

Beyond Formal Policing: The Security Role of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) in Cross River State

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Abstract

This study interrogates the growing relevance of informal policing in Nigeria, with particular focus on the role of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria in addressing security challenges in Cross River State. The objective is to examine the contributions, effectiveness, and community perceptions of vigilante activities within a context marked by the limitations of formal policing institutions. The study is anchored on Social Contract Theory and Community Participation Theory, which together provide a robust framework for understanding state responsibility, citizen involvement, and the legitimacy of community-driven security arrangements. Adopting a descriptive research design, the study relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, textbooks, and credible documentary sources. The analysis is qualitative and exploratory, involving critical content evaluation and synthesis of existing literature to generate contextual and analytical insights. Findings reveal that vigilante groups play a significant role in neighbourhood surveillance, intelligence gathering, rapid response, and social regulation, thereby complementing formal policing efforts. Community perceptions are largely positive, driven by accessibility and effectiveness, although concerns about accountability persist. The study concludes that informal policing remains indispensable in the local security architecture and recommends its institutionalisation through structured regulation, training, and strengthened collaboration with formal security agencies.

Keywords: Cross River State; Informal Policing; Nigeria Police Force; Security; Vigilante Group of Nigeria

1. Introduction

Security and peace remain fundamental conditions for development and a decent quality of life in any society. A stable and secure environment enables citizens to pursue economic activity, social interaction, and political participation without fear. Scholars have therefore long maintained that security provides the foundation for societal progress. Abiakam and Okereke (2025) posit that effective security institutions create the enabling environment for citizens to live and work productively toward the social, economic, and political advancement of their communities. In contrast, insecurity weakens human capacity to constantly face threats to life and property, and the prospects for meaningful development diminish considerably.

In many societies, the provision of security is regarded as a central responsibility of the state. The state establishes formal institutions, such as the police, the military, and other law enforcement agencies, to maintain order and protect citizens. Bassey (2019) opines that the delivery of safety and security constitutes a fundamental public good and represents one of the core justifications for the existence of the modern state. Similarly, Adelani (2024) emphasizes that human safety and security should be understood as essential human rights because they contribute directly to human welfare and social prosperity. In practical terms, the legitimacy of any state partly depends on its ability to protect lives, maintain order, and ensure that citizens feel secure in their daily activities.

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Despite this normative expectation, the reality in many developing societies presents a different picture. Nigeria, for instance, has experienced persistent security challenges over the years. Rapid urbanisation, youth unemployment, communal conflicts, and organized criminal activities have intensified insecurity across different regions of the country. Incidents such as armed robbery, kidnapping, cult violence, terrorism, and communal clashes have become recurring features of Nigeria's security landscape (Ogbonnaya, 2019). These developments have created widespread anxiety among citizens and have placed enormous pressure on the country's formal security institutions, particularly the Nigeria Police Force.

Agba and Zubairu (2021) argue that the persistence and increasing complexity of crime in Nigeria have generated widespread concerns about the capacity of formal policing institutions to adequately guarantee public safety. Although the Nigerian Police Force remains the primary agency responsible for maintaining law and order, it continues to face serious challenges, including inadequate manpower, insufficient logistics, limited community trust, and operational constraints. These limitations have created security gaps in many communities, thereby encouraging the emergence of alternative or complementary forms of security provision. In response, several communities across Nigeria have increasingly relied on informal policing structures, particularly vigilante groups, to assist in crime prevention and community protection. The Vigilante Group of Nigeria is among the most prominent forms of these informal security arrangements and has become an important factor in local security governance in many states, including Cross River State.

The growing reliance on vigilante organisations raises important questions about the role of informal policing in contemporary security governance. While these groups often emerge as community responses to insecurity and are sometimes supported by local authorities, their activities also generate debates regarding legality, accountability, effectiveness, and the relationship between formal and informal security institutions. Understanding the operational role of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria is, therefore, necessary for a broader assessment of how communities navigate security challenges in contexts where formal policing capacity appears limited.

Against this background, the central objective of this study is to examine the role of informal policing in enhancing community security in Nigeria, with particular reference to the Vigilante Group of Nigeria in Cross River State. To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

- i.) *To what extent has informal policing contributed to crime control in the Cross River State, Nigeria?*
- ii.) *What are the prevailing community perceptions regarding the activities of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria?*

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing body of scholarly literature on informal security governance and community-based policing in developing societies. Second, it provides empirical insight into the role of vigilante groups as complementary security actors within Nigeria's broader policing framework. Third, the study offers useful policy insights that may guide security sector reforms and promote more effective collaboration between formal law enforcement agencies and community-based security initiatives.

2. Theoretical underpinning: Social Contract Theory and Community Participation Theory

This study is anchored on the complementary perspectives of social contract theory and community participation theory. Social contract theory provides the classical philosophical explanation for the existence of the modern state and its fundamental responsibilities. The theory, associated with scholars such as Hobbes (1651), Locke (1689), and Rousseau (1762), posits that individuals voluntarily surrender certain freedoms and personal powers to a central authority in exchange for protection and the maintenance of order. Under this arrangement, the state assumes the primary responsibility for safeguarding lives and property while citizens agree to obey established laws and institutions. The legitimacy of the state, therefore, rests largely on its capacity to fulfil its obligation to provide security. Where the state fails to adequately guarantee safety, the social contract's foundation weakens, prompting citizens to seek alternative mechanisms to protect themselves and their communities.

The relevance of social contract theory to this study lies in its capacity to explain the emergence of informal security arrangements within contexts where formal security institutions struggle to meet public expectations. In Nigeria, the state, through agencies such as the Nigeria Police Force, is constitutionally responsible for maintaining law and order. However, persistent challenges, including inadequate manpower, limited operational resources, weak community trust, and rising crime rates, have constrained the effectiveness of formal policing in several parts of the country. In many communities, including those in Cross River State, these limitations have created security gaps that leave citizens vulnerable to crime. As a result, local residents often organize into vigilante groups as a collective response to perceived deficiencies in state policing. These groups operate as community-based security structures aimed at protecting lives and property and maintaining order within their immediate environments. In this sense, the emergence of the Vigilante

Group of Nigeria can be interpreted as a practical manifestation of citizens attempting to renegotiate the security dimension of the social contract when the state appears unable to fully deliver on its obligations.

Complementing the social contract perspective is the theory of community participation, which emphasizes the active involvement of local populations in addressing issues that directly affect their welfare. Community participation theory holds that sustainable solutions to societal challenges are more effective when the people most affected by those challenges are actively engaged in decision-making and implementation. Arnstein's (1969) conceptualisation of participation highlights the importance of redistributing power so that citizens who are often excluded from formal political processes can influence policies and actions that shape their environment. Participation, therefore, goes beyond consultation. It involves empowering communities to identify their needs, establish priorities, and collectively take responsibility for solving local problems.

Within the context of security governance, community participation recognizes that residents often possess intimate knowledge of their neighbourhoods, social networks, and patterns of criminal behaviour. This local knowledge makes them valuable partners in crime prevention and community protection. Participation also fosters collective responsibility and strengthens social cohesion, both of which are critical for maintaining order at the grassroots level. When communities participate in their own security arrangements, they develop a stronger sense of ownership and commitment to protecting their environment.

The relevance of community participation theory to this study is evident in the Vigilante Group of Nigeria's operational structure and activities. Vigilante organisations typically emerge from community initiatives where residents collaborate to address security concerns that directly affect them. Members of these groups are usually drawn from the communities they serve, and their operations are often supported through collective funding, voluntary participation, and locally established rules. In Cross River State, as in many other parts of Nigeria, the Vigilante Group of Nigeria serves as a community-rooted institution that complements formal law enforcement by assisting with surveillance, intelligence gathering, and crime prevention.

The combined application of social contract theory and community participation theory, therefore, provides a comprehensive framework for analysing informal policing in Nigeria. While social contract theory explains why citizens expect the state to provide security and why alternative arrangements emerge when this expectation is not fully met, community participation theory explains how communities organize themselves to actively contribute to their own protection. Together, these perspectives illuminate the broader dynamics of security governance in Nigeria and help to situate the activities of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria within the evolving relationship between formal policing and community-based security initiatives.

3. Empirical review

Empirical scholarship on informal policing in Nigeria and other African societies has expanded considerably in recent years. The growing body of literature reflects increasing concern about the limitations of formal policing institutions and the emergence of community-based security arrangements as alternative mechanisms for crime prevention and control. Studies have examined the operational roles, effectiveness, legitimacy, and challenges of vigilante groups and other informal security actors within different socio-political contexts.

Lawal and Offorha (2026) conducted an empirical study in the Kwara Central Senatorial District of Nigeria to examine the activities and effectiveness of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria. Using a mixed-methods approach that combined survey data with qualitative interviews with community members and security stakeholders, the researchers found that the Vigilante Group of Nigeria plays a significant role in maintaining community security, particularly in rural areas where police presence is limited. The study revealed that the group contributes to crime surveillance, intelligence gathering, and community patrol operations. However, the researchers also identified several constraints affecting the group's performance, including weak institutional support, inadequate funding, and lack of formal training for members.

Similarly, Ibrahim-Olesin *et al.* (2024) conducted an empirical study to examine the effectiveness of community policing in addressing crime and rural conflicts in Nigeria. The study adopted a mixed-method approach that combined survey data with qualitative interviews involving community members and relevant security stakeholders. The findings revealed that community policing significantly enhances local security by improving intelligence gathering, strengthening collaboration between residents and security agencies, and enabling quicker responses to emerging threats. The study further showed that community-based security arrangements contribute meaningfully to crime reduction, especially in rural areas with limited formal police presence. However, the researchers identified key challenges, including inadequate funding, poor coordination, and limited institutional support, which constrain the overall effectiveness of community policing initiatives.

Abdullahi *et al.* (2025) conducted an empirical investigation focusing on the role of community vigilante groups in responding to cyber-related crimes in selected communities in Ogun State. Employing a descriptive correlational research design and a sample of over four hundred respondents, the study revealed that vigilante groups are increasingly adapting their strategies to respond to emerging forms of criminality. The research demonstrated that community-based patrols, neighbourhood monitoring, and information sharing have contributed to the detection of suspicious activities linked to cybercrime networks. However, the study emphasized the need for improved training and institutional collaboration in order to strengthen the operational capacity of these groups.

In a related study, Okoronkwo *et al.* (2025) examined community policing strategies and crime control in Imo State. The researchers adopted a mixed-methods approach combining survey questionnaires and key informant interviews. The study found that collaborative patrols involving vigilante groups and the police contributed significantly to the reduction of kidnapping and armed robbery incidents in several communities. The authors concluded that cooperation between formal and informal policing actors enhances local security outcomes, though persistent challenges, such as mistrust and inadequate resources, continue to affect the sustainability of these partnerships.

Recent research within Cross River State has also provided important insights into the role of informal policing in crime control. Andrew *et al.* (2024) conducted a study that examined the relationship between vigilantism and property-related crimes in Calabar South. Using a correlational survey design involving 150 respondents, the researchers found that increased vigilante activity was associated with significant reductions in armed robbery, burglary, and vandalism. The study concluded that vigilante patrols and surveillance activities contribute to crime deterrence within urban communities.

However, not all empirical findings present uniformly positive outcomes. Igwe-Okomiso *et al.* (2024) conducted a study in the Yakurr Local Government Area of Cross River State to examine the relationship between community participation and crime control. The researchers found that while certain community-based mechanisms, such as neighbourhood watch groups, significantly contributed to crime prevention, the activities of some vigilante groups did not demonstrate a statistically significant relationship with crime reduction. The study therefore suggested that the effectiveness of informal policing arrangements depends largely on organisational structure, local legitimacy, and coordination with community institutions.

Aina's (2024) qualitative study on vigilantism and counterbanditry in Zamfara State highlighted how vigilante groups emerge as responses to severe security crises in regions where state institutions face serious operational limitations. Based on extensive field interviews with community members and security actors, the study found that local trust and community embeddedness are crucial factors that sustain the legitimacy of vigilante organisations. However, the absence of clear regulatory frameworks raises concerns regarding accountability and human rights.

Comparative insights also emerge from other African countries. Habetegabrael *et al.* (2025) conducted a study in Ethiopia examining community policing practices within a highly centralized policing system. Their findings indicated that even within strong state-controlled security frameworks, community-based participation remains essential for effective local crime prevention. The researchers emphasized that community actors often possess important contextual knowledge that complements formal policing strategies.

Zibo *et al.* (2024) explored political vigilantism in Ghana. Through qualitative interviews and documentary analysis, the researchers found that political vigilantism often arises from youth unemployment, weak public trust in state institutions, and intense political competition. Although these groups sometimes claim to provide security services, the study warned that poorly regulated vigilantism can contribute to political instability and violence.

In Nigeria's conflict-affected regions, the role of informal security actors has also received considerable scholarly attention. Dany (2022) conducted several studies on civilian defence groups involved in counterinsurgency operations in northeastern Nigeria. In a study examining the role of women within vigilante structures such as the Civilian Joint Task Force and the Vigilante Group of Nigeria, the author found that women played important roles as intelligence gatherers, informants, and community mobilizers in efforts to combat insurgency. This research highlighted the broader social dimensions of informal security institutions.

In an earlier study, Agbiboa (2021) examined the activities of civilian defence groups combating Boko Haram insurgency. Using field-based qualitative research, the study found that collaboration between civilian vigilante groups and military forces contributed to improved intelligence gathering and enhanced local protection. However, the author cautioned that the absence of effective oversight mechanisms could create risks of abuse and community tensions.

Agbiboa's (2020) research on the Civilian Joint Task Force further demonstrated how informal security groups can evolve from spontaneous community self-defence initiatives into important partners of state security institutions. The study revealed that local knowledge of terrain, language, and social networks enabled vigilante members to provide intelligence that significantly strengthened military operations against insurgents.

Structural factors driving the emergence of informal policing have also been examined in broader studies. Peter *et al.* (2023) conducted a mixed-methods study that examined community participation in crime prevention in rural Nigeria. Their findings indicated that poverty, unemployment, weak infrastructure, and limited police presence contributed to the rise of community-based security initiatives. The study concluded that informal policing structures often fill security gaps created by inadequate state capacity.

Badiora's (2019) study in Lagos State examined community support for vigilantism through a survey of nearly 400 residents. The findings showed that public acceptance of vigilante groups depended largely on perceptions of fairness, procedural justice, and community legitimacy, rather than on vigilante groups' crime-fighting effectiveness alone. The study emphasized that vigilante organisations maintain public support when they operate in ways consistent with community norms and values.

Chikwendu *et al.* (2017) conducted two related studies in Anambra State that further illuminate public perceptions of vigilante groups. In their study, the authors used a cross-sectional survey design with 600 respondents and found that community members widely accepted vigilante groups as partners of the police in protecting lives and property. However, the research also documented concerns regarding unlawful arrests and detention practices carried out by some vigilante members.

In an earlier study, Chikwendu *et al.* (2016) examined the role of vigilante service groups in crime control and sustainable development. Their findings showed that the perceived inability of the formal police to effectively address crime was a major factor behind the emergence and acceptance of vigilante groups in many communities.

Ogbozor's (2016) study of informal security actors in Nigeria provided one of the most comprehensive empirical examinations of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria. Based on field interviews with security actors across several states, the study identified the Vigilante Group of Nigeria as one of the oldest and most widely recognized informal policing institutions in the country. The research found that the group contributes to community surveillance, intelligence gathering, dispute mediation, and early warning mechanisms. However, the study also noted concerns about weak accountability structures and limited formal oversight.

3.1. Research Gap

The empirical literature reviewed above demonstrates that informal policing institutions, particularly vigilante groups, have become important actors in community security across many parts of Nigeria. Most studies agree that these groups often emerge as community responses to security gaps created by the limited capacity of formal policing institutions. Empirical evidence shows that vigilante groups contribute to crime surveillance, intelligence gathering, patrol operations, and rapid response mechanisms within local communities. However, the literature also highlights persistent concerns relating to training deficiencies, weak institutional regulation, accountability challenges, and human rights implications.

Despite the growing number of studies on vigilantism in Nigeria, important gaps remain. First, many studies focus broadly on vigilante groups or other informal security institutions, without providing a detailed analysis of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria's institutional structure and operational dynamics. Second, several existing studies emphasize public perception or crime control outcomes but pay limited attention to how the activities of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria fit within the broader framework of hybrid or beyond-state policing systems. Third, there remains limited empirical work that specifically examines the operational role and community security contributions of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria within Cross River State. This study, therefore, addresses these gaps by examining the security role of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria within the broader context of beyond-state policing in Nigeria.

4. Methodology

Given the nature of the inquiry, this study adopted a descriptive research design, well-suited to exploring and providing an in-depth understanding of social phenomena such as informal security arrangements. The study relied exclusively on secondary sources of data, including peer-reviewed journal articles, textbooks, newspapers, magazines, and credible internet materials. Relevant concepts such as policing, informal policing, insecurity, vigilantism, and the Vigilante Group of Nigeria were carefully examined and clarified to enhance conceptual precision and analytical depth. The study is therefore exploratory in orientation, and the analysis was carried out qualitatively through critical content evaluation and synthesis of existing literature. This methodological approach aligns with that adopted by Ayamba (2019; 2016) in his studies, where secondary data and qualitative analysis were effectively utilised to interrogate complex governance issues. One major advantage of this method is its ability to provide rich, contextual insights without the constraints of fieldwork, particularly in sensitive areas such as security studies. In addition, it allows for the integration of diverse scholarly perspectives, thereby enhancing the robustness and depth of the analysis.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. The Constraints of Formal Policing: The case of the Nigeria Police Force

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF), as the central institution for internal security, operates within a framework that has persistently limited its effectiveness across diverse socio-political contexts. Scholars have consistently argued that structural centralisation is a critical constraint, contending that a highly centralized policing system struggles to respond to localized security dynamics in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria (Akinyetun, 2022; Otu & Apeh, 2022). This institutional rigidity weakens the police's capacity to cultivate community trust and undermines intelligence-led policing. Consequently, the NPF often remains detached from grassroots realities, thereby limiting its responsiveness to emerging and context-specific security threats.

Operational inefficiencies further compound these structural challenges. The NPF continues to grapple with chronic resource deficits, including inadequate manpower, insufficient training, and obsolete equipment, all of which constrain proactive policing strategies (Ayamba, 2017). These limitations reinforce a reactive policing model, in which law enforcement responds to crimes after they occur rather than preventing them through intelligence gathering and community engagement (Omeje, 2017). Empirical evidence suggests that such deficiencies not only reduce operational effectiveness but also heighten communities' vulnerability, particularly in regions with weak institutional presence (Ezikendu *et al.*, 2024).

Corruption and lack of accountability represent another critical dimension of the NPF's constraints. Practices such as bribery, extortion, and alleged collusion with criminal elements significantly erode public confidence in the police institution (Lawal & Offorha, 2026). The absence of robust oversight mechanisms fosters a culture of impunity, thereby weakening deterrence and undermining the rule of law. This perception of compromised integrity discourages citizens from reporting crimes or cooperating with law enforcement agencies, ultimately disrupting the flow of vital information necessary for effective policing (Iton *et al.*, 2024).

The cumulative effect of these institutional and operational constraints is a profound legitimacy crisis, marked by widespread distrust between the police and the communities they are mandated to protect. Historical experiences of police brutality, human rights violations, and opaque investigative processes have deepened this disconnect (Ikechukwu, 2018). In response, communities increasingly resort to alternative security arrangements, notably vigilante groups and community-based watch systems (Aluko, 2020). While these actors attempt to fill the security vacuum, their emergence underscores the limitations of formal policing and highlights the urgent need for reforms that prioritize accountability, decentralisation, and community-oriented policing frameworks (Ugbedejo & Omoniyi, 2020; Adejumo, 2013).

5.2. The role of informal policing in crime control in the Cross River State, Nigeria

The findings of this study demonstrate that informal policing, particularly through the activities of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria, constitutes a vital component of crime control in Cross River State. Within a context defined by structural and operational limitations of formal policing institutions, informal security actors have emerged as indispensable complements to state efforts. Their contributions extend beyond routine crime prevention to encompass broader dimensions of community safety, grounded in locally embedded practices that reflect the socio-cultural realities of their operational environment. This underscores the adaptive nature of informal policing as a response to institutional gaps within the formal security architecture.

A central function of informal policing in the state lies in neighbourhood surveillance and routine patrol. Vigilante groups maintain a continuous presence within their communities, leveraging their proximity to monitor suspicious activities and respond in real time. This localized visibility enhances deterrence and strengthens situational awareness, thereby reducing opportunities for criminal activity. Empirical evidence within Cross River State indicates that increased vigilante patrols are associated with measurable declines in crimes such as armed robbery, burglary, and vandalism (Andrew *et al.*, 2024). The implication is that the embeddedness of these actors within the community significantly reinforces everyday security.

Closely linked to surveillance is the critical role of informal policing in intelligence gathering. Vigilante members, being part of the local social fabric, possess nuanced knowledge of community dynamics, including social networks, terrain, and behavioural patterns. This insider advantage enables them to identify criminal elements and track suspicious movements with greater precision. Existing studies affirm that such grassroots intelligence enhances overall crime control efforts. Olusola (2022) finds that community-based security actors provide valuable intelligence that complements formal policing, while Akinlabi and Ihemeje (2021) observe that structured information sharing between vigilante groups and the police improves response time and strengthens preventive strategies. This evolving intelligence synergy reflects the growing relevance of hybrid policing frameworks.

Another significant contribution of informal policing is its capacity to respond rapidly to emerging security threats. Unlike formal law enforcement agencies, which are often constrained by bureaucratic procedures and logistical delays, vigilante groups operate with a level of immediacy that enables swift mobilisation. This is particularly critical in rural and semi-urban areas where formal police presence remains limited. Lawal and Offorha (2026) emphasize that vigilante groups frequently serve as first responders, intervening at the early stages of criminal incidents and preventing escalation. In this sense, informal policing fills an urgent operational gap within the broader security system.

Beyond direct security interventions, informal policing also plays an important role in social regulation and community engagement. Vigilante groups contribute to maintaining order by reinforcing community norms and discouraging deviant behaviour through informal mechanisms such as mediation, warnings, and moral persuasion. Their legitimacy is closely tied to their alignment with local values and expectations. Badiora (2019) notes that public support for vigilante groups is often rooted in their ability to reflect and uphold communal standards. In Cross River State, where communal ties remain strong, this form of social regulation enhances both compliance and collective responsibility for security.

The study further reveals an increasing pattern of collaboration between informal policing actors and formal security institutions such as the Nigerian Police Force. Evidence points to joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and coordinated responses to crime across several communities. Okoronkwo *et al.* (2025) report that such cooperation contributes to reductions in crimes, including kidnapping and armed robbery. This partnership reflects a pragmatic shift towards integrated security governance, in which both formal and informal actors combine resources and capabilities to achieve more effective crime-control outcomes.

Despite these contributions, informal policing in Cross River State is constrained by several structural and operational challenges. A major limitation is the lack of formal training and professional capacity among vigilante members, many of whom operate without standardized procedures or adequate knowledge of legal frameworks. Ameh and Omoniyi (2023) identify inadequate training as a key factor affecting performance. In addition, weak accountability and regulatory mechanisms create the potential for abuse and misconduct, raising concerns about human rights violations and the long-term legitimacy of the system. Resource constraints further limit operational effectiveness, as inadequate funding, equipment, and logistics reduce the sustainability of patrol and response activities (Aina, 2024; Akinlabi & Ihemeje, 2021; Ogbozor, 2016). Addressing these challenges remains essential for strengthening the effectiveness and credibility of informal policing within the state.

5.3. Community perceptions on the activities of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria.

The findings indicate that community perceptions of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria's activities in Cross River State are shaped by a pragmatic mix of trust, lived experience, and immediate security needs. In contexts where formal policing structures are perceived as inadequate or overstretched, communities tend to judge security actors less by legal status and more by effectiveness, accessibility, and responsiveness. This explains why the Vigilante Group of Nigeria enjoys considerable public support, even though such support is often conditional and accompanied by certain reservations about its operations.

A dominant perception among residents is that vigilante groups are more accessible and responsive than formal law enforcement agencies such as the Nigeria Police Force. Because vigilante members are drawn from within the community, they are seen as familiar, approachable, and readily available. This proximity fosters trust and encourages residents to share information and report suspicious activities. International Crisis Group (2022) finds that community members often prefer engaging vigilante actors due to their immediacy, while Isah (2021) emphasizes that such embeddedness enhances both legitimacy and operational effectiveness within local contexts.

Closely linked to accessibility is the perception of effectiveness. Many residents in Cross River State associate the presence of vigilantes with tangible reductions in crime and improved community order. The visibility of patrols and the active role of vigilante members in apprehending suspects reinforce the belief that they are directly contributing to safety. Empirical evidence supports this perception. Andrew *et al.* (2024) report that residents in Calabar South link increased vigilante activities to a decline in property-related crimes, while Lawal and Offorha (2026) observe higher levels of perceived security in communities where such groups operate. These perceptions strengthen the social legitimacy of vigilante operations and sustain public endorsement.

Community perception is further reinforced by the participatory nature of vigilante activities. The Vigilante Group of Nigeria is widely viewed as a collective community initiative rather than an external imposition. Residents contribute through intelligence sharing, financial assistance, and moral support, thereby creating a sense of ownership over security outcomes. Peter *et al.* (2023) argue that such participatory arrangements enhance social cohesion and promote compliance with community norms. In Cross River State, this shared responsibility deepens positive perceptions and positions vigilante groups as integral components of the local security framework.

However, these positive perceptions are tempered by concerns about accountability and the potential for abuse. Some community members express unease regarding the methods employed by vigilante groups, particularly in relation to suspect handling and the use of force. Chikwendu *et al.* (2017) note that the absence of formal training and regulatory oversight can lead to excessive force or unlawful detention. This introduces a tension between effectiveness and legality, where communities may tolerate certain excesses for immediate security gains, but such tolerance risks undermining long-term trust if left unaddressed.

Perceptions of fairness and justice also play a critical role in shaping public attitudes. Support for vigilante groups is often contingent on their ability to act impartially and uphold community standards of fairness. Badiora (2019) emphasizes that procedural justice is central to community acceptance of informal security actors. Findings from Cross River State suggest that trust is sustained when vigilante members are seen to treat individuals equally and avoid bias, while any indication of favoritism or abuse quickly erodes confidence and weakens their legitimacy.

Finally, broader structural and institutional factors influence community perceptions. Collaboration between vigilante groups and formal security agencies enhances public confidence, as Okoronkwo *et al.* (2025) show that joint operations and information sharing improve both trust and perceived effectiveness. At the same time, socioeconomic realities such as poverty and unemployment make communities more inclined to accept informal policing as a necessary response to insecurity (Aina, 2024). Nonetheless, there is a growing expectation for reform, with calls for improved training, regulation, and professionalisation. Adelani (2024) argues that strengthening institutional frameworks for community-based policing will not only improve performance but also sustain positive public perception over time.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the role of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria in complementing formal policing structures, with particular focus on Cross River State. The findings demonstrate that informal policing has become an indispensable component of Nigeria's security architecture. Vigilante groups contribute significantly to crime control through community surveillance, intelligence gathering, rapid response, and social regulation. Their embeddedness within local communities enhances trust, accessibility, and responsiveness, thereby addressing critical gaps left by formal law enforcement agencies. However, the study also reveals that the effectiveness of these groups is constrained by issues of inadequate training, weak regulatory frameworks, limited resources, and concerns about accountability.

Implications

The implications of these findings are both theoretical and practical. At the theoretical level, the study reinforces the relevance of hybrid security governance models in developing contexts with limited state capacity. It shows that security provision is increasingly pluralistic, involving both formal and informal actors whose interactions shape overall outcomes. In practice, the findings highlight the need to rethink Nigeria's security policy by formally recognizing and integrating vigilante groups into the broader policing framework. Ignoring their role would overlook a critical layer of community-based security that sustains local order and stability.

Recommendations

Based on these insights, several recommendations are advanced. First, the government needs to establish a clear legal and institutional framework to regulate vigilante groups' activities. This will enhance accountability and ensure that their operations align with national laws and human rights standards. Second, structured training programmes should be introduced to build vigilante members' capacity in areas such as conflict management, intelligence handling, and lawful arrest procedures. Third, stronger collaboration between the Vigilante Group of Nigeria and formal security agencies should be encouraged through joint operations, communication channels, and information-sharing systems. Fourth, adequate funding and logistical support should be provided to improve operational effectiveness and sustainability. Finally, community engagement mechanisms should be strengthened to ensure that vigilante activities remain responsive to local needs while maintaining public trust. These measures will enhance the positive contributions of informal policing while minimizing associated risks.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing interests or relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Statement of Ethics Approval

This study adhered to ethical research standards.

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