



The Survey of War Affected Youth

RESEARCH & PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH IN ARMED CONFLICT IN UGANDA

SWAY RESEARCH BRIEF 1: THE ABDUCTION AND RETURN EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH

APRIL 2006

What is SWAY?

SWAY is a research study in northern Uganda dedicated to understanding the scale and nature of war violence and its impact on youth.

*Read more about SWAY on p.3
See SWAY's methodology on p.8*

In this Research Brief:

- Abduction and return experiences

In future Research Briefs:

- Standards of living among youth in the IDP camps
- The psychosocial consequences of war violence
- Youth economic activity
- The long-term impact of abduction on health and education.
- Determinants of vulnerability



New survey evidence on LRA abductions

Based on surveys of more than 1,000 households and nearly 750 youth from eight sub-counties in Kitgum and Pader districts, SWAY research briefs are intended to re-lease preliminary results for discussion and debate while full analysis is still underway.

A third of boys and young men taken, a fifth never return Pages 2-3

In the 8 areas surveyed, a third of all boys and men aged 13 to 30 report having been abducted at least once by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), more than half of these for two months or longer. Tragically, we estimate one fifth never returned. One sixth of women and girls reported an abduction, a third for two months or longer.

Minority of abductees actually soldierPage 4

While beatings, the witnessing of violence, and the carrying of heavy loads are nearly universal experiences, perhaps only half of those taken for more than two months ever carry a gun, and only a fifth are forced to kill.

Do abductees become willing recruits? Page 5

A surprising number of abducted youth, including a third of the children, say there was a time they felt like staying with the LRA. More than a tenth admits to having felt loyalty to Kony, and having ambitions to become a commander.

Minority see reception center, receive assistance, amnesty Pages 6-7

Only half of boys and men taken for more than a week ever passed through a reception center, and fewer still have received amnesty or any form of assistance.

Have we underestimated youth abductions?

Based on reports of approximately 20,000 children passing through reception centers, the UN has estimated that at least 25,000 children have been abducted. Counting the abducted is a difficult task, at best an exercise in educated guesswork. Survey evidence from SWAY, however, suggests a more accurate estimate may be at least 66,000 youth between the ages of 13 and 30.

Without including those abducted for less than a week, survey responses from eight sub-counties suggests that only half of male returnees passed through a reception center (see page 7). Moreover, we estimate one fifth of males never returned (page 2). Finally, at least one quarter of abducted youth are not children but between 18 and 30. These figures suggest that for every 3 children in the official count, 10 youth were actually abducted. Such higher numbers seem consistent with the high proportion of youth ever reporting an abduction—a third of males and a sixth of females.

The emphasis on abducted *youth* is important, as our evidence suggests that young adults are underserved by NGOs (pages 6-7). This is an alarming fact as young adults may be more impacted by the war than children (a topic for a future research brief). □

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Patterns of abduction

A large-scale survey of households and youth offers a chance to see the broader patterns in abduction. While the LRA especially focused on abducting boys aged 13 to 17, men and women of all ages were taken. Boys were twice as likely to be abducted as girls, and typically were abducted for longer. While abductions (and the average age of abduction) have been rising over time, they have been falling in average length.

The scale of abduction is immense. One third of the males we interviewed reported an abduction experience of at least a day, and two thirds of these were taken longer than two weeks. While fewer women appear to have been abducted, the number is still tragically high – one sixth have been taken at least for a day.

Not all of these abductions are lengthy. In fact, the majority have been quite brief. A typical abduction might see all able-bodied members of a household captured and forced to carry looted goods some distance, perhaps for several days. After this time most of the family is released, often with only the adolescent boys detained. Therefore, looking at abduction length (bottom left), we see that more than half of female abductees (and one third of males) stay less than two weeks with the rebels. These include escapes as well as released youth (discussed on page 6). Tragically, 22% of males and 7% of females never return.

Abductions were greatest in 2002 and 2003. This spike follows the government's (UPDF) Spring 2002 offensive against the LRA, Operation Iron Fist, and is generally seen as a retaliatory measure by the LRA. Looking, however, at the distribution of abductions over time (at right, middle), we can see that abductions were already on the rise in most of our sub-counties prior to Operation Iron Fist.

False reports?

A concern with such numbers is that youth may be falsely reporting abduction in the expectation of benefits. While undoubtedly this happened, we found that on average abduction was under-reported by households. After surveying the household, a small percentage of the youth we interviewed turned out to have an abduction experience that was not reported in the household roster. Typically this occurred where the abduction period was very short (such as a couple of days), but it also occurred when the youth had left the household some years before.

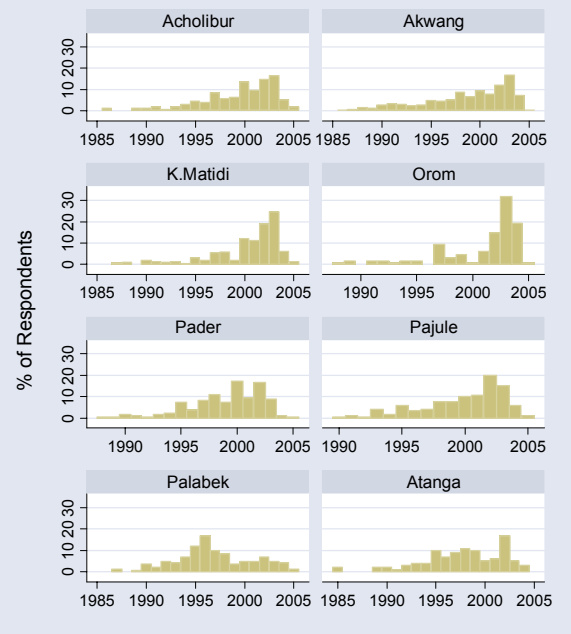
Could they simply be misrepresenting themselves for assistance? This would be difficult because of the detailed questions on abduction, return, the composition of the unit, their commanders, discipline, movements, and so forth. Our enumerators were careful about checking for inconsistencies, confident that this minimized false reporting.

[Continued on page 3]

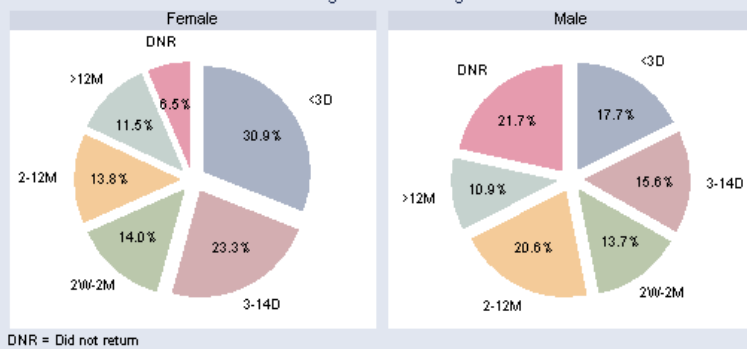
Abduction Index

Proportion of male youth ever abducted	1/3
Percent of these that are taken for more than two weeks	66
Proportion of female youth ever abducted	1/6
Percent of these that are taken for more than two weeks	46
Chance that a female gone for more than two weeks has not returned	1 in 4
Chance that a male gone for more than two weeks has not returned	2 in 5

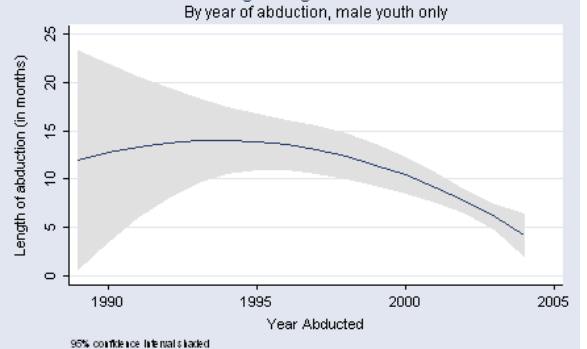
Distribution of Abductions by Sub-county
All ages and sexes, 1985-2005



Abduction Length for Youth aged 10 to 30



Average Length of Abduction
By year of abduction, male youth only

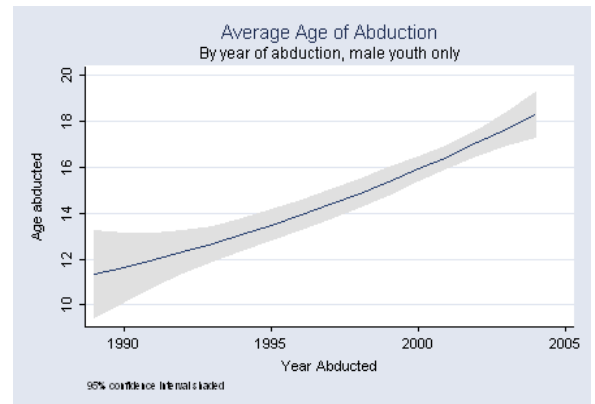
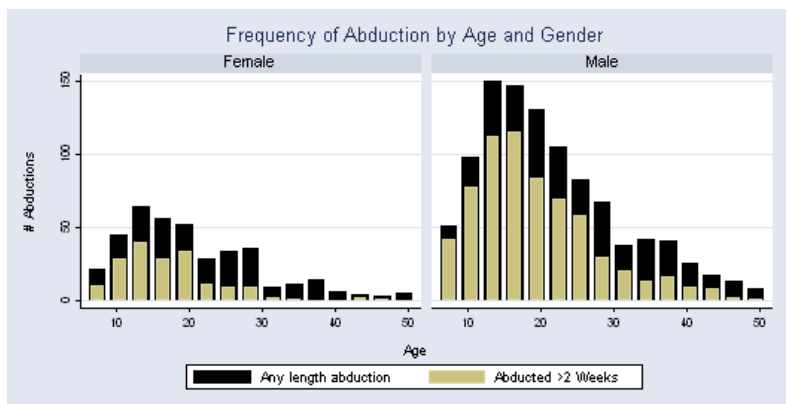
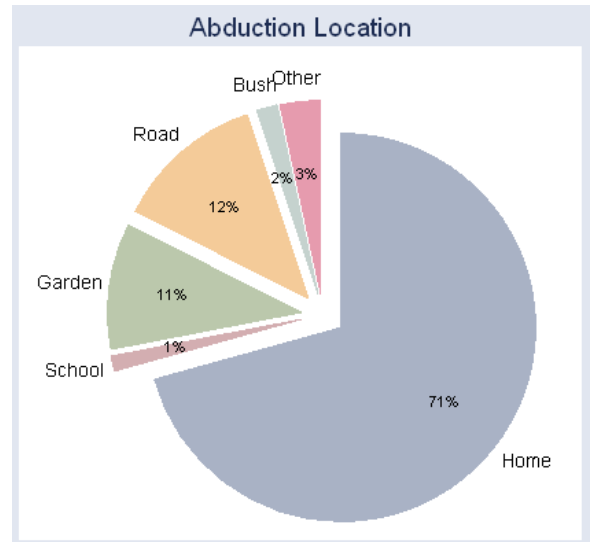


Age and location of abductions

Most abductions occur at home (see panel at right), with only a quarter occurring outside the camps or villages. These proportions have stayed roughly constant over time. Only in 2005, with the camps better guarded, do we see an increase in the proportion of those abducted from the road or bush (versus from home). The number of 2005 abductees interviewed is sufficiently low (only 8) that such a conclusion must be made with caution.

Most abductions also appear to be of adolescent boys (see figure bottom left). The rebels seems especially focused on boys aged 12 to 17. Even so, the average age of abduction has been rising steadily since the mid-1990s (see figure at bottom right). In 1994, when abductions began in earnest, the average age of abduction appears to have been approximately 13. By 2004 the average was nearly 18 years of age. The pattern is nearly the same if we only include lengthy abductions.

This rise in the average age of abduction coincides with a massive increase in the scale of abductions (and a fall in the average length). The popular notion is that young adolescents were targeted as they were easier to terrorize, could be molded into compliant soldiers, and could less easily escape. These propositions receive some support in the following pages. They are difficult to reconcile, however, with the rising average age of abduction. One possibility is that abduction has moved from a means of recruitment to a means of terrorizing the populace—a tactical shift on the part of the LRA. □



What is the Survey for War Affected Youth?



The Survey of War Affected Youth is a research program dedicated to improving the targeting and design of programs for war affected youth, and to understanding the scale, magnitude and incidence of violence and human rights abuses in the north.

To this end, SWAY is documenting the character of violence committed against youth, and the consequences of this violence (especially abduction) on their economic, social, physical and psychological well-being later in life.

SWAY was conducted in partnership with AVSI Uganda, who provided in-kind logistical and administrative support. We also gratefully acknowledge logistical support from UNICEF Uganda and IRC Uganda.

SWAY is supported financially by UNICEF Uganda (via AVSI) and by the MacArthur Foundation (via the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center). The initial pilot project was supported by the IPRA Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation, UC Berkeley’s IBER and Center for African Studies, and Indiana University, to whom we are most grateful. *The contents of this brief, however, do not necessarily reflect the views of these organizations; the SWAY Directors are fully responsible for the content in this research brief.*

To learn more about SWAY, visit www.SWAY-Uganda.org, or contact one of the Directors. □

Abductees and Soldiering

It is tragically common to hear a story of an abductee being forced to kill a family member or friend to “bind them to the group”. Yet until now we have had little sense of proportion. The SWAY survey evidence suggests that relatively few become fighters, and only a minority of abductees is forced to commit violence. While even a small number is too high, the numbers are lower than some have feared.

Looking at the incidence of violent acts (right) we see that the vast majority of abductees have had violence inflicted upon them – typically beatings, imprisonment, and witnessing of killings. Tales of extreme abuse like the following, from a teenage boy abducted for 4 months, are common:

We were all told to pinch the ear of the dead man and skip over [the body]...Some of the rebels kill people and then lick their blood so that they don't get haunted by their ghosts and its true they don't get haunted...After training, pangas were heated and used to make signs of the cross on each of our backs and after we were told that we were then soldiers of the LRA...

A fifth to a quarter of youth, meanwhile, were forced to attack or kill strangers, both in and out of battle. Perhaps surprisingly, several long-term abductees for the most part avoided extreme violence. From the table at bottom right, and the figure at bottom left, we see that not all long-term abductees were given a gun. While most received a gun within two months, not all did (often because of scarcity) and not all were allowed to keep the gun (at least not right away).

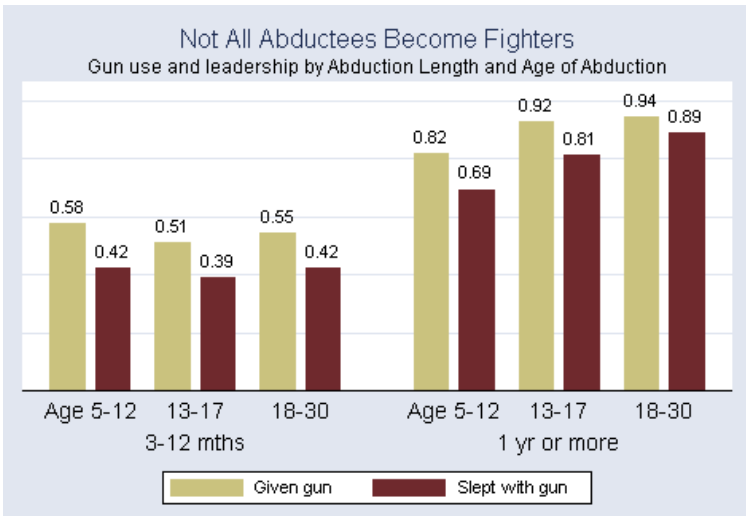
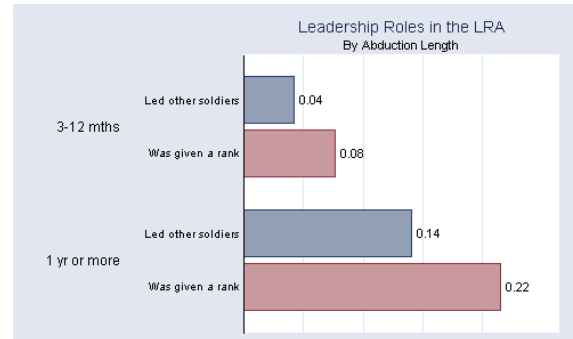
The number of battles experienced is lower than expected—3 on average for those gone 3 to 12 months, and 10 for those gone more than a year. Only a third of those gone longer than a year report being forced to kill. From the mother of a 14-year old who was abducted for 1 year:

I asked him if he did anything wrong while he was in the bush but he insists that he did not do anything wrong. He was given to the LRA leader, carrying his gun, luggage and babysitting. He said he never killed. When the man [leader] was killed, he tried to run away and throw away the luggage, but he wasn't successful. Later in Palabek, when there was fighting, he was able to escape.

Since these experiences are self-reported, it is of course possible that the worst experiences are under-reported. It was our experience that most youth spoke freely of their time in the bush, and we are confident of the main message to emerge from the analysis: that the majority of abductees were witnesses and victims to violence, but not necessarily perpetrators. □

War Violence Experienced By Abductees

Witnessed a killing	78%
Tied or locked up	68%
Received a severe beating	63%
Forced to steal or destroy property	58%
Forced to abuse dead bodies	23%
Forced to attack a stranger	22%
Forced to kill a stranger	20%
Forced to kill an opposing soldier in battle	15%
Forced to attack a family member or friend	14%
Forced to kill a family member or friend	8%



Fighters

Median number of months after which an abductee received a gun	2
Average number of battles seen by a youth abducted for 3 to 12 months	2.8
Average battles seen by an abductee gone longer than a year	9.7
Percent of long-term abductees that "often felt like an important part" of their unit	45
Percent that ever believed they had magical protection from bullets	1.7
Percent that professed "ever feeling allegiance to Kony or the LRA"	54
Percent that still do	1

Exploring the agency of child and youth abductees

Several researchers and commentators have challenged the notion of pure victimhood when dealing with child and youth soldiers, stressing that however forcible the recruitment, some agency remains with the child or young adult.

Our survey evidence suggests that of those that stayed more than three months, at least a quarter to a third became willing recruits for a time. Moreover, half report that their commanders found them “dependable”. The experience seems more common amongst the young, and the longer-term abductees, and portrays both the agency of the youth and the power of a brutal system of rewards and punishments.

From the figures at right, we can see that nearly a third of the youth that stayed with the rebels longer than three months reported that there was a time they felt like staying with the LRA. From an interview with a now 25-year old male in Acholibur, abducted twice for a total of 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.

More than simply seeking to survive, some report that life in the bush was not all violence and misery. From a man from Palabek Gem, now 30, abducted for two months:

You know, when we are together, at least someone will do something funny and thus you end up laughing. So there were things we laughed about. Even dancing, we used to if we are together as that would make us happy and at that particular time, we often felt there is peace.

Half of all respondents that stayed longer than 3 months also admit to feeling allegiance to Kony, or having aspirations to become a commander. Desires to stay were much higher among children (but allegiance to Kony seems uninfluenced by age).

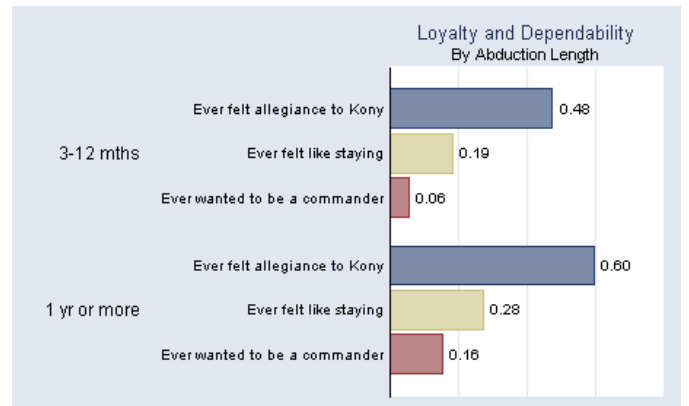
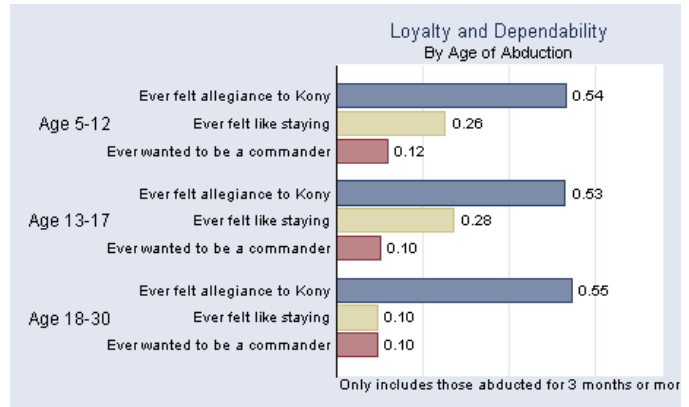
As seen on the previous page, those that stayed with the armed group for long were reasonably likely to be given a rank, and lead other soldiers. Reasons for promotion, illustrated at right, were often related to their skill and obedience as recruits.

While often convinced for a time, however, many of the youth we spoke to had a moment of awakening, often spurred on by the magnitude of the violence and the futility of the cause. From a male abducted for 2 years, now 20 and living in Kitgum Town:

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.

Others show remarkable agency and were able to resist the violence in a passive way, although these instances seem rare and sometimes to little effect. From a male abducted one week, now 23 and living in Kitgum Town:

When I was just abducted, they told me to kill others. When I was in the bush, there was a lady who was digging her cassava. I was supposed to kill her but I told her to run. When she did, another group of rebels caught her and killed her... This issue of the woman still bothers me. □



Return Experiences

Chance that a returnee taken for more than two weeks did not go to a reception center	1 in 2
Proportion that report being beaten by the UPDF during capture or custody	1/10
Percent of returnees reporting they were kept in UPDF custody for 2 weeks or longer	9
The median length of custody for a returnee, in days	2
Proportion that go home after return	19/20
Chance that a child returnee goes back to school upon return	1 in 2
Chance that a returnee receives basic NGO services after returning home	1/3

Escape and return experiences

Escape

Of those who come back, the vast majority escape from the LRA rather than being released or rescued (see figures at middle left). Of the minority released by the LRA, the reasons given are either that they were too young (typically 12 years or less in age), too old (mid-twenties or older), injured and unable to walk, or simply beaten senseless and left to die. From an interview with a young man abducted 2 years, now 25 and living in Kitgum Town:

The second thing is the time I tried to escape with my friends. Unfortunately, those people followed us and took us back. So when we reached the camp where the other rebels were, they picked four kadogos [small boys from the group/newly abducted] and ordered them to go and kill us by beating us with sticks. The kadogos took us and beat us badly until we became unconscious and they went away thinking we were dead. But God is great. We found ourselves getting up with the early morning breeze.

Of those that escape, nearly a third do so at night, sneaking away while their captors were sleeping. Roughly a third also report sneaking away while being left alone. Many of these youth report being sent to loot goods, dig up cassava, or fetch water, and walking off into the bush when they realized they were unsupervised.

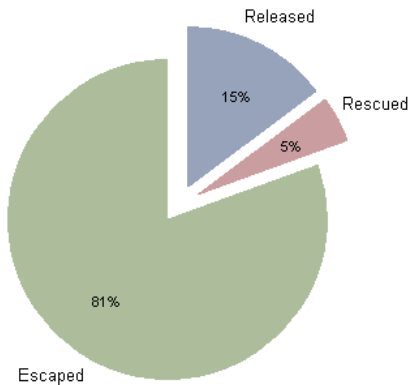
Finally, nearly a third report that they escape in the confusion of a battle or ambush. From a young man taken 2 months, "I escaped when [a UPDF commander] laid an ambush on us." Or, from an 18-year old boy taken 3 years:

In the morning we continued moving and met with the UPDF who fired at us ... By around 6pm, we had scattered so I decided to walk away.

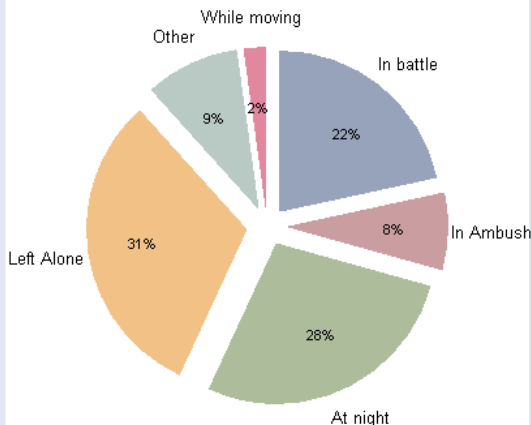
Is the timing of escape based only on opportunity? When asked why they did not attempt escape earlier, youth responded that they had not had the chance (36%), that they were too well guarded (24%), that they were fearful (17%) or that they were tied or in the Sudan (9% each). Even so, as noted on the previous page, the motive for escape seems to be a mixture of opportunity and willingness. From an 18-year old boy abducted 8 years:

We used to do things and still believe him [Kony] because we thought this could happen [Kony over throwing the government] but the commanders knew he was not overthrowing the government. Kony used to say his soldiers are young people because the adults always escaped. So when I grew up and started seeing that whatever Kony says was not true because if were really true then the government could have been overthrown. I also saw that the people he abducted before me had all escaped. This made me think of escaping which I finally did. (18 year old, abducted 8 years, Pajule)

How did you leave the LRA?



How did you escape?



Coming back: the UPDF and Reception Centers

Upon escape, 57% of abductees go directly home rather than through a reception center or the UPDF. The number is lower for those taken for a longer period, but even a quarter of those gone for more than a year say they did not pass through the UPDF. Returnees are fearful of the UPDF, in many cases with good reason. While returnees stayed with the UPDF for only 2 days at the median, nearly a tenth were detained for more than two weeks, and a similar number report abuse at the hands of the army, like this 18-year old boy who escaped after three years.

It was unfortunate that when I was just about to cross the Padibe road, I met with the UPDF mobile group. They opened fire at me and I lifted my gun up and threw it down and headed towards them. At that time, I was no longer afraid. I just put it in my heart that if I was going to die then it will be God's will. They had already shot at my trousers and tore it with bullets. When I reached them, they were very aggressive. They beat me up so badly and tied me up. They said I was a typical rebel that should just be killed but some of them said that I shouldn't be killed.

[Continued on following page]

The proportion reporting abuse at the hands of the UPDF was close to 15% in the mid-1990s, fell to 5% in the late 1990s, and has been rising since back to 15%. The average time an abductee is detained has been falling over the period, suggesting fewer long detentions.

Once released by the UPDF, returned abductees were typically brought to a reception center in order to receive counseling, services, and be reunited with family. Yet half failed to pass through the centers, even some that had passed through the UPDF child protection unit. In the figures at right, we see that only a minority of the male youth taken for several months ever went to a reception center. This is especially true of young adults.

Fewer than half of long-term abductees have received an amnesty certificate (see figure at right, second from bottom).

At bottom we can also see that fewer than half of children returning from the bush return to school, only a bare majority receive a cleansing ceremony of some nature, and only a small number report receiving any NGO services since returning. Typically these are limited to blankets and a mattress. Only a handful received training of help with income generation.

Returning to the family and community

Most returnees (95%) report that they returned home after abduction. The level of acceptance they received from their families is extremely high. Roughly 98% reported that their families not only welcomed them home, but also never insulted, blamed, or abused them for having been in the bush. From a 23-year old in Kitgum Town, who was abducted for 2 months:

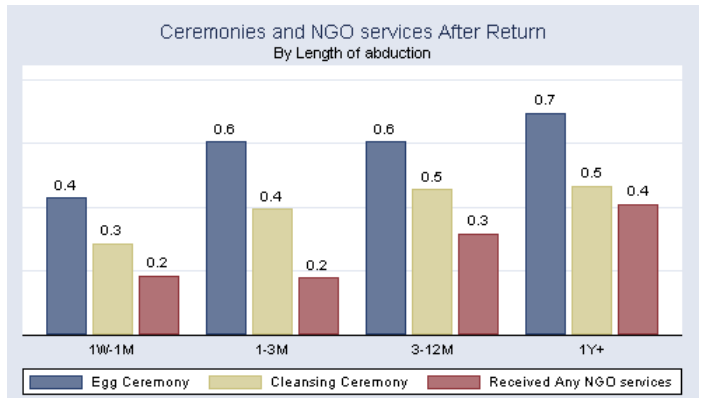
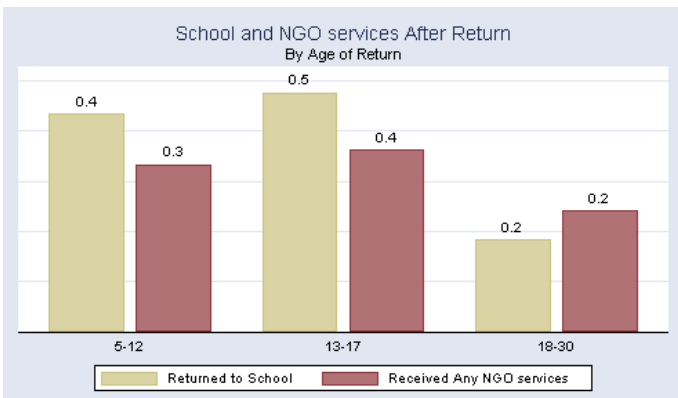
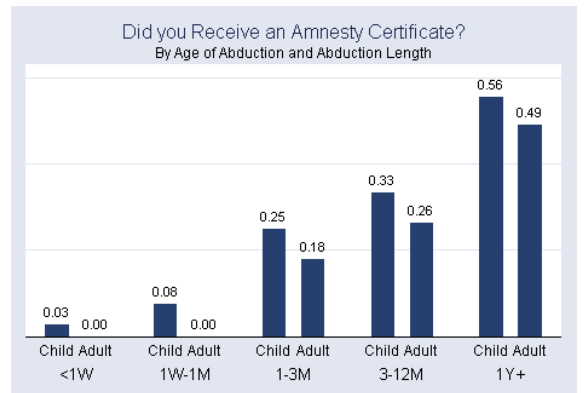
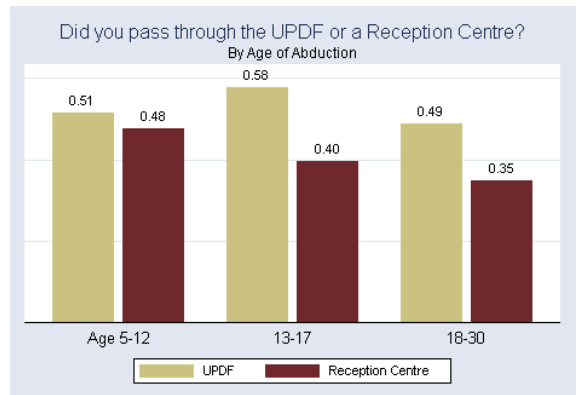
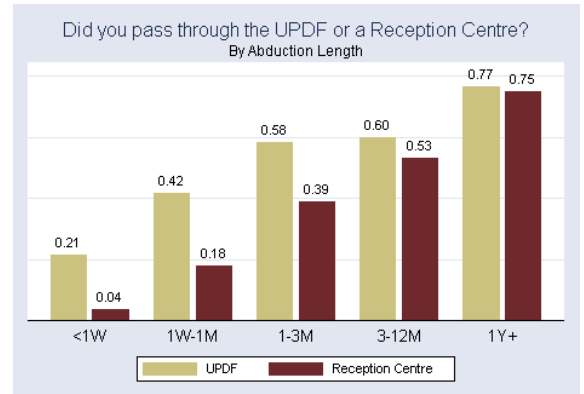
When I just came home, I was really happy to be home. I couldn't realize whether people hated me or not. Life in the bush was not for people but for animals. I found life good at home. Both of my parents were alive. No neighbors said anything bad to me.

The reception from the community, while typically strong and welcoming, was not nearly so unanimous. While almost no one reported that their community blamed them for the things they had done, more than a quarter of returnees said that they were insulted by community members upon return, or that community members were afraid of them. Even so, 94% reported that they felt "very" or "somewhat" accepted by their community.

One finding that emerges from the in-depth interviews is returnees were least accepted and sometimes persecuted by the parents and families of those who were abducted but had not yet returned. From an 18-year old from Pader, abducted for three years:

When I returned, some people used very bad and unkind language because some of them whose sons and daughters were abducted but child did not return felt bad that I returned.

Also common were accusations that returnees were "behaving like a rebel" whenever there was an altercation or dispute, or persecution from community members when rebel activity in the area was intense. Very often alcohol was part of the problem. Such insulting was extremely painful to the youth. □



SWAY Methodology

SWAY was conducted by a highly trained team of six research assistants, all university-educated Acholi youth, between September 2005 and March 2006. Youth were traced to wherever they may have migrated, and surveys and interviews were conducted in camps, barracks, towns, and cities around Uganda. The survey instruments, as well as further information about the study, are available for download at www.SWAY-Uganda.org.

Study population

SWAY's population of interest is males born between 1975 and 1992, and thus between 13 and 30 years of age today—the conventional Acholi definition of youth.

Eight sub-counties, or clusters, were selected for surveying: Akwang, Kitgum Matidi, Orom, and Palabek Gem in Kitgum District; and Acholi Bur, Atanga, Pader, and Pajule in Pader District. Security and logistical concerns prevented us from selecting clusters randomly, and so generalization of any results to the entire region must be done with caution.

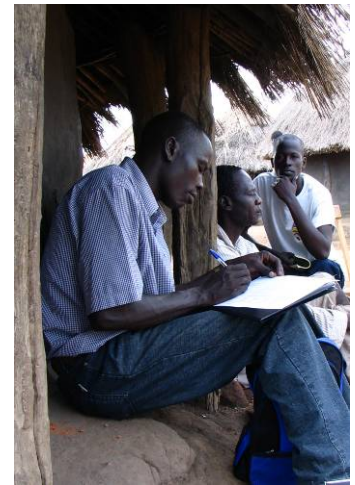
Study Design

The Survey includes both a quantitative survey component as well as in-depth qualitative interviews with a small sub-sample of the youth (along with their families, neighbors, and teachers). Youth were selected for the quantitative survey in two stages. Households in each sub-county were selected randomly from World Food Program distribution lists created in 2002 and 2003. A roster of youth in the household was developed with household members, including information on each household member's age, mortality, and abduction history, and each youth's present occupation, location, and education. A sub-sample of youth was selected for in-depth interviewing from these rosters.

The pool of male youth resident in the camps today exclude all those that died, were abducted and did not return, or have since migrated away. In order to obtain a random sample of youth living in the region prior to the 1997 escalation of the conflict, the household roster completed was a retrospective one—households were asked to recall all youth living in their household in 1996, the year of Museveni's first election.

Sample size

1,200 households were selected, of which 38 were dropped due to inaccessibility and 146 could not be located, leaving 1,016 households and data on more than 10,000 individuals. Of the 2,317 male youth in the rosters, nearly 900 were selected for in-depth interviewing. Interviews continue, with more than 730 completed. Migrants are being tracked to their new locations across the country. Over 85% of selected youth are expected to be found. A sub-sample of more than 30 youth was selected non-randomly for in-depth qualitative interviews, as well as interviews with their family and communities. □



People of SWAY

Chris Blattman is co-Director of SWAY. He is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Economics at the University of California at Berkeley, and holds a Master's in Public Administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

In addition to SWAY, Chris has also conducted large socio-economic and health surveys of children and youth in Kenya and South Asia.

Chris is presently conducting randomized evaluations of youth post-conflict programs in Kosovo and Ingushetia.

Jeannie Annan is co-Director of SWAY. She is a PhD candidate in the Department of Counseling Psychology at Indiana University at Bloomington, and is presently a Visiting Fellow at the Human Rights Center at the University of California at Berkeley.

Prior to SWAY, Jeannie worked for six years in psycho-social program management and evaluation in Uganda, Sudan, and Kosovo.

In July 2006 Jeannie will be joining Bellevue Hospital in New York counseling international victims of torture.

Roger Horton is the SWAY Survey Manager. He has several years experience working with youth in East Africa, and he holds a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University.

Okot Godfrey is SWAY Survey Supervisor. **Aloya Innocent, Okoya Denish, Ayee Florence, Laruni Evelyn,** and **Aryemo Filder** are our dedicated Research Assistances.

In Uganda, SWAY is pleased to be partnered with **UNICEF Uganda** and **AVSI Uganda**.