

COMMUNITY POLICING AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA: THE CASE OF LOCAL VIGILANTE GROUPS IN THE SOUTH-EAST GEOPOLITICAL ZONE, 2019-2023

Kenneth Nweke & Evans O. Nwankwo

Department of Political Science

Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Rivers State

Abstract

The weakness and failure of the Nigeria Police and other security agencies of government to provide adequate security for the lives and property of citizens, especially at the community level necessitated the need for the formation and use of local vigilante groups in most parts of the country including the South-East. This paper, therefore, examines the impact of community policing on addressing security challenges in Nigeria, specifically with a focus on the local vigilante groups in the South-East geopolitical zone between 2019 and 2023. The theoretical framework used for analysis in this paper is the deterrence theory as propounded by early utilitarian philosophers - Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham who used deterrence to explain crime and also see it as a method to reduce same. The study draws on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including community leaders, security personnel, and members of the vigilante groups. The findings reveal that although community policing, as exemplified by the local vigilante groups, has played a significant role in reducing the myriad of security exposures in the South-East, including armed robbery, kidnapping, cultism, herdsmen attacks, and communal conflicts, the effectiveness of the local vigilante groups in fighting crimes and criminality in the zone is limited by inadequate training and funding, lack of coordination with formal security agencies, and political interference. The paper concluded that, in spite of the challenges facing community policing in Nigeria, the use of local vigilante groups has the potential to enhance public safety and security in the South-East. The paper recommended among others, the need for the provision of adequate training, equipment, and funding to local vigilante groups with a view to enhancing their capacity for community policing and combating the avalanche of security challenges in Nigeria's South-East zone.

Keywords: *Community, Policing, security, Vigilantism, Region.*

Background to the Study

Community policing has emerged as an essential approach to maintaining law and order in many countries, including Nigeria. In Nigeria, the South-East geopolitical zone has been grappling with various security challenges, such as armed robbery, kidnapping, communal clashes, cult-related violence, and herdsmen attacks. To combat these issues, local vigilante groups have been established in several communities to supplement the efforts of the police and provide security at the grassroots level. However, the effectiveness and sustainability of these local vigilante groups have come under scrutiny, necessitating a comprehensive examination of their role in community policing. The concept of community policing emphasises the active participation of community members in crime prevention and the collaboration between law enforcement agencies and the community. The local vigilante groups, composed of community volunteers who take on security responsibilities, play a vital role in enhancing security at the grassroots level. These groups typically function as part of community policing efforts, collaborating closely with the police and other security agencies to tackle security issues at the local level. They are community-based groups established and financed by community members with the goal of combating crime and safeguarding the lives and property of residents (Erhurhu, 2017).

There are several vigilante groups existing in the South-East geopolitical zone. In Enugu for

instance, Okoli *et al* (2020) posited that more than 3000 registered vigilante groups, known as Neighbourhood Watches, have been formed in accordance with the laws of Enugu State. The governor issued a directive for communities within the state to establish these watches. In Ebonyi State, there are also Neighbourhood Security Watches such as EbubeAgu, Afikpo North Vigilante Group among others. In Anambra, we have vigilante service groups such as Anambra Vigilante Services (AVS), Anambra State Vigilante Group (ASVG), Anambra State Vigilante Association (ASVA). In Abia State, there are Abia State Vigilante Service (ASVS), Homeland Vigilante Service (HVS), Abia State Security Watch (ASSW), among others, while in Imo State, there are Imo State Security Network Agency (IMSSNA), Imo State Vigilante Group (IMSVG), Imo Security Network (IMOSECNET), and other variations of vigilante groups.

Local vigilante groups in the South-East zone of Nigeria have emerged as significant actors in the realm of community security, playing a role in addressing crime and providing a sense of protection within their respective communities (Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2019). The rise of non-state security actors in Nigeria can be attributed to the police's inability to sufficiently ensure security, maintain law and order, and dispense justice in society (Onuoha, 2017). These groups, often known as “vigilante associations” or “local security outfits,” which are formed by community members who take it upon themselves to maintain law and order in the absence of adequate law enforcement presence or perceived inefficiencies of the formal security apparatus. These vigilante groups operate based on community-based policing models, where members are drawn from the local population and are familiar with the intricacies of their respective communities (Akpan, 2021). They employ local knowledge, traditions, and social networks to gather intelligence, prevent crime, and respond to security incidents promptly. By collaborating closely with community members, local vigilante groups can bridge the gap between law enforcement agencies and the community, fostering trust and cooperation.

Previous studies have explored the effectiveness of community policing initiatives in Nigeria and highlighted the importance of collaboration between local vigilante groups and formal law enforcement agencies. Okorie and Ugwuoke (2017) conducted a study on community policing initiatives in the South-East region and emphasized the need for cooperation between local vigilante groups and the police to enhance crime prevention and control. Ome and Olorunfemi (2019) focused specifically on local vigilante groups in Nigeria and highlighted challenges such as inadequate training, limited resources, and potential abuse of power that need to be addressed for effective community policing. Specifically, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature by examining the role of local vigilante groups in community policing and the security challenges faced in Nigeria's South-East geopolitical zone from 2019 to 2023. By analyzing data from interviews, and documentary materials, this study will provide insights into the perceptions, experiences, and challenges faced by local vigilante groups operating within the framework of community policing. It will also investigate the level of satisfaction among community members regarding the performance of these groups and explore the impact of various challenges on their effectiveness.

Statement of the Problem

The South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria has faced various security challenges, including incidents of armed robbery, kidnapping, communal clashes, and inter-group conflicts (Onyishi, 2019). In response to these threats, local vigilante groups have emerged as grassroots initiatives aimed at protecting lives and properties, preserving cultural heritage, and maintaining social cohesion within their communities. Efforts have been made to address these challenges and enhance the effectiveness and accountability of local vigilante groups. The Nigerian government, in collaboration with State and local authorities, has initiated measures to regulate and provide oversight for vigilante activities (Onyishi,

2019). These measures aim to establish guidelines, codes of conduct, and training programs to ensure that local vigilante groups operate within the bounds of the law and respect human rights. Additionally, partnerships and collaborations between local vigilante groups and formal law enforcement agencies have been fostered to enhance coordination, information sharing, and capacity-building (Nwangwu & Ihuoma, 2021). Such collaborations can help address the limitations of local vigilante groups, such as their limited resources, access to advanced technology, and legal frameworks, while capitalizing on their grassroots knowledge and community connections.

Despite the implementation of community policing strategies and the emergence of local vigilante groups in the South-East region of Nigeria, significant security challenges persist. The effectiveness of community policing and the role of local vigilante groups in addressing these challenges remain uncertain, necessitating an in-depth investigation into the dynamics, strengths, limitations, and potential concerns associated with these community-based security initiatives. The activities of local vigilante groups also raise concerns regarding accountability, human rights, and potential abuse of power. In some instances, these groups have been accused of engaging in extrajudicial actions, vigilantism, and infringing upon the rights of individuals (Anyadike, 2020). The lack of formal training, oversight, and regulation can contribute to instances of excessive force or arbitrariness, posing challenges to the rule of law. It is against the above backdrops that this study examined the impact of community policing on addressing security challenges in the South-East region of Nigeria focusing the local vigilante groups.

The main thrust of this paper is to investigate the role of community policing in addressing security challenges in Nigeria, with a focus on the local vigilante groups in the South-East geopolitical zone, 2019-2023. The specific objectives are to:

- i. Ascertain how community policing has affected the security challenges in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria.
- ii. Identify the roles of local vigilante groups in reducing of security challenges confronting the South-East zone.
- iii. Determine the limitations to the effectiveness of local vigilante groups in the fight against crimes and criminality in the South-East.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Community Policing

Community policing is an approach and tactic in law enforcement that gives priority to collaborative partnerships between the police and the community to address crime, maintain public safety, and improve the overall well-being of communities. It involves a shift from traditional reactive policing to a proactive approach that focuses on building trust, engaging with the community, and problem-solving (Trojanowicz, 1994). Community policing aims to involve community members as active participants in the crime prevention process. It recognizes that the police cannot solely effectively combat crime and ensure public safety. By working together with community residents, organizations, and stakeholders, the police gain valuable insights, build relationships, and jointly develop strategies tailored to local needs.

The concept of community policing encompasses several key elements including the promotion of partnerships and collaborative relationships between the police and the community. These partnerships involve active engagement, information sharing, and joint problem-solving efforts to address crime and safety issues (Rosenbaum & Lurigio, 2017). Additionally, community policing aims to identify and tackle the underlying causes of crime and disorder. It encourages a problem-solving approach that involves analyzing data, conducting community assessments, and developing targeted strategies to prevent and reduce crime (Skogan & Hartnett, 2017). Notably, community policing emphasizes proactive engagement with the community. This includes increasing police visibility through foot patrols,

community meetings, and other forms of direct interaction to build trust, gather information, and foster positive relationships (Troshynski & Forde, 2020).

As posited by Troshynski and Forde (2020), community policing endeavours to grant authority to community members by engaging them in decision-making procedures and fostering their active involvement in initiatives aimed at preventing crime. It supports community initiatives, encourages neighbourhood watch programs, and promotes collaborative problem-solving (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2020). Community policing has been associated with numerous benefits, including improved police-community relations, increased trust in law enforcement, enhanced crime prevention, and a greater sense of safety and well-being among community members. However, successful implementation requires ongoing commitment, resources, training, and support from both the police and the community.

Conceptualising Security Challenges

Understanding security challenges requires a clear comprehension of the concept of security. Security can be defined as the state of being free from danger or the sense of safety from potential threats. It encompasses the defense, protection, and preservation of fundamental values, ensuring they are shielded from any potential threats. Security also entails safeguarding against various forms of social, physical, economic, and psychological risks or harm (Nwankwo *et al.*, 2022). Security challenges therefore, refer to a range of complex and evolving threats that pose risks to the safety, stability, and well-being of individuals, communities, and nations. These challenges can arise from various sources, including terrorism, organized crime, cyber threats, geopolitical conflicts, social unrest, and natural disasters (Buzan *et al.*, 2018). Understanding and addressing security challenges requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach that involves various actors, strategies, and resources. One major security challenge in today's interconnected world is terrorism. Acts of terrorism can cause significant loss of life, damage infrastructure, and create fear and instability within societies. It is a global threat that requires international cooperation, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism measures (Jenkins, 2018).

Another significant security challenge is organized crime, involving a variety of illegal actions, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, and arms smuggling. Organized criminal networks often operate across borders and exploit vulnerabilities within legal and economic systems, posing a significant threat to national security (Mallory, 2019). Cybersecurity has emerged as a critical security challenge in the digital age. Cyber threats, including hacking, data breaches, and cyber espionage, can have severe economic, political, and societal consequences. Protecting critical infrastructure, safeguarding sensitive information, and enhancing cybersecurity capabilities are essential to address this challenge (McConnell, 2019). Geopolitical conflicts and tensions between nations also present significant security challenges. These conflicts can result in armed conflicts, territorial disputes, displacement of populations, and humanitarian crises. Resolving conflicts through diplomatic means, promoting dialogue, and strengthening international cooperation are essential for achieving sustainable peace and security (Gheciu & Riecke, 2019).

Social unrest and political instability within countries can lead to security challenges. Protests, demonstrations, and civil unrest can result from grievances related to social, economic, or political issues. Addressing underlying causes, promoting inclusive governance, and protecting human rights are crucial in managing and preventing such challenges (Jongman *et al.*, 2019). Natural disasters, including hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and pandemics, pose significant security challenges by causing widespread destruction, displacing populations, and straining resources and emergency response systems. Preparedness, disaster management, and international cooperation are vital in mitigating the impact of natural disasters (Comfort, 2019). Addressing security challenges requires a comprehensive

and integrated approach that combines effective law enforcement, intelligence gathering, technological advancements, international cooperation, community engagement, and risk management strategies.

Conceptualising Vigilante Groups

Vigilantism refers to the act of individuals or groups taking the law into their own hands to enforce order, seek justice, or address perceived wrongs outside the established legal system (Breckenridge, 2019). Vigilantes often emerge in situations where there is a perceived lack of effective law enforcement, breakdown of social order, or deep-seated grievances. While vigilantism can arise from a sense of civic duty or a desire to restore justice, it poses significant challenges to the rule of law and can lead to violence, human rights abuses, and social instability. Vigilantism can take various forms, ranging from informal neighbourhood patrols to organized armed groups. In some cases, vigilante groups may arise as a response to specific security challenges or criminal activities, aiming to fill perceived gaps in law enforcement capacity (Chapkis, 2019). However, the actions of vigilantes are often characterized by extrajudicial violence, lack of accountability, and a disregard for due process.

Vigilantism presents complex legal and ethical challenges. It undermines the authority and legitimacy of the formal justice system, which is designed to ensure fairness, due process, and accountability (Hughes & Edwards, 2018). The actions of vigilantes can lead to human rights violations, create social divisions, and perpetuate cycles of violence. Efforts to address vigilantism require a multifaceted approach. Strengthening the rule of law, enhancing law enforcement capacity, and promoting access to justice are crucial in addressing the root causes that drive individuals to take justice into their own hands (Nadarajah & Sriskandarajah, 2020). Vigilante groups are organized collectives of individuals who take law enforcement or security matters into their own hands, often operating outside the formal legal system (Zárate, 2019). These groups typically emerge in response to perceived failures of law enforcement agencies or a lack of trust in the criminal justice system. While some vigilante groups claim to protect their communities from crime and violence, their actions often raise significant legal, ethical, and human rights concerns.

Vigilante groups can take various forms, ranging from community-based neighbourhood watch groups to more organized and armed militias. In some cases, these groups may arise as a result of specific security challenges or as a response to criminal activities that the community perceives as unchecked by the authorities (Bjelopera & Randol, 2020). However, the activities of vigilante groups often involve extrajudicial actions, including violence, intimidation, and vigilantism. The rise of social media and online platforms has also influenced the dynamics of vigilante groups. Online vigilante groups, sometimes referred to as “cyber-mobs,” use digital platforms to identify and expose alleged wrongdoers, engage in public shaming, and even administer punishments (Sharma & Sharma, 2020). While some online vigilantism efforts may be driven by a desire for social justice, they can also lead to cyberbullying, doxing, and the spreading of false information. Hence, the existence of vigilante groups raises significant challenges in terms of rule of law, due process, and human rights. The actions of these groups can result in violence, human rights abuses, and the erosion of trust in formal justice systems (Bayley, 2019). In sum, while vigilantism may emerge in response to real or perceived gaps in law enforcement, it poses significant challenges to the rule of law, human rights, and social cohesion.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for analysis in this paper is the deterrence theory. The theory was first propounded by Cesare Beccaria in 1764 and later expounded by Jeremy Bentham who used it to explain crime in his work, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, published in 1789. Deterrence theory, introduced by criminologist Cesare Beccaria in the late 18th century, suggests that potential

criminals are discouraged from engaging in unlawful activities when they perceive that the potential costs or penalties outweigh the benefits (Beccaria, 1764). This theory proposes that the fear of punishment acts as a deterrent, effectively deterring individuals from committing crimes and curbing criminal behaviour.

The major assumptions of deterrence theory include that individuals are rational decision-makers who weigh the potential costs and benefits before engaging in criminal acts. It suggests that individuals will choose to refrain from criminal behaviour if the expected punishment is severe enough to outweigh the perceived benefits. The theory also argues that the certainty of punishment is crucial in deterring crime. It posits that individuals are more likely to be deterred if they believe there is a high probability of getting caught and punished for their actions. The theory further emphasizes the importance of the severity of punishment in deterring crime. It suggests that the more severe the punishment, the greater the deterrent effect, as potential offenders will be dissuaded by the anticipated negative consequences.

In the context of community policing and security challenges in Nigeria, deterrence theory provides insights into the potential relevance and applicability of punishment as a deterrent to crime, including the activities of local vigilante groups in the South-East region. Local vigilante groups, as community-based security initiatives, often seek to deter criminal activities and enhance community safety through their presence and actions. The theory suggests that the perceived presence and potential consequences imposed by these vigilante groups can serve as a form of deterrence to potential offenders. If individuals believe that their likelihood of being caught and punished by these community-based groups is high, they may be deterred from engaging in criminal behaviour. Furthermore, deterrence theory highlights the importance of certainty and severity in deterrence. For local vigilante groups to effectively deter crime, they need to establish a reputation for being vigilant, proactive, and capable of apprehending offenders. By demonstrating their ability to swiftly and effectively respond to security threats and mete out appropriate consequences, local vigilante groups can create a deterrent effect within the communities they serve.

Nevertheless, the application of deterrence theory in the context of local vigilante groups and community policing should be approached with caution. While the theory suggests that punishment can deter crime, the potential for abuse of power and violation of human rights by these groups should be considered. The focus should be on ensuring that their actions are guided by the principles of fairness, due process, and accountability. In sum, deterrence theory, proposed by Cesare Beccaria, posits that individuals are deterred from committing crimes when the potential costs outweigh the benefits. The theory's assumptions of rationality, certainty, and severity provide insights into the relevance and applicability of punishment as a deterrent to crime in the context of community policing and the activities of local vigilante groups in the South-East region of Nigeria. However, caution must be exercised to ensure that deterrence efforts align with principles of fairness, human rights, and accountability.

Methodology

The methodology used for this study typically involves a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. These methods aim to gather comprehensive data, analyze relevant information, and provide insights into the relationship between community policing, security challenges, and the role of local vigilante groups. The study conducted a thorough review of existing literatures on community policing, security challenges, and local vigilante groups in Nigeria. It reviewed scholarly articles, books, reports, policy documents, and other relevant sources to identify key concepts, theories, and empirical studies related to the topic. It equally conducted interviews with key stakeholders, including police officers, community members, local vigilante group leaders, and government officials. These interviews can provide insights into their experiences, perceptions, and roles in community policing and security challenges. Data collection also included conducting direct observations in the South-East geopolitical

zone to observe the activities and operations of local vigilante groups, their interactions with community members, and their collaboration with formal law enforcement agencies. Content analysis technique was used in analyzing interview transcripts, field notes, official reports, media articles, and other qualitative data related to community policing, security challenges, and local vigilante groups to understand the historical, legal, and operational aspects of these issues.

Discussions and Analyses

The discussions and analyses in this section were drawn from documentary data, direct observations, and interviews conducted with key stakeholders, including police officers, community members, local vigilante group leaders, and government officials.

Community Policing and Security Challenges in the South-East of Nigeria

The relationship between community policing and security challenges in Nigeria is a complex and multifaceted one. Community policing, as an approach to law enforcement, emphasizes collaboration and community partnership to address security concerns (Olaniyan, 2022). It recognizes that effective policing requires the active involvement and cooperation of community members. Nigeria faces various security challenges, including but not limited to insurgency, armed robbery, kidnapping, communal conflicts, and ethno-religious tensions (Ishola & Dabira, 2020). Community policing in Nigeria aims to build trust, enhance communication, and promote cooperation between the police and the community (Isah, 2021). It involves the establishment of community-based initiatives, such as neighbourhood watch groups (vigilante groups) and volunteer patrols, to supplement the efforts of formal law enforcement agencies. These initiatives empower communities to actively participate in their own security and collaborate with the police and local vigilante groups in crime prevention, intelligence gathering, and problem-solving.

The relationship between community policing and security challenges in Nigeria is twofold. On one hand, community policing can help address security challenges by fostering positive relationships, enhancing situational awareness, and promoting timely responses to criminal activities (Adepoju, 2022). The involvement of community members in security efforts can lead to the identification and reporting of suspicious activities, the creation of safer environments, and the prevention of crimes. On the other hand, security challenges can also pose significant obstacles to effective community policing implementation. In areas experiencing high levels of violence or instability, the trust between the community and the police may be eroded, hindering the collaboration necessary for successful community policing initiatives (Ezeani, 2021). Limited resources, inadequate training, and corruption within law enforcement agencies can also impede the implementation of community policing strategies. To strengthen the relationship between community policing and security challenges in Nigeria, several measures have been taken. These include improving police-community relations through community engagement programs, establishing mechanisms for regular communication and feedback, enhancing the professionalism and training of police officers, and providing adequate resources and support for community policing initiatives (Eneh, 2022).

Previous studies have explored the concept of community policing and its impact on crime prevention in Nigeria. For instance, Okorie and Ugwuoke (2017) examined the effectiveness of community policing initiatives in addressing security challenges in the South-East zone. They emphasized the need for collaboration between local vigilante groups and formal law enforcement agencies to enhance crime prevention and control. Another study by Ome and Olorunfemi (2019) explored the role of local vigilante groups in community policing in Nigeria. They highlighted the challenges faced by these groups, including inadequate training, limited resources, and potential abuse of

power. The researchers also emphasized the importance of addressing these challenges to ensure the sustainability and legitimacy of community policing efforts. Nigeria, as a country, has been grappling with various security issues, including insurgency, armed robbery, communal conflicts, and ethno-religious tensions (Ishola & Dabira, 2020). In response to these challenges, local vigilante groups have emerged as grassroots initiatives aimed at addressing community security challenges. Fostering partnerships and collaborations between local vigilante groups and formal law enforcement agencies is therefore crucial in addressing security challenges in the South-East zone. Such collaborations can help overcome the limitations faced by local vigilante groups, such as limited resources, access to advanced technology, and legal frameworks, while capitalizing on their grassroots knowledge and community connections (Nwangwu & Ihuoma, 2021).

To gather information on the security challenges in the South-East zone, interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including law enforcement officials, local vigilante groups leaders, community leaders, and residents most of whom pledged anonymous. The findings revealed several security challenges that plagued the South-East geopolitical zone during the specified period to include kidnapping, armed robbery, cultism, communal conflicts, and herdsmen attacks. Interviews highlighted that kidnapping was a prevalent security challenge in the South-East zone. Kidnappers targeted individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds, including prominent individuals, business owners, and even students. Ransom demands were often made, and incidents of violence were reported in some cases. On the issue of armed robbery, the interviews revealed that armed robbery incidents were a significant concern in the zone. The interviewees lamented that criminals targeted homes, businesses, and travelers along major highways, often leading to loss of lives and properties. And that, the use of firearms and other dangerous weapons was common in these robberies.

The interviews also revealed that, the proliferation of cult groups and youth gangs emerged as a significant security challenge in the South-East geopolitical zone during the specified period under study. Interviewees expressed concerns about the violence and criminal activities associated with these groups. Inter-communal clashes and territorial disputes between rival groups contributed to the insecurity in the region. The interviews equally highlighted that communal clashes over issues such as land disputes, resource control, and political power had a severe impact on security. The interviewees affirmed that conflicts between different communities led to violence, destruction of property, and the displacement of residents. They equally lamented that, although the herdsmen attacks on their communities had reduced drastically, the menace has not stopped as the herdsmen now attack on occasional basis.

In sum, the case of local vigilante groups in the South-East zone of Nigeria from 2019 to 2023 highlights the intricate relationship between community policing and security challenges. While these groups have played a role in addressing community security concerns, concerns related to accountability, human rights, and abuse of power need to be addressed through regulation, oversight, and collaboration with formal security agencies. Community policing however, has the potential to address security challenges in Nigeria by promoting collaboration, trust, and proactive engagement between the police and the community.

Local Vigilante Groups and Security Challenges in South-East Zone, 2019-2023

The South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria has experienced its share of security challenges, including inter-group conflicts, banditry, and kidnapping (Onyishi, 2019). For numerous years, the South-East region of Nigeria was regarded as the safest geopolitical zone within the country. Among its five states - Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo - this zone experienced the lowest incidence of violent attacks compared to other regions in the country. According to a 2019 report by Nigeria Mourns, the South-East had the fewest reported killings, with 94 fatalities. In contrast, the South-West recorded

157 deaths, the South-South had 341, the North-Central reported 469, the North-East had 1009, and the North-West had the highest number of deaths with 1,118 (Chime, 2022).

In light of renewed secessionist agitations by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the government's response to it, security in the South-East region has significantly worsened. Due to growing concerns about violence and kidnappings linked to bandits and rogue herders, Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of IPOB, who is currently facing criminal charges, expressed the group's desire to safeguard the South-East and subsequently established a security unit called the Eastern Security Network (ESN) on December 13, 2020. Despite the purported aim of enhancing security through the ESN, recent data compiled by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and media reports indicate a staggering 555.7 percent increase in killings in the South-East between 2020 and 2021. The CFR and other media platforms analyzed data on reported violent attacks from January 1, 2020, to December 12, 2021, excluding killings associated with domestic violence and mob justice. During this period, the South-East recorded 97 deaths from reported violent attacks between January 1, 2020, and December 12, 2020, while the number of deaths rose to 636 in reported violent attacks between December 13, 2020, and December 12, 2021 (Chime, 2022). The report is presented in table 2 of the appendix. From the 2021 Nextier Violent Conflict Database reports on death by regions, in terms of herdsmen killings the South-East ranked 4th with 37 deaths, for killings resulting from secessionists' struggles, the South-East ranked 1st with 294 deaths followed by South-South with 72 deaths, South-West with 67 deaths, while in terms of extra-judicial killings, the South-East ranked 3rd with 37 deaths. In 2022, the South-East ranked 3rd for herdsmen killings, and 3rd for extra-judicial killings (Nextier, 2022).

Various local vigilante groups have played a significant role in mitigating the security challenges within their respective communities within the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria. These groups, often known as “neighbourhood watch,” “vigilante associations” or “local security outfits,” are composed of community members who take it upon themselves to maintain law and order in the absence of adequate law enforcement presence or perceived inefficiencies of the formal security apparatus. The activities of local vigilante groups in the South-East geopolitical zone have been both lauded and criticized. On one hand, these groups have been commended for their efforts in curbing crime, providing a sense of security, and preserving cultural heritage (Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2019). They often employed community-based policing models, utilizing local knowledge, traditions, and social networks to gather intelligence, prevent crime, and respond to security incidents promptly.

On the other hand, the activities of local vigilante groups also raised concerns regarding accountability, human rights, and potential abuse of power. In the absence of proper regulation and oversight, these groups may engage in extrajudicial actions, vigilantism, and infringement upon the rights of individuals (Anyadike, 2020). The lack of standardized training, clear guidelines, and mechanisms for accountability can contribute to instances of excessive force or arbitrary decision-making, undermining the principles of the rule of law. To address these challenges and promote effective community policing, efforts have been made to regulate and provide oversight for local vigilante groups in Nigeria. The Nigerian government, in collaboration with state and local authorities, has initiated measures to establish guidelines, codes of conduct, and training programs for vigilante activities (Onyishi, 2019). These measures aim to ensure that local vigilante groups operated within the bounds of the law, respect human rights, and are accountable for their actions.

Interviews were conducted with members of local vigilante groups, community members and leaders, and the law enforcement officials to understand the contributions of the local vigilante groups in addressing security challenges in the South-East zone. The interview established that the local vigilante groups play a significant role in reducing the myriad of security challenges in the South-East. The interviewees emphasized the importance of local vigilante groups in gathering intelligence about

criminal activities. They highlighted that members of these groups had a deep understanding of their communities, enabling them to identify potential threats and share valuable information with law enforcement agencies. The interviews further revealed that, local vigilante groups played a crucial role in mobilizing communities against crime. They organized awareness campaigns, encouraged residents to report suspicious activities, and facilitated cooperation with law enforcement agencies. This collaborative approach fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility within the communities. More so, interviewees reported instances where local vigilante groups responded swiftly to security threats. They often complemented the efforts of the police by patrolling neighbourhoods, setting up checkpoints, and apprehending criminals in the act. Their presence and vigilance acted as a deterrent to criminal activities.

Local Vigilante Groups and Limitations in Combating Crimes and Criminality in the South-East

The limitations to the effectiveness of local vigilante groups in fighting crimes and criminality in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria can be attributed to various factors. Local vigilante groups often lack proper training in law enforcement techniques, investigation procedures, and human rights standards. They may not have access to necessary resources such as equipment, communication systems, or vehicles to effectively combat sophisticated crimes. Again, local vigilante groups operate outside the formal legal framework and may not have the legal mandate to enforce the law. This can lead to issues of legitimacy and accountability, as their actions may be perceived as extrajudicial or arbitrary (Ukiwo, 2012). More so, there is often a lack of coordination and information sharing between local vigilante groups and official law enforcement agencies. This can result in duplication of efforts, miscommunication, and conflicting strategies in tackling criminal activities. Also, local vigilante groups typically operate at the community or local level, which limits their ability to address crimes that extend beyond their jurisdiction. Criminal activities often require a broader regional or national response that only official law enforcement agencies can provide (Horsfall & Jaja, 2018). It has been noted that insufficient support and recognition is a major limitation to the effectiveness of local vigilante groups. They often face challenges in terms of financial support, equipment, and recognition from the government. Limited funding and resources therefore hamper their effectiveness in tackling crimes and maintaining operations (Ukiwo, 2012). In some instances however, local vigilante groups may misuse their authority and engage in acts of vigilantism. This can lead to human rights abuses, arbitrary detentions, and extra-judicial killings, undermining the rule of law (Ukiwo, 2012; Obi, 2012).

In the course of this study, interviews were conducted with local vigilante group leaders, members, and relevant stakeholders to explore the limitations faced by these groups in their fight against crimes and criminality. The interview proved that, the effectiveness of the local vigilante groups in fighting crimes and criminality in the South-East geopolitical zone is limited by inadequate training and funding, lack of coordination with formal security agencies, and political interference. The interviewees highlighted the lack of proper training, equipment, coordination and collaboration, poor funding, and politicization of the vigilante groups as significant limitations. The interviews further revealed that local vigilante groups often faced challenges due to the unclear legal status of their operations. The absence of clear legal frameworks and recognition made coordination and collaboration with law enforcement agencies difficult. Again, some interviewees acknowledged that there were instances where local vigilante groups were accused of human rights abuses, excessive use of force, and engaging in extrajudicial activities. These incidents undermined public trust and raised concerns about the accountability and oversight of these groups. They equally highlighted the limited jurisdiction of local vigilante groups, which often operated within specific communities or localities. They affirmed that criminals could exploit this jurisdictional limitation by carrying out crimes across different areas, making it challenging for vigilante

groups to effectively address such transboundary criminal activities.

The above findings are in tandem with the findings of previous studies related to the subject matter. Thus, the findings corroborate with that of Chikwendu *et al.* (2016) indicating that vigilante service groups contribute to crime control. Furthermore, Erhurhu (2017) and Unya (2017) identified insufficient funding, politicization, and absence of incentives as the primary challenges faced by vigilante groups in Nigeria. Chikwendu *et al.* (2016) also highlighted socio-cultural factors, such as the formal police's limitations in effectively controlling crime, as a driving force behind the establishment of informal policing structures. These informal structures are widely accepted within their respective communities as effective agents of crime control. The study findings are equally in tandem with the Ukiwo (2012) who posited limited training and resources, lack of legal authority, insufficient support and recognition, potential for abuse of power; Obi (2012) who established potential for abuse of power; and Horsfall and Jaja (2018) who found inadequate coordination with law enforcement agencies, and limited jurisdictional reach as the major limitations to the effectiveness of local vigilante groups in fighting crimes and criminality.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study sheds light on the intricate relationship between community policing, security challenges, and the role of local vigilante groups. The findings highlighted both the positive contributions and potential concerns associated with these community-based security initiatives. Their presence in the South-East zone has played a significant role in addressing security challenges within communities. These groups have utilized community policing strategies, leveraging local knowledge, traditions, and social networks to gather intelligence, prevent crime, and respond to security incidents promptly. By fostering trust and cooperation between community members and law enforcement agencies, local vigilante groups have been able to bridge the gap and enhance community safety. However, groups' lack of standardized training, clear guidelines, and mechanisms for accountability led to instances of excessive force and human rights abuses. To mitigate these concerns, there is a need for robust regulation, oversight, and collaboration with formal law enforcement agencies to ensure that local vigilante groups operate within the bounds of the law, respect human rights, and are held accountable for their actions. It is therefore pertinent to note that, in spite of the challenges facing community policing in Nigeria, the use of local vigilante groups has the potential to enhance public safety and security in the South-East geopolitical zone. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. There is need for the provision of adequate training, equipment, and funding to local vigilante groups with a view to enhancing their capacity for community policing and combating the avalanche of security challenges in Nigeria's South-East zone.
- ii. There is need to foster stronger collaborations between local vigilante groups, community members, formal law enforcement agencies, and relevant government bodies. This can be achieved through information sharing, joint training programs, and coordinated efforts to address security challenges.
- iii. Government should establish and implement standardized guidelines, codes of conduct, and operating procedures for local vigilante groups. These should emphasize respect for human rights, adherence to the rule of law, and mechanisms for accountability.
- iv. Both the government and community leaders should provide comprehensive training programs for local vigilante groups to enhance their skills in areas such as conflict resolution, community engagement, and human rights awareness. This will empower them to effectively carry out their roles while upholding ethical standards.
- v. Both the government and community leaders should establish mechanisms for regular monitoring,

- evaluation, and assessment of local vigilante groups' activities. This will help identify areas for improvement, address potential abuses, and ensure compliance with established guidelines.
- vi. The government and community leaders should conduct public awareness campaigns to educate the community about the roles, responsibilities, and limitations of local vigilante groups. Promote open channels of communication to address concerns, receive feedback, and build trust between the community and local vigilante groups.

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Appendices

Table 1: Vigilante Groups in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria

S/N	State	Vigilante Group
1	Abia	Abia State Vigilante Service (ASVS), Homeland Vigilante Service (HVS), Abia State Security Watch (ASSW)
2	Anambra	Anambra Vigilante Services (AVS), Anambra State Vigilante Group (ASVG), Anambra State Vigilante Association (ASVA)
3	Ebonyi	Ebonyi State Neighbourhood Watch, Ebonyi State Vigilante Service (ESVS), EbubeAgu, Afikpo North L.G.A. Vigilante Group
4	Enugu	Enugu State Neighbourhood Watch (ESNW), Enugu State Vigilante Group (ESVG), Enugu State Security Network Agency (ESSNA)
5	Imo	Imo State Security Network Agency (IMSSNA), Imo State Vigilante Group (IMSVG), Imo Security Network (IMOSECNET)

Source: Compiled by the Authors

Table 2: Killings in South-East

State	2020 (Before ESN)	2021 (With ESN)
Abia	15	70
Anambra	21	187
Ebonyi	35	103
Enugu	09	68
Imo	17	208
Total	97	636

Source: The Cable Index; Nigeria Security Tracker