are discussed in Annan (2007), Blattman and Annan (2007) and Annan, Blattman and Horton (2006)

⁴ Households were randomly sampled from a 2002 United Nations census, and 95 percent of these were successfully tracked down. (A possible concern is the disappearance of households between 1996 and the 2002 UN census. We estimate that fewer than 5 percent of 1996 households disappeared in this manner as most households left some family members behind to collect food aid.) Interviewers then developed a roster of youth present in the household in 1996 with the household head. The year 1996 was chosen as it pre-dated more than 90 percent of abductions and was easily recalled as the time of the first election since 1980. Youth were sampled from this retrospective roster and, as half of survivors had migrated, were tracked across the country. 85 percent of surviving youth were successfully found. Among abducted youth, 20 percent never returned from abduction (and are presumed perished), 3 percent returned but since died, and 7 percent survived but could not be found, for a total attrition of 30 percent. Demographic data on non-survivors and unfound migrants were collected from surviving family members. The potential bias arising from such attrition is discussed below.

In-depth qualitative interviews were also conducted with abductees, community and clan leaders. Among the LRA, interviews focused on foot soldiers and mid-level officers, including junior commanders, catechists, spies, ‘wives’, bodyguards, and even accountants.

Throughout this chapter, ‘abduction’ refers to any time forcibly spent with the rebels, regardless of length. Abductees thus include those taken for a few hours up to those absent for a decade. One concern with such data is that youth may have misrepresented themselves as abducted in the hopes that it would lead to assistance. If true, both the numbers and the patterns reported in this analysis might be biased. We took three precautions to minimize this risk. First, all abductions were cross-checked. Household heads (who were typically interviewed months before the individual youth) were asked to report the abduction experiences of all household members. Major inconsistencies between these reports and answers from the youth themselves were investigated.⁵ Second, upon being interviewed, all youth were informed repeatedly that the survey was not tied to any assistance. Finally, youth who reported an abduction were asked multiple questions on their particular abduction experience, making misrepresentation significantly more challenging. As a consequence, in our opinion abductions are overstated by no more than 5 percent, and possibly not at all.

3. The scale and incidence of abduction

These data suggest that the scale and incidence of abduction is different than what has been presumed in the past. First, it appears that the scale of abduction has been underestimated, in part because the percentage of abductees who passed through reception centers has been overestimated. Moreover, the LRA’s focus has been largely upon adolescent males aged 12 to 16. Younger children were often deliberately avoided and were more likely to be released. Other than by age, however, there is little pattern to abduction by the LRA.

⁵ In all, roughly ten percent of reported abductions appeared suspicious due to discrepancies between the reports of the household head and the youth. For half of these discrepancies, either the abduction period was short (such as a single day) or the youth had left the household some years before, and so we are inclined to believe that the discrepancy is the result of the household head’s error. In the other half of cases (less than 5 percent of all abductees) the youth’s report is sufficiently divergent from that of the parent that our suspicions are aroused, and it possible that abductions are overstated by this amount. It is also possible, however, that parents sought to conceal abductions. Fortunately, the estimates of the impact of abduction presented in this chapter do not change materially when these youth are re-classified as “non-abducted”, and so are likely to create little bias.

Scale

The total number of abductees is difficult to ascertain, and any figure is at best an educated guess. Widely quoted is a UNICEF figure of 20,000 to 25,000 children passing through reception centers. The total number of abductees, including those who do not return through the official system, may be three times this amount, however. Survey responses from our eight sub-counties suggest that only half of male returnees passed through a reception centre. Moreover, based on the retrospective household rosters, one fifth of male abductees never returned. Finally, at least one fifth of abducted youth are not children but between 18 and 30 at the time of abduction. These figures suggest that for every 3 children in the official reception center count, 10 youth were actually abducted—suggesting a figure of at least 66,000 abductions in total.

Could 66,000 abductions be an overestimate? Such a large figure is consistent with the high level of abduction reported in the sample, and is likewise consistent with the results of a recent assessment of abduction's incidence based on reception center records (Pham et al. 2007). One concern, however, is falsely reported abductions, which (as discussed above) may lead to at most a 5 or 10 percent overstatement of abduction. A more significant concern, however, is that not all those taken by the LRA are arguably "abducted". This is not so much a debate about the willingness of the individual to go with the LRA, but rather the recognition that many are released or escape almost immediately.⁶ Indeed, a third of young men in our sample escaped, were rescued, or were released within two weeks (see Table 1).

These short abductions are especially important to capture, however, for at least two reasons. First, they often included a great deal of violence, and are significant and grave experiences in the lives of most respondents. Second, in most cases it seems that the intent of the rebels was to keep the youth for as long as possible. Less than five percent of male youth reported they were released—in almost all cases because they were either "too young" (under 11), "too old" (over about 23), or too injured to walk. Thus if male adolescents and young adults remain with the LRA for only a matter of

⁶ This concern is an important one to some abductees. From one informant, "The formerly abducted people I know who are here in Acholibur are about 75 [in number], but some people just claim they were abducted. Some of them were just taken from the garden and asked to direct the rebels for a distance of about 6 miles and then told to go back home. Such a person also claims he was abducted, but he has not reached the core that we have reached. Such a person, when asked, cannot tell you the sufferings we have gone through."

days, it is likely because they escaped rather than were released. Accordingly, for the purposes of this report we consider any time with the LRA—regardless of length—as an “abduction”.

Incidence

Popular wisdom has it that 80 percent of the LRA is made up of abducted children. Like many of the numbers in the north, the factual basis for the claim is unclear.⁷ Survey data suggest that 80 percent is only a mild overstatement, however. Of those males abducted before age 30, two-thirds were under 18 (and three quarters were under 21).

Figure 1 displays the distribution of age at the time of abduction. By far the most heavily targeted group appears to be adolescent boys, and the rebels seemed to have been especially focused on boys aged 12 to 16. In fact, as demonstrated in Blattman and Annan (2007), age seems to have been the sole criterion for abduction—neither poverty nor orphaning nor any other observable characteristics other than age seems to be associated with abduction at all. In fact, the LRA’s manner of abduction is indistinguishable from a random draw of the population, stratified by age.

Age, however, was of critical influence. The distribution of abduction age in the sample indicates that three times as many males aged 14 were abducted as those aged 9 or 23 (Figure 1, vertical bars). The preference for adolescent boys holds true even after adjusting for the disproportionate number of young people in the population. From 1989 to 2004 a 14-year old youth in the study population had an average of a five percent chance of abduction—twice the level of risk faced by one aged either 9 or 23 (Figure 1, connected line).

The focus on adolescents is even more pronounced once we account for youth released by the LRA. According to interviews with former commanders and abductees, rebel raiding parties commonly abducted all able-bodied members of a household to carry looted goods, but were usually under instruction from the senior leadership to release children under 11 and adults older than their mid-20s after loot was delivered to a safe location. Ten percent of male abductees were released in the first month of abduction (not counting those left behind because of injuries). However, the probabili-

⁷ See for instance Allen and Schomerus (2006). Allen (2005) argues that the number of children in the LRA is often exaggerated and that only a third of abductees were likely under 18.

ty of release is close to fifteen percent for children under 11, dips to less than five percent for adolescents, and is rising in age thereafter.

While these figures suggest that the bulk of abductees were indeed under the age of 18, this does not necessarily mean that at any given point in time the LRA itself contained so many young people. First, the core leadership was for the most part adult volunteers, drawn from the initial LRA fighters from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Second, child soldiers that remain with the group inevitably grow to become adults. Even so, it seems likely that abducted children under the age of 18 made up the majority of LRA ranks.

4. Command and control within the LRA

The data also reveal the LRA's means of command and control. Media accounts of the LRA often focus on the use of violence as a tool of control. Commonly reported are accounts of ritual killings of new members, of abductees being forced to kill a parent or brother, or of the massacre of children who attempt to escape. How common are such experiences? What other tools of control are employed? How effective are they? The survey data provide some unexpected answers. While the experience of some form of violence is nearly universal, a minority of youth report being forced to the most commit terrible acts. Moreover, the use of disorientation and misinformation was not only common but also seems to have been all too effective. In the end, a near majority of youth abductees explained that there was a time when they felt loyal to (and important members of) the rebel force.

Methods of motivating forced recruits

The LRA's almost total reliance on forced recruitment distinguishes it from the majority of rebel movements in Africa and elsewhere. Nevertheless, the LRA, like any other rebel force, has had to motivate its recruits not only to participate (i.e. not run away) but also to carry out their dangerous duties well. Interviews with rebel commanders and abductees reveal the methods employed by the LRA to motivate participation and performance. Table 1 lists summary statistics from the survey, based on males abducted less than two weeks (32 percent of abductees), two weeks to three months (23 percent), three months to one year (21 percent) and more than one year (23 percent).

The provision of material incentives was relatively rare. Only 4 percent of all youth abducted report ever being “rewarded for a job well done”, reaching a high of 9 percent among those abducted more than a year (Table 1). Among these, moreover, the most commonly cited reward was food. Remuneration with money or loot was exceedingly rare. Even commanders seldom received loot, as there was little to give. Material rewards were promised upon victory, however. According to one long-term abductee interviewed, “they used to tell us that if we fight and overthrow the government then we shall get wealth and even the young soldiers would get high ranks in the army.” Many long-term abductees appear to have been convinced, at least for a time, of these future gains. As we will discuss below, the gradual realization that no gains would come would lead many to abandon the group at a later date.

Violence and the threat of punishment was a principal instrument of control in the LRA, and even short abductions involved exposure to significant brutality. Real and threatened death and injury were among the primary means of dissuading escape and motivating performance. “In the bush,” explained one youth abducted for two years, “you do things out of fear.” From Table 1, 57 percent of abductees report a having ever been severely beaten (compared to 23 percent of non-abducted youth) and 25 percent report being attacked with a weapon (compared to 3 percent of non-abductees). Beatings rise to two-thirds and attacks to one third of the youth abducted three months or more. Severe beatings or death are reportedly the most common fate of any abductee caught trying to escape, a sentence other abductees were often forced to carry out with sticks or machetes—53 percent of abducted youth report that abductees were ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ forced to beat or kill new arrivals.

Previous studies of forced recruitment in Uganda and elsewhere have presented the forcible commission of violence (typically killing or the desecration of dead bodies) as a key feature of initiation into the group, one that serves several purposes: terrorizing the youth to break down his psychological defenses, raising the specter of punishment by his community if he were to return, and desensitizing the recruit to violence (e.g. Honwana (2006); Singer (2005)). The survey suggests such horrible tactics are all too common but fortunately not pervasive. From Table 1, a minority of abductees reports ever being forced to kill (23 percent) or abuse dead bodies (22 percent). A slightly larger proportion of long term abductees report being forced to kill a soldier or civilian (42 percent).

The most sensational of reported practices—being forced to kill a friend or family member—occurs more rarely. 12 percent of abductees report being forced to beat someone close to them, and 8 percent report being forced to kill a family member or friend—figures that rise only slightly among long-term abductees.⁸ While even one such act is too many, it is important to note that our worst fears are not confirmed.

The LRA also sought to limit escape opportunities by quickly moving the abductee as far as possible from home. 61 percent of abductees report being tied, usually for the first one to two weeks of capture (Table 1). The first day's march would often deliberately backtrack, move in circles, and disorient the abductee. Within the first week or two of capture abductees would be taken as far as possible from their place of abduction, preferably to the bases in Sudan (where escape was nearly impossible due to the distances, disorientation, and the hostile Sudan People's Liberation Army).

In addition to violence and disorientation, misinformation was used to promote fear and loyalty. Abductees were told that, if they escaped, rebels would return and kill them or their family. Youth forced to kill were also told that they would be exiled from their home communities. Another example comes from the LRA's reaction to the Ugandan government's offer of amnesty to all but the most senior LRA officers (first extended in 2000). In response, interviews suggest that Kony immediately banned the possession of radios by his troops and kept Amnesty a closely-held secret, even from officers. Abductees who had heard of amnesty were told that it was a ruse and that any who escaped would be killed by the army.

Finally, spiritual practices were central to motivating recruits—a clear attempt to create new social bonds and loyalty based on a shared cosmology (as well as fear). Kony created a cult of mystery and spiritual power which few abductees or civilians question even now. The Acholi informants with whom we spoke disagreed not on whether Kony possesses spiritual power, but whether these spirits are good or bad.

Within the LRA, these purported powers were used to the rebel group's advantage. A spiritual initiation ceremony, typically featuring prayers and anointment with oil and prayers, was reported by the

⁸ Such self-reported acts of violence may be under-reported, of course. Based on in-depth follow-up interviews with a subsample of youth and their families, however, the general accuracy of these self-reports appears substantial. Moreover, when asked what *other* recruits were forced to do, responses followed similar patterns and proportions. Finally, perhaps due to the widespread abduction in northern Uganda, many of the atrocities committed are openly spoken about and admitted.

vast majority (70 percent) of males taken two weeks or longer. The group is highly structured, with detailed spiritual restrictions on personal conduct (e.g. eating, drinking, and bathing) and on military practices. Kony is also feared and respected as a prophet. Three long-term bodyguards to Kony described a catalog of prophecies foretold and coming to pass. They also described displays of power, such as the ability to vanish. Through the power of the spirits Kony was also perceived to be omnipresent and able to track down escapees by the smell of the holy oil with which they were anointed.

It is important not to overstate the importance of religious propaganda, however. Some of the spiritual messages commonly reported in the media find little support in the data. For instance, while abductees readily admitted to one-time loyalty to the LRA or acceptance of other spiritual practices, virtually none reported that there was a time when they believed that they had magical protection from bullets. Moreover, while spiritual messages and initiation were commonly received, former abductees were at least as likely to report political propaganda and the promise of material rewards as spiritual dogma. The feasibility and importance of overthrowing the government appears to be the most common throughout the data, followed by the crimes committed by Museveni and promises of government positions and loot.

The effectiveness of indoctrination and control

How effective was this focus on fear, punishment, dogma, misinformation, and disorientation? Some degree of indoctrination is apparent. According to one informant, abducted for two years,

I became like a real soldier. I was spying for them... There you do things just for survival. I started staying like any of them but I knew in the back of my mind I was just doing it for survival. But for a point I forgot the survival and became a part of them. I was abducting and stealing just like them.

Such “forgetting” and shift in identity was commonly reported. In some cases this was associated with Kony’s spiritual powers. According to one informant, “In the bush, there is something that confused people. There is certain type of [holy] oil which they put on you. It confused you and could never think of home.”

As a consequence, many abductees stayed for long. Two thirds remained more than two weeks, nearly a quarter remained for a year or more, and an eighth remained for at least two years (Table 1). The average abduction lasted nearly nine months. Half of all male youth who stayed at least two

weeks with the group received a gun, usually after only two months. Four fifths of those that ever received a gun were eventually allowed to sleep with the gun, a clear signal of trust (Table 1).

Levels of self-reported loyalty and comfort with the LRA appear quite high. Of those abducted more than two weeks, 44 percent claim to have ever felt allegiance to Kony, 39 percent felt like an important member of the LRA at some time, 26 percent perceived themselves as dependable fighters, 19 percent admitted there was a time they felt like staying with the LRA, and 9 percent admitted that they aspired to become a commander one day. These quantities increase steadily among those that stayed longer than a year, as seen in Table 1.

Ultimately, the majority of forcible recruits appear to either escape or perish. Four-fifths of abducted youth return. More than nine in ten of the fifth that did not return can likely (and tragically) be assumed perished, as few remain with the LRA (relative, that is, to the estimated 66,000 abducted). Of those that do return, just 5 percent were rescued and 15 percent were released. The remaining 80 percent escaped, almost always during an unsupervised moment (such as in the heat of battle).

For those who remain with the LRA for long periods of time, the decision to escape is usually explained as being preceded by a moment of “awakening”:

When I grew up I started seeing that whatever Kony says was not true. If it were really true then the government could have been overthrown. And here the people he abducted before I was had all escaped. This made me thought of escaping which I finally did.

Some of these stories reflect a realization that the promised benefits would not be received. According to one abductee, “We would ambush and carry things but then I wouldn’t benefit. It was the leaders who benefited. Then I thought I should escape because I had not gone on my own but had been abducted.” From another,

When I was just abducted I was optimistic that we would win this war because the commanders kept on telling us that we would overthrow the government soon. But after seeing what atrocities these rebels were doing, like killing many civilians, looting and continuous fighting without any success, I realized the rebels are wasting time and we’ll not overthrow the government. This made me think of escaping, which I eventually did, and came back home.

Why these methods of indoctrination and disorientation were effective, as well as upon whom they were most successful, are admittedly still poorly understood. Below we suggest that age of abduction is a significant correlate, and offer partial explanations why this might be the case.

5. The strategic value of adolescent abduction

In guerrilla fighting, the effectiveness of children is questionable at best; young adult volunteers are plausibly the most effective recruits, and—all other things equal—should be the primary targets. If so, how does one explain the behavior of the LRA, who preferred young adolescents over young adults for almost all military tasks?

Simply put, all other things are seldom equal. The evidence suggests that young children and adolescents are more easily indoctrinated and controlled than young adults, and so tend to remain much longer once abducted. Children and adolescents are also in much greater supply than adults due to the demographics of the region. The evidence suggests that young children were militarily less useful than adolescents, however. If true, then adolescents may make the ‘optimal’ forced recruits when too few volunteers are available.

Alternative theories of child soldiering

Dozens of explanations for underage recruitment have been offered by the vast child soldier literature.⁹ Four broad classes, however, capture the vast majority of these explanations. First, some emphasize the *relative supply* of children. In many poor countries there has been a demographic shift (exacerbated by AIDS) that has created the largest population of young people in history (Singer (2005); Rosen (2005)). Similarly, other studies note that the recruitment of children is said to have increased as adults were killed or displaced (e.g. Becker (2004); Machel (1996); Cohn and Goodwin-Gill (1994)).

A second class emphasizes the *functional value* of child recruits. Their usefulness for menial tasks is widely noted.¹⁰ There are fewer consensus, however, on the military value of children. Some argue that children lack the necessary fortitude (e.g. Gutiérrez (2006); Wessells (2006)) while others argue the opposite, quoting rebel commanders across Africa who attest to children’s stamina, survival, and

⁹ A current and comprehensive listing of the alternative explanations for child soldiering is provided by Wessells (2006).

¹⁰ For example, Shepler (2005) notes that in Sierra Leone children were useful as servants and aides to military officers.

stealth (e.g. ILO (2003); Boyden (2003); Cohn and Goodwin-Gill (1994)). Such testimony is consistent with psychological evidence from U.S.-based studies that find that adolescents have an underdeveloped concept of death, an inability to assess risks, feelings of strength and power, the impression of invulnerability, and shortsightedness.¹¹ Also in the military value vein, several authors link the increase in the use of child soldiers to rises in the affordability and supply of light weaponry (e.g. Coalition (2006); Singer (2005); Machel (1996)). By this argument, lighter and cheaper automatic firearms disproportionately increase the relative combat effectiveness of child combatants and thereby raise their usefulness.

A third set of explanations emphasize the *costs of recruitment*, hypothesizing that children require little material remuneration in absolute and relative terms. Several scholars argue that hunger, poverty, youth unemployment, and the absence of educational opportunities may make soldiering a relatively attractive (or even the only) opportunity for youth, thereby reducing the material incentives required (e.g. Honwana (2006); ILO (2003); Brett and Specht (2004); Machel (1996)). Another variant of this cost argument suggest that children may be inexpensive recruits because they are more willing to fight for non-pecuniary rewards such as honor and duty, revenge, a sense of purpose, or protection from violence.¹² The vast majority of the evidence to support these claims, however, is largely anecdotal.¹³

Finally, children may be easier to retain. Several studies emphasize the exploitability of children, suggesting that the young are more malleable, adaptable, more easily indoctrinated, more easily deceived, or less likely to question authority (e.g. Gutiérrez (2006); Honwana (2006); Singer (2005); Peters (2003); Cohn & Goodwin-Gill (1994)). The bulk of this evidence is taken from interviews with rebel officers.¹⁴ Others have framed this argument in terms of developmental psychology. Gutiérrez (2006) and Peters (2004), for instance, argue that children are in different stages of moral development and do not make decisions in the sense adults do.

¹¹ See Andvig and Gates (2006), Wessells (2006) or Brett and Specht (2004) for a discussion.

¹² e.g. Honwana (2006); Rosen (2005); Brett and Sprecht (2004); Machel (1996); Cohn and Goodwin-Gill (1994); Rosenblatt (1984).

¹³ Lab-based psychological evidence from the US is also sometimes used to bolster these claims. Andvig and Gates (2006), for example, point to evidence from developmental psychology that children have a greater tendency for altruism and for bonding to a group.

¹⁴ For instance, one central African rebel commander quoted by ILO (2003) argued that the young “are docile and can be manipulated,” and, “they obey orders to the letter” (p.26).

What each of these explanations has in common is an implicit emphasis on the strategic value of child recruitment. Very simply, rebel leaders are interested in recruiting civilians for the military value they yield. Limited resources or a limited ability to monitor and manage a force imply that most rebel groups are constrained in their ability to recruit, however. Thus such groups have an incentive to target those civilians that are expected to offer the highest expected benefits—an amount determined largely by their military value, their cost of recruitment and maintenance, and their likelihood of desertion. By this logic, children will be recruited when they are expected to be as or more valuable than that of adults, or when they yield lesser value but adults are in short supply.

Why adolescents?

The war in northern Uganda provides a tragic opportunity to weigh these competing explanations. By examining the differences in the self-reported actions, attitudes, and experiences of former abductees by the age of their abduction, we can obtain indications of the relative effectiveness, cost, and retention of children under coercion. For instance, comparisons of remuneration by age should reflect differences in relative cost, comparisons of gun receipt and self-reported dependability should indicate military effectiveness, while comparisons of abduction length and allegiance should indicate differences in ease of indoctrination and retention. Our measures of cost, effectiveness, and ease of retention are of course only proxies for the real underlying variables, and so must be interpreted with some caution. The cross-age comparisons, however, are plausibly unbiased and well-identified. Thus while attitudes and behaviors as a rebel are undoubtedly reported with some error or bias, so long as this measurement error or bias does not change with age of abduction, any bias will cancel itself out in cross-age comparisons.¹⁵

The results below suggest that, at least when participation is coerced, young adolescents aged roughly 12 to 16 appear to be the most plentiful, effective and reliable recruits—a fact that is largely

¹⁵ Another source of potential bias could arise from the provision of selective incentives. Consider that, if adults are indeed systematically different than children, a rebel leader might offer adults different incentives to participate and perform. If so, cross-age comparisons would confuse real underlying differences between children and adults with the response to different incentive packages, thereby biasing the result. As we will see below, the evidence points to equally low levels of material incentives offered to both children and adults. The evidence on age-varying non-material incentives and tactics is mixed, however. Adults appear mildly more likely than children to report having been tied up and receiving political propaganda, while they are slightly less likely to be forced to commit gross acts of violence and to be threatened with harm. These differences are neither systematic nor large, however, and so significant bias seems unlikely.

due to their supply, their pliability and their low likelihood of desertion. Children below the age of 12 appear at least as (or even more) easily manipulated as adolescents, but do not appear as militarily effective. Adults appear at least as militarily effective as adolescents, but seem much more difficult to disorient, intimidate, and indoctrinate. The LRA's expectation of benefits from forced recruits thus peaks around the age of 14 or 15—a configuration that corresponds closely to LRA abduction pattern seen in Figure 1.

Relative supply

Simple demographics can explain part of the LRA's focus on adolescents. Looking back to 1995, 21 percent of our sample population was between the age of 5 and 9, while males aged 10 to 19 composed 14 percent. Thus by 2003 (the year that abductions peaked) there were roughly 50 percent more adolescents than young adults in the population. If LRA abduction were simply a random draw of the population under 30, then this difference in supply could account for some of the emphasis on adolescent males seen in Figure 1 (the vertical bars).

To account for the potential influence of supply, a population-adjusted likelihood of abduction can be calculated, and is illustrated by the connected line in Figure 1. The connected line displays the average probability that a youth of a particular age was abducted in a given year between 1989 and 2004. Note that this population-adjusted figure continues demonstrates a preference for adolescents—the probability of abduction is increasing up to age 14, where it peaks at nearly five percent, and is decreasing in age thereafter. Even so, the emphasis on adolescents is significantly less pronounced in the population-adjusted line than in the unadjusted vertical bars. In northern Uganda, demographics would appear to account for roughly a third of the excess abduction of adolescents over adults.

Relative remuneration and cost

The cost of recruiting does not seem to have played a role in targeting adolescents. The survey data and interviews suggest that child and adult abductees were equally cheap in the eyes of rebel commanders. Food and water were typically pillaged, and so seem unlikely to materially influence the relative cost of children, adolescents, and adults. That said, we do not have detailed data on food and water consumption by age, and it is possible that adults were more expensive to maintain. Interviews

with former commanders, however, suggest that food and water consumption were not a primary concern.

The most significant cost of labor is, in most instances, direct remuneration—whether in the form of wages, loot, or extra rations. Material rewards were relatively uncommon in the LRA, however. Rewards, moreover, varied little with age of abduction. A simple regression of the receipt of rewards or remuneration on age yields a relationship that is close to zero and statistically insignificant, a finding that holds even after accounting for possible confounding factors such as abduction year, location, length and pre-war characteristics. Thus we see little evidence of the cost argument so often emphasized in the literature.

Relative ease of retention

Ultimately, most of the emphasis on young adolescents over adults seems to be explained by differences in ease of retention—very simply, adolescents were the preferred forcible recruits because they stayed longer once captured. The inverse relationship between age and abduction length is illustrated Figure 2.¹⁶ Average length of stay declined from an average of nearly a year for a child of 11, to just five months for a youth in his late twenties. After adjusting for abduction year and location, an abductee's average length of abduction appears to fall by an average 0.3 months for every additional year of age.¹⁷ Given that the average abduction length is just 8.5 months, this implies that lowering the age of abduction by ten years increases the average length of stay by more than a third.

The interview and survey data support three explanations for the positive relationship between age and the propensity for escape. First, *the ease of disorientation appears to be falling in age*. Rebel leaders and long-term abductees commonly explained that younger abductees were most fearful of escape, either because their surroundings were more unfamiliar or because they were insufficiently cunning. For instance, according to a 7-year servant of Kony's, "Old people like escaping, but for the children it is difficult because they do not know how." Such claims can be tested indirectly. If because of fear or disorientation children are less likely to initiate escape on their own initiative, then on average they

¹⁶ The solid line represents the average length of abduction at a given age of abduction, and is calculated as a running mean with a bandwidth of 0.5 years of age. The dashed lines represent the 90 percent confidence interval.

¹⁷ Significant at the 5 percent level. This estimate comes from a linear regression (not displayed) of abduction length on abduction year and location indicators, as well as pre-war characteristics. In this instance the unit of observation is an individual abduction. Youth may have experienced more than one abduction.

should be more likely to be rescued or to escape in battle (where less initiative is required). They should also be less likely to know their location at the time of escape. These predictions are borne out by the data. Young children (those abducted before age 11) were eight times more likely to be rescued than adults (those taken in their late twenties), as seen in Figure 3. Moreover, familiarity with the location of escape is rising with age, with adults 40 percent more likely to know their location at the time of escape compared to young children (see Figure 4). There is also weak evidence that adults were a third less likely to have escaped during battle—that is, they are more likely to have snuck away at night or while left alone.¹⁸ These results are robust to controlling for potentially confounding factors, such as abduction length, year, and location.

Second, *children and adolescents appear more easily indoctrinated and controlled*. Interviews suggest that children and adolescents were more easily indoctrinated and deceived, more trustworthy, and less likely to question authority. According to one youth, who was abducted for 6 months:

You know, it is easy to convince a child of 12 years of anything. He will believe any promises made and does not know the difference between good and bad. But if you are mature, you know they will not overthrow the government.

Similarly, speaking to another long-term abductee, “A child can be deceived into thinking that you know something and did something bad at his place. A child can not change his mind easily if somebody else gives a different view.”¹⁹ In general, the survey data support these accounts. The proportion of youth reporting that they “ever felt allegiance to Kony” is over 30 percent among young children and declines to roughly 20 percent for adults (Figure 5). Adolescents were also the most likely to report ever feeling like staying with the LRA. 20 percent of young adolescents reported having such feelings, compared to roughly ten percent of young children and even fewer young adults (Figure 6). Younger abductees are also somewhat more likely to feel safer inside the LRA. While only four percent claimed to feel this way overall, the level is roughly seven percent for young children and just

¹⁸ The decline of one third is observed in the data, but is not statistically significant at conventional levels.

¹⁹ Adult abductees were also seen as untrustworthy. According to a former bodyguard to Kony, “[Kony] thinks old people can be used to send to go and kill him, and that it’s not good for old people to be next to him because they might have bad [subversive] thoughts”. Another bodyguard who served Kony’s family for eight years echoed such sentiments. Adults, he explained “can escape anytime, and that they will reveal their secrets to the government.” Several former abductees also mentioned that adults were feared as possible spies.

one percent for adults.²⁰ Such accounts of adolescent malleability are largely consistent with a growing body of psychological and neurological research on adolescent behavior and development.²¹

Third and final, the youngest also appear more likely to stay because *children and adolescents are relatively more vulnerable than adults outside the rebel group*. Children are dependent on family for their welfare, and evidence from other conflicts suggest that the absence of a family increases the likelihood that a youth will join an armed group.²² In northern Uganda, where participation was involuntary, orphaning and poverty appear to disproportionately influence children to stay with the LRA longer. As seen in Figure 7, abductees who have lost one or more parents tend to remain significantly longer with the rebel group, but the effect is declining in age. By early adulthood the gap between orphans and non-orphans is closed. Linear regression results (not displayed) also suggest that youth with more poorly educated fathers are also more likely to remain with the armed group, an impact also declining in age abducted. The results for landholdings and cattle suggest a similar pattern for wealth, although it is not statistically significant.

Relative military value

Finally, we turn to assessing relative military value. Several participants emphasized children's traits that were useful for combat. One long-term abductee interviewed, for instance, emphasized children's agility: "The children were of ages 6 to 17 years, and if taken to fight could not easily be shot at because they could easily run in the bushes to confuse the government soldiers." A bodyguard to Kony, meanwhile, emphasized their fearlessness: "When fighting, everyone does it equally. However, children are strong hearted because they are short. Since you fight while standing, it gives them a chance to fire without fear. But those who are old normally have fear compared to children."

²⁰ All results statistically significant at (at least) the five percent level.

²¹ For instance, studies have suggested that susceptibility to peer influence peaks at age 14 (Berndt (1979); Steinberg & Silverberg (1986)), that adolescents project over shorter horizons and discount the future more than adults (Greene (1986); Nurmi (1991); Gardner and Herman (1990); Halpern-Felsher and Cauffman (2001)), that adolescents place less weight on risks than adults (Halpern-Felsher and Cauffman (2001); Furby and Beyth-Marom (1990)); that impulsivity increases between middle adolescence and early adulthood (Greenberger (1982); Steinberg & Cauffman (1996)); and that significant adolescent brain development in regions associated with long-term planning, emotion regulation, impulse control, and risk evaluation (Spear (2000); Dahl (2001); Geidd et al. (1999)).

²² The Machel (1996) report to the UN on child soldiering, summarizing 24 commissioned qualitative studies, argued that "the children most likely to become soldiers are those from impoverished and marginalized backgrounds and those who have become separated from their families." (p.11)

Other accounts, however, stress that small children were less trusted with military tasks and, when abducted, played a servile role. Rebel officers questioned a young child's ability to handle a firearm, or be an effective fighter. Another widely-noted limitation on the use of children was their inability to carry heavy loads. The LRA typically traveled in small bands, carrying everything on their backs. Members were expected to carry food, supplies, ammunition, and even heavy artillery over long distances, and groups were renowned for their ability to move hundreds of kilometers in a few days. In this regard children appeared less able.

In general, the survey evidence suggests that young children below the age of 11 or 12 were entrusted with military tasks less frequently than older youth, while adolescents seem to have been at least as dependable and effective as young adults (and in some cases more so). First, the self-reported reliability and effectiveness of recruits appears to increase in age of abduction, as seen in Figure 8. Second, older abductees were also more likely to receive a rank. Eight percent of youth abducted after age 21 received a rank—more than twice as often as youth under 11.

Third, adolescents appear to have been most likely to receive a gun and report ever killing a soldier or civilian, as seen in Figures 9 and 10.²³ Younger abductees also take much longer to receive a gun, conditional on receiving one—children abducted at age 8 to 10 received a gun after an average of 8 months, while youth abducted at age 16 to 18 received one after just 1.8 months on average. Adolescents are also the most likely to have committed killings on behalf of the group (Figure 14). Parametric fits of these relationships suggest that each is statistically significant.

Finally, there is suggestive (but not conclusive) evidence for the 'heavy loads' argument. Younger children reported carrying heavy loads 87 percent of the time, compared to 93 percent of adults. Linear regression estimates suggest that the probability of carrying heavy loads increased roughly half a percentage point with each additional year of age, yet this figure is not statistically significant.

²³ The peaking of gun possession and forced killing in early adolescence, as seen in Figures 9 and 10, is supported by the results of a linear regression of each dependent variable on a quadratic form of age (i.e. age and age-squared). The coefficients on age and age-squared suggest a peaking of these self-reported behaviors in mid-adolescence (roughly 14). These results are robust to the inclusion of potentially confounding factors as controls, including abduction length, year, and location.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed systematic data and interviews with formerly abducted youth with two aims in mind: one, to provide a sense of proportion to abduction experiences; and two, to weigh the influence between competing theories of LRA behavior, in particular the targeting of young adolescents.

These data present a somewhat different picture of the LRA and abduction. Elsewhere we have argued that the long-term impacts of abduction have been misconstrued—in particular, psychological trauma and social dislocation have been overestimated, and the economic and educational consequences underestimated.²⁴ This chapter, meanwhile, has investigated LRA tactics and abduction experiences. While the scale of abduction appears to have been underestimated, other crimes, such as the abduction of very young children or the forced commission of violence—especially the forced killing of relatives or the abuse of dead bodies—are less common than some of our worst fears. Rather, the LRA seems to have focused primarily on the abduction of adolescents, and to have used disorientation, the threat of violence, and political propaganda at least as commonly as spiritual persuasion, and much more commonly than the forced commission of violence. The emphasis on political propaganda and the promise of future material rewards are reported at least as frequently as spiritual messages and dogma, presenting the LRA as more idea- and cause-driven than is typically reported in the media. Overall, these various forms of propaganda seem to have been fairly effective, at least for a time—a near majority of abductees report one-time loyalty to Kony and dependability as members of the LRA.

The LRA also comes across as more strategic and coldly rational in its tactics than commonly supposed. The rebel group's emphasis on abduction of adolescents is consistent with evidence that adolescents provided the optimal combination of military effectiveness and longevity—a balance between size and ability, and ease of indoctrination and disorientation.

The LRA's internal emphasis on political ideology is consistent with arguments made by long-time observers such as anthropologist Sverker Finnström (2003). The LRA's use of violence and human rights abuse for strategic purposes has likewise been noted by Doom and Vlassenroot (1999), Van

²⁴ See Annan, Blattman and Horton (2006), Blattman and Annan (2007), and Annan (2007).

Acker (2004) and Vinci (2005), and is part of a broader swing in political science towards recognizing the logic of violence in civil war (e.g. Kalyvas (2005)).

As noted in the introduction, such accounts lie in stark contrast to the all-too-common presentation of the LRA as criminals, cult leaders, and irrational actors. This treatment is exemplary of a larger trend to regard current conflicts as criminal and depoliticized “new wars” (Kaldor (1999)) and rebel groups as predatory or cult-like—sometimes called the “new barbarism” (Kaplan 1994; Richards 1996). The evidence to support such claims is thin, however, and the case against them is ever growing. Why then do they persist?

The LRA has been a fluid and changing organization, a factor that may account for some of their seeming incoherence and inconsistency. The leadership has also expended little effort in presenting a coherent and rational face to the world, or even to their Acholi brethren. Indeed, they may even have benefited from the aura of spiritual mystery and power that surrounds their movement.

Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that the view of the LRA as barbaric and irrational has suited most parties to the conflict. For the journalists there are unspeakable (but not unwriteable) horrors to report. For the international donor and the human rights advocate, the image of the victimized child and the vicious rebel force suit both fundraising and programming biases. For the government, the image of their enemy as barbaric and irrational yields obvious benefits in rallying international support and, perhaps, military aid.

As audiences, we ourselves may be excessively open to the rebel-as-barbarian narrative. Stathis Kalyvas (2003) has argued that the end of the cold war robbed analysts and audiences of a clear and simple framework for characterizing conflict, and the “new wars” and “new barbarism” thesis presents an orderly, if ultimately flawed, means of understanding violent civil wars. Our mistake is simply a failure of imagination, and the desire for simple and orderly accounts of inherently complex conflicts and histories.

Psychological evidence also suggests that humans may be inherently biased towards remembering and highlighting traumatic events more vividly than other memories.²⁵ Further, feeling that the acts

²⁵ See, for example, McGaugh (1992).

themselves are 'barbaric', people may have difficult associating cruelty and violence—particularly toward children—with rational and conscious political intent.

Finally, the academics who collect evidence and develop more complex theories of behavior, including these authors, are often guilty of writing for a narrow audience, and expending little effort at pushing their alternative message to the media and general public. This chapter and this volume hopefully represent a step in the opposite direction.

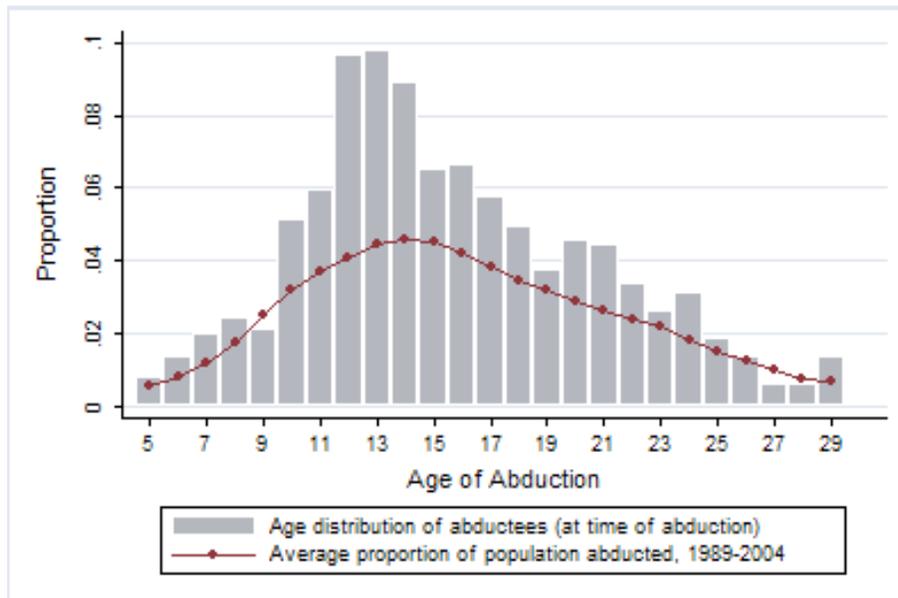
Table 1: Self-reported abduction experiences from returned former abductees

(N = 462 abducted males aged 14 to 30)

	Abducted				All*	Never abducted
	< 2 weeks	2 weeks to 3 months	3 months to 1 year	> 1 year		
Proportion of abductees	32%	23%	21%	23%	100%	
<u>Violence experienced</u>						
Severely beaten	36%	57%	75%	71%	57%	23%
Attacked by someone with a weapon	20%	13%	36%	30%	24%	3%
Tied up or imprisoned	43%	65%	76%	70%	61%	6%
Forced to carry heavy loads	68%	96%	93%	91%	85%	12%
<u>Violence committed</u>						
Forced to abuse dead bodies	8%	19%	39%	29%	22%	0%
Forced to beat/cut a family member or friend	3%	16%	15%	18%	12%	0%
Forced to beat/cut another civilian	10%	15%	29%	34%	20%	0%
Forced to kill a family member or friend	3%	11%	7%	12%	8%	0%
Forced to kill another civilian	8%	15%	20%	32%	17%	0%
Forced to kill a soldier	3%	14%	16%	25%	13%	1%
Ever killed at all	9%	20%	27%	42%	23%	1%
<u>Abduction experiences*</u>						
Received an initiation ceremony	10%	48%	73%	88%	50%	
Ever rewarded for a job well done		1%	8%	9%	6%	
Ever given a gun		13%	54%	85%	50%	
Allowed to sleep with a gun		8%	39%	75%	40%	
Median no. of months before receiving gun		0.6	2.3	4.5	3.4	
Ever received a rank		1%	7%	17%	9%	
<u>Mindset*</u>						
Ever felt loyal to Kony		32%	45%	56%	44%	
Ever felt like an important member of the group		20%	49%	49%	39%	
Ever felt that the commanders could depend on you		3%	28%	48%	26%	
Ever felt they wanted to stay in armed group		5%	22%	29%	19%	
Ever felt safer inside than outside the LRA		1%	4%	14%	6%	
Ever felt you wanted to be a commander		3%	8%	15%	9%	
<u>Return</u>						
Escaped					80%	
Released					15%	
Rescued					5%	

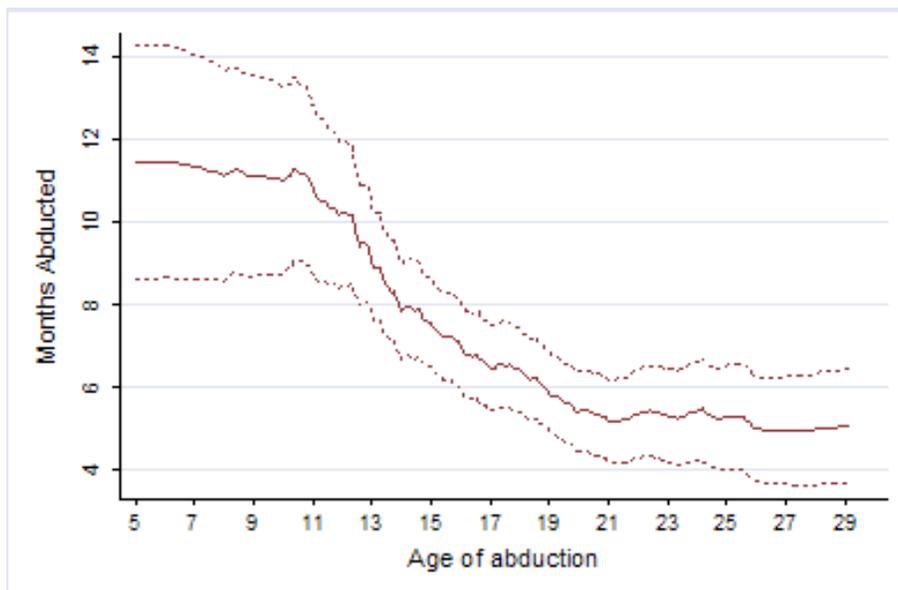
* Some abduction experiences and mindsets were not recorded for youth abducted less than 2 weeks in total. In these instances, the "Abducted: All" column averages over those abducted 2 weeks or more alone.

Figure 1: Distribution of LRA abductions of males by age of abduction



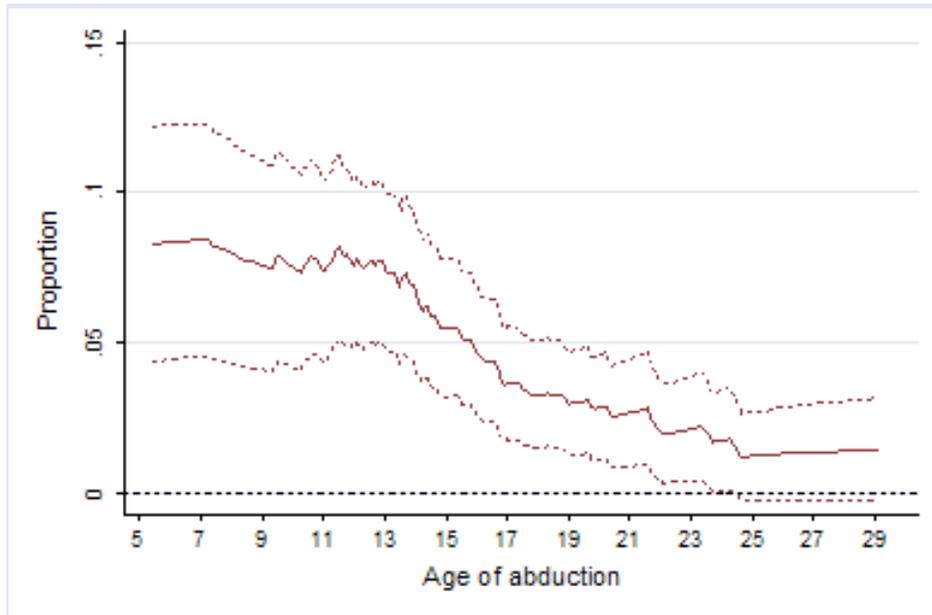
Notes: Data include absentee youth and youth who have since died or did not return from abduction (collected from the household survey). Multiple abductions are included. The proportion of the population abducted by age is calculated by dividing the number of youth abducted at each age in each year by the total number of youth in the population of that age in that year, and calculating the running-mean over all years via symmetric nearest-neighbor smoothing (bandwidth = 0.5).

Figure 2: Length of abduction, by age of abduction



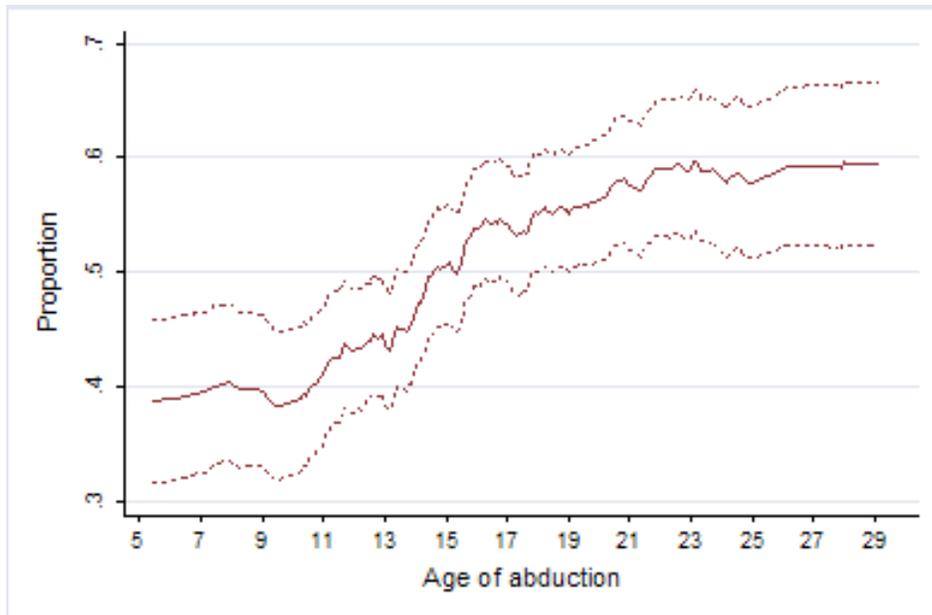
Notes: The solid line is a running-mean calculated via symmetric nearest-neighbor smoothing with a bandwidth of 0.5. The dotted lines represent the 90% confidence interval. Data include absentee and non-surviving youth, but exclude youth that did not return from abduction. Multiple abductions enter individually.

Figure 3: Probability that an abductee was rescued (versus escaping)



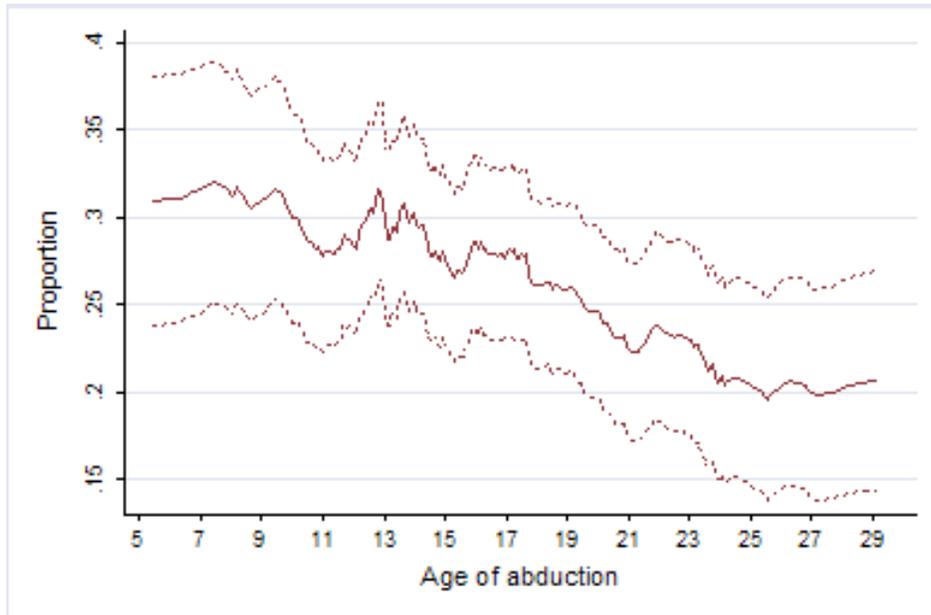
Notes: The solid line is a running-mean calculated via symmetric nearest-neighbor smoothing with a bandwidth of 0.5. The dotted lines represent the 90% confidence interval. Data do not include absentee or non-surviving youth, but are weighted by inverse sampling and attrition probabilities. Multiple abductions enter individually.

Figure 4: Probability an abductee who escaped knew his location at the time of escape



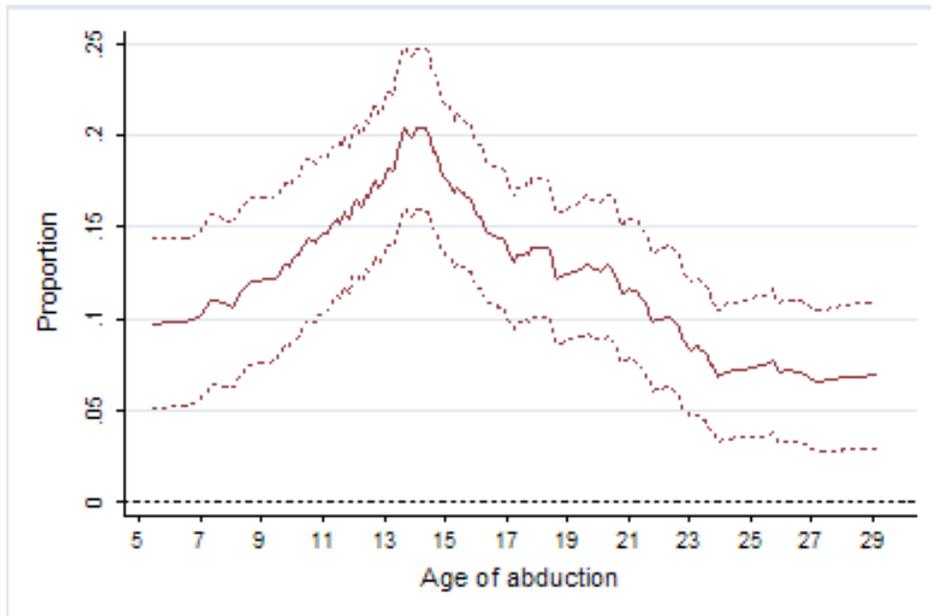
Notes: The solid line is a running-mean calculated via symmetric nearest-neighbor smoothing with a bandwidth of 0.5. The dotted lines represent the 90% confidence interval. Data do not include absentee or non-surviving youth, but are weighted by inverse sampling and attrition probabilities. Multiple abductions enter individually.

Figure 5: Probability that the youth “ever felt allegiance to Kony”



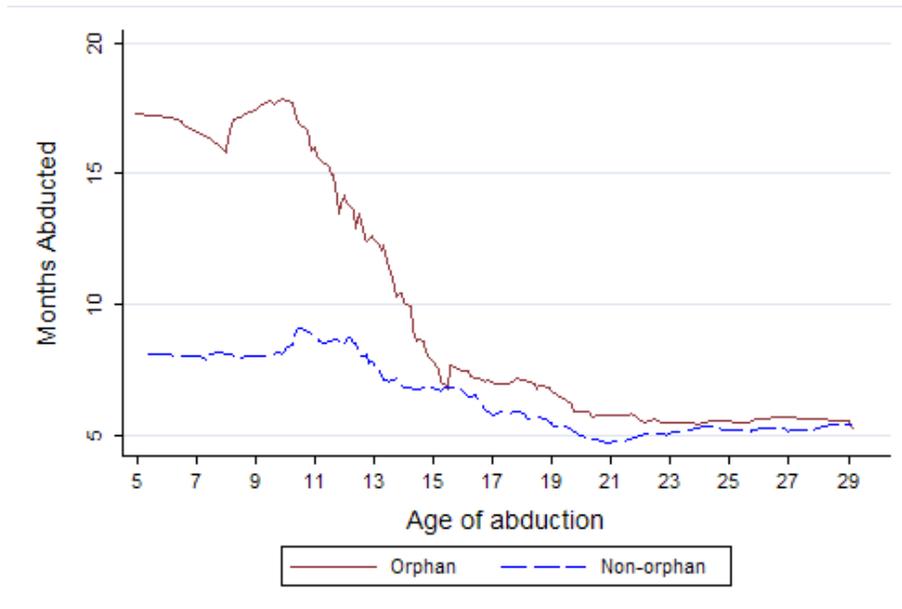
Notes: The solid line is a running-mean calculated via symmetric nearest-neighbor smoothing with a bandwidth of 0.5. The dotted lines represent the 90% confidence interval. Data do not include absentee or non-surviving youth, but are weighted by inverse sampling and attrition probabilities. Each abductee enters once, and multiple abductions are ignored. The results are robust to adjusting the mean for abduction year, length and location.

Figure 6: Probability that the youth “ever felt like staying with the LRA”



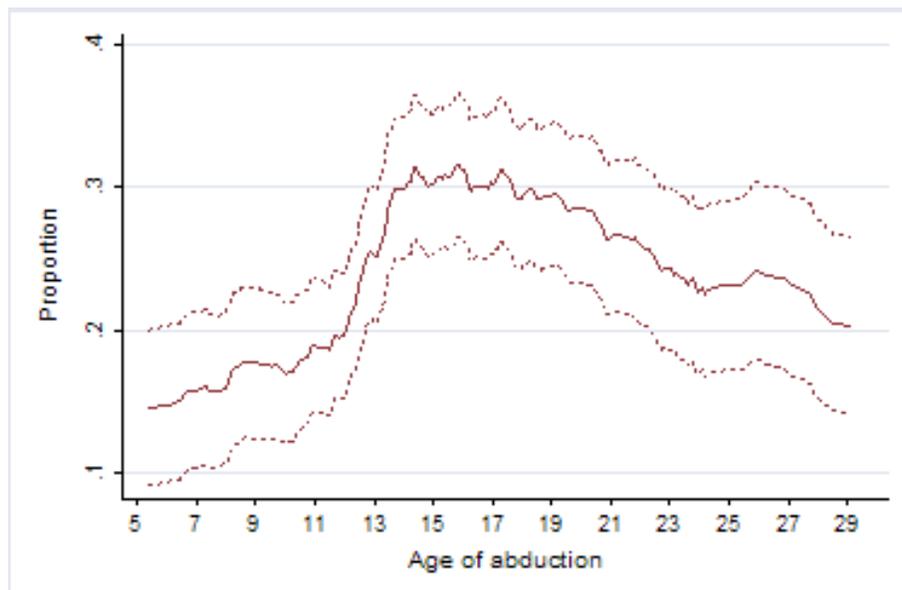
Notes: The solid line is a running-mean calculated via symmetric nearest-neighbor smoothing with a bandwidth of 0.5. The dotted lines represent the 90% confidence interval. Data do not include absentee or non-surviving youth, but are weighted by inverse sampling and attrition probabilities. Each abductee enters once, and multiple abductions are ignored. The results are robust to adjusting the mean for abduction year, length and location.

Figure 7: The influence of being an orphan on abduction length, by age of abduction



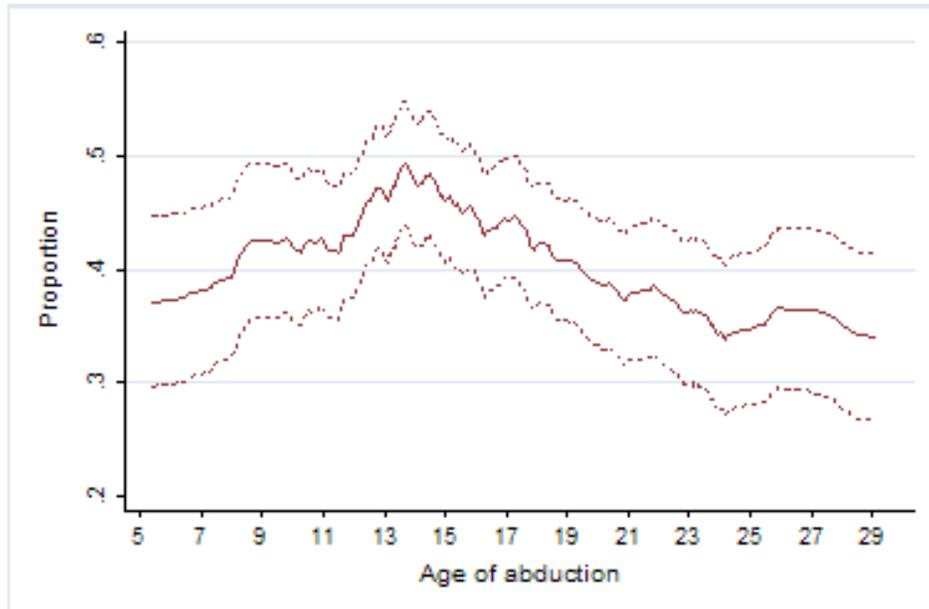
Notes: Both lines represent running-means calculated via symmetric nearest-neighbor smoothing with a bandwidth of 0.5. No confidence interval is displayed. Data do not include absentee or non-surviving youth, but are weighted by inverse sampling and attrition probabilities. Each abductee enters once, at the age of his or her longest abduction, and multiple abductions are otherwise ignored. The results are robust to adjusting the mean for abduction year, length and location.

Figure 8: Probability that a youth “was considered a dependable member of the group”



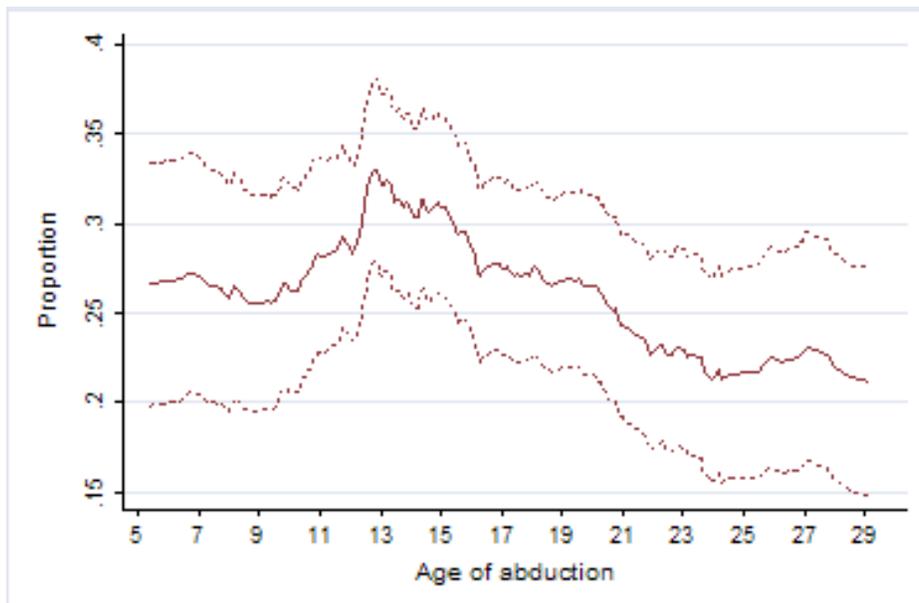
Notes: The solid line is a running-mean calculated via symmetric nearest-neighbor smoothing with a bandwidth of 0.5. The dotted lines represent the 90% confidence interval. Data do not include absentee or non-surviving youth, but are weighted by inverse sampling and attrition probabilities. Each abductee enters once, and multiple abductions are ignored. The results are robust to adjusting the mean for abduction year, length and location.

Figure 9: Probability that an abductee was allowed to keep a gun



Notes: The solid line is a running-mean calculated via symmetric nearest-neighbor smoothing with a bandwidth of 0.5. The dotted lines represent the 90% confidence interval. Data do not include absentee or non-surviving youth, but are weighted by inverse sampling and attrition probabilities. Each abductee enters once, and multiple abductions are ignored. The results are robust to adjusting the mean for abduction year, length and location.

Figure 10: Probability that the youth reports ever killing (soldiers and civilians)



Notes: The solid line is a running-mean calculated via symmetric nearest-neighbor smoothing with a bandwidth of 0.5. The dotted lines represent the 90% confidence interval. Data do not include absentee or non-surviving youth, but are weighted by inverse sampling and attrition probabilities. Each abductee enters once, and multiple abductions are ignored. The results are robust to adjusting the mean for abduction year, length and location.

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