

Vigilante Groups, Informal Security Structures, and Community Development: Implications for State Authority in Calabar Municipal, Cross River State

¹Bassey Ekpenyong Anam, ²Emmanuel Agi Adinya & ³Mary Effiong

¹*Institute of Public Policy and Administration, University of Calabar*

²*Department of Public Administration, University of Calabar*

³*Department of Adult and Continuing Education, University of Calabar*

Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/ijargpgm.v5.i1.33

Abstract

This study examines the role of vigilante groups and informal security structures in community development and their implications for state authority in Calabar Municipal, Cross River State, Nigeria. The increasing prevalence of insecurity and the limited capacity of formal security agencies have led to the emergence of community-based security arrangements that operate alongside state institutions. Using a survey research design, the study explores how vigilante operations contribute to crime prevention, social order, and community development outcomes. Findings from recent literature and empirical evidence indicate that vigilante groups significantly enhance local security and foster development by reducing crime, improving trust, and strengthening grassroots governance. However, challenges such as human rights abuses, lack of regulation, weak coordination with formal agencies, and threats to state monopoly of force persist. The study concludes that while vigilante groups contribute positively to community development, their operations raise important questions about legitimacy, accountability, and state authority. It recommends institutional integration, regulatory frameworks, and capacity-building to harmonise informal and formal security systems in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Vigilante groups, Informal security, Community development, State authority*

Corresponding Author: **Bassey Ekpenyong Anam**

Background to the Study

Security remains a fundamental pillar of governance, stability, and sustainable development in any society. Across Africa, however, many states continue to face complex and evolving security challenges, including armed robbery, insurgency, kidnapping, communal violence, cattle rustling, cultism, and political unrest. In Nigeria, these challenges have significantly strained the capacity of formal security institutions such as the police, military, and civil defence corps, which are often constrained by inadequate manpower, weak logistics, corruption, and limited community trust (Alemika, 2013; Onuoha, 2017; Eze, 2017).

In response to these institutional weaknesses, many communities have increasingly relied on vigilante groups and informal security structures as alternative or complementary mechanisms of crime prevention. These groups are locally based and operate within neighbourhoods, markets, and rural settlements, providing surveillance, intelligence gathering, and rapid response to criminal threats. According to Ebo (2007), the emergence of such non-state security actors reflects broader patterns of state fragility and governance gaps across developing societies. In Calabar Municipal, Cross River State, vigilante groups have become an essential part of the local security architecture. They are often deployed in residential areas, motor parks, and commercial zones where formal policing is perceived as insufficient. Studies show that these groups assist formal security agencies by providing local intelligence, conducting night patrols, and supporting conflict mediation (Jack-Rabin et al., 2023). However, while their contributions are widely acknowledged, their growing influence raises important concerns regarding accountability, human rights, and the erosion of the state's monopoly over legitimate use of force, as by Weber (1947).

Beyond security, there is increasing evidence that community development outcomes are closely tied to the effectiveness of local security arrangements. Anam (2020) that sustainable community development depends on stable governance structures, social cohesion, and safety. In contexts where vigilante groups are effective, communities often experience improved economic activities, enhanced social trust, and increased participation in development initiatives. However, where informal security actors operate without regulation, there is a risk of abuse, political manipulation, and parallel power structures that may weaken state authority.

The phenomenon of vigilante and informal security groups is not unique to Nigeria. Across Africa, similar structures have emerged in response to weak state security capacity, though their forms and impacts differ. For instance, South Africa has community policing forums, Kenya relies on neighbourhood watch groups and local elders, while Ghana integrates traditional authorities into community security systems. In contrast, countries like Cameroon and Niger face more unregulated vigilante operations that occasionally clash with state forces. The table below presents a comparative overview of informal security structures across selected African countries and their implications for state authority and community development.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Vigilante and Informal Security Structures in Selected African Countries

Country	Informal Security Structure	Role in Security	Impact on Community Development	Implications for State Authority
Nigeria	Vigilante groups (e.g., neighbourhood watch, local security outfits)	Crime prevention, patrol, intelligence gathering	Improved local safety and economic activity in some areas	Weak regulation creates tension with state monopoly of force
South Africa	Community Policing Forums (CPFs)	Collaboration with police, crime reporting	Strengthens civic participation and safety awareness	Generally supportive of state authority due to formal integration
Kenya	Nyumba Kumi initiative (community policing clusters)	Early warning and neighbourhood monitoring	Enhances social cohesion and local governance	Strengthens state legitimacy through structured partnership
Ghana	Traditional authorities and community security committees	Conflict mediation and local dispute resolution	Promotes rural development and social stability	High legitimacy due to integration of chiefs into governance
Cameroon	Local vigilante/self-defence groups	Informal patrols against theft and insurgency	Mixed outcomes; improves safety but sometimes causes abuse	Often challenges state authority due to weak regulation
Niger Republic	Community-based defence groups in rural areas	Protection against banditry and insurgency	Improves rural survival and mobility	Limited coordination with formal state security institutions

Source: Anam, Adinya and Effiong, 2026

The comparative evidence shows that the effectiveness and legitimacy of informal security structures vary significantly across African states depending on the level of institutional integration. Countries such as Ghana and Kenya demonstrate more structured collaboration between community-based security systems and formal state institutions, resulting in stronger legitimacy and positive development outcomes. In contrast, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Niger exhibit more fragmented systems where vigilante groups operate with limited regulation, often creating tensions with state authority.

This variation suggests that the developmental impact of informal security structures is highly dependent on governance frameworks, institutional coordination, and legal recognition. Where integration is strong, these groups enhance both security and community development; where weak, they risk undermining state authority and creating parallel power structures. This study investigates the relationship between vigilante groups, informal security structures, and community development in Calabar Municipal, Cross River State. It specifically examines how these groups contribute to local safety and development while simultaneously shaping perceptions of state authority. By situating the Nigerian experience within a broader African comparative framework, the study provides a deeper understanding of the governance implications of informal security systems in contemporary Africa.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the constitutional responsibility of the Nigerian state to provide security, increasing levels of insecurity have persisted across urban and semi-urban communities (Okoli & Iortyer, 2014). Formal security agencies are often overstretched, underfunded, and lack adequate community trust (Eze, 2017; Onuoha, 2017). Consequently, vigilante groups have emerged as alternative security providers in many communities, including Calabar Municipal (Jack-Rabin et al., 2023). While these groups have contributed to reducing crime and enhancing safety, their operations raise serious governance concerns. Reports of excessive force, lack of training, and absence of accountability mechanisms have been widely documented (Anyadike, 2020).

Furthermore, existing studies show that although vigilante groups play important roles in crime prevention, their impact on broader community development and state legitimacy remains under-researched. There is also limited empirical evidence on how their operations affect the authority of the state in local security governance. Therefore, the problem this study addresses is the dual reality of vigilante groups as both contributors to community development and potential challengers to state authority in Calabar Municipal.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Examine the role of vigilante groups in crime prevention.
2. Assess the contribution of informal security structures to community development.
3. Investigate the relationship between vigilante operations and state authority.
4. Identify challenges affecting vigilante group effectiveness.

Literature review

Vigilante Groups and Crime Prevention

Vigilante groups have become increasingly important actors in crime prevention across Nigeria, largely due to the persistent limitations of formal policing institutions. Empirical studies consistently show that these groups contribute to reducing crime through community surveillance, intelligence gathering, and rapid response to security threats (Adebayo, 2013; Eze, 2017). Their effectiveness is particularly evident in areas where police presence is weak or delayed, allowing them to serve as first responders to criminal incidents.

Jack-Rabin et al. (2023), in a study of Calabar Municipal and surrounding urban communities, found that vigilante groups significantly reduced incidents of robbery, burglary, and youth-related violence by increasing night patrols and improving neighbourhood vigilance. Similarly, Okiro (2017) observed that where vigilante groups maintain structured coordination with community leaders, crime reporting increases and criminal deterrence improves. However, the effectiveness of these groups is not uniform across communities. It is largely influenced by the level of trust between residents and vigilante members, availability of resources, and the degree of collaboration with formal security agencies.

Comparative evidence from other Nigerian regions also supports these findings. For instance, studies in northern Nigeria show that community-based vigilante groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) have played significant roles in counter-insurgency efforts against Boko Haram, complementing military operations through local intelligence (Okoli & Iortyer, 2014). This demonstrates that vigilante groups are not only urban phenomena but also critical actors in rural and conflict-affected areas.

Informal Security Structures and Community Development

Informal security structures contribute significantly to community development by fostering safer environments that enable economic, social, and infrastructural growth. According to Anam (2020), sustainable community development is strongly dependent on the presence of effective local governance structures that ensure safety, participation, and social order. Security stability encourages investment, improves market activities, and enhances access to education and healthcare services at the grassroots level.

Adeyemi (2019) further argues that improved security conditions directly influence rural development by increasing mobility, strengthening social interaction, and encouraging local entrepreneurship. In Nigeria, vigilante groups have been credited with restoring confidence in previously unsafe communities, thereby indirectly stimulating development activities such as market expansion and community-based projects (Onwuzor, 2023).

Empirical studies from other African contexts reinforce this relationship. In Kenya, community policing structures have been linked to improved local economic activities due to reduced crime rates (Ruteere & Pommerolle, 2003). Similarly, in Ghana, the integration of traditional authorities into community security systems has enhanced both safety and rural development outcomes (Aning, 2006). These findings suggest that security and development are mutually reinforcing, particularly in environments where formal institutions are weak.

Vigilantism and State Authority

The rise of vigilante groups raises important theoretical and empirical questions regarding the authority and legitimacy of the state. Max Weber's classical definition of the state as the entity that holds the monopoly of legitimate violence (Weber, 1947) provides a useful framework for understanding this debate. The increasing reliance on non-state security actors in Nigeria challenges this monopoly, raising concerns about state fragility and institutional weakening. Alemika (2013) argues that the inability of formal security agencies to effectively control crime has led to the informal delegation of policing functions to community-based actors, thereby undermining state legitimacy. Similarly, Okoli (2016) contends that the proliferation of vigilante groups represents a form of "security pluralism" that fragments state control over coercive power. While some scholars view this as a pragmatic response to insecurity, others see it as a sign of governance failure.

Empirical evidence suggests a mixed outcome. In some communities, vigilante groups operate under the guidance of traditional rulers and local governments, thereby complementing state authority. In others, however, they function independently, sometimes

clashing with police forces or engaging in extra-judicial practices. This duality creates tension between the need for local security and the preservation of centralized state authority.

Challenges of Vigilante Operations (Outline with Brief Explanation)

Lack of Formal Training

One of the major challenges facing vigilante groups is the absence of formal security training. Many members are recruited from local communities without adequate knowledge of policing ethics, legal procedures, or human rights standards. According to Salihi (2019), this lack of training often leads to unprofessional conduct, including the use of excessive force, wrongful arrests, and poor handling of suspects. As a result, their operations may sometimes create more security and legal problems than they resolve.

Weak Legal and Institutional Framework

Vigilante groups often operate outside formal legal structures, making their activities difficult to regulate or standardise. Ebo (2007) notes that this lack of legal backing creates ambiguity regarding their roles, responsibilities, and limits of authority. Without clear institutional frameworks, their actions may conflict with those of formal security agencies, leading to jurisdictional disputes and reduced operational efficiency.

Accountability and Oversight Challenges

Due to their informal nature, vigilante groups are often not subjected to strict accountability mechanisms. This absence of oversight increases the risk of abuse of power, corruption, and misconduct. In some cases, members may act with impunity, knowing that monitoring structures are weak or nonexistent. This undermines public trust and raises concerns about justice and fairness in their operations.

Political Manipulation and Elite Capture

Another significant challenge is the potential for political interference. Local elites or political actors may influence vigilante groups to serve personal or partisan interests, such as intimidating opponents or controlling community outcomes. This politicisation of security structures undermines their neutrality and legitimacy and can escalate rather than reduce conflict within communities.

Inadequate Funding and Logistics

Most vigilante groups operate with very limited financial and material resources. They often rely on voluntary contributions from community members, which are inconsistent and insufficient for sustainable operations. This results in shortages of basic equipment such as uniforms, communication devices, and transportation, thereby limiting their effectiveness in crime prevention and rapid response.

Poor Coordination with Formal Security Agencies

Weak collaboration between vigilante groups and formal security institutions remains a major constraint. According to Onuoha (2017), intelligence sharing and operational coordination are often inconsistent or poorly structured. This lack of synergy leads to

duplication of efforts, delayed responses to security threats, and missed opportunities for effective crime prevention.

Human Rights Concerns

Because of limited training and weak oversight, some vigilante groups have been associated with human rights violations, including unlawful detention, corporal punishment, and extrajudicial actions. These practices undermine their legitimacy and can create fear rather than trust within communities. While vigilante groups play an important role in enhancing local security, their effectiveness is constrained by structural, institutional, and operational challenges. Addressing these issues requires formal recognition, capacity building, regulatory frameworks, and improved collaboration with state security agencies.

Theoretical Framework

This study anchored on the State Fragility Theory, as advanced by Rotberg (2004), which explains the emergence and persistence of non-state actors in governance functions when the state is unable to effectively perform its core responsibilities. A central assumption of the theory is that the primary duty of the state is to provide security, maintain order, and ensure the welfare of its citizens. However, when state institutions become weak, under-resourced, or ineffective, gaps emerge in governance structures, particularly in the security sector. These gaps create conditions in which alternative actors such as vigilante groups, community defence organisations, and informal security networks arise to meet local security needs.

In the context of Nigeria and specifically Calabar Municipal, the State Fragility Theory provides a useful explanation for the increasing reliance on vigilante groups for crime prevention and community safety. The inability of formal security agencies to respond promptly to criminal incidents, coupled with issues of inadequate manpower, poor intelligence systems, and weak community trust, has created a vacuum in local security governance. According to Rotberg (2004), such environments encourage citizens to develop self-help mechanisms to ensure survival and protection. Thus, vigilante groups emerge not as replacements for the state but as compensatory structures that attempt to bridge the gap between community security needs and state capacity limitations.

However, the theory also highlights the long-term implications of sustained reliance on non-state security actors. While vigilante groups may enhance immediate security outcomes, their continuous operation outside formal state control can gradually weaken the authority and legitimacy of the state. This is because the monopoly of legitimate force, which is a defining characteristic of state sovereignty, becomes fragmented when multiple actors perform policing functions independently. Over time, this may lead to parallel power structures, inconsistent enforcement of laws, and potential abuse of authority. Therefore, while State Fragility Theory explains the emergence of vigilante groups, it also underscores the need for their regulation and integration into formal security frameworks to prevent further erosion of state authority.

Methodology

This study adopts a survey research design, which is considered appropriate for examining relationships between variables in social science research. The design allows for the systematic collection of data from a defined population to describe existing conditions and test hypotheses about the relationship between vigilante groups, informal security structures, and community development. The study was conducted in Calabar Municipal, Cross River State, an urban and semi-urban setting characterised by diverse socio-economic activities and evolving security challenges. The area provides a suitable context for examining the interaction between formal and informal security systems due to the visible presence of vigilante groups and their collaboration with community stakeholders.

The population of the study consists of residents, vigilante members, community leaders, and formal security personnel within Calabar Municipal. These groups were selected because they represent key stakeholders in local security governance and community development processes. A total sample size of 150 respondents was drawn for the study. The sampling procedure combined both purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents with specific knowledge and involvement in security matters, such as vigilante members and community leaders, while simple random sampling was used to select residents to ensure fairness and reduce bias in representation.

Data for the study were collected using a structured questionnaire, designed to capture respondents' perceptions of vigilante operations, informal security structures, and their implications for community development and state authority. The questionnaire contained closed-ended items measured on a Likert scale to facilitate quantitative analysis. The data collected were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics and general response patterns. In addition, Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis was employed to test the hypotheses and determine the strength and direction of relationships among the variables at a 0.05 level of significance, ensuring statistical reliability and validity of the findings.

Results/ Findings

This section presents and analyses the empirical data collected for the study, focusing on the demographic characteristics of respondents and the statistical relationships between vigilante groups, informal security structures, and community development in Calabar Municipal.

Biodata of Respondents

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 150)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	88	58.7
	Female	62	41.3
Age	18–25 years	28	18.7
	26–35 years	46	30.7
	36–45 years	40	26.7
	46 years and above	36	24.0
Occupation	Vigilante members	35	23.3
	Community leaders	40	26.7
	Security personnel	30	20.0
	Traders/residents	45	30.0
Education	No formal education	12	8.0
	Primary education	28	18.7
	Secondary education	60	40.0
	Tertiary education	50	33.3

The table shows that the study adequately captured diverse categories of respondents, including vigilante members, community leaders, security personnel, and residents. The relatively balanced distribution enhances the reliability of the data, as responses reflect multiple perspectives on vigilante operations and community development in Calabar Municipal.

Hypotheses of the Study

H_{01} : There is no significant relationship between vigilante groups and crime reduction in Calabar Municipal.

H_{02} : There is no significant relationship between informal security structures and community development in Calabar Municipal.

Table 3: Relationship between Vigilante Groups and Crime Reduction

Variables	N	r-value	p-value	Decision
Vigilante Groups & Crime Reduction	150	0.71	0.000	Reject H_{01}

The result shows a strong positive and statistically significant relationship ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.05$) between vigilante groups and crime reduction. This implies that vigilante operations significantly contribute to reducing crime rates in Calabar Municipal. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected, confirming that informal security structures play a vital role in enhancing public safety.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between informal security structures and community development in Calabar Municipal.

Table 4: Relationship between Informal Security Structures and Community Development

Variables	N	r-value	p-value	Decision
Informal Security Structures & Community Development	150	0.67	0.000	Reject H ₀₂

The result indicates a strong positive and significant relationship ($r = 0.67, p < 0.05$) between informal security structures and community development. This suggests that improved security provided by vigilante groups enhances economic activities, social interaction, and overall development in the community. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study confirm that vigilante groups and informal security structures play a significant role in improving security and promoting community development in Calabar Municipal. The strong relationship between vigilante activities and crime reduction aligns with Adebayo (2013) and Eze (2017), who emphasised that community-based security systems are effective in supplementing formal policing efforts, especially in areas with limited state capacity. Furthermore, the positive relationship between informal security structures and community development supports the view of Anam (2020), who argued that development at the grassroots level is strongly influenced by the presence of safety, stability, and active local participation. The findings suggest that when communities feel secure, they are more likely to engage in economic activities, social interactions, and collective development initiatives.

However, the study also highlights challenges associated with vigilante operations, particularly issues of weak regulation, lack of accountability, and poor coordination with formal security agencies. These findings corroborate Alemika (2013) and Salihu (2019), who noted that while informal security groups contribute to safety, their effectiveness is often undermined by institutional weaknesses and governance gaps. The results suggest that vigilante groups are an important but informal extension of the security system, whose effectiveness depends on proper coordination, regulation, and integration with formal state institutions.

Conclusion

This study sets out to examine the relationship between vigilante groups, informal security structures, and community development, with particular attention to their implications for state authority in Calabar Municipal, Cross River State. Based on the findings, it is evident that vigilante groups have become an important component of local security governance in Nigeria, especially in contexts where formal security institutions face capacity limitations. Their activities contribute significantly to crime reduction, improved safety, and the creation of a more stable environment for social and economic activities. In this regard, they serve as functional complements to formal policing structures and play a direct role in enhancing community development outcomes.

However, despite these positive contributions, the study also reveals that the increasing prominence of vigilante groups raises critical concerns regarding governance and state authority. The lack of formal regulation, accountability mechanisms, and institutional integration creates a situation where non-state actors increasingly influence security governance outside the direct control of the state. This development poses potential risks to the legitimacy of the state's monopoly over the use of force and may lead to parallel systems of authority if not properly managed. The study concludes that while vigilante groups are essential in addressing local security challenges and promoting community development, their operations must be carefully structured within a regulated framework. This will ensure that their contributions are harnessed without undermining state authority, institutional coherence, and democratic governance in Calabar Municipal and beyond.

Recommendations

1. **Formal Integration into Community Policing Frameworks:** Vigilante groups should be formally integrated into existing community policing structures to ensure coordination, accountability, and synergy with formal security agencies. This will help reduce operational conflicts and improve efficiency in crime prevention.
2. **Development of Legal and Regulatory Frameworks:** Government should establish clear legal guidelines that define the roles, responsibilities, and limits of vigilante operations. Such frameworks will help prevent abuse of power and ensure compliance with human rights standards.
3. **Capacity Building and Training:** Regular training programmes should be introduced for vigilante members to improve their knowledge of basic policing skills, conflict management, human rights protection, and ethical conduct. This will enhance professionalism and effectiveness.
4. **Strengthening Collaboration with Police and Security Agencies:** There should be structured collaboration between vigilante groups and formal security institutions through joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and coordinated response mechanisms. This will improve trust and operational effectiveness.
5. **Improved Funding and Government Oversight:** Government at both state and local levels should provide financial and logistical support to registered vigilante groups. In addition, oversight mechanisms should be established to monitor their activities and ensure accountability in their operations.

References

- Adebayo, A. (2013). Community participation and crime control in Nigeria. *African Security Review*, 22(3), 45–60.
- Adeyemi, K. (2019). Security and grassroots development in Nigeria. *Journal of Development Studies*, 15(2), 33–50.
- Alemika, E. E. O. (2013). Security challenges and police reform in Nigeria. *African Security Review*, 22(3), 134–148.
- Anam, B. (2020). *Understanding community and rural development*, Ethereal Bliss.
- Anyadike, N. (2020). Vigilantism and human rights in Nigeria. *Journal of African Law and Policy*, 8(1), 44–59.
- Bayley, D. H. (2005). *Changing the guard: Developing democratic police abroad*. Oxford University Press.
- Ebo, A. (2007). Security sector reform in post-conflict West Africa. Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF).
- Eze, O. (2017). Community policing and intelligence sharing in Nigeria, *Journal of Security Studies*, 11(2), 55–70.
- Jack-Rabin, Y. I., et al. (2023). Vigilante groups and crime management in Calabar Metropolis. *LWATI Journal of Contemporary Research*.
- Kelling, G. L., & Sousa, W. H. (2001). Do police matter? An analysis of the impact of New York City's police reforms. *Civic Report No. 22*. Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.
- Okafor, O. (2007). Traditional justice systems in Nigeria. *African Journal of Law*, 15(2), 89–105.
- Okoli, A. C. (2016). Political ecology of insecurity in Nigeria. *International Journal of Political Science*, 2(4), 12–20.
- Okoli, A. C., & Iortyer, P. (2014). Terrorism and humanitarian crisis in Nigeria, *Global Journal of Human Social Science*, 14(1), 39–50.
- Okiro, G. (2017). Police-community relations in Nigeria. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(1), 21–40.
- Onuoha, F. C. (2017). Nigerian security architecture challenges, *Conflict Trends*, 2017(1), 12–20.

- Onwuzor, D. O. (2023). Vigilante groups and socio-economic development in Nigeria, *Journal of Political Studies*.
- Ray, D. I. (2003). Rural local governance and traditional leadership in Africa. *Public Administration and Development*, 23(3), 1–12.
- Rotberg, R. (2004). *When states fail: Causes and consequences*. Princeton University Press.
- Salihu, N. (2019). Joint task force operations in Nigeria. *African Security Review*, 28(1), 62–78.
- Sampson, R. J., & Raudenbush, S. W. (1999). Systematic social observation of public spaces: A new look at disorder in urban neighborhoods. *American Journal of Sociology*, 105(3), 603–651.
- Skogan, W. G. (2006). Community policing: Common themes and promising directions, *Crime and Justice*, 28, 1–64.
- Weber, M. (1947). *The theory of social and economic organization*, Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, J. Q., & Kelling, G. L. (1982). Broken windows: The police and neighborhood safety, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 249(3), 29–38.